

# The Contribution of Scholarship to Good Government

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**Lord Wilson of Dinton**, *Secretary of the Cabinet from 1998 to 2002, and now Master of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, looks at three recent British Academy publications that contribute to current debates on good government.*

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I REMEMBER once being asked what it was like being a top civil servant working for the British government. Slightly to my surprise, and without premeditation, I heard myself reply that it was a bit like carrying a grand piano up stairs while people tried to poke you in the eye with a sharp stick. It was a response which I remembered quite often when I became Cabinet Secretary.

Do not misunderstand me. It was not a plea for sympathy: I had family and friends whom I could look to in times of trouble. Nor was it a complaint about my position which I found deeply absorbing and considered a privilege. It just reflected my sense of the sheer difficulty of good government, which is only just on the right side of possible at the best of times, and my frustration that so few people outside government – or so it felt – were prepared to take an intelligent, non-partisan interest in what was going on, rather than stabbing away for political advantage or entertainment.

There were many journalists, of course, who followed events closely. The best of them had an extraordinary ability to read and analyse events perceptively. There were Select Committees such as the Public Administration Committee, and other bodies such as the Committee on Standards in Public Life, who from time to time emitted shafts of light on important topics. And then there were the academics who worked in fields relevant to government or who studied government itself as a professional interest.

During my career I came to have a high regard for the contribution which scholarship can make to good government. This went much further than just the ability of academics to conduct research on contract to government departments, useful though that is in many fields. It was much more the contribution that they could make through rigorous independent analysis of matters of central importance to good government: by

holding up a lantern to some aspect of government and by showing it in an unfamiliar light.

One of the problems of being in a position of power in government is that it does not allow much time for reflection. Mastering the arguments, the people, the paperwork, handling the problem, the crisis, the next announcement: these things are quite enough to keep most senior officials and ministers busy into the night. Very little original thought happens inside government. Ministers are prone to demand new ideas from their departments and it may be that there is some project or idea, previously judged not ripe, in the locker which meets their needs. But most new thinking originates well away from the seats of power, in a university perhaps, or (as was once the case) the Reading Room of the British Museum.

New thinking can of course be very irritating. It is not helpful to be offered a radical idea when an old one is about to be relaunched, or for new research to cast doubt on a flagship policy in which the government has invested a lot of political credit. In politics as in everything else timing is all. Even so it is important that there should be a community of independent scholars prepared to 'think otherwise' and challenge stale or muddled thinking, people who are sturdy enough not to be pushed off course when their timing is inconvenient or unfashionable.

These three books published by the British Academy, all of them excellent, illustrate very well what I mean. Each of them originated in a workshop or some such event organised by the British Academy. Each consists of a collection of essays by contributors of very different discipline and background (including myself in a minor role as discussant), concentrating on broadly the same topic, albeit from very different perspectives. Each provides a rich battery of insights into government.

(I should incidentally like to take the opportunity to say that the British Academy has a fine record of promoting dialogue between people in government and academics. They did so in a group which met regularly under the joint chairmanship of the late Ben Pimlott and myself when I was Cabinet Secretary. I was very grateful.)

## A sense of history

Take for instance the question of historical perspective. It is common for governments to behave as though nothing much had happened before they came to power, to proclaim that what matters is the future, not the past, and to define what they propose as 'modern' in contrast to the 'conventional wisdom' which has hitherto prevailed under their predecessors and ipso facto is 'old-fashioned'. At the simplest level scholarship, without being tied to any vested interest, can analyse the antecedents of policy and thereby offer a new perspective on the present.

Thus in *Hutton and Butler: Lifting the Lid on Power*, edited by W.G. Runciman, Peter Hennessy draws a fascinating parallel between the Suez affair and the invasion of Iraq, comparing the role of the JIC in each case and the failures of the Cabinets in each period to scrutinise what the Prime Minister of the day was up to:

In the long-term memory, the equivalent of the 1956 'collusion' is likely to be the '45 minutes' WMD readiness report. ... Not 'doing a Tony' could prove just as powerful an impulse for tomorrow's Whitehall generations as 'not doing an Anthony' was for yesterday's.<sup>1</sup>

Each of these books contains similar historical perspectives. Thus Rudolf Klein and William Plowden in *Joined-Up Government*, edited by Vernon Bogdanor, compare that early initiative of the Blair government which they call JUG (Joined-Up Government) with an initiative of 1977 called JASP (Joint

Approach to Social Policy) which stemmed from a report of the Central Policy Review Staff two years before in which Plowden had been involved:

The report's diagnosis and prescription anticipated many of the themes which have since re-emerged under the label of joined-up government. ... In summary, then, it seems that the lessons of history are being relearned, albeit largely unconsciously. Coordination has been the elusive goal of public administration for more than a century.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly in *Transparency: The Key to Better Governance?*, edited by Christopher Hood and David Heald, the former author traces some of the different strains and meanings of the term back through many different thinkers in many different centuries, even as far back as ancient Greece and China. He comments that:

they all translate into some view of openness about rules and behaviour, but those to whom they apply – citizens, governments, organisations – are different, and the underlying doctrines of government that they reflect may be conflicting. ... [T]here is an obvious tension between the 'town meeting' vision of transparency as direct face-to-face accountability of public officials to ordinary citizens on the ground, and the accounting vision of transparency as a set

of arcane book-keeping rules governing the way big bureaucracies relate to one another...<sup>3</sup>

We live in a period when the term 'accountability' is used glibly to cover many different kinds of accountability: Ministerial accountability to Parliament, management accountability, accountability to the public in a 'town meeting', and so on. This scholarly perspective is a crucial reminder that each kind of transparency needs to be assessed and understood in its own context and that conflating the different concepts could be very damaging if it led, say, to the introduction of personal accountability of civil servants to Parliament.

I had not known, incidentally, that Sweden had a Freedom of the Press Act in 1766.

### Rigorous analysis

But there is a lot more to the scholarship in these books than simple historical perspective. The application of rigorous analytical thinking to concepts which appear easy to grasp, such as 'joined-up-government' or 'transparency' can force one to refine one's thinking in important, perhaps fundamental, ways.

To give one example, Onora O'Neill in an essay on 'Transparency and the Ethics of Communication' develops a powerful case for arguing that:

transparency by itself is a very incomplete remedy for corruption, untrustworthiness, or poor performance in public and corporate life. It can achieve rather little unless the material disseminated is made accessible to and assessable by relevant audiences, and actually reaches those audiences. ... [I]t is often all too plain that the real aim of certain practices of disclosure is not to communicate. ... [E]ven where information and informants are trustworthy, transparency *by itself* may leave many with little reason to trust, because it does not even aim to put them in a position to judge matters for themselves, or to follow, check or challenge the information disclosed.<sup>4</sup>

I confess that I have given a number of talks recently in which I have endorsed, I thought rather cogently, the case for openness in

government. Having read this and some of the other excellent essays in this book, I have a strong desire to go away into a corner by myself and have a quiet think about what I actually do believe. And that illustrates exactly why in my view scholarship matters when considering issues of government.

### Lessons

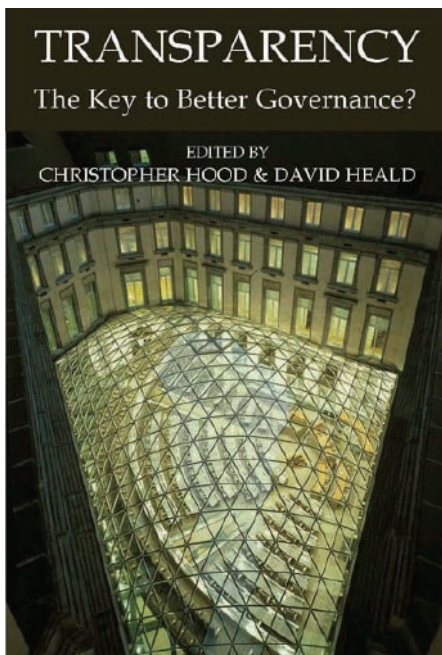
Allied to that is the role which scholarship can play in drawing out the lessons from events in government. Sir Michael Quinlan, an outstanding scholar in his generation of civil servants, offers a verdict on 'The Lessons to be Drawn for Governmental Process' from the Hutton and Butler Reports which is all the more devastating for its politeness:

[I]t is neither surprising nor illegitimate that a Prime Minister of Mr Blair's abilities, energy and self-confidence, coming to and subsequently retaining power moreover with the endorsement of the electorate in exceptional degree, should have chosen to operate in a more centralized way than almost any predecessor, and in doing so should have been keen to reshape working practices in new ways (including swift and determined management of media concerns) which he regarded as more suited to his task and aims than older ones.

It is, however, open to question, as we survey the scene disclosed by Hutton and Butler, whether the changes – often, it seemed, reflecting a marked impatience with collective process – always rested upon sufficient understanding that existing patterns had not been developed without practical reason, and that departing from them might therefore have a downside that needed careful consideration beforehand.<sup>5</sup>

The other two books similarly contain a wealth of material from which the wise public servant could learn a great deal.

The essays in *Transparency* for instance analyse clinically and from every angle the concept and practice of open government, not only in this country but elsewhere. Reading it may depress the reader. They demonstrate many things which one feared, and a few which one knew: for instance, the costs which may flow from meeting



transparency requirements, the techniques which those required to be transparent may use to defeat those requirements and the disappointment in store for those who hope that the Freedom of Information Act will inaugurate a new era of trust. Alasdair Roberts' chapter on 'Dashed Expectations: Governmental Adaptation to Transparency Rules' includes particularly compelling evidence from other countries of such tactics as 'raising fees to squelch demand'; and James Savage's account of the problems of disclosure by Greece in the context of EU Budgetary Surveillance is, well, downright shocking.

I was grateful for Christopher Hood's gentle summing up at the end which strives to find something encouraging to say. It nonetheless concludes that:

the devil is always in the bureaucratic detail, and prudence seems to justify a strong element of 'practical scepticism' about the way transparency measures work out on the ground.<sup>6</sup>

The one thing one can say with confidence is that there are lessons about openness to be learned from this book. Not very encouraging ones, but lessons.

### Holding up a mirror

Finally, scholarship has a role to play in holding up a mirror to current fashion and simply asking whether it makes sense – or in the worst case what we think of the Emperor's new clothes. This is what *Joined-Up Government* does par excellence, and I have the most difficulty with it of all the three books because it deals with something in which I was particularly involved.

When I became Secretary of the Cabinet, 'joined-up government' was all the rage. The phrase had been coined just before my arrival by my colleague who was permanent secretary of the Cabinet Office, Robin Mountfield, possibly in his bath although I am not sure of that. I hope he will not mind my revealing that my first instinct was to try to strangle its use before it got any further. I supported the case for better coordination; but the echo of 'joined-up writing' seemed to me to imply something facile which a five-year-old could do, whereas I knew it was a complex business which required

considerable sophistication if it was to work. But the phrase was up and away, and in the public domain. It had probably already been used by the Prime Minister, as one contributor to this book says. The prospects of strangulation were hopeless, and I failed.

Despite my distaste for the term, joined-up government was a noble cause in its way. One of the most important chapters in the book, which may acquire some historical interest in time, is the final one, written by Geoff Mulgan who played a key part in its invention as a special adviser in Number 10. It is the best, most authoritative account of why the initiative was launched that one could hope for. Using exactly the right language ('silos', 'delivery', 'cross-cutting'), down to the authentic bullet points of the period, he explains very fairly the defects which New Labour had identified in the ability of the government machine to act as they wanted. Coming at the end of the book, after much academic analysis, it may read to some rather like M. Poirot's exposition at the end of an Agatha Christie novel.

Many of the pressing problems facing government – such as social exclusion, crime, environment, family and competitiveness – do not fit into neat departmental boundaries.... Vertical organization by its nature skews government efforts away from certain activities, such as prevention – since the benefits of preventive action often come to another department. It tends to make government less sensitive to particular client groups whose needs cut across departmental lines. (The elderly are a classic example.) At worst, it incentivizes departments and agencies to dump problems onto each other...<sup>7</sup>

Having been Permanent Under Secretary of the Home Office where I had fumed at the way that we seemed to have to manage the consequences of all the failures of other departments' social policies, I knew what he meant.

The problem was not so much to diagnose the problem accurately as to know what to do about it. The Civil Service, under strong guidance from the new Government, gave joined-up government its best shot, experimenting with a variety of ways of

encouraging departments and public services to cooperate. Geoff Mulgan illustrates this well, in sixteen bullet points.

It is beyond the scope of this review, and indeed of the book, to assess how far these efforts were successful. I hope an assessment is made in due course. But for the time being it would probably be safe for the general reader to assume that along with all the other waves of reform which have swept over the government machine over the last quarter of a century it did not achieve everything hoped for but carried things forward a little way, and prepared the ground for the next big wave which in this case was 'delivery'.

What this book illustrates, again thanks to the scholarship of its editor and contributors, are the important issues which were concealed beneath that easy phrase, joined-up government, which had perplexed previous generations of administrators in their attempts to improve the coordination of public services and which will still face future generations of public servants who are in the same business.

'Joined-up Government', as Christopher Hood explains, is a new term for an old administrative doctrine called coordination. It became fashionable in the 1990s to deride working in functional departmental structures, or 'silos' as they became known. But what this derision overlooked was that too much emphasis on joined-upness risked reducing local autonomy, confusing lines of accountability and weakening the specialisation and expertise conventionally associated with functional organisation.

The implications of this are explored well in the book. I particularly enjoyed Edward Page's formal analysis of silo mentalities into five types, all of which I immediately recognised and have probably represented in my time (turf, budget protection, bureaucratic politics, ignorance and technical reasons).

If I had to contribute my own chapter now – and this is not an offer – I would argue that much government business can still be satisfactorily be handled within the structure of functional departments provided that officials continue to be trained in the culture of consultation of other departments where their interests are affected, and provided also that Cabinet government still works. As

Christopher Hood reminds us, group ethos has long been the 'efficient secret' of the British civil service. But it is not enough for some issues which transcend departments. In these cases, governments tend to be most effective when they select carefully the 'cross-cutting' areas where they want to have an impact and concentrate on those, backed up by considerable political will from the top, rather than when they adopt a generalised approach which attempts too much across too broad a front, risking 'chaos more than coordination' in Gerry Stoker's phrase.

I would also want to explore still further the constitutional issues which are touched on with characteristic shrewdness by Vernon Bogdanor in his introduction. I suspect that the impact of joined-up government may to some degree have been coloured by uncertainty about how New Labour viewed the role of the centre and the constitutional implications which lay behind that. Peter Mandelson had indicated in 1996<sup>8</sup> to anyone who would listen that there would be a much stronger centre under Blair, but the implications were never fully articulated. In time it became clear that it was a world in which, in Sir Michael Quinlan's words in *Hutton and Butler*:

there was a sense of all participants – ministers, civil servants, special policy advisers, public relations handlers – being treated as part of an undifferentiated resource for the support of the central executive.<sup>9</sup>

This sense of everyone being part of an undifferentiated resource, with its implicit impatience with boundaries and roles, may have been the concept which differentiated joined-up government from other attempts at improving coordination, at any rate subconsciously (as Lord Hutton would say). Indeed it can be argued that it extended subconsciously beyond central government to include local government and other agencies for the purposes of 'delivery', and permeated other areas of central policy such as the setting of targets for bodies which lay beyond the direct control of government such as the police.

There may also have been a subconscious recognition that this concept of an undifferentiated resource contained con-

stitutional implications which it was better not to address. For instance, if the Prime Minister were to become the chief executive of the government, and if all the permanent secretaries in charge of government departments were to report to him through the Secretary of the Cabinet, perhaps at the head of a Department of the Prime Minister, what would become of the Secretaries of State? If the whole public sector were to be the agents of central government, what would become of local government councils and police authorities and school governors and the like, not to mention local democracy?

All things are possible when you have no written constitution. The language of 'partnerships' and 'stakeholders' offered the best hope of getting past the problem. If the only thing that matters is 'what works', then by definition nothing else matters, provided that everyone cooperates. But there lies the snag. As Vernon Bogdanor observes,

The success of joined-up government presupposes a degree of consensus which has not always been apparent in the British political system.<sup>10</sup>

Joined-up government contained within it hints of more fundamental issues which were never fully explored. As it happened, the real world intervened, events moved on, some interesting experiments were made, and the subconscious thoughts remained in the subconscious. But scholars are right to examine the experiment.

## Conclusion

Reading these three books is a stimulating business. There is something on nearly every page to provoke those interested in government to exclaim with approval or disapproval or surprise or interest. Coming back to my initial point, they illustrate richly the contribution which professional, disinterested scholarship and good minds can bring to the business of government. Scholars are not necessarily always right or complete in their analysis. They sometimes lapse into language which it is hard for the lay person to follow, or attempt to formalise what cannot be formalised. But they are an active force for good in the pursuit of good government, in a world where such forces are scarce, and I am very glad the British Academy is encouraging and supporting them.

<sup>1</sup> Peter Hennessy, 'The Lightning Flash on the Road to Baghdad: Issues of Evidence', in W. G. Runciman (ed.), *Hutton and Butler: Lifting the Lid on the Workings of Power* (British Academy Occasional Paper, 2004), pp. 75 and 80.

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Klein and William Plowden, 'JASP Meets JUG: Lessons of the 1975 Joint Approach to Social Policy for Joined-Up Government', in Vernon Bogdanor (ed.), *Joined-Up Government* (British Academy Occasional Paper 5, 2005), pp. 107 and 112.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Hood, 'Transparency in Historical Perspective', in Christopher Hood and David Heald (eds), *Transparency: The Key to Better Governance?* (Proceedings of the British Academy 135, 2006), pp. 19-20.

<sup>4</sup> Onora O'Neill, 'Transparency and the Ethics of Communication', in Hood and Heald (eds), *Transparency*, pp. 84, 88 and 89.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Quinlan, 'Lessons for Governmental Process', in Runciman (ed.), *Hutton and Butler*, pp. 126-7.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Hood, 'Beyond Exchanging First Principles? Some Closing Comments', in Hood and Heald (eds), *Transparency*, p. 224.

<sup>7</sup> Geoff Mulgan, 'Joined-Up Government: Past, Present, and Future', in Bogdanor (ed.), *Joined-Up Government*, pp. 175 and 177.

<sup>8</sup> *The Blair Revolution* (Faber and Faber, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Quinlan, 'Lessons for Governmental Process', p. 128.

<sup>10</sup> Bogdanor (ed.), *Joined-Up Government*, p. 17.

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In July 2004, the British Academy organised a public debate on 'Hutton: The Wider Issues' – a meeting that was also able to take account of the Butler Report which had appeared five days earlier. A short volume of essays, *Hutton and Butler: Lifting the Lid on the Workings of Power*, was published in October 2004 in the *British Academy Occasional Papers* series.

A meeting on 'Joined-Up Government' was held at the British Academy in October 2001. A volume arising from the meeting, *Joined-Up Government*, was published in July 2005 (*British Academy Occasional Paper 5*).

In collaboration with the Economic and Social Research Council, the British Academy held a workshop on 'Transparency: The Term and the Doctrines' in January 2005. *Transparency: The Key to Better Governance?* is published in September 2006 as *Proceedings of the British Academy*, volume 135.

Details of all three publications can be found on the Academy's web site at [www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/](http://www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/)

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