

# Public Administration: Towards a Science

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“In practice we never doubt the fact of the conformation of the present to the immediate past. It belongs to the ultimate texture of experience, with the same evidence as does presentational immediacy. The present fact is luminously the outcome of its predecessors, one quarter of a second ago. Unsuspected factors may have intervened; dynamite may have exploded. But, however that may be, the present event issues subject to the limitations laid upon it by the actual nature of the immediate past. If dynamite explodes, then the present fact is that issue from the past which is consistent with dynamite exploding. Further, we unhesitatingly argue backwards to the inference, that the complete analysis of the past must disclose in it those factors which provide the conditions for the present. If dynamite be now exploding, then in the immediate past there was a charge of dynamite unexploded.”

—From *Symbolism*, by A. N. Whitehead.

## INTRODUCTION.

Many universities throughout the world now include amongst their courses of study the subject Public Administration. When this (or any) subject receives such status two questions of significance may be asked:

(1) What is this subject, “Public Administration,” concerned with, and how do we go about making a study of it?

(2) What are the “uses” of the study of such a subject?

A review of the literature over which the enquiring student might range, reveals that many writers on public administration are concerned to discuss aspects of technique of administration as manifested in government systems and/or to suggest methods of reforming such systems and of eliminating “frictions” which they see in them. We are concerned here to examine the fruitfulness of such methods for general purposes of discussion, and to see whether another and more significant, approach to the study of the facts cannot be suggested.

The natural, physical and social sciences are organised bodies of knowledge built up out of the vast array and complexity of facts which comprise the universe. These facts are reduced to order and significance with the aid of the scientific method (definition, classification, etc.) Cannot the data of the sphere of public

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administration be treated in the same way, subject to special reservations necessary because we are dealing with human material and, because of the inadequacy of information? In short, is it not possible to have a more fundamental approach to public administration, considerably removed from the technique appropriate to the art of administration, and not dependent on value judgments (which involve a biased frame of mind, and "should" and "ought" views), which can be formulated, taught and studied in a manner similar to that employed in positive sciences?

Such a science transcends the art of administration: of getting a job done. It deals with relationships embodied in facts and capable of expression as scientific laws. This means applying to the facts of the world of public administration the same kind of reasoning that Cairnes required for the economic world when he said:<sup>1</sup> "For my part, I believe that, whether we are able to discover it or not, there is a law of market price, as there is a law of normal price, as there is a law of wages, of profit, of rent, as there are laws of the winds, and tides and seasons, and of the phenomena of external nature—a law in the only sense in which law can be predicted of natural objects; namely,, as consisting in the constancy of the relation between facts and the conditions which produce them." Economists have grappled with problems such as we are discussing here for many years: their discoveries and conclusions provide much material for reflection.

### **The Study of Public Administration.**

Administration is a problem inherent to human association: public administration is part and parcel with government organised to carry out community business. It is a way of looking at the facts of such situations, just as the facts can be looked at from other points of view, e.g., the economic, religious, philosophic. We do not seek to have an all embracing view, but must departmentalise and specialise so that we can become experts in our field and make a well-wrought contribution to the final, generalised picture.

The emphasis on the "fourth arm of government," administration, has increased steadily throughout this and the last century, following on the extension of the functions and scope of government. The changes in philosophy, economic development, and in social relationships which lie behind the growth of the Civil Service State

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<sup>1</sup> *Some Leading Principles of Political Economy*, London, 1888, p. 88.

need not here be discussed as such, although an understanding of them is vital to a correct focussing of administrative development. The faults of past administration, the increase in services rendered and the critical attitude of harassed taxpayers have been amongst the immediate causes of popular interest in the subject.

Students of political science were soon realising the new problems involved, and the importance of public administration became increasingly evident as its rôle in the political process grew more distinct. The increase in numbers and in the quantity and quality of work to be done by the Civil Service led to a crisis in England, and the reforms in recruitment which followed were vital for all future development. The United States of America in recent years has faced a similar crisis.

Much has been written on and around the subject of Public Administration, and its study is seen to be an important one by students at large. For this reason the work of the administrator is receiving ever-increasing attention (particularly in the war economy). His rôle in society in general is one for the sociologist. The discussions of Public Administration can be seen to fall broadly into two groups, classified according to subject matter and approach. The first group comprises those writers who consider public administration as an art of getting government business done, which is an essential quality of every civil servant in his own particular sphere. A good many books, and much of the definition, refer to this aspect—the aspect which is rather vaguely summed up as “the management of men and materials for the purposes of the State.”

But it is now fairly widely seen, even if the full significance of the fact is not realised, that there is a series of questions, which transcends those of mere techniques, concerned with vital “problems in relationship.” The body administrative has its roots in the body politic. This fact alone causes many and varying problems of relationship, of adjustment, of repercussion. And there are relationships of cause and effect throughout the whole administrative set-up itself which have been more or less recognised, and such things as these can be covered by the term “public administration.” The facts of repercussions between groups first directed attention to public administration. For instance, the problem of recruitment in England in the last century was just such a case. It came to be realised that poor quality civil servants meant poor quality service,

which in turn was reflected back on educational standards, and the type of recruit offering.

But the attitude of mind and dominant motive "in back" of most discussion of either of the two types at present is one of desiring rightness and despising wrongness, measured according to some norm which the writer has. For this reason "ugly" facts may be suppressed or overlooked (perhaps because of lack of information), and full implications and assumptions are often neglected, because the desired reform programme must be "proved best." In this type of discussion different systems (often completely divorced from their context) are examined to yield examples of faults or merits which a writer is concerned to demonstrate, and systems of administration (usually that of the writer's own country and some other) are compared and contrasted in the light of desired results. But to arrive at the truth *all* the facts must be considered, before impartial "principles" can be formulated, in the scientific sense of the term.

Unless the administrative machinery, and its setting, whence it draws its blood and in which it has its being, be assembled on the work bench, to use Phelps Brown's terms,<sup>2</sup> taken to pieces, built up and watched functioning in the laboratory of theory, how can we say as the "reformers" attempt to do (a) why the machine works in this way and not in that, (b) what are its susceptibilities to outside influences, pressures and stresses felt at certain points, (c) how by altering the structure in one place the whole thing can be made to function in a different way? The object in studying administrative relationships is not necessarily undertaken so that we can assert that such and such a thing is a "good thing," or needs altering because it is "bad," but is to show how certain results will always follow when certain conditions are established. Once all the determinants are there, i.e., as long as the variables and constants have the same values and same relations, the same conclusion is inevitable.

In place of the current attitude and spirit of investigation, the scientific method, it is urged, can more fruitfully be employed. The layout of public administration can be examined, country by country, unit by unit, against its appropriate background of society, as there organised. In this way, laws of behaviour can be formulated for the sphere of public administration in the sense that, given certain predisposing conditions, certain results will follow. Following up this

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<sup>2</sup> *Framework of the Pricing System*, by E. H. Phelps Brown.

method, when advice on administrative change is sought, or an end, i.e., a proposed reform, given, then Public Administration will be able to demonstrate the conditions which must be established before that end or change can be realised. The end may be "good" or "bad"—that is not the concern of the scientific method as such, or of the student of Public Administration, as a scientist. He is concerned to know how and why things happen in the way they do, and why a "good thing" in one political and social set-up may be useless in another, due to some new predisposing factor(s) in the latter case.

As an example, consider this case. The First Division of the British Civil Service is often upheld as a desirable model for other systems of public administration. But is it always realised by its advocates that such a division and the recruitment policy appropriate to its formation, rest on circumstances hard to realise in other countries? The unique universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and their educational system, the qualities of the British middle classes, all framed in a system of capitalist society at a peculiar stage of evolution, contribute largely to the fact that it is almost impossible to realise exactly the same results in other societies, simply by using the British method of recruitment.

From a consideration of such things, we come to realise the bed-rock fact, viz., that public administration is carried on within a certain framework, by which it is conditioned. To change the system of administration it is necessary to know what predisposing elements in the situation have to be changed first. To know and formulate the necessary predisposing elements in the great task of investigation and research in public administration. Administration is functionally related to certain basic factors, such as politics and education—the forms and shapes of these determine results in the administrative sphere. The grand aim of a positive science of Public Administration, *as a subject of academic study*, can be to show, in the same way as the scientific method does in other spheres of thought, the inevitability of sequence once a train of action is set in motion from certain premises. The same rôle for Economics is envisaged by Lord Keynes in these words:<sup>3</sup> "The Theory of Economics does not furnish a body of settled conclusions immediately applicable to policy. It is a method rather than a doctrine, an apparatus of the mind, a technique of thinking, which helps its possessor to draw correct conclusions."

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<sup>3</sup> *General Introduction*, Cambridge Economic Handbooks.

It is necessary to say something further on the subject of scientific laws.<sup>4</sup> These laws do not command people or things to behave in a certain way, but sum up how people and things *do in fact behave* under given, stipulated circumstances. "A true scientific law cannot be broken; it can only be wrongly formulated." Two types of law can be distinguished, viz., universal and enumerative. The latter is of the "A exists" type: the former of the type "if B C D, then A." At this point I cannot do better than quote Fraser's opinion again, because in describing the position of the economist, he is, to my mind, exactly giving the position of the student who seeks to study the positive science of public administration."<sup>5</sup>

"The economist is usually concerned neither with facts alone nor with relationships alone, but with the embodiment of relationships *in* facts. He wants, not merely to know that certain events have taken place, nor merely to construct hypothetical chains of cause and effect, but to *understand* events in terms of general principles. And consequently the law which he formulates will to a greater or less extent be *both* universal and enumerative. On the one hand they will assert—if they are not to be completely empty—something about the concrete phenomena studied; on the other hand they will exhibit these phenomena—if they are to be more than a blind array of facts and statistics—as being the result of certain predisposing conditions, and as being necessary, given those conditions. In some cases, no doubt, the enumerative element will be nearer to the centre of his interests, in other cases the hypothetical element. But if the main object of economists is to formulate "significant generalisations" about the economic world, then the measure of their success will be their ability to formulate laws which are equally important as summaries of historical fact and as expositions of scientific uniformities."

This statement epitomises the method and outlook the adoption of which I am urging in the study of public administration. The charge that the social sciences are less positive than the natural *may* be admitted, but this is no reason why they should become purely normative. The lack of power to undertake controlled physical experiment need not upset us if we are prepared to make the theory of public administration our laboratory. The significance of relation-

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<sup>4</sup> For an expansion, see Fraser, *Economic Thought and Language*, p. 46 et seq.

<sup>5</sup> This extract is from *Economic Thought and Language* (p. 51), to which this section is much indebted.

ships being *embodied in facts* has never been fully grasped by students of public administration, or if it has, has been overwhelmed by notions of reform. This significance may be of no importance to the actual administrator in his work, or may have only a particularised meaning for him, so that it appears that a positive science of public administration will become something removed from more mundane and pedestrian ways; drawing its facts from the real world, and making its method and technique for reaching conclusions available to all who seek them. In Professor Pigou's words, which have significance, not only for economists, "If the art of social reform is to be effective, the basis of it must be laid in a 'science.' The contribution towards the work of practice that economists aspire to make is to provide for it this foundation. Their effort, though it may well be roused to action by the emotions, itself necessarily lies within the sphere of the intellect. Resentment at the evils investigated must be controlled, lest it militate against scientific exactitude in our study of their causes. Pity, however sincere, and grief, however real, are here intruders to be driven ruthlessly away. Stirred by their appeal, we have entered the temple of science. Against them its doors are closed, and they must wait without for our return."<sup>6</sup>

But even at this point the doors of our temple are liable to be stormed. The critics have another shot in their locker, which is more deadly (and which has been fired at all the social sciences at one time or another). This relates (a) to the difficulty involved in studying human material, as contrasted with inanimate things; and more specifically, concerning Public Administration that (b) political influences will usually upset any neatly arranged plan worked out for a Utopia in the administrative field alone. Such criticisms are often based on confusion about science itself and what it attempts to do. We may consider the problem in a roundabout way.

"Generalisations relative to public administration are hazardous," says Marshal E. Dimock.<sup>7</sup> That depends on the width of the generalisations. If the predisposing conditions are defined rigorously enough, very strict "generalisations" can be drawn. When we cannot get *all* the predisposing conditions we are no worse off than the physical scientists. Their generalisations become more and more hazardous as more and more elements are introduced into the prob-

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<sup>6</sup> *Unemployment*, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Frontiers of Public Administration*, p. 4.

lem, and if their final results depend on some variable of unknown quantity, then their predictions are very hazardous indeed. Public administration, Dimock goes on to say, like government is a human activity, and like the activity of humans is complex and often unpredictable—so much depends on the personal factor. The way to overcome this difficulty is to postulate (any number) a series of possible “values” for the personal and other factors and proceed to calculate results. Unless those people who are anxious for reform have really done something like this, i.e., have given a series of possible values to all the variables, they are talking nonsense. In Pareto’s words, anybody who talks about what will (or should) happen in the future must have formulated laws out of the past, even though he does not admit it. These laws in social sciences are not abstract things, but “are summaries of historical facts and . . . expositions of scientific uniformities.”

But the critics are still menacing. An historical review of the emergence of the art of public administration will show that so far, in world history, there has been a close relationship between politics and public administration. This sort of relationship we may label a “source,” or “external,” relationship, to be distinguished for purposes of discussion from relationships established between internal elements of the administrative machine. We find, in actual cases, these source relationships, and this brings us to the objection which is usually made at this point. It is said that, e.g., a theory of recruitment considered “best” from the point of view, e.g., of efficiency tests, can be vitiated by these source relationships—i.e., politics can intervene and upset perfect internal functioning of the administrative machine.

Now what is really meant by such an objection, when we put it in the terminology of our point of view, is that the predisposing conditions which make a recruitment policy best in one place or at one time, are not realised in another. To see how this works out, it is first necessary to construct a model of the set-up we are studying, or wish to copy, and then to allow the new forces to act, and watch the way in which our structure is twisted and bent by these forces (which, as new predisposing conditions, mean a new series of results). In this way, in the laboratory of theory, can we make our experiments. In this way, too, can the de-stabilising influence of new (political) factors be set out in an orderly way and appraised for what they are, particularly for the benefit of the reformers. They can

give us the end they want to secure, and we can show them means, particularly indicating alterations and defences necessary if the desired results are to be secured. For example, consider the contribution of this method towards the answering of Lewis Merriam's pleas (*Personnel Administration in the Federal Government*, p. 3)—“Thus the first element in the problem is the erection and maintenance of a system of dikes which will keep the flood waters of partisan politics from engulfing the fields of administration,” and again, p. 4—“Good work, good structures, have a real chance of permanence only if they can be protected from the flood of politics.”

Our first significant “source” relationship may be derived from historical instances over the centuries and from a survey of the current political lay-out. To discover its force at any particular time, we have to narrow our view to cover only a selected range. Similarly, postulating certain conditions we can find other source relationships of varying magnitude and importance, e.g., a study of the social set-up of 19th century England reveals relationships between the educational system and administration, social and political philosophy and administration and so on. These forces may act on administration via politics or more directly (as with education). This method could be largely extended by historical study and contemporary survey. Conditions are postulated, and the results which they predispose examined. This is only a new way of looking at much material already embodied in the literature, but, to be normative, it is a better way because it is generalised and, so far as method goes, unbiassed.

The books about public administration abound with propositions concerning recruitment, management, devolution, etc., etc. How many of these have ever been formulated in such a way as to show us at once what are the assumptions and circumstances necessary to make them true and their restrictive, or generalised and fundamental nature shown? For instance, there is Montesquieu's thesis: That the conjunction of legislature, judicial and administrative functions in one body tends to produce tyranny. And Macauley's proposition: That persons who until two and twenty have devoted themselves exclusively to their studies will everywhere be found superior to those who at eighteen or so have gone to work. Or, on the political side: That those laws with which the people identify themselves tend to be faithfully observed; and that ministerial responsibility is

our main protection against bureaucracy. In what racial, institutional, and cultural circumstances do these hold good?

Here, then, is a method by which the action of the laws of Public Administration can be discovered. The most generalised laws will relate to the source relationships. For example, when we are given a political set-up of any kind, the problem of administration arises. But this, like the law of gravity, without its time and place reservations, tells us little. Nevertheless, we have here a basic and fundamental relationship which, when bound more and more closely with the bonds of time, place and circumstances, will yield us valuable laws.

As a sample demonstration, let us work over a proposition that has been formulated in the past, and see how we can discover its significance.

(1) Proposition: That where thinking is centralised and action decentralised, efficient administration tends to be ensured.

(2) Definitions required: Of "thinking," "centralised" and "decentralised," "efficient administration."

(3) We need a series of cases showing how, when and where such results have or have not been obtained, and why.

(4) These can be obtained from contemporary and historical survey, from which our raw material is sifted out, finally giving us:

(5) The conclusion, stating under what conditions the proposition is found true. (It might be under conditions which have never been realised.)

In our researches we will discover that source relationships, which frame the administrative machine, come into most problems in two ways. One: they shape the bricks and determine the content of them. Thus they have a powerful influence on the structure of the machine. So in building up our machine we must clearly realise their influence on the material we are to use. Two: source influences, particularly the political, admitted with the material of which the machine is built, may clog it up; or they may run into the works at various places, throwing the whole thing out of gear, because there are no dikes to prevent them. The contrast here is between, say, recruitment policy, which reflects source influences through the whole structure, and, say, the political influence of Ministers in departments, or the tampering with the works of civil servants by bribery and corruption. So in framing the cases, we need evidence (a) concerning the strength of the machine itself, and (b) of the

way in which it is allowed to function, according to its lights, once it is set up.

It is hoped that a method of testing propositions, such as the one outlined above, will, besides enabling significant laws to be formulated, allow the student of Public Administration to put suggested reforms to the test and predict results with a greater certainty, than if he had allowed feeling, and insufficient consideration of *all* relevant facts, to guide him. And how should the body of Public Administration be overhauled so as to conform, in method of study, to the scientific outlook? It seems that the most fruitful way would be to make a survey of certain selected countries, say Britain, the U.S.A., and Australia, about which most information is available. This survey would cover the historical emergence of administration in each, against its own particular background. Series of relationships and sequences would emerge, giving us the raw material for our principles or laws. (See e.g. the example of British recruitment mentioned above.)

### Conclusion.

At first this new approach, this new way of looking at things, will not mean such a startling change. Discussion will still range over that field of administrative relationships which much of the literature discusses, but with a new emphasis and a changed attitude. Research into cultural, legal, political, philosophical and economic backgrounds will become of great importance, and contemporary survey a vital need. Only in this way can a sufficient body of raw material be built up, ready for sifting over and using in models, from which relationships can be discovered.

Suggestions for answers to the questions posed at the beginning of this essay have now been given according to my views. If such a science as I suggest can be created, then "advice" could be given on surer grounds than at present, and would be free from the partisan tang which distinguishes so much "reform" nowadays. But such advice could be delivered only from the steps of the temple, after all the mysterious rites have been performed within. The word "mysterious" is used quite seriously, because it does not seem possible that a positive science of Public Administration will ever be any more the possession of the general public or the ordinary civil servant, as such, than any other science is.