

'THANK-OFFERING TO BRITAIN FUND' LECTURE

THE ROLE AND CHARACTER OF THE
CIVIL SERVICE

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I SHOULD like to begin by saying how honoured and flattered I feel to have been asked to give this lecture. I have chosen as my subject the role and character of the Civil Service in Great Britain for three reasons. First, I firmly believe that the Civil Service, as it has developed its role and acquired its character over the last hundred years or so, has contributed a great deal to making Britain such a pleasant country to live in. Secondly the subject is a topical one, since the Civil Service, like so many of our institutions, has been the subject of searching inquiry and is now undergoing a process of deliberate reshaping and reorganization. Thirdly—and perhaps most important—the Civil Service is the only subject upon which I am even faintly competent to give such a lecture as this.

Even so I must stress that I do this as a working civil servant, amid all the distractions and hurly-burly of practical life in the Service, and not as a theoretician or researcher with time to go back over the history, verify my impressions, or think profoundly about their implications. I hope that you will excuse this; it was inevitable when you chose a civil servant.

I suppose that what a country wants from its Civil Service is that it should be efficient and humane, in the broadest sense of those words. I take this to mean that the Service should carry out the tasks allotted to it as effectively as possible, using no more resources than are absolutely necessary; that in their official dealings with their fellow citizens civil servants should be not only completely just, but as helpful and imaginative as their powers and duties permit; and that in its higher direction the Service should be responsive to changing needs, not only the manifest changes following from a change of Government, but also the longer-term, less immediately obvious, changes arising from developments in society as a whole, and its institutions both public and private.

It is a commonplace that we live in rapidly changing times, and it may be tedious for you to sit through descriptions of the changes, fascinating or horrific according to the temperament of the speaker and listeners. Nevertheless, anyone who has any part of responsibility for the management of the Civil Service in Britain must think hard about the particular changes, both in the state of our society and the tasks of our Government, that have already affected the Service, and do his best to guess in what direction they will take us in the future.

This must be my excuse for starting this lecture with an outline of what I see as the main changes that have already occurred, mainly since the war, in Government and society, of a kind to which the Civil Service must respond.

The most obvious changes have been in the extent of the Government's activities—the steady widening of the public sector till it now includes about 6.25 million employees, about a quarter of the work force, of whom about 720,000 are civil servants, working directly under Ministerial directions. This growth is the result not only of the extension of the Government's directly managed services—the social security, employment, and retraining services, the motorway programme, and so on—but also of an even greater extension of public services not directly managed by the Government or civil servants, but under their 'policy control'—the nationalized industries and the Health Service being the biggest examples. This relatively new form of responsibility seems to have affected the traditional relationship of central government to the remaining part of the public sector, the local authorities—where increasingly the demand for national policies—e.g. in housing and education—is not merely throwing doubt on local autonomy, but is at the same time creating new tasks for Ministers and civil servants alike. Moreover, even where it claims neither managerial authority or policy supervision, the Government is intervening more and more in the decision-making both of individuals—planning restrictions and road safety regulations are examples—and of private firms, to the point where every industry must have its departmental 'sponsor' and feels not only the forces of restriction, but also the hot winds of exhortation about efficiency, exports, and so on. Finally, the Government has accepted, and is expected to accept, responsibility for managing the general economic climate; now it is beginning to look as if the physical climate—at any rate so far as it is influenced by man—is also to be a government responsibility. Perhaps we may even detect

efforts to saddle the Government with general responsibility for the social climate as well. At the same time the traditional areas of government—defence, foreign affairs, and law and order—get no easier and demand no less attention.

All of this has changed the character of government, and the nature of civil servants' tasks, in a number of ways.

The first is inherent in the concept of a public sector, as something which can be considered as a whole, of which the Government is the central manager or policy controller, and which it can only manage and control if in some sense it controls, or at least decisively influences, the economy and perhaps even society as a whole. This has led, among other things, to the search for unity and consistency among activities which hitherto were regarded as diverse and either not reacting with each other at all, or so remotely as to be not worth considering together. Opinions can differ on whether this desire for consistency is rational or can be carried too far, but there can be no doubt that it has been a powerful force, and one requiring the attention of many civil servants.

The second arises from the sheer size of the public sector—which forces upon it extremely elaborate systems and procedures, so as to break it down into manageable units, and to provide for a multiplicity of relationships between them—including the continuous adaptation of these units and their inter-relationships to changing circumstances.

The third is the increasing importance of technological and scientific expertise of all kinds, in these affairs, which has come with the introduction of government, on a grand scale, into the physical world. Ministers are no longer simply or even mainly concerned with influencing the minds and hearts of men to live peaceably with each other while they go about their private affairs and manage their own destinies. They must perforce be concerned with such matters as the routing, design, and cost per mile of motorways, the structure of the aircraft industry, the prospective return on projects as diverse as exploration for gas and oil in the North Sea, or a national pensions scheme whose full effects will not be felt until well into the next century, with the possibility of coping with double the present number of qualified applicants for higher education, the priorities to be accorded to the different lines of medical advance, and so on. Apart from the specific kinds of expertise relevant to each of these areas of activity there is a clear and increasing need for the skills and techniques of managing them—not only within each

of them, but in the allocation of resources, according to some acceptable implicit or explicit order of priorities, between them.

The upshot of all this has been an increasing interest in, and emphasis on, the managerial, as opposed to the traditionally political, side of government activity—and this throughout the whole of public sector activity, from the management of the smallest labour exchange or typing pool to the management of the great Departments, and the business of the Cabinet itself. This in turn has led to an increasing interest in what civil servants as opposed to Ministers do, and in what Ministers do apart from taking part in debates in Parliament—in what are called the processes of decision-making, the promotion of efficiency, the proper allocation of resources and their wise use. It has seemed to many that it cannot be said that Ministers can be regarded as personally responsible for all this—that the old doctrine of ministerial responsibility is now seen plainly to be what perhaps it always was, a myth, and that the really interesting questions of the time are those that revolve round the recruitment, training, organization, and techniques of all those different kinds of experts that must be needed—including, of course, the civil servants.

This brings me to the second area of change—in society itself. I cannot pretend to sociological insight, so that you can, if you wish, disregard entirely my opinion that what I am about to describe is, in part at any rate, a reaction against the growth of governmental activity that I have just described; however that may be, I think it is undeniable that alongside the centripetal tendencies I have been describing, there has grown up a strong centrifugal one—a desire to get the operations of government nearer to the grass-roots—to bring decision-making and operation closer together, to restore local authority, to enable the people affected to participate more closely in the decisions which affect them. How far this also reflects the growth of a better- or longer-educated electorate, or whether it is rather the result of the decline in deference to authority—or even whether these are two sides of the same coin—it is not for me to say. It does seem to me, however, that there is a tendency of this kind, and that together with the growth of governmental activity it has produced the following phenomena:

First, the desire by Parliamentarians, and others interested in public affairs, to have opportunities, through select committees and in other ways, to cross-examine civil servants and to bring administrative processes, including the processes

of decision-making and policy formulation, under public scrutiny.

Second, the institution of the Ombudsman, or Parliamentary Commissioner, to inquire into the administration of particular decisions, especially those affecting individuals.

Third, the desire to give greater autonomy and responsibility to local authorities, and to find a structure of local government which will be both nearer and more interesting to the citizen while at the same time being large enough to be efficient.

Fourth, the desire to find some unit of government larger than local authorities, but smaller than the present United Kingdom Government: this is of course particularly associated with nationalist feeling in Scotland and Wales, but appears from time to time in relation to regions of England as well.

All of these things, of course, affect the Civil Service very closely—and would do even more dramatically if some of the more radical ideas were implemented. But the Civil Service is also affected by what I think is basically the same phenomenon in another way. One way of picturing the remoteness people feel about government—especially if they are coming to believe that the aspect of government which affects them most is in the hands of civil servants—is to call them ‘mandarins’, to picture them as isolated beings ruling as it were an alien population—and to demand their appearance in public, their submission to public scrutiny, their public accountability: there is also a demand that they should not be in any way different—they should be ‘of us’—a sort of cross-section of the community as a whole, suffering at all points as we do. It is worth remarking in passing that if the public at large feels like this about the Civil Service as a whole, a large part of the Civil Service feels like this about those within it who appear to be its own rulers—the Administrative Class.

So there has grown up a demand for changes in the Civil Service, to meet both the new tasks of government and the new demands of society, demands which in part reinforce each other and in part conflict. Thus the demand that administrative processes should be brought under closer and more public scrutiny is made both by those who believe that the Civil Service is not as efficient as it should be, that it needs bullying into organizing itself properly and adopting the latest managerial techniques, and by those who want to see it brought under closer democratic control and made to reveal its forward thinking before decisions

are taken. At the same time those whose primary interest is in efficiency would like to see the independent powers of local authorities diminished rather than increased, and deplore the meticulous scrutiny of Parliamentary Committees and the Ombudsman, on the ground that it not only increases the number of civil servants, but also puts a premium on sticking safely to rule, record, or precedent and stifles initiative. These conflicting ideas and demands are not simply represented by different groups in the population: they can frequently be found together in the same speech or report.

We, however, who have the job of managing the Civil Service, under the direction of Ministers, and of guiding its reorganization and reform, have to pick our way through these various considerations and try to resolve the conflicts: and in this next section of my address I want to say something of what we have done and how we have gone about it.

But before I embark on that, I must first offer one reflection on what I have already said. I have attempted an outline description of the growth of government and the public sector over the last twenty-five years: and have probably appeared to imply that this growth, if it does not continue, will at least not reverse itself. I have up to now shown no recognition that government might contract, that large areas of what is now the public sector might return to the private one, that government intervention might decrease, that more of our affairs might be left to the market, to individual inclination, to chance, God, or what you will. It is, of course, a peculiarly easy, if not comforting, trap for a civil servant to fall into: at any rate I am aware that it is a trap. It is, I readily admit, possible that a government, or series of governments, might reverse the post-war trend: that, indeed, might be one outcome of the social tendencies I was describing. It does not seem to me, however, that this will happen overnight; or that the possibility absolves me and my colleagues from trying to do the best that we can with the Civil Service in the area where we have it, so to speak; we should be, in my opinion, trying to organize the public sector as efficiently as possible, to recruit, train, and promote civil servants as sensibly as possible in the area for which we are now responsible, so that while an activity remains within the public sector it is managed and operated as well as possible and that if at some future date it is handed over to some part of the public sector outside the Civil Service or taken out of the public sector altogether, the enterprise handed over should be in as good a

condition as possible and the handover be accomplished as smoothly as possible. I cannot imagine that anyone, however devoted he might be to the reduction of government activity, would go so far as to advocate that we should deliberately connive at inefficiency, or engineer irresponsibility, so as to provoke an irresistible public demand for the abandonment of some activity by government.

Having, I hope, made it clear that I wish to assert no particular vested interest in the shape and size of the central government and public sector as it now is, I return to my account of what we have been doing in the two years of our existence as a separate department.

We have found it convenient to group our activities under two main headings, which cover so to speak the demand and the supply side of our equation. On the demand side we have the work concerning the tasks which are laid upon the Civil Service, their division into different functions, the processes to which they give rise, their organization and management. These throw up a demand for numbers of civil servants with specific skills and experience. On the other side we have the problems concerning the supply of these people, their recruitment, training, selection, career development, promotion, etc.

I have already in the earlier part of this lecture given an outlined description of the tasks, in all their variety and complexity. Here I merely want to draw attention to one or two of the main features of the changes which we see already happening and developing further in the future.

The first is the revolutionary change which has been coming over the whole field of administrative processes, with the advent of the computer. Although the Service is well advanced in this field, the possibilities are so immense that we expect continuous extensions and developments as far ahead as we can see. The main need, as I see it, is to ally the introduction of computers with operational research and other analytical work so as to ensure that we do not merely automate existing manual procedures, but take the opportunity of the advent of the new technology to improve them wherever possible. These developments have already changed and will go on changing the nature of our demands for people—we shall want more people skilled in systems analysis, computer programming and operation, and fewer of the traditional clerical skills.

The second point concerns the management of all these processes. Here again we have seen great advances in the techniques

available to the decision-makers. These can be roughly divided into two groups—those concerning the allocation of resources, and those concerning the effective and efficient use of resources allocated.

In the first group we have made considerable strides in recent years. We have now developed a system which, conceptually at any rate, provides for the estimating of future resources and for displaying the consequences of various possible alternative allocations of them to the decision-makers, a system which is capable of being applied to any unit of management from a branch of a department to the public sector as a whole. This will undoubtedly be developed and deepened as time goes on, and will again throw up new and different demands for people with particular skills; we shall need more statisticians and economists and other scientists as well as people capable of understanding the work of these specialists and working with them to present the material to the decision-makers.

In the second group of activities—the efficient use of resources allocated to a particular activity—we are less advanced; and this is serious because the full benefits of either side of the system cannot be got without the full development of each. Until we have a more precise understanding of what I might call the production functions of administrative activity—the relationship between the input of resources and the output in terms of public benefit—there will not only be difficulty in assigning responsibility for the management of resources, but there will also be an inherent vagueness in the material presented for decision on the allocation of resources. What we are doing in this area is to try out systems of cost-benefit analysis and other techniques such as management by objectives, which have been found useful in other fields, mainly in private enterprise. At the same time we are conducting research directed to the possibility of measuring output in public activities and more broadly into the application in the public sector, and particularly in the activities of central government, of management theories and techniques developed mainly for private businesses. Thus our immediate demand is for people versed in these techniques from business schools, the universities, and business itself, and I am glad to say that help has been forthcoming in full measure. I might remark in passing that this is an area of activity in which both the political parties in this country are deeply interested, so that there will be no loss of momentum with the recent change in the party complexion of the government, following the General Election. Indeed, as

is well known, the present government intend to step up the efforts in these matters and plan to bring a number of businessmen into government on a full-time basis for this and other purposes. It will be seen from what I have said that this is a development which I welcome unreservedly. The difficulties, both intellectual and political, are formidable, and I shall be glad for all the help I can get.

If these developments are successful, so that we are able to translate these ideas into actual operational reality, then we shall see further changes in our demand for skills and experience in the Civil Service—and if the full benefits of the new systems are to be realized, in the other public services as well.

Now I turn to what I have called the other side of the equation—the supply side. Before I outline what we are doing here I want to make two preliminary but very important points.

The first is that we are not of course planning a Civil Service in a vacuum. We have, in the existing Service, an enormous stock of people not only possessing a great variety of the talents, skills, and experience needed but also dedicated to the public service as such.

Secondly we must never forget that we are not dealing with machinery—mobile hands or brains so to speak—but with people. People, once their imagination is fired and they have harnessed their talents, are capable of far more sensitive responses and subtle creations than the most ingenious computer; at the same time, if they are badly treated, the variety and depth of their recalcitrance is tremendous. Apart from that the civil servants of today are part of today's society; they are both contributors to and are affected by the changes in society and social attitude to which I referred at the beginning of this lecture. Moreover, since our processes of selection and the training and experience we give to civil servants are already highly developed, it seems to me possible that we have in the Service a higher proportion, compared with the country as a whole, of able, intelligent, forward-looking, and therefore potentially restless if not rebellious people. This means that it is simply not possible for any group of people, whether they come from outside or whether they are the top management of the Civil Service, simply to design new systems of work, new arrangements for recruitment, selection and training, and hand them out, ready made, to the hungry flock. Civil servants of all ages, and all grades and specialities, are proud of their Service, passionately interested in its development, and feel they have a right—in my

opinion quite correctly—to participate in the working out and implementation of the changes I have described.

These two facts lie at the root of what we have done and are doing as our response to the changing demands being made upon the Service.

The argument has revolved round two great issues—the abolition of the class structure and the specialist/generalist controversy. Both of these topics have generated and are continuing to generate an enormous amount of subtle theology, which is likely to get more and more convoluted as negotiations go on. Nevertheless there are, I think, at the heart of each of these issues some perfectly simple issues.

First the class structure. Until recently you could think of the Civil Service, without too much caricature, as being slotted into a bank of pigeon holes. These ranged from lower to middle to higher, broadly according to the educational qualifications of people as they came in. At the same time there was a further distinction according to whether people were generalists or whether they had specialist qualifications. The impression was that it was extremely difficult if not impossible to jump from one pigeon hole to the other—whether from a lower to an upper one or whether from a specialist one to a generalist one; and that this was extremely unfair, as well as being wasteful of talent, for a variety of reasons, but principally because it was believed—with a good deal of truth—that those who came in to the upper generalist pigeon hole—that is to say those who were recruited as graduates to the Administrative Class—had an almost guaranteed and exclusive expectation of securing the most senior and best-paid jobs in the Service.

That was the picture as many people saw it, including many civil servants as well as members of the Fulton Committee. It was, of course, an oversimplification.

There were many people who were in fact able to get into the generalist area occupied in my caricature by the Administrative Class, from other classes, including a number who did not have university degrees; and there were many people in specialist classes who had as influential jobs and were as well paid as people in the Administrative Class. Nevertheless there was a widespread feeling both of unfairness and inefficiency, and there was something in it.

The sense of unfairness and inefficiency was heightened by the description of one set of people as ‘generalists’ and the other categories as ‘specialists’. In my opinion this was also an over-

simplification and something of a caricature. If you examine closely what in fact went on you will find that even before we introduced systems of formal training, many of the so-called generalists were in fact trained—admittedly more by experience than in any formal way—to become specialists of a variety of special kinds; in particular in the Parliamentary processes and other ministerial activities and, as an extension of these, in the business of financial control and personnel management as these functions were traditionally understood. These skills, at any rate while they were accepted as sufficient, were obviously of a kind which were appropriate to work in a number of departments; and this led, together with the absence of formal qualifications, to these people being dubbed ‘generalists’. What has happened, in my opinion, is not so much that ‘generalism’ has been found inadequate, as that the particular skills which were covered by that description have been either overtaken by events or seem to require a great deal more formal training as well as experience, and to be supplemented by the skills and experience of people formerly dubbed ‘specialists’.

In this situation what precisely we do with the structure seems to me less important than that we should seek to achieve the following objectives:

First, we should look for our best talent, for the people who seem most likely to be the top civil servants of the future, throughout the Service and not only from one particular part of it; and we should judge them not merely on their educational attainments on entry, but on a combination of what that can tell us, together with our own selection tests, and their performance in a variety of jobs after they have come into the Service.

Second, we should recognize that in the nature of things after the initial testing and training period, it is both necessary and salutary that people should specialize—not in the sense of being put into rigid compartments, but in the sense being allowed to accumulate practical experience in an area or function of government for a reasonable length of time.

Third, we should also recognize that as people rise in the Service, whether in areas of activity formerly thought of as generalist, or in the specialist areas, their work is in fact likely to become more generalized and less specialized, as it becomes more managerial; this may well require fresh training for all, wherever they may have started.

Fourth, we should also recognize that some specialists will prefer, and it will be in the public interest to respect their preference, to remain actively engaged on their specialism, and not to be brought into general management positions; and if their specialist performance is good enough we should allow this and reward them accordingly.

These general propositions underlie the arrangements which we have already negotiated, and are about to bring to fruition for the recruitment of non-specialist graduates and for what is called, in the jargon, the 'interim merger of the administrative, executive, and clerical classes'. This is our first step; it will be followed by similar mergers in the scientific and some of the other professional classes, as a prelude to the opening up of opportunities between the classes—something which we are endeavouring to do now on an individual basis ahead of a general arrangement. All of this we are doing, in accordance with the principles I referred to earlier, in full consultation with the representatives of the Staff Associations, and as far as possible in public.

So far I have been talking about the need for improving in various ways the efficiency of the Civil Service in changing circumstances. Now I want to turn to the last of the three things which at the outset I said that I thought that any society would expect from its Civil Service—responsiveness to political change.

The thing about the Civil Service in this country which interests most foreigners, and particularly at a time like the present, immediately after a General Election—is the fact that while politicians and Ministers change, the Civil Service is permanent. There is in fact something of a paradox in this, in that the Civil Service is at one and the same time the permanent service of the state and also the servant of the administration which is for the time being in power. The first question which arises is: how is this possible? It seems to me that it is possible if, and only if, the following requirements are fulfilled:

First, each successive administration regards itself as elected to look after the welfare of the whole community, and not just the section of it which voted it into power.

Second, each successive administration regards itself as bound to maintain, and not to subvert, the constitution—i.e. to hold regular Parliamentary elections as required by law, to accept the results of them, to respect the rights of the Opposition, the laws of the country and liberties of the people, and so on.

Third, the people, for their part, accept the results of the electoral process and live peaceably under whatever government is elected.

Where these conditions do not obtain, there is, it seems to me, no room for a permanent, non-political Civil Service of the kind we have in this country. I should perhaps add that among all the changes that are coming over this country, and despite suggestions from some quarters to the contrary, I do not foresee any change in these fundamental requirements.

I therefore conclude that a permanent, politically neutral, Civil Service of the kind we now have is still feasible, and that it is not necessary to plan on any other basis.

This, however, leaves over the other side of the question: even if it is feasible is it desirable?—or to put it perhaps less emphatically: would some other system be better? More specifically, would we do better to follow the example of the United States? There, broadly speaking, the prerequisites I have described still obtain, and there is a permanent Civil Service but its top ranks, at levels broadly equivalent to our Permanent Secretaries and Deputy Secretaries, and encompassing what we think of as the major managerial and policy-making functions, are held not by the permanent Civil Service but by appointees of the President, who are more often than not his political supporters coming in at his invitation and not remaining after his departure.

There are of course a large number of reasons, derived from the political history and constitutional arrangements of the two countries, which explain this particular difference between us. It is not my present purpose to go into these in detail but simply to use the example as a means of asking the question: would we be better off if Ministers were to bring in to the Service numbers of their own supporters, not being members of either House of Parliament, to occupy, broadly speaking, the positions now occupied by the Permanent Secretaries and Deputy Secretaries now drawn from the permanent Civil Service? I should perhaps interject that so far as I am aware this is an academic question; the idea was rejected by the Fulton Committee and is not, so far as I know, part of the programme of either political party.

I am sure that it will not surprise you to learn that I do not think that this would be a desirable development. I believe it to be the main duty of the Civil Service, at this particular point of contact with Ministers on the formulation of policy and the taking of policy decisions, to be the eyes and ears of Ministers, to present to them a picture of ongoing reality, and to work out

for them, in the way that I have already described, the various alternative policy options open to them and the likely consequences of a choice of any one of them. I believe that to do this job in the way that it ought to be done requires long training and experience, and detailed knowledge of the administrative processes involved, as well as the past history of the subject, of a kind which can only be acquired from a career in a permanent service. I also believe that the chief danger to which politicians and Ministers are exposed is not, as is often supposed, that obstructive bureaucrats will drag their feet in implementing their schemes, but that their own optimism will carry them into schemes and policies which will subsequently be seen to fail—failure which attention to the experience and information available from the Service might have avoided. Since I hold these views, I also hold that the interposition between Ministers and the permanent Service of a layer of political appointees could only be damaging—because it would tend to insulate the Minister—the ultimate decision-maker—from reality and to infect the advice he received with the kind of optimism to which I have referred.

I do not mean to imply by this that civil servants in this country are uniquely able to adjust themselves to changing political masters and to see at once all the implications of a change of government in every field of policy and administration; nor do I exclude the use of personal politically oriented advisers brought temporarily into the Service by particular Ministers. What I do say is that it is better that their contribution should supplement, and not take the place of, the face-to-face and continuous dialogue between Ministers and their permanent advisers.

I have now had a good deal of experience of changes of government and been concerned, in the period immediately before each election, with the preparation of briefs explaining the situation in the area of government activity for which I was responsible and outlining the problems, and alternative solutions, as I saw them. This work has necessarily been done in ignorance of the result of each election, and experience since 1945 has taught me that the results of elections can often be surprising. It has therefore been necessary to prepare for both parties, and the fact is that the differences between the two sets of briefs have been remarkably small and only what one would expect: a fuller explanation for those who would, if they won, be coming fresh to the scene, a discussion in greater depth of

topics which, from the manifestos, campaign speeches, and other indications, one party or the other was known to be interested, and a proper reticence, in the material prepared for one side, about the private affairs of the other. This experience seems to me to show that there is indeed a great deal of common ground—what I have called ongoing reality—which is properly, necessarily, and desirably the concern of a permanent Civil Service.

I have included in my description of our pre-election work ‘a proper reticence’. The need for this, which I hope is obvious, is closely linked with another current debate—on what is called the anonymity of civil servants—the tradition that we should not take part in public discussion of the affairs with which we are concerned. This has been held by many to be an old-fashioned absurdity and to deprive the public both of the benefit of expert knowledge and opinion and to enable us to hide our deficiencies from public scrutiny.

It must by now be clear that I myself, like many of my colleagues, believe that this tradition can be carried too far, and that there are topics on which civil servants can usefully contribute, in their own persons and under their own names, in public debate. The ongoing reality of which I spoke is not something which any citizen can observe for himself, it is in many fields of government a highly abstract, complex, logical construction, compounded from uncertain theory and imperfectly measurable and incompletely available data; its understanding is therefore difficult; the range of uncertainty in the conclusions to be drawn about it is normally wide; and its significance for policy decision frequently a matter of dispute between experts. This means, to my way of thinking, that if the demand for more public participation in discussion of policy issues is to be met the public must be given, not only the raw data, but also their interpretation—with all their uncompleteness and uncertainty—and the best estimate that can be made of what I might call the considerations affecting policy.

In recent years successive governments have been moving quite steadily in this direction, and if it continues there will be a growing field in which this work—the work of civil servants—will be put out for public information and discussion. To my mind there would be every advantage in the name of the civil servants responsible for such studies being known, and their being allowed to join in public debate on their own findings.

I am not, of course, suggesting that this can be done in every field of public policy, there are obvious areas, in foreign affairs, defence, and financial policy where there are overwhelming reasons for secrecy until the moment for decision comes. I am also aware that what I have called the uncertainties and ambiguities of interpretation are frequently the stuff of party controversy—though I am not always sure why—and that for a civil servant to espouse a particular interpretation would often entail taking sides. This fact will frequently inhibit the freedom with which we can speak, and will always make any public utterance by a civil servant a somewhat perilous adventure. Nevertheless, I have been glad to see that our political masters have been becoming more tolerant, and that we have been becoming bolder, and I hope the result has been contributing to public enlightenment and will continue to do so.

Nevertheless the need for reticence remains, and so far as I can see will continue, in a particular area—the confidential exchanges between civil servants and Ministers, including the advice given by civil servants to Ministers on particular questions. This seems to me to follow quite ineluctably from our position as the permanent Service, serving either political party and necessarily privy to the personal and political views of Ministers, and former Ministers, of both sides. In my view this has nothing whatever to do with the Official Secrets Act and would remain just as necessary if the Act were repealed. It is an essential part of our ethic and the only basis on which we can continue to function as we do. It is obvious that the line between the area of reticence, and the area where I think we can be seen and heard, is very difficult to draw, nevertheless I think it is a good thing that the attempt is being made, so that we can learn how to contribute more than we have in the past to public enlightenment, and at the same time continue to deserve the trust reposed in us by Ministers.

In this section I have been describing the ethics, the role, and the problems of those at the top of the service—who have been, as I have explained, predominantly the Administrative Class. Although that label will now be disappearing, the problems will still be there and the need for the qualities will remain. I know that within the present Administrative Class there are many fully capable both of carrying on past traditions and developing them as new needs appear, and that they will welcome into the top rank of the Service colleagues from other

disciplines and backgrounds who understand the problems and accept the obligations as well as the opportunities.

When I embarked on this lecture, I intended to discuss whether the role and character of the Civil Service was such that it could usefully be described as a profession. Having tried to describe the role as I see it—both those parts of it which I see changing, and those which I think should not change—I now rather doubt whether a label is necessary. We share some characteristics of the recognized professions and not others: in some contexts the label is a useful shorthand, in others rather misleading. For my part I am content to be a civil servant.