THE BRITISH ADMINISTRATIVE ELITE
THE ART OF CHANGE WITHOUT CHANGING?

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Résumé
— La haute fonction publique britannique : l’art du changement sans changer ? — Une interprétation possible de l’état de la haute fonction publique britannique, définie comme le sommet de la fonction publique, serait que des vagues successives de réformes depuis 1979 aient fondamentalement changé son caractère. Auteurs des réformes et chercheurs affirment qu’une modification fondamentale se serait en effet produite. Certains voient comme une modernisation nécessaire. D’autres ont été plus critiques, considérant ces modifications comme détruisant une institution saine au nom de la « managérialisation » voire de la « politisation ». Mais qu’est-ce qui a vraiment changé ? Si on ne peut nier certains changements, reste à savoir quelle est leur importance concrète ? Cet article examine avec attention les faits qui permettent de constater l’existence, ou non, de transformations. Sa principale conclusion est que le degré de modification est bien moins important que ce que certains rapports suggèrent. On constate en effet une plus grande continuité dans le rôle principal d’élaboration des politiques et surtout dans le rôle constitutionnel fondamental de la haute fonction publique britannique que ce que les changements superficiels suggéraient. Néanmoins, des défis récents, dont certains sont apparus sous l’impact de la crise financière mondiale, peuvent être des événements allant vers un changement fondamental du rôle de la haute fonction publique même si cela ne s’est pas encore produit.

Mots clefs
| Haute fonction publique britannique, changement, élites administratives

Abstract
One narrative about the British administrative elite – defined as the top of the civil service – is that successive waves of reforms since 1979 have fundamentally changed its character. Reformers and external academic analysts have both claimed fundamental change has occurred. Some see this as a good thing, a necessary modernisation. Others have been more critical, seeing these changes as destroying a healthy institution in the name of ‘managerialism’ or even ‘politicisation’. But what has really changed? It is undoubtedly true that there have been some changes, but how significant are they? This article will try to carefully assess the evidence about what has changed, and what has not. The principle conclusion is that the degree of change is far less than most accounts suggest – there is a great deal more continuity in the principle policy-making role and above all the fundamental constitutional role of the British Senior Civil Service than superficial changes would suggest. Nevertheless, recent challenges, some brought on by the impact of the global financial crisis, may be moving events towards a fundamental shift in the role of the administrative elite – although it has not happened yet.

Keywords
| British Senior Civil Service, change, administrative elites
For the purposes of this paper, the Senior Civil Service (SCS) in Britain is treated as being equivalent to the ‘administrative elite’. This focus is adopted because of the unique constitutional role of the civil service and its symbiotic link to the political executive – in the words of the famous ‘Armstrong Doctrine’, the ‘civil service has no constitutional personality separate from that of the government of the day’. It is of course not entirely true that the SCS equals the ‘administrative elite’; if the latter is taken to mean the top-echelons of those who administer the state and its functions, then it is clearly broader than simply the SCS. The entire civil service in the UK represents only about one tenth of all public servants – the vast majority of those who work in education, health, local government, defence, policing, etc., are not ‘civil servants’ but ‘public servants’, or in the case of the armed forces ‘military officers’. The leaders of these other groups could easily be considered part of the ‘administrative elite’, but they do not have the same constitutional relationship with the political elite, mentioned above, that defines the civil service. Despite this, they clearly could, indeed probably should, be included in any full analysis of Britain’s ‘administrative elite’. However, space and resource constraints dictate a narrower focus for this paper – concentrating on the SCS.

The case of the ‘devolved governments’ in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should be briefly mentioned for clarity. In Scotland and Wales the Senior Civil Service remains part – for the moment at least – of the UK SCS, although there are moves in Scotland to change this. Northern Ireland is a more complex and unique case. Most senior civil servants working for the Northern Ireland Assembly (NIA) government are members of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS), which is a remnant of the historic all-Ireland civil service from colonial days. This was not, and still is not, part of the UK ‘home’ civil service. To complicate matters, UK ‘home’ civil servants do still staff the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) in Belfast and London, which still represents the interests of central government for the province. Given these complexities in the devolved administrations, this paper is restricted to the UK central government – or ‘Whitehall’ as it is most frequently called.

THE SIZE OF THE BEAST

So what is the size of the SCS beast – or the ‘Mandarinate’ as it is sometimes called? The SCS accounted, in 2011, for just under 1% of the total civil service of 498,433 (see Figure 1).

However, ‘Whitehall’ – that is the ‘head offices’ of most ministries – accounts for about 9% of all civil servants (about 45,000). Of course, most of these staff are not in policy-related occupations but many do form part of the support system for the actual ‘administrative elite’, the SCS, in Whitehall. Conversely, not all of the SCS are based in Whitehall – the policy of dispersing functions around the UK means that a substantial number are now located outside of London altogether, although mostly still within England (as opposed to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). ‘Whitehall’ remains the centre, even for those ‘out-stationed’ in the ‘provinces’, which is how most senior civil servants see it. The impact of the ‘cuts’ following the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government in May 2010 is clear to see in Figure 2. After a steady rise in numbers from 2000 onwards the total suddenly went into decline.
Figure 1 – Civil service employment: percentage by responsibility level: 31 March 2011

Source: Civil Service Statistics 2011, ONS

Figure 2 – Size of the Senior Civil Service, 1996 to 2012

Source: copied from (Comptroller and Auditor General, 2013)
The distribution between grades and ministries can be seen clearly in Figure 3. It is worth noting the relatively small numbers in the two core departments – the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury –, although this group wields considerable power, especially HMT.

**Figure 3 – Senior civil servants by grade and department, April 2012**

![Chart showing the distribution of senior civil servants by grade and department]

Source: copied from (Comptroller and Auditor General, 2013)
Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of the SCS across different roles. Again it is notable that about a quarter of the total (just over a thousand) are in what are defined as ‘policy’ roles – although in fact a number of other professional groups (e.g. economists, scientific and medical staff and others) are also really specialist policy staff.

Figure 4 – Classification of Senior Civil Service posts against civil service professions, April 2012

Source: copied from (Comptroller and Auditor General, 2013)
Whilst the SCS numbered some 4,000 plus, the elite of the elite is also sometimes numbered as a mere couple of hundred – the so-called ‘Top 200’ of permanent secretaries and their immediate deputies, plus a few agency chief executives. Which particular layer of the Whitehall ‘onion’ you choose to analyse – from the core ‘Top 200’, through the 4,000 plus members of the SCS, down to the 45,000 denizens of ‘Whitehall’ – depends on your purposes and theoretical perspectives. For the most part in this paper we will concentrate on the SCS, and sometimes the ‘Top 200’ for particular analytical discussions.

THE CHANGING SOCIOLOGY OF THE SCS

The traditional image of the SCS has been that of a privately-educated elite who went to Oxbridge¹, straight into the Fast Stream and in due course rose to the top of the civil service – and moreover was, as some put it, ‘male and pale’. As late as only a decade ago it was still possible to conclude that ‘the Civil Service continued to be the preserve of an all-male, Oxbridge educated, upper to middle class elite’ (Kavanagh and Richards, 2003). This may indeed have been true in the fairly recent past, but it has gradually become a caricature of the actual ‘sociology’ of top civil servants. The number of ‘public school’² educated top civil servants has steadily declined over the past century (see Figure 5) and currently stands at only 27% for the ‘Top 200’ (see Figure 12). Similarly the class background of top civil servants has gradually shifted as the number of top civil servants from ‘upper-class’ backgrounds has steadily declined (see Figure 6).

The comparison with other British elite groups is instructive – the dominance of the ‘public-school’ educated amongst these groups is notable. For example, amongst judges 70% went to ‘public schools’; as did 54% of company CEOs and journalists; 51% of medics and 42% of scientists and scholars (Sutton Trust, 2009). To this extent, sociologically at least, the civil service elite has clearly moved further away from its mainly upper-class origins. Moreover this has been very a long-term trend, as evidenced by Figure 5 and Figure 6.

The proportion of successful candidates to the civil service Fast Stream³ also shows a declining influence of Oxbridge – the number of successful candidates from Oxford or Cambridge fell between 1998 and 2011 from 34.5% of the total to 26.0%. There has also been an increase in direct entry to the SCS, circumventing the traditional Fast Stream route. In 2011 some 23% of the SCS and 41% of the ‘Top 200’ were ‘external entrants’ who had joined the SCS through the external recruitment route (Cabinet Office, 2012). This almost meets a target set in 2005 to have 25% of the SCS drawn from the private, voluntary or wider public sector (Cabinet Office, 2005). Some analysts have claimed that external recruitment, especially from the private sector, has fundamentally altered the complexion of the SCS: ‘the leadership of the British civil service is now predominantly composed of private sector appointees’ (Wilks, 2013, 77). This is something of an exaggeration, because although there has been an increase in private sector recruitment, as Figure 7 shows it has actually declined in recent years.

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1. ‘Oxbridge’ is a term used to denote Oxford and Cambridge universities.
2. ‘Public school’ is the term used in the UK for, confusingly, privately owned, funded and run schools. What in other countries would be called ‘public schools’ are in Britain generally referred to as ‘state schools’.
3. ‘Fast Stream’ is the direct entry scheme for university graduates who are selected as potential ‘high-flyers’. There are actually several different ‘Fast Streams’ now.
Figure 5 – School background of top civil servants 1880-1970


Figure 6 – Social class of top civil servants’ parents

Figure 7 – External recruitment trends from open competitions: Senior Civil Service

![Graph showing external recruitment trends from open competitions: Senior Civil Service](image)

Source: derived from Cabinet Office figures cited in (Public Administration Select Committee, 2010)

It should also be noted that these are the figures for only ‘open competition’ appointments. According to the Civil Service Commission only about half or less of selections at this level are ‘open’. So, for example, the 43% private sector appointments for 2002-03 is 43% of approximately half of all appointments – about 22%.

The results of this recruitment can be seen more clearly in data supplied by the Cabinet Office to a select committee (see Figure 8). From this it can be seen that all ‘outsiders’ in the SCS stabilised at 23%, and we know that only around two thirds of those would be from the private sector. Moreover about one third of all ‘externals’ are ‘medical, information technology and finance’ specialists.

Figure 8 – Headcount for SCS 2003-2008

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<th>2003</th>
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<th>2008</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
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</table>

Source: evidence from Cabinet Office to Public Administration Select Committee (2010)

There are, however, several other ways in which business elites have had an impact on the SCS, as Wilks (2013) points out. These include secondments into the civil service (see Public Administration Select Committee, 2010), especially from the big accountancy firms into HM Revenue and Customs (see Committee of Public Accounts, 2013); the widespread use of management consultants (Comptroller and Auditor General, 2010); the increasing number of former senior civil servants taking up posts in the private
sector (Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, 2012); and the increasing use of ‘non-executive directors’ on the boards of ministries and agencies (Wilks, 2013).

Over the past two or three decades the ‘male and pale’ character of the top civil service has also begun to change – many more women are now at senior ranks (see Figure 9). Over a third of the SCS are now women. Ethnic minorities too have slowly begun to penetrate both the civil service as a whole (up from 5.8% to 8.9% between 2000 and 2009) and the SCS, which now has 4% from this group.

*Figure 9 – Women in the SCS 1996-2009*

![Graph showing the percentage of women in the SCS from 1996 to 2009](image)


All of this suggests that the administrative elite is, very slowly, becoming more sociologically representative of British society. How much of this is due to specific policies, and how much to general modernisation trends in society and labour markets as whole, is less clear. For example, participation of ethnic minorities in the civil service (8.9%) as a whole is almost exactly the same as in the rest of the public service (8.7%), and in the private sector (9.1%). And neither for women nor for ethnic minorities does participation at the top (34% and 4% respectively) yet come close to reflecting participation in the whole civil service workforce (which is 53% and 9% respectively). Furthermore, whilst the strictly ‘upper-class’ nature of the top civil service has moderated, in 2011 analysis of applications for the Fast Stream showed that over 70% still came from households with at least one parent in the ‘higher managerial, administrative or professional’ occupational categories. This suggests that whilst the extreme elitism of the past may have been modified, the Fast Stream at least still mainly attracts candidates from a broader stratum, including both upper and middle classes, but still an elite social group.

4. Although in 2012 there has been a sudden drop in women at most levels. Whether this is a temporary ‘blip’ or a reversal of recent trends remains to be seen.
The increase in external recruitment may also not be quite all it seems. The bare numbers can be misleading. Some analysts have suggested that much of the ‘external’ recruitment has been to specialist posts like finance, IT, procurement, human resources, strategy, and communication posts. Likewise, there has been considerable recruitment to ‘operational’ service delivery roles, especially in the so-called ‘Next Steps’ agencies (Levitt and Solesbury, 2006). These individuals have had limited impact on core policy-making functions and the creation of a ‘policy expert’ profession as part of the ‘Professional Skills for Government’ programme was seen by many as a ploy to ‘protect the traditional “mandarin” domain of policy’ (ibid). Most of the core policy functions continue to be dominated by career, ex-Fast Stream, civil servants.

A key issue here has been the reinvention of the ‘generalist amateur’ into the ‘policy professional’. The traditional senior civil servant had only a first degree from a ‘good’ university (most usually ‘Oxbridge’). Since joining the civil service via the Fast Stream they will have had some limited in-house training, but very few would have gone on to do a higher degree. Whilst in the service they will have moved from post to post fairly rapidly, and often with little regard to their past experience or any incipient expertise – hence the phrase often employed of ‘gifted amateurs’. A senior civil servant might be in charge of national roads policy one week and be the human resources director for the Home Office the next.

Since the Oughton report in 1993 there have been various attempts to alter this situation and make the core policy-making function more ‘professional’ and establish clearer career paths and career ‘anchors’ for policy specialists (Oughton, 1993). These included various attempts to train the policy ‘professionals’ including the so-called Northcote and Trevelyan programmes run by the (then) Civil Service College, the Top Management Programme run by the Cabinet Office and the ill-fated Civil Service MBA of the late 1990s. It is interesting to note that few of these in-house initiatives have focussed on the sort of ‘analytics’, including economic and financial analysis, which would predominate in any policy analysis course in, say, a US university. However the basic training and experience of the core policy civil servants remained largely unchanged – they still moved rapidly from one post, and policy area, to another and still did not mostly have higher degrees. This may however be changing somewhat. In a recent survey of the SCS we conducted, of those who answered our question about their qualifications all had first degrees, over half had a Masters or equivalent and a quarter said they had PhDs. This is probably a biased sample, which is why we did not use it in our report, but it is still indicative of some possibly important changes taking place within the SCS (Talbot and Talbot, 2014).

The most recent initiative to try to get away from the ‘gifted amateur’ image and reality was the Professional Skills for Government (PSG) programme5 initiated by the last Labour government (and since abandoned by the new 2010 government). PSG sought to ‘stream’ senior civil servants (and some lower ranks) into ‘professions’ – one focussed on ‘operational management’, which was a continuation of the ‘Next Steps’ attempt to create a cadre of ‘agency’ managers. Another was a functional specialist ‘profession’ (or rather, group of professions) focussed on things like finance, IT, purchasing, etc. The third was our old friend the ‘policy’ profession, focussed, not surprisingly, on the policy-making role that traditionally lies at the heart of the SCS. Despite the renaming of this core group, very little else seems to have changed as a result of PSG – indeed I have argued elsewhere that it in fact cemented many of the traditional features of the ‘gifted amateur’ policy elite into place.6

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So, whilst the sociological composition of the SCS may have changed somewhat over the years, this does not necessarily mean that the SCS culture has changed to the same degree. The traditional view of the senior civil servant as a detached, cerebral, cultured, politically neutral, and essentially amateur generalist does not mean that such people have to have come from private schools, or Oxbridge, or even be white and male. There is strong anecdotal and observational evidence that the traditional culture at the top has changed only slightly, much less than the purely sociological changes would imply. Nor has the experience in-service of senior civil servants changed markedly – few have operational experience of running services within the civil service, never mind the 90% of public services not run directly by the civil service. More have external experience in the private sector, but their core in-house experience remains in rapidly-changing policy jobs focussed on drafting policy statements, white papers, legislation and other policy outputs. As the ‘Next Steps’ report of 1988 concluded, most senior civil servants’ attention was firmly focussed upwards on policy-making rather than downwards on policy delivery (Jenkins et al., 1988). This remains true today.

NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK – SPADS AND TSARS

Two developments which, combined, can be said to have had a significant impact on the landscape within which the SCS operates have been the rise of SPADs and tsars over the past two decades. Whilst these are not new, they expanded in numbers rapidly under the New Labour government (1997-2010) and have continued at similar levels under the Coalition government (2010-), as can be seen in Figure 10.

*Figure 10 – Number of special advisers, by No.10 and departments, 1994-5 – 2010-11*

Figures not available for 2009-10 because of change of government. Source: Hansard

7. ‘SPADs’ is the acronym often used for ‘special advisers’
The increase in specifically political appointments of special advisers has been paralleled by the growth in another, more ambiguous, category – the so-called ‘tsars’. These are people appointed by the Prime Minister or ministers to review a specific area of policy, often for a limited term. They have had various titles – Reviewer, Adviser, Advocate, Ambassador, Champion, Commissioner, Envoy, Representative and Voice. The term ‘tsar’ has often been objected to on the grounds that it implies some sort of executive power, rather than policy-advice, role – which is what most of these people do. In the first two years of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government more than ninety ‘tsars’ were appointed to investigate, advise, recommend and even sometimes act on, specific policy areas. The previous Labour government appointed around 189 ‘tsars’ during its entire 13-year term in office. This suggests this is an important new feature of the political-administrative landscape.

**Figure 11 – Rate of tsar appointments 1997-2012**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Duration of government (months)</th>
<th>No of ‘tsar’ appointments</th>
<th>Rate PA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labour 1997-2001</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour 2001-2005</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour 2005-2010</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition 2010-2012</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>182</td>
<td>282*</td>
<td>19</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*(total exceeds 267 because Coalition renewed some Labour appointments)*
Source: Levitt and Solesbury, 2012

Many of these ‘tsars’ are not ‘political’, in the sense that SPADs are – they are not necessarily supporters of the parties in power. But they are very much an alternative source of policy advice to the traditional civil service. Nor are ‘tsar’ appointments subject to the same procedures – or accountability mechanisms – applied to SPADs, which are now much more institutionalised and regulated. Although figures for numbers of ‘tsars’ in post by year are not available, a rough estimate would put the number – certainly since the mid-2000s – at above fifty at any one time. Taken together, SPADs and tsars represent a significant shift in the way in which the policy-advice function operates in central government. There are probably, today, well over 130 SPADs and tsars at any one time engaged in policy-advice roles in British central government. Taken together with the almost 120 ministers in British central government this means there are 250 or so politicians and politically-appointed policy-makers operating within the core executive.

Compared to the total SCS, the political and politically-appointed elite remains small – 250 or so compared to the 4,000 plus in the whole SCS. But is that the correct comparison or ‘unit of analysis’? It could be argued that it would be more appropriate to compare the ministers-SPADS-tsars with the very top of the civil service – the so-called ‘Top 200’. The ‘Top 200’ is, arguably, what the civil service itself sees as the elite of the elite. They are, again arguably, of equivalent status to the political elite. As the name ‘Top 200’ suggests, this group is actually smaller than the ‘political elite’ – the number of ministers, SPADs
and tsars at any one time – and this raises interesting issues about the real balance of power between the political and administrative elites in government. On this analysis, ministers and their politically appointed ‘supporters’ outnumber the equivalent mandarinate, which is not the commonly accepted image. But it would be wrong to push this analysis too far – mandarins have the support of the whole 4,000 plus strong SCS, not to mention the thousands more who support policy work at every level (Page and Jenkins, 2005). Civil servants control the flow of information to ministers, SPADs and tsars. Without their cooperation SPADs in particular can find it almost impossible to operate effectively, and such cooperation can be withdrawn if civil servants perceive SPADs to be not fully supported by their ministers. On the political elite ‘side’ of the equation, not all SPADs have equivalent status to top civil servants and many tsars are not ‘political’ themselves. Nor are ministers, SPADs and tsars organised into integrated ministerial offices (as in Australia) or ‘cabinets’ (as in France). SPADs and tsars are also not evenly distributed within government. Whilst at the centre, especially the Prime Minister’s office where are a substantial groups of SPADs, in individual ministries there are usually only 2-3 of them, making them very isolated (see Figure 10). Likewise, tsars tend to be concentrated at the centre.

So the balance of power in terms of numbers, knowledge and organisation still clearly lies with the permanent civil service administrative elite, but there is no doubt that the political elite has been steadily acquiring greater resources, independent of the civil service, for themselves. This may only be an evolutionary process, but it is changing. Recent moves by the Coalition government, partly as set out in their Civil Service Reform Plan (2012), suggest there could be an acceleration in these trends.

More recently, the Government decided, after a commissioned report from a think-tank 8, to inaugurate ‘Extended Ministerial Offices’ and issued guidance to departments on how they should be established 9 and the Civil Service Commission drew up rules for appointments to these new ‘EMOs’ 10. It remains to be seen to what extent these EMOs actually get set up between now and the next 2015 General Election, but it is unlikely to be very many (mainly because the complications of coalition government make this initiative very challenging). This EMO initiative, and the increase in SPADs and tsars, all emphasise the point made above that the political elite as a whole tends to regard the administrative elite (SCS) as a separate entity to be treated with caution, at the very least. The narrative of ‘Yes, Minister’ and ‘Yes, Prime Minister’ was firmly rooted in public choice ideas about bureaucrats as ‘budget maximisers’ with their own self-regarding motives who will seek to thwart ministers. The growth of SPADs and tsars – under governments of all main parties – seems to confirm that this trope has strong purchase on the thinking of the political elite. Their desire for alternative sources of support and advice from outside of the civil service suggests a lack of complete trust in the administrative elite.

THE ADMINISTRATIVE ELITE, POLITICAL ELITE, GOVERNMENTAL ELITE

One hypothesis that has been advanced is that what we have in Britain is not separate administrative and political elites, but rather a ‘governmental elite’ because of the close fusion of elected politicians and permanent civil servants in the core executive (Rhodes, 2013).

2011). It is certainly true that there is a semi-fusion at the very top of government, in particular because of the constitutional position of the civil service (see below). But at most this relates to the temporary partial fusion of interests of ministers and mandarins (top civil servants) within ministries. This affects, at any one time, about 120 politicians and perhaps the ‘Top 200’ civil servants. Moreover as the political class has become more ‘professionalised’ over the decades, the sociological profile of the two groups has converged (see Figure 12 for the school backgrounds of the ‘Top 200’ Civil Servants and 650 MPs). Though the ‘governmental elite’ thesis thus has some empirical evidence to support it – not least the political-anthropological-observational research that is linked to the idea (Rhodes, 2011) – it is difficult to accept.

Firstly, the ‘fusion’ between the political elite and administrative elite at the very top is always partial and temporary. The fact that some ministers and mandarins are capable of collaborating closely in office does not make them part of the same elite group in the way that, for example, ‘énarques’ in France might be considered to be. There is little evidence that British politicians and mandarins move in the same circles outside of their ministries and they certainly don’t share the same career histories, or move easily from one category to the other (again, as they do in, for example, France or Japan).

Instructive here is the almost total ‘Chinese wall’ in career terms between the political and administrative elites. From the administrative side it is almost unheard-of for senior civil servants to move into the political sphere. In recent decades there have been only a small handful of instances where anybody with civil service experience moved into politics. These include two former junior civil servants (Douglas Hurd and Harold Wilson) who became MPs and later ministers and in one case Prime Minister. In two other cases former military or civil service leaders have gone into the House of Lords as party affiliated members - Lord West [Lab] and Baroness Neville-Jones [Con]. It is also true that former Heads of the Civil Service usually go into the House of Lords, but they always, by tradition, sit as ‘Crossbench’ Peers (i.e., not affiliated). (There are currently four – Lords Armstrong, Wilson, Turnbull and O’Donnell).

Compare this to Japan where, to use an example, in the 1986 elections eighty former higher civil servants were elected for the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to the House of Representatives (23% of the total LDP members) and 24 to the House of Councillors (33% of the LDP) (Koh, 1989).

Secondly, despite the apparent constitutional semi ‘fusion’ between ministers and mandarins, which is discussed more fully below, in reality they occupy fundamentally different constitutional positions. Ministers can be, and are, sacked or forced to resign; mandarins very rarely so. The word ‘permanent’ when used to describe permanent secretaries or the permanent civil service is an important signifier of the continuing difference between elected, temporary, politicians and the administrative elite.

Thirdly, the political elite continues to view the administrative elite as different to themselves and whilst they may have a close working relationship, the politicians continue to want to be supported by ‘their’ special advisers and others. As discussed above, the rise of SPADs and ‘tsars’ as an alternative policy apparatus for ministers is a marked trend, and change, in the reality of Whitehall. So whilst the ‘governmental elite’ idea does highlight an important constitutional dimension to the British civil service, its utility is really rather quite limited as an analytic tool or a theory. It is probably better, analytically, to continue to view the political and administrative elites as two separate entities whilst also trying to understand how they do, temporarily, ‘fuse’ at the very top.

To conclude this survey of the sociological changes at the apex of the administrative component of government, we can see that at the centre of government lies the administrative elite’s ‘policy’ core of ‘generalist’ civil servants who have risen through the traditional Fast Stream route to the top. The social, gender, ethnic and educational backgrounds of this elite core have been changing, so the stereo-typical image of an Oxbridge and public-school-educated, white, male ‘mandarin’ is no longer as true as it once was.

Alongside this policy ‘core’ are two new classes of participants: specialists and political appointees. The most important of these new groups is clearly the politically appointees. As discussed above, political appointees are not necessarily ‘political’ and SPADs and tsars do not yet constitute anything like the French ‘cabinet’ or the Australian ministerial offices. Nevertheless this does represent a significant shift in the configuration of Whitehall, and recent developments, such as the Civil Service Reform Plan of the Coalition government (2012), suggest this will continue. The second ancillary group are the specialists – in fields like IT, procurement, finance and personnel and in some cases professions like medicine or science. These are more likely to have been recruited from outside the civil service – mainly the private sector but also significant numbers from the rest of the public sector. Few of these ever make it to the very top (permanent secretaries) and some research suggests they are actively kept away from important policy-making functions.
A MISSING ELEMENT: PARLIAMENT

One element that is largely absent from most analyses of the British administrative elite is the role of Parliament and its own administrative support. The main reason for this is the tight coupling between the senior civil service and the executive ‘branch’ of government, and the perceived and real weakness of Parliament.

That reality is changing in two ways. Firstly, Parliament is, very slowly and incrementally, accruing more administrative power of its own, which will be the main subject of this section. Secondly, Parliament is also increasingly seeking to exert greater control and accountability over the civil service administrative elite, which will be discussed further in the next section. It is important to be clear at the outset that the administrative staffs of Parliament are not civil servants – they work exclusively for Parliament itself. Second, such staffs have been traditionally small (especially when compared to, say, US Congressional staffs). But the latter has been, very slowly, changing, in several ways.

Firstly, the creation of Parliamentary select committees (in both Houses, but mainly the Commons) from the early 1980s onwards has created a new layer of Parliamentary staff whose primary remit has been to support their committees in scrutinising the work of the executive – both political and administrative parts. Whilst most of the select committees have staffs in single figures, nevertheless their very existence is a new element in the overall topology of Whitehall-Westminster.

Secondly, the creation of the National Audit Office (NAO), also in the early 1980s, as a Parliamentary body run by the Comptroller and Auditor General, who is an officer of Parliament, was a qualitatively important development. The NAO’s traditional relationship with Parliament was exclusively through the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), which as the name suggests is the committee responsible for holding the government to account for public spending – in probity, effectiveness and efficiency matters. The NAO itself (with 850 or so staff) performs two functions. Firstly to audit the accounts of all civil service and other national public agencies and secondly to carry out ‘value for money’ (VFM) studies in specific areas (it currently conducts about fifty of these a year). Traditionally, matters arising from both audit and VFM were dealt with mainly by the PAC.

Thirdly, the NAO’s relationship with Parliament has shifted, incrementally but significantly, over the past decade or so. Gradually, the NAO has begun to work with all the other select committees in Parliament. Sometimes this has been as a result of specific requests – for example when they were asked by the Foreign Affairs Select Committee to conduct a review of the work of the British Council (a quango). During 2010/11 this had expanded to the point where the NAO ‘provided 20 select committees with a wide range of support’ and produced ‘performance briefings to assist select committees’ annual oversight of departments’ performance’ (NAO website). This represents a major expansion of the NAO’s support to Parliament.

Fourthly, Parliament has established its own internal resource to help with its scrutiny work – the Scrutiny Unit (set up in 2002) that helps with both legislative and financial scrutiny matters.

Fifthly, Parliament has also recently acquired (in 2008) responsibility for the Office of National Statistics (ONS). ONS is very much at ‘arms-length’ from Parliament, but is now nonetheless a Parliamentary body instead of being a government quango. It remains to be seen how far this changes its role.

All of these changes taken together mean that Parliament now has considerably more administrative resources either directly or indirectly at its disposal than it did three decades ago.
ago. This means it both has a greater ‘administrative elite’ of its own, separate from the civil service, and it also has greater resources with which to challenge the political and administrative executive elites. As will be discussed in the next section, Parliament is also challenging some of the constitutional conventions governing the role of the senior civil service and who can call it to account.

THE UNCHANGING CONSTITUTIONAL POSITION OF THE SCS

What has not changed in the past thirty years is the constitutional position of the Senior Civil Service. This was famously set out by Lord Armstrong (then Sir Robert, Head of the Civil Service), known as the ‘Armstrong Doctrine’, in a memorandum circulated in 1985 after the Clive Ponting Affair. In that memo Armstrong stated that ‘The Civil Service as such has no constitutional personality or responsibility separate from the duly elected government of the day.’ (Hennessy, 1989, 346). What this means is that ministers alone are accountable to Parliament, and civil servants to ministers. These are principles that can be traced back to the Northcote-Trevelyan Report (1854), the Haldane Report (1918) and right up to the Armstrong Doctrine (Kavanagh and Richards, 2003).

When it comes to answering to Parliament, this position was set out clearly in something known as the ‘Osmotherly Rules’ (or the ‘Memorandum of Guidance for Officials Appearing before Select Committees’, published in May 1980, and written by a civil servant called E B C Osmotherly). These were (and still are) an attempt by the civil service to stymie the new select committees (Hennessy, 1989, 361-363). Osmotherly stated baldly that ‘Officials appearing before Select Committees do so on behalf of their Ministers.’ It went on to say that officials ‘would remain subject to Ministerial instructions as to how he should answer questions.’ As Peter Hennessy put it ‘In short, elected MPs were to be denied any real knowledge of the inside workings of the Whitehall machine and any chance of making the bureaucratic brokers of concealed power accountable to the sovereign parliament’ (Hennessy, 1989, 362).

Although these constitutional conventions have never been quite as clear-cut as they suggest and have come under considerable strain in recent years, they continue to be espoused as part of the ‘Westminster model’ and ‘the British Political Tradition’ (Kavanagh and Richards, 2003). Several important recent, very different, studies of the Westminster model and the Whitehall elite come to more or less the same conclusions about the continuing importance of these constitutional conventions.

The first is Rhodes’ ‘political anthropological’ study of ministers and mandarins (Rhodes, 2011). His central conclusion is worth quoting in full: ‘Since 1988, I have criticised the Westminster narrative of British government and contrasted it with my preferred version of network governance in the differentiated polity. But even today, ministers and civil servants act as if the Liberal constitution sets the rules of the political game’ (Rhodes, 2011, 281). Rhodes goes on to say that newer ‘managerialist’ and ‘network governance’ ideas have been added on top of, rather than replaced, the traditional model of minister-mandarin relations. As essentially a social constructionist, Rhodes does not accord the status of ‘reality’, but he does admit that his conclusions came as a ‘surprise’ as he ‘watched ministers and civil servants enact their everyday stories, I saw them re-enacting the nineteenth-century constitution.’ (Rhodes, 2011, 280).

Richards’ study of the New Labour government and the civil service likewise concludes that ‘the process of change and reform over the past thirty years should be
explained in terms of it being mediated through a resolute defence of the Westminster model by the core executive’ (Richards, 2008, 54). Lodge and Rogers come to similar conclusions about the persistence of the Westminster ministerial accountability model, whilst criticising its anachronistic nature: ‘The constitutional conventions governing the civil service and regulating its relationship with ministers, Parliament and the public are now anachronistic and severely inadequate. This is particularly true of the most important of these: the convention of ministerial responsibility.’ (Lodge and Rogers, 2006, 1).

The paradox at the heart of this system is that whilst the administrative elite is in theory ‘accountable’ to ministers, in practice and also in theory there is no clear mechanism by which ministers can hold them to account, without being accused of ‘politicisation’ of the civil service. The reality of this supposed ‘Permanent Secretary to Minister to Parliament’ accountability chain is captured in a remark from one Permanent Secretary: ‘as a group Permanent Secretaries have managed to duck accountability.’ (Permanent Secretary, cited in (Lodge and Rogers, 2006)).

There are several points to make about this situation. Firstly, there are of course all sorts of informal ways in which members of the SCS can at least be partially held to account by ministers (although the usual ‘punishment’ is simply to be moved away from the minister who complains – see (Hennessy, 1989) for many examples of this). Secondly, the convention of permanent secretaries also being designated as ‘Accounting Officers’ to some extent circumvents the ministerial accountability doctrine by making them directly accountable to Parliament, usually in the form of the Public Accounts Committee, for their stewardship of public money. This has been greatly extended in recent years with the creation of Executive Agencies within the civil service, with every agency CEO also being designated an Accounting Officer (AO). This means the number of AOs has risen from a couple of dozen to almost two hundred at one point. Thirdly, in practice the Osmotherly Rules have also begun to break down as select committees have called more and more civil service witnesses and some have clearly not kept to these conventions when giving evidence (for example, several Agency CEOs who have clearly gone beyond what their ministers would wish them to say in their evidence to a select committee). Evidence of these changes comes in a remark from a Permanent Secretary:

“A number of recent changes are beginning to change things but it needs to be made stronger. Permanent Secretaries should be held to account for making sure that their departments are ‘fit for purpose’, and that they have the right capabilities in place… we do need to find a mechanism for much greater and rigorous performance of Permanent Secretary performance. I think it is very difficult to argue against the logic that this be a form of external scrutiny.” (Permanent Secretary cited in (Lodge and Rogers, 2006)). More recently this culminated in a public clash between the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee (Margaret Hodge MP) and the then Head of the Civil Service (Gus O’Donnell) over how far civil servants were accountable to Parliament. 12

The result of these gradual changes is that several Parliamentary committees are now starting to question the traditional ‘ministerial accountability’ model – including the House of Commons Liaison Committee, Public Accounts Committee and Public Administration Select Committee and the House of Lords Constitution Committee. The latter recently made the rather important point that the ‘Osmotherly Rules’ are merely a set of internal rules adopted by Government, and have no standing in Parliament (House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution, 2012).

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Back in the mid-1990s the then Conservative government published two White Papers on civil service reform with the phrase ‘continuity and change’ in their titles (Prime Minister and Minister for the Civil Service, 1995, Prime Minister and Minister for the Civil Service, 1994). It was fairly clear from these documents and informal briefings that whilst Ministers were after ‘change’, the civil service thought they had successfully defended ‘continuity’. There have been some aspects in which the administrative elite of the civil service has changed over the past three decades and longer. Sociologically they have moved away somewhat from the stereotype of the private-school- and Oxbridge-educated, white, male, Fast Streamers – in short the ‘gifted amateur’. The elite has become more diverse, but the culture at the top seems to have changed much less than the sociological changes would imply. The context within which the elite operates has certainly changed, with structural changes both within and beyond Whitehall. Most notably, whilst as yet nowhere near being displaced, there are clear challengers to the traditional role of the administrative elite as the monopolistic ‘policy advisers’ to ministers. What has most clearly not changed is the fundamental institutional and constitutional framework within which the administrative elite functions. There are clear small-scale changes taking place, and the traditional model is under immense strain, but it has not yet been fundamentally challenged.

There are signs however from two important directions that this may happen in the not too distant future. From (current) Ministers there is a clear desire to shift the nature of the accountability relationship between themselves and mandarins, and perhaps to create something akin to the French cabinet system. Since the onset of the ‘global financial crisis’ and especially the creation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government in May 2010, another element has been added. The pay and conditions of the SCS have been subjected to quite drastic cuts at the same time as their numbers have been slashed (see Figure 2 above). According to an NAO report in 2013 between 2009-10 and 2012-13 SCS net pay dropped by 17.5% and the number leaving every year jumped from 10% to 17% over the same period (Comptroller and Auditor General, 2013). So alongside an attempt from Ministers to exert greater control over the SCS also comes an assault on their pay and conditions (and as they see it, their status). One result, reported the NAO, was a sharp drop in private sector recruitment as SCS jobs became less secure and less attractive. To what degree these changes to pay and conditions are a genuine attempt to demonstrate that ‘we are all in it together’ or this is simply an excuse to help politicians weaken the (as they see it) obstructionist administrative elite is open for debate.

On the other hand, from Parliament comes a different challenge to the exclusive accountability of senior civil servants to ministers discussed above. Several Parliamentary bodies including the Public Administration Select Committee and Liaison Committee in the House of Commons have called for a Commission of Inquiry into the civil service (Liaison Committee, 2013, Public Administration Select Committee, 2013). At the start of 2014 a major debate in the House of Lords echoed the call from the Commons for a Commission. Rather more broadly, the perception that the administrative elite is not ‘fit

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13. As result of severe pay restraint and SCS members being forced to make larger personal contributions to their (reduced) pensions.

for purpose’ has been growing since at least the 1960s (Kavanagh and Richards, 2003) and many would argue is now reaching crisis proportions (see for example the widely reviewed book *The Blunders of our Governments* by two well respected academics (King and Crewe, 2013)).

Whether any of these forces will result in fundamental change remains to be seen. That there are substantial challenges to their status, accountability, pay and job security is beyond doubt. That there have been sociological changes is also true, if sometimes exaggerated. The popular perception of lack of capability is a long-run problem, but does seem to have worsened over the past 2-3 decades. What is clear, so far at least, is that there has been, as yet, much more continuity than change in these fundamental relationships and the nature of the British administrative elite, although that may be changing.

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