

What is a 21st-century civil service for?

Serving in the age of crisis: resilience-building as the future of the civil service

On the 21st of January 2021, Taiwan recorded its first Covid case - the biggest global crisis in a century had just arrived on its shore. But the country had two enormous advantages: first, by going to the root of its deficiencies during the 2003 SARS epidemic, Taiwan's civil service was well-prepared for an epidemic; second, in reaction to political turmoil in 2014 (Sunflower Student Movement), the state undertook significant digital reforms, based on civic engagement and governmental transparency. Two years on, the country had only 853 deaths for a population of 23 million, and had still not undergone any lockdowns. What was behind Taiwan's success? It was the state's ability to radically shift its traditional approaches and adapt to an age of crisis.

Faced with climate change, demographic transformations, and international conflict, it is now urgent that we follow in Taiwan's footsteps. A 21st-century civil service should focus on building resilience. This involves a radical reversal of the predominant and often decried practices in the British civil service. These practices, set up during a period of relative stability, are in effect dangerously ill-adapted to the unstable age we live in. Building on Judith Rodin's work on resilience, I will present a model of civil service built on four pillars:

- 1) Foresight and preparation
- 2) Diversification and decentralisation
- 3) Flexibility and Innovation
- 4) Leadership and meaning

From stability to instability

The British civil service is, according to a 2017 capability report by the National Audit Office, "operating in a decidedly sub-optimal environment".¹ In constant overdrive, it struggles to keep up with the ever-accumulating issues it faces. At the heart of this crisis is not an unwillingness to reform - the last decades have brought regular changes within the institution - but an incapacity to change the "stability" paradigm from which the civil service originally sprang.

From 1945 to 2008, the civil service mostly evolved in eras of relative stability, moving from one international consensus (Bretton-Woods) to another (Washington). The first phase was structured around big industries which provided predictability at a macro-level (constant growth rates) and micro-level (job security).² The second phase was more volatile, but remained stabilised by a reliable commercial supply chain and the "Pax Americana". Major shocks did occur, such as the Winter of Discontent or Black Wednesday, but their effects were suppressed by the strength of the global system.

As such, many prominent contemporary civil service practices are predicated on the "stability paradigm"; they are built for a steady and dependable system. This paradigm has been a central

¹Comptroller and Auditor General, [Capability in the Civil Service](#), National Audit Office (2017)

²Christoph Demmke, [Reform trends and the future of civil services and HRM in Europe](#), IGPDE(2019)

factor behind four dominant outlooks within the civil service. I am not saying, of course, that stability is the only reason behind each approach, but that it acted as a crucial enabler.

First, instead of trying to prevent problems, the civil service focuses on responding to them as they emerge.³ Resolving issues reactively works if the system is stable enough. Second, societal order facilitates top-down centralisation, as it becomes easier to drive policy based on rational models.⁴ For instance, the predictability of public demand (particularly in the Bretton-Woods period) enabled the state to rationally separate different societal needs into different public domains; “health”, “care”, or “housing” were then each handled by departmental silos.⁵ Third, the civil service’s oft-critiqued lack of flexibility and innovation was fueled in parts by external stability. Resistance to change is stronger when the concerned parties don’t see any reason to it - as long as the system works, what’s the point of altering it?⁶ Fourth, the belief that the government is “the problem” (which emerged in the 1980s), that it is outdated and secondary, relies on the stability paradigm. Only in an age of economic prosperity and market power can states shrink away.⁷

These approaches (mostly) worked when the global system was robust, but they are woefully unadapted to our unstable era, marked by long-term stresses (such as an ageing population and socioeconomic inequalities) and sudden shocks (like the pandemic or the Ukraine War). Most significantly, climate change is the biggest existential threat to our human species in millennia; extreme weather events will surge in frequency and severity, strife will increase due to competition over rare resources, and our planet will become less inhabitable.⁸ It is now time for the civil service to fully acknowledge the age of crisis we now live in. Predicated on the instability paradigm, the purpose of a 21st-century civil service should be resilience-building.

The four characteristics of resilience

According to Judith Rodin, resilience is the capacity to “prepare for disruptions, to recover from shocks and stresses, and to adapt and grow from experience”.⁹ Partly drawing upon her renowned book “the resilience dividend”, I note four main characteristics of resilience-building, which I will use to offer a model of a civil service adapted to our unstable age.

³Gmeinder, M., D. Morgan and M. Mueller, "[How much do OECD countries spend on prevention?](#)", OECD (2017).

⁴There is no doubt however, that centralisation is mostly a historical

⁵Adam Lent, Jessica Studdert, [The Community Paradigm, why public services need radical change and how it can be achieved](#), New Local (2021)

⁶Zahid Hussain, *Can political stability hurt economic growth?*, World Bank Blogs (2014)

⁷Christoph. Demmke, Timo Moilanen, *Civil services in the EU of 27 : reform outcomes and the future of the civil service* (2010)

⁸Hans-Otto Pörtner, Debra C. Roberts, et. al, [Climate Change 2022 Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability](#), Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2022)

⁹Judith Rodin, *The Resilience Dividend: Being Strong in a World Where Things Go Wrong*, The Rockefeller Foundation (2014)

First, resilience is about anticipation and preparation for shocks. A given entity should be both aware of “its strengths and assets, liabilities and vulnerabilities, and the threats and risks it faces” and willing to address them before the shock actually occurs.¹⁰ Second, resilience is bolstered by diversity. Diversifying the pool of resources allows institutions to rely on a “range of capabilities, technical elements, people or groups” rather than lone elements.¹¹ Third, resilience is about adaptiveness - “the capacity to adjust to changing circumstances by developing new plans, taking new actions, or modifying behaviours”.¹² There is one last feature of resilience-building that Rodin does not explicitly account for, but that I believe is the most important: meaning. It is through meaning that we can persevere against all odds, that we can find the existential resources to maintain our effort in the long run.

Crucially, these four characteristics - which are predicated on instability - are in contradiction with the previous four dominant approaches which presupposed a stable world order. Against acute response, resilience emphasises foresight and preparation. Against centralisation, resilience encourages the civil service to decentralise and collaborate with external stakeholders, shifting its role from director to coordinator. Against conventionalism, crises compel the civil service to adapt and experiment. And lastly, against the belief that the civil service is obsolete and secondary, resilience-building requires it to unashamedly come back to the fore and act as an existential anchor in an age of uncertainty.

How civil service can build our resilience

Of course, resilience is not a new concept within the civil service. As shown in the UK’s National Risk Register, anticipating potential threats is common in bureaucratic policy.¹³ But, fashioned during decades of stability, these practices are only limited forms of resilience-building. They are weakened by the leanness model, in which the objective is not to strengthen resilience, but to make it as cheap as possible.¹⁴ The assumption is that the shock can either be avoided or quickly absorbed.

We know from the 2008 crash and the pandemic that this previous method of resilience-building has become dangerously outdated. Instead, we need to shift the paradigm by making resilience a national mission for the civil service, structuring it around the four key pillars we saw earlier.

1) Foresight and preparation

¹⁰Ibid, p.13.

¹¹Ibid, p.20.

¹²Ibid, p.34.

¹³Cabinet Office, [National Risk Register](#) (2021).

¹⁴OECD, [A systemic resilience approach to dealing with Covid-19 and future shocks](#) (2020)

The first ingredient to resilience is foresight, with two goals: the anticipation of risks (both in sudden shocks and long-term stresses) and the civil service's awareness of its own strengths and liabilities against these risks.

Foresight comes with the benefit of prioritisation. In an age of instability, the civil service struggles to proficiently hierarchise the endless amount of issues it faces.¹⁵ Locked within the first dominant approach referred to above - response rather than prevention - it tends to privilege short-termism over long-term impact. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which failing to appropriately prioritise at one point makes it even harder to do so later on.

Strengthening foresight is therefore an essential component of the civil service's shift towards the instability paradigm. Singapore's "Centre For Strategic Futures" (which has influenced the UK's Government Office for Science) and their work on 'futures thinking' gives us some insight into how the civil service could improve its understanding of the challenges and weaknesses that are most important to tackle.¹⁶ Enhancing foresight is also about making civil servants more forward-minded. The Centre For Strategic Future has shown how that cultural shift can be achieved - they organise regular training sessions for civil servants on the latest future-modelling methods.

Foresight however remains almost useless without preparation. It is crucial for the state to then proactively resolve those unearthed weaknesses and challenges, or they risk gaining momentum. At odds with the acute response approach, this implies going to the root of the problem and preventing it (or at least lessening its impact) instead of trying to manage it when it arises. The benefit of this approach was indirectly shown back in 2020. Preparing for a hard Brexit, the civil service worked to enhance its redeployment abilities, enabling it to quickly redeploy 1300 civil servants in the early days of the pandemic.¹⁷

2) Diversification and decentralisation

As shown during the pandemic, an overly centralised state will often become overrun by the surging number of issues it must cater to. A vital aspect of resilience, therefore, is diversifying the resources you can draw upon; or to put it in policy-making terms, decentralisation.

Non-governmental actors like private companies or local communities are often better suited for resilience-making. The Vaccine TaskForce's success in delivering vaccines in short time-spans has been celebrated by many as a blueprint of private-public partnership.¹⁸ In addition, local communities were often the first responders, providing vital help to vulnerable people, and setting up support networks.¹⁹ These examples reveal that a civil service working to strengthen our resilience is one that collaborates on equal terms with citizens and businesses.

¹⁵Ros Taylor, [Squeezed mandarins: the four big challenges facing the civil service](#), LSE Blogs (2017)

¹⁶<https://www.csf.gov.sg/>

¹⁷ [Whitehall Monitor](#), Institute for Government (2021)

¹⁸Katy Balls, [Secrets of the Vaccine Taskforce's success](#), The Spectator (2021)

¹⁹Matt Leach, [Communities must be at the heart of plans for a new resilient Britain](#), Local Trust (2020)

The idea that citizens are only passive users could work when stability meant a centralised state could rationally cater to everyone's demand without being overwhelmed. In an age of instability, we need to shift towards building capabilities from the bottom-up, allowing these organisations to be autonomous from a civil service which cannot be expected to respond to every contemporary challenge.²⁰ The Wigan deal shows us how devolution of service-delivery to communities can help us do more for less money.²¹

Decentralisation is also crucial to avoid group-think. The latter will often lead an organisation to miss the signs of a major shock. The current democratic crisis - shown either through Brexit or the Black Lives Matter demonstrations - is partly the result of group-think within Whitehall. Fortunately, digital instruments offer a new opportunity to bring a further diversity of perspectives into the civil service. Audrey Tang's innovations in Taiwan demonstrates how digital instruments can allow citizens to have a voice in the development of public services. Their success in handling the pandemic through citizen engagement proves that bringing external perspectives is fundamental to resilience-building.

Finally, to decentralise successfully, civil servants will have to unlearn hierarchical mentalities, and learn collaboration. Listening, understanding, negotiating, engaging in mutually respectful dialogues - these are the dialogic skills a civil servant will require. Wigan and Taiwan prove that, with the right culture, these can be fostered.

3) Flexibility and innovation

Another central aspect of resilience building is flexibility and innovation. When faced with the unprecedented, an organisation will be pushed towards the untried and the experimental. This was certainly the case during the pandemic, where civil servants were able to introduce long-awaited digital and bureaucratic reforms at an unparalleled speed.²² Against the image of bureaucratic rigidity, we notably saw more fluid cooperation between departments, furthering the civil service's overall flexibility. But again, how do we maintain that dynamic in the long run?

Singapore once more offers some indication into how that could be achieved. In recent years, they have created a matrix of agencies and networks that bring officers from different departments.²³ These agencies have been able to pool their collective expertise to better understand how they can support one another when faced with certain multidimensional challenges. Examples of this approach include the National Climate Change Secretariat or the

²⁰Hillary Cottam, *Radical Help: How we can remake the relationships between us and revolutionise the welfare state*, Virago (2018)

²¹Chris Naylor, Dan Wellings, [A citizen-led approach to health and care: Lessons from the Wigan Deal](#), the Kings Fund (2019)

²²Azusa Kubota, Tshoki Zangmo, [Reforming civil service: Towards a future ready government](#), Kuensel (2021)

²³[Building a public service ready for the future](#), Public Service Division (2015)

National Security Coordination Secretariat. Developing internal flexibility that way is also crucial to strengthening civil service coordination, which is especially relevant to the devolution involved in resilience.

In addition, the aspects of resilience that have been explored above relied on the idea of trying out new things. That is resilience's biggest paradox: bearing with risks requires risk-taking. And, the civil service is arguably in the best position to endure risks. Of course state funds are not illimited, but they certainly have more leeway than private companies. E-Stonia, a massive government-led program of digitisation in Estonia, is a good example of how innovation combined with governmental funds can be tremendously successful.²⁴ The ability of Estonia's public service to continue their activities with almost no interruption during the pandemic demonstrates how crucial an innovative civil service is to resilience-building.²⁵

A fundamental aspect of resilience is to build on the innovations made during crises. The UK's Resilience & Rapid Response Award is a great example of how that could be achieved, and how the culture of innovative resilience-building can be ingrained within the civil service.²⁶ In 2020, the winners - a cross-government team - were rewarded for creating a digital "NHS Get An Isolation Note service. You could still go further however - in Canada, they have a dedicated public sector innovation budget for each ministry and agency.²⁷

4) Leadership and meaning

Adapting to a century rife with crisis will force the civil service to constantly reinvent its practices. But reinvention in practice does not always mean relinquishing values. On the contrary, in a period of increased volatility, it is more important than ever to anchor ourselves in firm principles. After years of denigration, the civil service needs to come back to the fore. No other institutional actor can combine such expertise and impact with the all-important values which the country holds dear: merit, impartiality, service, and transparency.

However, civil servants themselves need to believe and promote these values more strongly than they have done since the emergence of the final dominant outlook. The only government that is a problem is one without values. Restoring a sense of pride and belief in those values is essential to the resilience of civil servants, because only meaning can drive their institution to persevere and innovate in the face of emergencies. Meanwhile, for citizens, emergencies reveal the importance of trust in our democratic institutions, and interestingly, a poll from October 2020 showed that 60% of the population trust civil servants to tell the truth, whereas just 16% trusted government ministers.²⁸ The civil service should capitalise on that trust to restore public faith and cushion the deep divide of our times. These meaningful connections between citizens

²⁴<https://e-estonia.com/>

²⁵Jana Silaškova, Masao Takahashi, [Estonia built one of the world's most advanced digital societies. During COVID-19, that became a lifeline](#), World Economic Forum (2020)

²⁶[Civil Service Awards 2020: Resilience and Rapid Response Award](#), Civil Service (2021)

²⁷[Funding mechanisms for public sector innovation in Government at a Glance](#), OECD (2017)

²⁸Jill Rutter, [The civil service and Brexit](#), UK in a changing Europe (2021)

and civil servants can further bolster collaboration even beyond crisis itself, as we've seen in New Zealand's "spirit of service to the community".²⁹

Conclusion

We live in an age of crisis and we cannot have a civil service that pretends otherwise. Recent efforts to counter this fact nonetheless remain limited, and the approaches shaped by that period of relative stability remain at the forefront of the British civil service. They are dangerously ill-equipped to face the crises we are and will be facing in the future.

A 21st-century civil service should be structured around the purpose of resilience-building. This involves a radical reversal of many of its dominant outlooks: prevention over reaction, decentralisation over centralisation, innovation over conventionalism, and leadership over self-doubt. For all the problems it comes with, crisis has one benefit: reform becomes necessary rather than just desirable. At this point in history, then, we find ourselves with the opportunity to radically transform our civil service so it becomes once more a thriving pillar of society.

²⁹[The Spirit of Service: Briefing to the Incoming Government](#), New Zealand State Services