

# The ugly face of the corporate public sphere

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There have been about 9,600 entries on this blog in the last seven years. The vast majority have been written by me. But every now and then I make an exception to that rule. What follows has been written by [Dr Ivan Horrocks of the Open University](#), whose comments here I have much appreciated and much of whose thinking I value and share. I was delighted he offered this piece for publication here.

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Since the late 1960s government in the UK has been committed to bringing management and other specialist expertise into government from the private sector. The original rationale for this was sound and undoubtedly beneficial. It was, very importantly — and with few exceptions - an arrangement built on respect, equality and mutuality.

From the late 1970s this dynamic began to change. There are many reasons for this, but the most important catalyst by far for the increase in the involvement of big business and the private sector in UK government and public services, their growing influence and power, and thus the inevitable creation of what now equates to a corporate public sphere (taken here to refer to all structures, institutions and processes of government, public policy and public service) has been the dominance from the 1970s onwards of neo-liberal economic and political ideas and beliefs.

Government by the market and an overwhelming belief that the perceived or real problems of the public sector could be solved by importing the ethos and management practices of the private sector were early and powerful components of this ideology. In practical terms this translated into a stream of efficiency reviews, programmes of organisational transformation, reinvention, privatisation and marketisation, the advent of the so called “new public management”, and the “rebranding” of citizens, patients, clients, students and so on as “customers”, regardless of the nature of their relationship with public services and the state.

Despite many examples of the shortcomings and negative outcomes of the largely

uncritical adoption of such ideologically inspired policies, David Cameron continued this tradition when in February 2011 he wrote an article for *The Daily Telegraph* in which he promised to privatise pretty much every public service, apart from ‘...some areas — such as national security and the judiciary — where this wouldn’t make sense.’ He continued: ‘But everywhere else should be open to diversity; open to everyone who gets and values the importance of our public service ethos.’ Interestingly he too claimed this as a ‘transformation’, injecting another ‘key principle’ of the Tory (neo-liberal) public service ethos — ‘choice’ (also a key public service principle of Blair’s governments) into the war against the ‘state monopoly’ in the provision of public services.

It is inevitable that over the decades since the neo-liberal assault on social democratic forms of government and public service began that it has gradually impacted all aspects of the ethos and practice of public service and management. However, the underlying values (the social democratic public service ethos) proved remarkably resilient. Thus, while accepting new management ideas, new organisational forms, and much else besides (one of the more recent examples being business people such as Lord Browne [ex BP] joining the boards of government departments), many civil servants and public sector workers — at all pay grades and levels of seniority - maintained a commitment to the fact that the work they did was, ultimately, a public — not private/commercial — service, and thus a public good. Consequently, although under constant attack, the values and beliefs, and, crucially, key, underpinning features of public service and management maintained, albeit in an increasingly compromised manner.

By the latter years of the New Labour governments of Blair and Brown a tipping point had been reached, however. The constant influx into leadership, senior management and key — high level — advisory roles across government and public services of people from the private sector, many of them deeply wedded to the values and beliefs that underpin neo-liberalism and highly sympathetic to arguments about the failings and weaknesses of the public sector, began to make its mark. So too did the anti-public sector rhetoric of politicians and negative press that public services — and public service - had endured for many years. Indeed, by the late 2000s, it was not uncommon within any public sector organisation to come across public servants who believed that they were lesser beings than people who worked in commercial organisations, and, certainly, that the work they did was less valued by, and valuable to, society.

The drift away from public sector leadership and management based on the distinctiveness of the public realm and a matching ethos of public service has always contained two self fulfilling logics, of course. The first is that as more and more people with a commercial background and support for, sympathetic to or ambivalent about, neo-liberal ideas entered government and public service they became the facilitators for the entry of others with similar backgrounds and beliefs and values. It is little wonder then, that by 2010 the mission statements and organisational objectives,

management structures and cultures, and practice and jargon of almost every government department and public service more closely resembled that of corporate, profit driven enterprise, than a public (and publicly funded), usually not for profit, service.

The second is that as the distinction between the organisational and managerial realms of the public and private sectors became ever weaker and blurred the temptation for everyone from government ministers down to make policy and managerial decisions with at least half an eye on future (private sector) employment prospects and opportunities must have become ever more tempting. After all, why try to maintain an ethical position while an increasing number of your colleagues benefit from a naive or deliberate ignorance of such issues.

Nevertheless, the majority of public servants still recognised the distinctiveness of what they did and held to the core public service ethos that had acted as a check on the importation into the public domain of the most unsuitable and potentially damaging features of private sector leadership and management. Even New Labour maintained some semblance of belief in government and the public interest being broader and deeper than a cipher for the demands and wishes of multi-nationals and the wealthy. That said, examples of the corrupting influence of neo-liberal values and beliefs proliferated and became many and varied, exerting a corrosive effect on many public services and servants who had to work in environments where it became increasingly beneficial to hold such views and act accordingly.

The arrival of the Coalition government signalled a step change in what had become an almost unstoppable process in the emasculation of government, public service and public management. The last vestiges of a system of interchange between the public and private sectors based on respect, equality and mutuality were ditched. The mantra “private good, public bad” was visibly and loudly celebrated. As Cameron’s *Telegraph* article and many speeches since have signalled, the supporters of such views were no longer required to rein in their base instincts. This was their day.

One of the most important and far reaching consequence of the ongoing and now rampant neo-liberal ‘turn’, for a country where government is supposedly based on representative democracy, is that as government and public service has taken on the structure, leadership, management and ethos of a commercial enterprise so a culture has been created in which government ministers are no longer seen for what they are - politicians — representatives of the people, supposedly serving the public interest, but as quasi company directors (of “UK Government PLC”). Senior public servants and managers act accordingly. Their loyalty and actions are governed by this mistaken and misplaced belief. They see nothing wrong, therefore, with treating politicians outside government who dare to ask searching and challenging questions (such as the PAC has done) with contempt and disdain. They are viewed as the equivalent of a small group of noisy, rebel, shareholders who turn up at the AGM of a large corporation and make a bit of a nuisance of themselves. They are not seen as exercising the legitimate authority

that has been vested in them through the ballot box as elected representatives of the citizens of a democracy, and thus guardians of the public interest.

Other no less serious examples are legion and are routinely highlighted on the Tax Research UK blog and elsewhere. A central feature of many of them is that the causal pathways lead back to the values, beliefs and actions of those who are ultimately responsible for the leadership and management of government and public services - government ministers. But in an age when accountability has become a dirty word for ministers and senior managers alike, listening to Jeremy Hunt using the findings of the Mid Staffs inquiry to lecture nurses and other NHS workers about their “failings”, rather than directing his attention at NHS leadership and senior management, was both insightful and instructive. It is a measure of the extent to which the Tories are confident that across government and the public sector senior management are all “neo-liberals now” — or if they aren’t they realise the consequences of voicing alternative views. Public service workers and professions such as nursing, teaching, medicine, policing, and so on, are now seen as the enemy — the last bastions of a social democratic, consensus based, public service ethos that is anathema to the supporters and servants of the neo-liberal project.

To be clear, this is not a lament for a supposedly golden age of government and public service — though to be sure it would not be difficult to construct such a narrative given the rock bottom status that both now occupy in the UK. The structure, function and culture of every organisation and sector — whether public or private — routinely requires critical review, and restructuring and rebuilding if necessary (as *Apple* discovered some years ago). But what we are now seeing goes beyond the hollowing out of the state that was a feature of government in the UK and elsewhere through the 1990s and 2000s. The primary problem — the rot at the core of contemporary public administration — is that such much of the leadership and management of government and public service no longer considers itself part of a public domain. Like managers of commercial enterprises their primary concern is now the bottom line. And the bottom line for government and public service is delivering the neo-liberal project. Thus, the ugly face of corporate capitalism morphs into the ugly face of the corporate public sphere.