

My Research on Public Service Ethics and Corruption in the 19th century

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In Hilary Term 2017 I was fortunate enough to enjoy a Visiting Research Associateship at the Centre for Victorian Political Culture, based at Keble College, Oxford. Coming from Newman University in Birmingham, one of the newest and smallest universities in the UK (having achieved full university status in 2013) to the oldest university in the English speaking world, it was comforting to walk through Newman quad at Keble and to find busts and portraits of John Henry watching over me. Thanks to the sponsorship of Professor Angus Hawkins and the support of Dr Ian Archer and Dr Alisdair Rogers, I was able to enjoy the facilities of the Senior Common Room, which nourished me on the cold January and February days and where I was able to consider whether or not Nikolas Pevsner was right to call the wallpaper 'a decidedly ladies' paper'. I also spent much time in Butterfield's library, opened by William Gladstone in April 1878, exploring the political, cultural and social history collection, before venturing out to the less inviting setting of the Gladstone Link beneath the Radcliffe Camera.

Writing of Gladstone leads me onto the work I have been pursuing this Term. Gladstone famously pronounced himself an enemy of privilege and in favour of greater equality of opportunity. In his recent magisterial volume on *Victorian Political Culture* Angus Hawkins notes that the traditional view of a 'liberal advance' in mid-nineteenth century Britain includes 'the replacement of patronage by a more meritocratic public ethos'¹, such as Gladstone espoused, in the administrative bodies of Victorian Britain. Recently, much work has been done on the growth of ethical values and professional self-denial in the higher civil service, particularly by Rodney Lowe² and Barry O'Toole³, but much of the process whereby this ethos became embedded throughout the civic realm remains largely uninvestigated.

My research project looks more specifically at the ways in which a culture of patronage, 'jobbery', peculation and the misuse of public office was replaced by what Frank Carr terms 'an intangible set of values'⁴ and John Girling calls 'the pursuit of virtue'⁵; a collective, institutional sense of altruism and personal self-denial that has proved remarkably tenacious in the character of British civic culture, at least until the 1980s. This was already well established in 19th century Prussia, where the bureaucracy had developed a reputation for honest, efficient government, before it became somewhat distorted by the ambitious national and personal ambitions of Bismarck.⁶

The adoption of the 'public service ethos' sought to expunge the plague of corruption. In British public discourse, the word corruption originally had a religious significance, referring to the effects of sin upon the body, but increasingly in post-Enlightenment Europe it came to mean misuse of the political system or of

individuals within it, arising from moral failure. As the British state and economy grew in the 18th century, however, the number of political offices also grew and so did the means for self-enrichment. With the expansion of the Empire, of course, it became possible to practise such morally questionable acts far from any scrutiny and any attempts to inhibit this behaviour either through trials, such as that of Warren Hastings, or official edicts, such as that against accepting 'gifts' given by the East India Company in 1765, had no effect whatsoever. As late as 1848 *The Times* observed that 'it is only wonderful how long corruption can hold its own in some obscure nook of the empire...from the absence of publicity.'⁷ Public offices were often bought and were seen as private property, from which one needed to regain one's investment by what we would regard today as extortion and embezzlement. Tax farming, as also practised in pre- and post-revolutionary France, was a prime example of this. Only very gradually did the idea of office holding come to be seen as rule-bound and bureaucratic in the Weberian model, and this process was by no means complete by the 1830s.

The idea of corruption was, therefore, actually more significant as a political issue rather than a bureaucratic one in the 18th century, with the freedom of the press to expose ministerial corruption being tested in a number of court cases. A discourse developed whereby the existing political system was seen to have become debased through the self-interest of the elites who had abused the trust the public placed in them and classical concepts of public service were therefore employed to posit an alternative approach to governance. According to James Thompson this concept of "old corruption" or even "the thing" cast government as 'an exercise in rewarding fellow aristocrats rather than an attempt to pursue the common good.'⁸ It was Parliament that was at the heart of the system of 'Old Corruption', whereby the government doled out well-paid sinecures and pensions to 'placemen' who could be relied on to vote the right way as and when required and whereby wealthy landlords could place their clients in Westminster through pocket or 'rotten' borough seats, whose few votes could easily be bribed. Chief among the landlords who manipulated the system to their advantage were of course the Crown and the Church of England. For radicals such as William Cobbett in the late 18th and early 19th century therefore, 'old corruption' was synonymous with the power of the Crown and the *ancien regime* who were, without the extension of the franchise, the removal of abuses and greater scrutiny of parliament, incapable of governing on behalf of the interests of the whole nation.

In fact, as Philip Harling has demonstrated, William Pitt and Lord Liverpool had attempted to justify the increases in tax demands during the Napoleonic Wars by clamping down on excessive jobbery even as the fiscal-military state grew.⁹ If one accepts therefore that egregious political corruption had been confined to Westminster and the clubs of Mayfair by the mid-1830s, it is necessary to turn to a

more common, albeit petty form of corruption, which clearly had been a persistent feature of British society since the days of Pepys and which is a feature of many societies today, if the *Corruption Perception Index* is a guide. While Pitt, Liverpool, Grey, Melbourne and Peel all did much to reduce the clientism which produced poor administrators or merely drained the public purse, they did not willingly attempt to reform the professional, ethical or moral standards of behaviour by public servants, as these agents multiplied in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Eventually, top-down reforms of the state officialdom were accomplished, most famously the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms of the Civil Service and the abolition of the sale of commissions in the armed forces. But these did not begin until the 1850s, many years after the expansion of the public administration, which began under Peel at the Home Office in the 1820s and continued with the reforms of the Whigs in the 1830s. Furthermore, according to John Bourne, these 'great reforms' only narrowly affected the senior levels of both army and civil service and were not fully implemented until the 1870s.¹⁰ Carl Dahlstrom has recently commented that during the nineteenth century British policy makers realised that the key to overcoming corruption in the emerging civic society was in untying 'the close bonds between politicians and administrators' by introducing 'a professional and meritocratically recruited civil service.'¹¹ Sayer and Corrigan established in *The Great Arch* that the appointment of the factory inspectors in 1833 was the crucial moment in the creation of the modern state, both as agents of national demands for improvement (moral and physical) and as establishers and standardizers of public institutions such as police stations and workhouses, which would grow eventually to be part of civic culture.¹²

Yet the inspectors have traditionally been studied either as a crucial element in the creation of the welfare state or as part of the wider development of the modern or 'liberal' state, wherein the need for state intervention to address abuses battled with the reluctance to intervene in economy and social relations between free citizens. They have, to my knowledge, never been systematically analysed as part of a process whereby endemic public corruption was gradually replaced by an ethos of public service. In the cases of front line forces, where the corruption of the service would be a threat to the legitimacy of authority, either local or national, such as the police, the development of an effective and widespread ethical code has been presented merely as professionalization, as if the desired values were self-evident and uncontested. Harold Perkin has described how 'patronage and 'corruption'...amateurism and inefficiency, extravagance and waste, secrecy and lack of accountability' were replaced in this period by 'selection and promotion by merit, by professional efficiency...and full financial accountability.'¹³ The strict morality and incorruptibility of early Victorian inspectors such as Leonard Horner at the Factory Office, Hugh Tremeneere at the Mines Office and Edward Gulson at the Poor Law

Commission, was a rebuke to the governing classes and, beginning with Lord Palmerston and thence with Gladstone, the moral tone and personal conduct of the inspectors infected that of the political leaders of the age. This circle of infectious virtue was, I believe, crucial in transforming the conduct of public servants and the wider civic sphere in later nineteenth century Britain and it is this issue which I have enjoyed exploring further in my time at Keble.

¹ A. Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: 'Habits of Hearts and Mind'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.17.

² R.Lowe, *The Official History of the British Civil Service: Reforming the Civil Service, Vol 1: The Fulton Years, 1966-81* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 17-41

³ B.J. O'Toole, *The Ideal of Public Service: Reflections on the higher civil service in Britain* (London, Routledge, 2006), pp.32-36

⁴ F. Carr, 'The Public Service Ethos: Decline and Renewal?' *Public Policy and Administration*, 14:4 (1999), p. 4

⁵ J. Girling, *Corruption, Capitalism and Democracy* (London: Routledge,1997), p.123

⁶ R. Neild, *Public Corruption: The Dark Side of Social Evolution* (London: Anthem, 2002)

⁷ *The Times*, 19 January 1848

⁸ J. Thompson, 'Good government' in D. Craig and J. Thompson (eds.) *Languages of Politics in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London: Palgrave, 2013), p. 28

⁹ P. Harling, *The Waning of Old Corruption: The Politics of Economical reform in Britain, 1779-1846* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996)

¹⁰ J. M. Bourne, *Patronage and Society in Nineteenth England* (London, Arnold, 1986).

¹¹ C. Dahlstrom, 'Bureaucracy and corruption' in P.M. Heywood (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Political Corruption* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 114

¹² P. Corrigan & D. Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), pp. 124-28

¹³ H. Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780-1880* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969). p.320