

150 years of fairness

Janet Paraskeva, First Civil Service Commissioner, explains why recruitment on merit through fair and open competition is as important as ever...

As First Civil Service Commissioner, with my fellow Commissioners, it is my legal responsibility to ensure that entry to the civil service is on merit on the basis of fair and open competition. There are 15 of us and we come from a wide range of backgrounds; we are appointed by the Queen and independent of the Government. Our other responsibility is to promote the Civil Service Code, which outlines the core civil service values of honesty, integrity, objectivity and impartiality, and we hear appeals from civil servants on breaches of the Code.

The Northcote-Trevelyan report of 1854 was the foundation of the modern civil service, an efficient non-partisan service that recruited on merit through open and fair competition, and that effectively served successive governments of whatever political persuasion. It was the Northcote-Trevelyan report that led to the appointment of the Civil Service Commissioners, who have been the trustees of these core values ever since.

The final recommendation of the report was that the role and work of the Commissioners should be established by Act of Parliament, but this never happened, and the Commissioners have always owed their existence to Orders in Council, rather than statute. However, this is about to change. The Government has made a commitment to introduce a Constitutional Renewal Bill, which will have at its heart the establishment of a Civil Service Commission, charged with upholding appointment on merit and the core civil service values.

So much has changed in 150 years and this seems a very appropriate moment to look again at Northcote-Trevelyan to see why the principle of appointment on merit through fair and open competition was considered so important, and to ask: is it still so important today? If it remains important, why is that? Do principles that were established under Gladstone mean the same under Brown, or have they taken on a new meaning?

It is probably helpful to remember why the principle of appointment on merit through fair and open competition

was seen to be so significant in 1854. The reason, simply, was efficiency. The existing system of patronage, in which jobs were often given by Ministers for political favours, and in which promotion was commonly on seniority and not on merit, was widely perceived to be chronically inefficient. Northcote and Trevelyan were wonderfully frank on the consequences of mid-19th Century recruitment practices: 'Admission into the civil service is indeed eagerly sought after, but it is for the unambitious, and the indolent or incapable, that it is chiefly desired.' They were equally scathing on contemporary promotion practices that lead to the appointment of 'men of very slender ability and perhaps of questionable character to considerable emolument'. In addition, they saw that patronage had led to a situation where jobs were owed to the favour of individual Ministers, and civil servants had no incentive to co-operate with their colleagues in other departments. The report does not mention 'silos', but any manager in a large organisation today will understand exactly the problems it describes.

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As we know, the answer to these ills was recruitment on merit. In the 19th Century, this was through examination of literary skills, but also on a broad range of knowledge: classics, mathematics, history, jurisprudence, political economy, modern languages, and political and physical geography. This is some way away from today's assessment centres, in-tray exercises and psychometric testing. But the principles proposed then are the same as are followed now: competition should be open to all and appointment should be on merit, ie. the best person for the position should be appointed, free of Ministerial interference. The outcome, we know, was the creation of an efficient, non-partisan service admired around the world.



First Civil Service Commissioner Janet Paraskeva argues that fair and open competition is a tradition to be proud of

However, before we get carried away in admiration of our 19th Century forebears, we should consider what ‘open to all’ meant to them. It certainly did not mean open to women. Nor did it mean open to men of all ages. It was envisaged that ‘in the case of candidates for superior situations, the limits should, as a general rule, be 19 and 25; and in the case of candidates for inferior offices, 17 and 21’. As one might expect, the report makes no mention of disability, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation. There were many disabled ex-Servicemen in Victorian Britain, but it seemed clear that they need not look to the Government for employment if they were too old, or could not carry out a job without adjustments, however reasonable.

Our understanding of open recruitment has changed dramatically. But the principle is as important today as it was then. The Civil Service Commissioners uphold the principle of appointment on merit through open and fair competition not just because it is the right thing to do, though clearly we believe that it is, but also because it is the most efficient thing to do. A civil service that did not seek to make appointment on merit would, over time, become a less effective service. A civil service where appointment and promotion were believed to be subject to Ministerial favour, or that appeared to promote its own political stance, would lose the respect of the public and might well lose the trust of succeeding administrations. A civil service that did not strive to get the best people into positions irrespective of their age, sex, religion, sexual orientation or disability would be less efficient. It would be less efficient because it missed many of the best people that were available. And over time, many citizens would feel it was not an employer that they should consider because it was not a place where people like them were taken on. This would have the double disadvantage of denying the civil service good recruits, and alienating from the Government many citizens it needed to reach and engage.

The Civil Service Commissioners are upholding a principle of recruitment on merit that was born in the 19th Century. But it is a principle that is as important today, in maintaining an efficient civil service best placed to help the Government deliver its policies, as it was when originally formulated.

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