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# Leadership in the British Civil Service

A study of Sir Percival  
Waterfield and the creation of  
the Civil Service Selection  
Board

Richard A. Chapman



## Leadership in the British Civil Service

First published in 1984, this book examines the style of leadership amongst senior civil servants and its impact on administrative reform by investigating the work of Sir Percival Waterfield who was First Civil Service Commissioner from 1939 to 1951. He was responsible for setting up the Civil Service Selection Board which was the key institution in the pioneering new approach to personnel selection initiated in Britain after the Second World War. It has been regarded as the model for personnel recruitment in other contexts and for civil service recruitment in other countries.

The book raises fundamental questions about the criteria for recruitment and promotion of leading officials in British central government and offers a rare glimpse of the day to day work of top civil servants and the administrative culture in which they operate.



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# LEADERSHIP IN THE BRITISH CIVIL SERVICE

A STUDY OF SIR PERCIVAL WATERFIELD AND THE  
CREATION OF THE CIVIL SERVICE SELECTION  
BOARD

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## PREFACE

When Professor Lord Simey and I had one of our many private discussions about the work of the Fulton Committee on the Civil Service (of which Simey was a member and for which I was commissioned to do research) we agreed that there were serious gaps in the existing literature on the subject. We regretted that there was so little published material of a rigorous biographical sort about the work of top civil servants and we also regretted that there were serious deficiencies in the more general literature on the day to day work of the civil service. We mentioned a few men who had clearly made their mark in the civil service and agreed how useful it would have been to know more about them and their work, but unfortunately there was insufficient time for the Fulton Committee to concern itself with such projects. However, I resolved that at some future date I would apply myself to a project of this sort. For about fifteen years other work prevented me from doing this.

My work with John Greenaway, which resulted in the publication, in 1980, of *The Dynamics of Administrative Reform*, rekindled my enthusiasm for the idea. In my researches into the civil service in mid-twentieth century Britain I became fascinated by reforms in personnel selection and, in particular, became intrigued by the role of Sir Percival Waterfield (of whom I previously knew nothing). It seemed to me that here was a topic for research that might satisfy my desire to work on some biographical material, might contribute to our knowledge of how the civil service actually works, or worked in relation to a particular development, and might also have some practical relevance in terms of future civil service reform. After some preliminary investigations and three years' hard research – on a spare-time basis with difficulties in working some 300 miles from my main research resources – this book is the result.

It has not been an easy book to write. Civil servants are not like politicians or other public figures who keep private papers and who must accept that their private lives become public. Indeed, their private lives are rarely of much interest to people who are not their personal friends. Nevertheless, insights into the sorts of people they are may be gleaned from their evidence to official committees and from comments of their own and others on numerous official files. I think Waterfield

#### 4 *Preface*

and his colleagues emerge from this study as people with hopes, fears and prejudices, like everyone else. However, this book contains no dramatic revelations, no intimate details about private relationships, and no scandals or other material likely to be worthy of serialisation or publication in extract form in Sunday newspapers – in the way that many biographical studies become so widely known.

This book, however, is intended to be much more than a biographical study. Although it focuses on the work and principal achievement of one man, it is also about leadership in a wider context. It argues that Waterfield was undoubtedly a leader in the British civil service at a particular time. He had qualities of drive and determination that resulted in the introduction of a new system of personnel selection that attracted world-wide attention. He was the chief executive responsible for setting up and managing the Civil Service Selection Board in its early years. He planned and guided his particular administrative reform without the support either of society in general or of any particular group within it at a time when the British people were preoccupied with the Second World War.

The most interesting aspect of the study for me was the insights it offered to my understanding of the workings of the British civil service and in particular into how the administrative culture of the higher civil service affects the day to day working of a particular bureaucracy. This becomes apparent as the story unfolds but some of the threads of it are drawn together with more general comments in the last chapter. Indeed, the last chapter is intended to put the study in a much wider context. It is dangerous to draw too many lessons too clearly out of one individual study, but it would be foolish not to draw as much as possible out of the enormous amount of research material used in this book (and also the vast collection of additional material that has not been used in detail in the text). Although the book contains nothing scandalous or dramatic, I hope readers will think my effort has been worthwhile, that it is as fair and balanced to Sir Percival Waterfield as an academic study can be, and that it makes a useful contribution to our understanding of how the British civil service actually works.

Richard A. Chapman  
University of Durham

## LIST OF CHARACTERS

The following have main parts in the story of the creation of the Civil Service Selection Board. Readers may find it useful to be able to refer to these brief details which have been extracted from *Who's Who*.

### **Sir Alan BARLOW**

born 1881. Educated: Marlborough; Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. Clerk in House of Commons, 1906; Junior Examiner, Board of Education, 1907; Private Secretary to Parliamentary Secretary of Board of Education, 1914, to Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Munitions, 1915, and to Minister of Munitions, 1916; Principal Assistant Secretary, Ministry of Labour; Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, 1933-34; Under Secretary, Treasury, 1934; joint Second Secretary, 1938-48.

### **Ernest BEVIN**

born 1881. MP for Central Wandsworth, 1940-50, East Woolwich 1950-51. National Organiser of the Dockers' Union, 1910-21; General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union, 1921-40; Minister of Labour and National Service, 1940-45.

### **Sir Edward BRIDGES (later Lord Bridges)**

born 1892. Educated: Eton; Magdalen College, Oxford. European War, 1914-18, Captain, and sometime Adjutant 4th Bn Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry. Home Civil Service: Treasury 1919-38; Secretary to the Cabinet, 1938-46; Permanent Secretary HM Treasury 1945-56; retired 1956.

### **Sir Cyril BURT**

born 1883. Educated: Christ's Hospital; Jesus College, Oxford. Lecturer in Experimental Psychology and Assistant Lecturer in Physiology, University of Liverpool, 1909-13; Assistant Lecturer, Psychological Laboratory, University of Cambridge, 1912-13; Psychologist to the London County Council (Education Department), 1913-32; Professor of Education in the University of London, 1924-31; Professor of Psychology, University of London, 1931-50.

**R.A. BUTLER (later Lord Butler)**

born 1902. Educated: Marlborough; Pembroke College, Cambridge, 1925-29. MP for Saffron Walden 1929-65; Under Secretary of State, India Office, 1932-37; Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Labour, 1937-38; Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 1938-41; Minister of Education, 1941-45; Minister of Labour, June-July 1945; Chancellor of the Exchequer 1951-55; Lord Privy Seal, 1955-59; Leader of the House of Commons, 1955-61; Home Secretary, 1957-62; First Secretary of State, July 1962-October 1963; Deputy Prime Minister, July 1962-October 1963; Minister in Charge of Central African Office 1962-October 1963; Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs 1963-64; Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, 1965-78.

**Sir Alexander CADOGAN**

born 1884. Educated: Eton; Oxford. Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary at Peking, 1933-35; Ambassador, 1935-36; Deputy Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs 1936-37; Permanent Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs January 1938-February 1946; Permanent Representative of HM Government in the UK to the United Nations, 1946-50; Government Director of the Suez Canal Company 1951-57; Chairman of the BBC, 1952-57; Director of National Westminster Bank, 1951-64.

**Anthony EDEN (later Lord Avon)**

born 1897. Educated: Eton; Christ Church, Oxford. European War 1915-19, Captain and sometime Brigade Major, King's Royal Rifle Corps. MP for Warwick and Leamington 1923-57; Parliamentary Private Secretary to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs 1926-29; Parliamentary Under Secretary, Foreign Office, 1931-33; Lord Privy Seal 1934-35; Minister without Portfolio for League of Nations Affairs, 1935; Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 1935-38; for Dominion Affairs, 1939-40; for War, 1940; for Foreign Affairs, 1940-45; Leader of the House of Commons, 1942-45; Deputy Leader of the Opposition, 1945-51; Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister, 1951-April 1955; Prime Minister and First Lord of the Treasury, April 1955-January 1957.

**Sir Ivo MALLET**

born 1900. Educated: Harrow; Balliol College, Oxford. Entered Diplomatic Service 1925; Assistant Private Secretary to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 1938-41; Acting Counsellor in the Foreign Office,

1941; Counsellor, 1943; Consul-General, Tangier, 1946; Assistant Under Secretary, Foreign Office, 1949; HM Ambassador to Belgrade, 1951.

**Sir Thomas PADMORE**

born 1909. Educated: Central School, Sheffield; Queen's College, Cambridge. Secretaries' Office, Board of Inland Revenue, 1931-34; transferred to Treasury, 1934; Principal Private Secretary to Chancellor of the Exchequer 1943-45; Second Secretary 1952-62.

**Sir George RENDEL**

born 1889. Educated: Downside; Queen's College, Oxford. Entered Diplomatic Service 1913; Head of the Eastern Department, Foreign Office, 1930-38; HM Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Bulgaria, 1938-41; British Minister and (later) Ambassador to the Yugoslav Government in London, 1941-43; employed in Foreign Office and UK Representative on European Committee of United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, 1944-47; British Ambassador to Belgium, 1947-50 (also Minister to Luxembourg, 1947-49). Retired 1950. Director (and Chairman) Singer and Friedlander Ltd.

**Sir Edward RITSON**

born 1892. Educated: Liverpool Institute; London University. Entered Civil Service, 1910; Deputy Chairman, Board of Inland Revenue, 1949-57.

**Dame Evelyn SHARP (later Baroness Sharp)**

born 1903. Educated: St Paul's Girls' School, Somerville College, Oxford. Entered Home Civil Service, 1926; Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Housing and Local Government 1955-66.

**Sir David SCOTT**

born 1887. Educated: Eton; Christ Church, Oxford. Joined 3rd Bn the Royal Scots 1906. Entered the Foreign Office 1911; Assistant Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 1938-44; Deputy Under Secretary of State in the Foreign Office, 1944. Retired 1947.

**Sir Percival WATERFIELD**

born 1888. Educated: Westminster; Christ Church, Oxford. Entered HM Treasury 1911; Treasury Remembrancer in Ireland, 1920-22; Principal Assistant Secretary 1934-39; Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Information, 1939-40; First Civil Service Commissioner 1939-51.

## 8 *List of Characters*

Retired 1951.

### **Sir Horace WILSON**

born 1882. Educated: Kurnella School, Bournemouth; London School of Economics. Entered Home Civil Service 1900; Principal Assistant Secretary, Ministry of Labour, 1919-21; Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Labour, 1921-30; Chief Industrial Adviser to HM Government 1930-39; Permanent Secretary of HM Treasury and Official Head of HM Civil Service 1939-42.

### **Sir Henry WILSON SMITH**

born 1904. Educated: Royal Grammar School, Newcastle upon Tyne; Peterhouse, Cambridge. Entered Home Civil Service 1927; Secretary's Office, General Post Office, 1927-29; HM Treasury 1930; Assistant Private Secretary to Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1932; Principal Private Secretary 1940-42; Under Secretary HM Treasury 1942-46; Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Defence, 1947-48; additional Second Secretary, HM Treasury, 1948-51.

### **Sir John WINNIFRITH**

born 1908. Educated: Westminster; Christ Church, Oxford. Entered Home Civil Service, 1932; Board of Trade, 1932-34; HM Treasury, 1934-59; Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, 1959-67.

# 1 ALEXANDER PERCIVAL WATERFIELD AND THE PRINCIPLES OF CIVIL SERVICE RECRUITMENT

Alexander Percival Waterfield was born on 16 May 1888. His family had strong connections with the Army and with the Indian Civil Service. His father, William Waterfield JP, who married Rose Herschel, served in the Civil Service of Bengal and became Comptroller-General to the Government of India. Like many of his male relatives Waterfield was educated at Westminster,<sup>1</sup> going on to Christ Church, Oxford, where he was Hertford Scholar in 1909. He took a First in Classical Moderations in 1909 and a First in Greats in 1911. In August 1911 he sat the Civil Service Commission open competitive examinations and achieved outstanding marks in Greek and Latin. He was placed first in order of merit for the Indian Civil Service, first for the Eastern Cadetships in the Colonial Services, and second for Clerkships (Class I) in the Home Civil Service.<sup>2</sup> He entered the Treasury in October 1911. From 1920 to 1922 he was Treasury Remembrancer in Ireland. He continued his career in the Treasury, receiving the normal promotions as he gained seniority, served as a member of the Palestine Partition Commission in 1938, and was appointed First Civil Service Commissioner in 1939 – the post from which he retired in 1951. He became a Companion of the Bath in 1923, was Knighted in 1944 and made KBE in 1951. In 1958 he was appointed Commissioner by the British and Maltese Governments to review government salaries and wages in Malta. In 1920 Waterfield married Doris M. Siepmann. He died on 2 June 1965.

For most of his life Waterfield was very close to his old school friend J. Spedan Lewis, who founded the John Lewis Partnership. Spedan Lewis was ‘an unrepentant and . . . aggressive individualist . . . A man of high purpose, unbridled imagination and great courage; he was outspoken but had in many respects the most kindly and generous disposition’.<sup>3</sup> He was also a man who did not always see the commercial world from the same viewpoint as his father, John Lewis senior, with whom he had a number of rather violent disagreements about business affairs. In 1914 one of these disagreements resulted in an arrangement whereby Spedan Lewis exchanged his junior partnership in John Lewis and Company for the control of Peter Jones Ltd, Sloane Square, which his father also owned. Through determination and industry Spedan

Lewis reduced the financial losses at Peter Jones and in 1919 actually made a large profit so that, in the early spring of 1920, he approached other shareholders with the idea of introducing a form of profit sharing.

From early in his business career Spedan Lewis developed ideas for profit-sharing which later resulted in a general plan which became the basis of the John Lewis Partnership. He believed it was essential for business to harness outstanding ability in whichever area of study it had been developed and saw various parallels between developments in business management on the one hand and in the management of public affairs on the other. He wrote: 'My own experience . . . convinced me that business along the lines of our partnership would be a perfectly congenial occupation for people qualified to do really well in the professions and . . . until the business world got a much greater proportion of possessors of those qualifications . . . business of all kinds . . . could never be in fact properly efficient'.<sup>4</sup>

In 1920 Lewis encouraged his very able and loyal friend to join him at Peter Jones Ltd. Accepting the invitation, Waterfield wrote to the Secretary HM Treasury in mid-March asking the Lords Commissioners to accept his resignation from the civil service, explaining: 'I should be ill advised to reject the advantageous offer which has been made to me to join a friend in a private enterprise, in which I hope that, in addition to greater leisure and less risk to my health from the strain of overwork, I may still find opportunity for performing, in a humbler sphere, work of some value to society'.<sup>5</sup> For a short period he then worked as a financial adviser in the position of Economy Director in Peter Jones Ltd. It is not known why he left Peter Jones after only a few weeks but it is probable he simply felt unsuited to commercial life and the particular pressures of working with Spedan Lewis. Certainly, the decision to terminate the appointment was initiated by Waterfield himself. By late May 1920 he had been accepted back into the Treasury, and it was agreed that his period of absence should count as unpaid leave to preserve his pension entitlement. The staff at Peter Jones and the world at large were informed by Lewis that 'the Treasury Authorities' had asked the company as 'a matter of patriotism' and with 'a plea of urgent public need' to release Waterfield to serve in Ireland as personal assistant to Sir John Anderson.<sup>6</sup>

The firm friendship between Percival Waterfield and Spedan Lewis continued right up to Lewis's death in 1963. They corresponded regularly and they shared a passion for gardening and for chess, which they played almost continuously by post. In 1955-56 Lewis invited Sir Percival and Lady Waterfield to join him on a six month holiday in

South Africa. In 1956 Waterfield proposed Lewis for membership of the Athenaeum and Sir Adrian Boulton, another old school friend, seconded the proposal.<sup>7</sup>

When, in 1941, the Home Secretary set up a Selection Board for the preliminary selection of candidates for senior appointments in the reorganised fire service, Waterfield became Chairman and Spedan Lewis joined him as a member of the Board.<sup>8</sup> In 1949 Waterfield seriously considered the possible use of the Civil Service Selection Board on an agency basis for testing candidates for administrative appointments in the John Lewis Partnership, but this suggestion was never officially approved. In 1952, however, after retiring from the Civil Service Commission, he was chairing selection boards for the Partnership.

Just before the Second World War Waterfield again seriously considered an appointment which could have resulted in resignation from the civil service. He had suffered severe private financial losses due to the Stock Exchange collapse in the 1930s which coincided with some unfortunate family illness and increasing expenses in connection with the education of his children – he had two sons and two daughters. He was so concerned about his finances that he moved house, from Cobham, Surrey, to a smaller residence in Guildford, and with the encouragement of Sir Isidore Salmon MP (who, in the 1930s, was active in the House of Commons Select Committee on Public Accounts, which Waterfield served at that time as a senior Treasury official) decided to apply for the post of Comptroller of the London County Council, which was advertised in the summer of 1937. Waterfield wrote to Sir Warren Fisher, the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury, about his decision on 15 August, saying: ‘Naturally I hate the idea of leaving the Treasury and my friends in the Service. But, as you know, I am growing more and more anxious about my finances, owing to the continued drain on account of education and illness’. As a consequence, Sir James Rae drafted an open testimonial, signed by Fisher, which, in most glowing terms, referred to Waterfield’s devotion to duty, courtesy, sincerity, vitality and enthusiasm. It ended: ‘He possesses a highly critical and imaginative mind and a strength of character which eminently fit him for the duties of a Financial Officer’.<sup>9</sup> He was never offered the job but it was not very long after this, in December 1938, that Waterfield’s appointment as First Civil Service Commissioner was announced, in succession to Sir Roderick Meiklejohn.

When Waterfield died in 1965 *The Times* obituary said that he concealed a kindly, sympathetic and imaginative nature beneath a

somewhat formal and precise manner. 'Those who met him as chairman of a selection panel, on whose decisions their fate depended, were not reassured by his bearing in the initial stages, but before long his willingness to listen to what they had to say, and his quiet grasp of what they were trying to convey, created confidence. No detail of any business in which he was concerned was too unimportant for his attention, yet that he could take the large view was shown by the changes that he introduced into the method of selection of candidates for the Administrative Class of the Civil Service. Having become convinced that the existing examination placed too much emphasis on academic attainments to the exclusion of other highly important qualities, he studied all the latest ideas about methods of selection in other fields, and especially the procedure adopted by the War Office for the selection of officers during the Second World War, and on this basis he evolved his scheme'.<sup>10</sup> Some time after his retirement Waterfield rather modestly concluded that 'the use of group selection methods such as those employed at CSSB has proved well worth while, and that the system has come to stay'.<sup>11</sup> The development of that method of selection drew upon Waterfield's persuasive skills in the closed politics of Whitehall and gave him the opportunity to make a lasting contribution to public administration.

The principles guiding recruitment to the higher civil service in Britain have evolved since the mid-nineteenth century. They are based on the requirements that on the one hand, the civil service should be efficient in its recruitment procedures, making full use of modern approaches to staff selection as part of personnel management; and on the other hand, civil service recruitment should embody features consistent with the values and practices of the British political system. Up to 1855 the usual method of appointment to posts in government departments was by patronage. Consequently, as William A. Robson has written, corruption and inefficiency were rampant.<sup>12</sup> In 1854 the Northcote/Trevelyan Report noted the need for 'an efficient body of permanent officers, occupying a position clearly subordinate to that of the Ministers who are directly responsible to the Crown and to Parliament, yet possessing sufficient independence, character, ability, and experience to be able to advise, assist and to some extent, influence, those who are from time to time set over them'.<sup>13</sup>

To deal with the defects of the service they observed at that time, Northcote and Trevelyan recommended the establishment of 'a proper system of examination before appointment', involving open competition and accompanied by a test of age, health and character. The

examination was to be conducted periodically by a central board constituted for the purpose. Appointment should be followed by a short period of probation and promotion, which should be the reward of industry and ability rather than seniority, and which should be regulated by a consideration of the public interests.

Although details have been changed in the past 130 years these general principles remain the basis for the system of recruitment today. Civil servants appointed for intellectual work are carefully selected at recruitment and afterwards they are given a variety of suitable work so that they become acquainted with a wide range of the department's business. Selection was entrusted to the Civil Service Commission, an independent body created by Order in Council in 1855, and remaining opportunities for patronage were swept away by an Order in Council in 1870.

The earliest scheme of competition for recruitment of the highest grade of civil servant, known as Class I, consisted of a preliminary examination (to qualify for admission to the subsequent competition) in handwriting, orthography, arithmetic, and English composition. The competitive examination covered thirteen subjects, none of which was compulsory, and candidates selected a number of examination papers up to a limitation which related to a fixed maximum of possible marks. Subsequent modifications increased the subjects which the candidates were permitted to offer and almost all the studies for the various honours schools at universities were embraced. By the outbreak of the First World War there were 38 subjects on the list. The reasoning behind this arrangement was that a competitive literary examination was the best means of selecting the most able candidates because the tests on which it depended were a means of assessing natural ability and acquired training. It was also consistent with one of the dicta of Lord Macaulay, formulated in a Report of the Committee on the Indian Civil Service, 1845: 'The youth who does best what all the ablest and most industrious youths about him are trying to do well will generally prove a superior man'. The Report went on to argue that 'early superiority in science and literature generally indicates the existence of some qualities which are securities against vice – industry, self-denial, a taste for pleasures not sensual, a laudable desire of honourable distinction, a still more laudable desire to obtain the approbation of friends and relations.'<sup>14</sup>

There were, however, defects in the competitive examination as it then existed and these were drawn to the attention of the MacDonnell Royal Commission on the Civil Service (1912-14). For example, it was