

THE BRIEFLY NOTED ARCHIVE

RANDOM IDEAS WORTH CONSIDERING FROM ANDREW GRAHAM WITH LOTS OF HELP FROM OTHERS

May 2014

Familiar Quotations on Civil Servants: Ironic with Grains of Devilish Truth

The following quotations are from a new and interesting site out of the Policy@Manchester.

I regard the biblical reference at the end as an ideal consultants report, having been the recipient of many. I use it in my teaching on the history of management. Here are the quotations:

Sir Richard Mottram The Permanent Secretary at the Department of Transport made the following perceptive comment when questioned by the Public Administration Select Committee on 7 March 2002: *What the Civil Service wants, and I always compare it to a rather stupid dog, it wants to do what its master wants and it wants to be loyal to its master and above all it wants to be loved for doing that.*

Sir William Harcourt This nineteenth century Liberal politician neatly summarized the different roles of Ministers and civil servants when he said that: *The Minister exists to tell the Civil Servant what the Public will not stand.*

Jim Callaghan: Shortly after his appointment as Foreign Secretary, (soon to be Prime Minister) Mr Callaghan was briefed by the Europhile Foreign Office official (later Sir) Michael Butler. At the end of the briefing Mr Callaghan said:

I get the impression that you really mind about the EEC and Britain's membership. That's fine by me. But just remember that I really mind about the Labour Party.

The Northcote Trevelyan Report : [This 1853 report](#) catalyzed the development of the apolitical UK civil service, recruited and promoted on merit rather than as a result of patronage. The authors noted that, at the time of their report: *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.*

Sir James Stephen Developing the above theme, Sir James made the following comment in his 1854-5 Parliamentary Papers: *A clerk in a Public Office may not even dream of fame to be acquired in that capacity. He labours in an obscurity as profound as it is unavoidable. His official character is absorbed in that of his superior. He must devote all his talents, all his learning, to measures, some of which he will assuredly disapprove, without having the slightest power to prevent them; and to some of which he will most essentially contribute, without having any share whatsoever in the credit bestowed on others, which his pain has earned for them; and if any accident should make him notorious enough to become the suspected author of any unpopular act, he must silently submit to the reproach, even though it is totally unmerited by him. These are indeed the indispensable disadvantages of the position of a clerk in a Public Office,*

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and no man of sense and temper would complain of them. But neither will any real man of mental power, to whom the truth is known beforehand, subject himself to an arduous examination in order to win a post so ill paid, so obscure, and so subordinate or, should he win it, no such man will long retain it.

General Sir Walter Walker (1981) *Britain has invented a new missile. It's called the civil servant - it doesn't work and it can't be fired.*

Mark Turner and David Hulme on policy-making: *What must be banished is any lingering idea that policy is some highly rational process in which expert technicians are firmly in control using highly tuned instruments to achieve easily predicted outcomes. Such an image is inappropriate for OECD countries let alone the developing world...*

Sir William Beveridge: *The besetting sin of civil servants is to mix too much with each other.*

The Bible: Exodus 18 contains an early reference to the creation of a civil service. Here, in verses 18-23, Moses' father-in-law gives advice to Moses:-

You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. ... select capable men from all the people - men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain - and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide for themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you.