I spent the first half of my career working in a local government sector which had literally been shaped by the professions. Departments were structured around planners, architects, accountants, social workers and surveyors. Their chief officers reported to their ‘own’ committees, reinforcing the power of the professional ethos. The equivalent of today’s head of the paid service was usually a legally qualified town clerk who was quaintly regarded as ‘primus inter pares’. He therefore struggled manfully (given the almost total lack of women in such positions) to develop some kind of corporacy in the authority. It was taken for granted that all this would be for the benefit of the public because, well, professionals had always worked for the good of their clients according to standards set by their professional peers. A specific customer focus was, therefore, unnecessary. Collaborations between the different professional departments tended to occur primarily in respect of a location (a retail redevelopment or housing regeneration) and was often fraught. Those of us who began to champion the use of corporate management participation and customer care were regarded by the professional majority as in a way betraying the profession.

When I moved to central government in 1990 I encountered a very different public service world almost devoid of professionals. Generalists were cherished, developed and promoted. The head of finance and personnel in the Department of Social Security with an
expenditure budget of £100 billion and 85,000 staff had no professional training. No one thought that unusual. Interestingly there was the same lack of corporate behaviour as existed in local government and an even more cavalier approach to the customer, client, patient – victim or supplicant!

Of course both locally and centrally much has changed and in some ways those changes have produced some convergence. Interestingly the civil service is now in the throes of ‘professionalising’ policy formulation, delivery and specialist support. The service also has many more professionally qualified specialists. Local government, meanwhile, has gradually broken down the professional compartments, instead organising more around issues – children, for example. In doing so it has placed a stronger focus on the broader skills of management and leadership.

Child abuse cases such as Climbié have shown how professional boundaries can lead to poor communications between individuals serving a single client. The lack of shared cultures, training and even language have protected the status and identities of professional groups but at the expense of the clients’ welfare. In a real sense professional boundaries can now be seen to have been designed for the convenience and protection of the professions not the client. As the emphasis shifts even more towards quality and client needs so the demand is for work to be redesigned in ways that make sense for the client and which, if possible, also achieve the more efficient use of resources. So we see not only children’s services but the development of teaching assistants in the classroom and some signs of the line between nurses and doctors being blurred simply because it makes sense from the patient’s point of view. In some extreme cases where professionals are in very short supply (eg occupational therapists) it has become necessary to redesign the job to ensure that clients receive the necessary support.

There has also been a shift in the balance of power between, on the one hand, the public service as a profession and, on the other, the traditional professions such as law, accountancy and surveying. As a young professional starting out in local government I was clear that
the primary loyalty of most professional colleagues was to the profession not the service or even the authority. The subsequent debates about corporate and community planning and management, customer care, community engagement, diversity and the new public management have gradually developed a sense that public service management is in itself a profession so that many members of the traditional professions see themselves as having a kind of dual citizenship. They remain accountable to their professional bodies but they are more aware of a wider responsibility to their authority or department and to the community it serves. Consequently many are openly sympathetic to an agenda that emphasises the need for public services to be driven by the wishes of citizens and users not the producers.

Professionals in the public service have always plied their trade under pressure. They have been used to challenge from their political masters determined to fulfil manifesto commitments in the face of possibly unhelpful advice. And they have been expected to justify their advice to communities sometimes angry at its implications and their apparent inflexibility. In recent years the challenges from both sources have become much more intense. As politicians themselves have become more pressured – not least by the media – so they have exerted more pressure for the ‘right’ or the convenient professional advice. Equally, communities have become better organised and have access to information and knowledge never available before the advent of the internet. These same communities now even have the benefit of online campaign tools to make them ever more effective. As a result the life of the public service professional, never easy, is becoming more difficult. The respect close to reverence, which they could in the past take for granted, now has to be earned. And each reported example of professional error makes earning that respect more challenging. The best public service professionals never saw their task as solely transferring knowledge to politicians or communities but rather interpreting that knowledge for their benefit. Their continued credibility depends ever more on their ability to do that without damaging their apolitical status. The successful public
professional needs therefore to develop an acute understanding of the particular political context in which they work if they are to operate effectively. Ministers want professional advice that has already been ‘cooked’ by exposure to the political realities of the time. Most do not welcome raw professional advice that they are expected to adapt to the real world.

The pressure experienced by professionals operating in these circumstances has never been fully understood by their own professional bodies. At times the employed lawyers, for example, have enjoyed a reduced status in their own profession. They have consequently been forced to rely on their own personal values and ethics in a way not perhaps experienced by colleagues operating in more traditional settings and that self-reliance may be serving them well in today’s more exposed environment. They are not just self-reliant but perhaps even self-regulated.

The fact that professionals in the public service face so many shared experiences and pressures and the fact that there is now so much convergence between local government, central government and the health service makes it all the more surprising that the public service has remained so segmented. As the balance of emphasis shifts between the professional in the public service and the public service as a profession one question is whether there is now a case for establishing a single public service profession in the UK.

When the devolved administrations were established the then cabinet secretary was careful to ensure that a unified civil service was retained to ensure a continuing free flow of people and a commonality of values. But if these arguments are powerful within the civil service then they could be equally powerful and could be applied across the public sector. For a start a single public service profession would encourage much greater movement of staff to the benefit of everyone. It is currently difficult to persuade able young civil servants to go into local government or even health because they are fearful that the experience will not be valued or that they will be forgotten. It is even harder to arrange secondments from local to central government – although there are of course examples. As a
result the level of understanding between the sectors is too low, to the
detriment of policy-making and delivery. A wider pool of
opportunities would make it easier for people to change career
direction and find jobs more suited to their particular competencies.
At the moment the different sectors are too suspicious of applicants
who have not been ‘grown’ within that particular sector. There are too
few examples of mobility.

The present artificial boundaries also discourage the free flow of
ideas, experience, knowledge and good practice. Central government
still has a tendency to ‘look down’ on local government and, as a
result, has been reluctant to see the relevance of much of the good
practice that has grown up there in recent years. Equally the health
service remains for many a mysterious place – within which much
good is taking place. Issues of leadership, management, service design
and the creation of client service strategies are all common across the
sectors and yet we now have separate local government leadership
centres, a national school of government, a national leadership centre
for schools and have even seen attempts to develop a ‘national health
university’. Perhaps a ‘national school for public service leadership’ is
needed that could have a transformational effect on our public
services, the quality of leadership and the definition and development
of this public service profession.

A move towards some kind of public service profession could also
help remove the artificial barriers which can exist even within single
professional groups. When I joined the Department for Education
and Employment there was, I think, only one person in the whole
department who had had extensive experience of working in schools
or in education authorities. It was Ray Shostak, who continued to
break the mould by going back to local government to establish the
Children’s Services department in Hertfordshire and who is now back
with central government at the Treasury. The problem was that there
was no natural route from the classroom to the local education
authority and thence to a senior position in government. That meant
that front-line teachers did not see how they could move into central
government to help shape directly the future of the education service.
They could contribute only when they were invited to do so and therefore felt disenfranchised with no sense of ownership of policy and every reason to criticise that policy. The same was true of health and housing and although action has been taken to improve the situation at the margins (more in some government departments than others) it is fundamentally unchanged. If an individual develops a passion for the profession in the front line surely it is right that they should have the opportunity to carry that passion and their knowledge to the minister’s door if that is their wish and they develop the skills to achieve it?

And what stands in the way of this public service profession? Vested interests certainly. As ever the current system works in favour of those with the power. In addition many would be concerned that a single profession would change the balance of power and influence between officials or officers and the politicians. And of course the transitional problems, not least pay disparities, would be very significant. So maybe we should be defining a direction of travel rather than a single precisely defined destination. We should do more to encourage a sense that public service with client needs at its core is in itself a worthy professional calling. We should continue to change the balance of loyalty between the traditional professional groupings and the public service as a profession. We should minimise the barriers to mobility ensuring that the most important jobs are genuinely open to the very best people. And we should aspire to a public service that is structured to facilitate partnership working for the benefit of clients. A public service which ensures that good practice is more likely to be shared and bad practice more likely to be avoided. It is difficult to argue that we currently have public services organised in the way most likely to satisfy client needs so let’s think radically about how they could be changed for the better.

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