POLICY POSITIONS AND THE GENERALIST/SPECIALIST DIVIDE

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Abstract

This paper will examine whether empirical evidence demonstrates discrepancies between Scottish Natural Heritage’s (specialist) policy approach and the more generalist policy perspectives of the public and of Scottish Natural Heritage’s partners in local government.

UK Government: An Introduction

British central government has long been defined as ‘generalist’ rather than ‘specialist’ in nature (q.v. Bennion, 1969). The civil service is characterised by senior staff who tend not to be professionally qualified in their relevant areas of administrative competence and who have worked for a number of Departments throughout their careers. This ‘generalist’ nature of British Government can also be seen in the appointment of elected representatives as Ministers, insofar as they again tend not to be professionally qualified in their areas of competence and are moved between Departments even more rapidly than career civil servants.

The ‘generalist’ nature of British central government is however far from being a new phenomenon. Birch (1986) notes that the Northcote-Trevelyan Report of 1854 (which provided the foundations of the modern British Home Civil Service) gave rise to the notion that, “. . . staff should be recruited for general classes of work rather than for specific posts or even specific departments,” an ideal which persists to this day insofar as, “. . . recruitment policy is that the top people in the Civil Service should be ‘generalists’ rather than specialists. It is in sharp contrast to the principles adopted in most other advanced societies.” Continuing in this vein Self (1977) explains that British government is frequently discussed in terms of the rôle of the specialist vis-à-vis the rôle of the generalist and that, “A pure distinction of this kind exists in few countries besides Britain . . .”. Moreover, Stanyer and Smith (1976) go further than Self, stating that,

Britain is almost alone in subordinating specialists to generalists in its civil service or in even making such a distinction . . . . . . . In France there is no underlying theory that there are two sorts of people, specialists and generalists . . .

Thus, it can be seen from the above that the clear message which emerges from even a cursory review of elementary textbooks on British government is that the generalist / specialist divide is an issue of central concern in most discussions of the nature of British government and its workings. Indeed, the generalist / specialist divide was to be one of the core issues dealt with in the 1968 Fulton Report which is widely regarded as the most important review of civil service activity since the publication of Northcote-Trevelyan which had been over a century beforehand. The publication of Fulton was to intensify the debate on the generalist / specialist divide in the UK, recommending as it did that when recruiting civil servants more account should be taken of specialists (at the expense of generalists) by making more attempt to match the academic background of applicants to the nature of work required by vacant civil service posts (although this recommendation was to be rejected by the Government of the day, allegedly following pressure from the civil service, q.v. Birch 1986).

More importantly for the purposes of this paper however the Fulton Report led to a process in the UK (mirroring processes ongoing in many other countries at that time) of, “Hiving-off departmental functions to autonomous non-departmental agencies established outside departments,” (Greenwood and Wilson, 1984). In other words, many governmental functions were moved from the generalist-dominated central Ministries into specialist-dominated quangos (usually termed Non-Departmental Public Bodies in the UK). These Non-Departmental Public Bodies were to be managed within the public sector but free from direct political control and accountability. Thus, most such Bodies were initially established with a view to undertaking activities which were not particularly contentious in party political terms and which it was thought would benefit from management by non-partisan specialists. Scottish Natural Heritage is a good example of such
a Non-Departmental Body operating ‘at arm’s length’ from government proper, managed by specialists and responsible for providing public services which are not particularly contentious in party political terms such as nature conservation (both wildlife and landscape) and the provision of countryside recreation.

Of course the rejection of Fulton’s recommendation on recruitment to the civil service, taken together with the acceptance of his recommendation for ‘hiving-off’ can be seen to have had the combined effect of (at the very least) maintaining the power of the ‘generalist’ in central Ministries. Furthermore, “The most important,” (Butler, 1993) of reforms in the Home Civil Service post-Fulton has served to create an even more emphatic specialist / generalist divide within British central government, that is, the ‘Next Steps’ reforms (q.v. Efficiency Unit 1988, 1991). This package of reforms had led to a situation in which more than three hundred thousand civil servants had been transferred by 1995 from central Ministries into no less than ninety-two ‘executive agencies’ (Painter, 1995) following a report by the Efficiency Unit (1988) which stated, “We recommend that ‘agencies’ should be established to carry out the executive functions of government within a policy and resources framework set by a department.” In other words, on top of the maintenance of power in central Ministries by the generalists in the wake of Fulton, some twenty years later arose a situation in which a further divide occurred within British central government. This divide was not between Ministries and Non-Departmental Public Bodies, but within Ministries, between a policy-making core of generalists and groups of specialists organised as Next Steps Agencies. Greer (1994) has commented that,

The characterising feature of Next Steps, the creation of executive agencies from the ‘operational’ arms of government reinstigates the policy versus administration cultural and skill divide which Fulton tried so hard to remove. The structure of Next Steps formalises the divide between the ‘operational’ agency people and the policy people in headquarters.

To conclude this section on UK government some mention of local government must also be made. In a similar vein to elected representatives at a national level, local politicians tend to be generalists. Senior staff in local government are as a rule however professionally qualified with regard to at least one area of their Department’s responsibilities. As Stanyer and Smith have noted (1976), “Most of the services and functions of local authorities require professional and technical skills. Thus an important difference to the civil service is that senior personnel in local government are specialists rather than generalist administrators,” which has led to a situation quite different to that found in central government. Indeed, in local government “... generalists have restricted life chances compared with specialists, in marked contrast to the situation in the central civil service ...” (Stanyer, 1976). There is however (at least as far as the debate on the generalist / specialist divide is concerned) a marked parallel between the nature of local government and of central government in the UK. As Stanyer (1976) notes, “The whole of the local government employment situation is dominated by the distinction between professionals and non-professionals or between specialists and generalists ...” Thus, to conclude this section, it can be seen from the foregoing that a clear message which emerges, even from a cursory review of elementary textbooks on British government, is that the generalist / specialist divide is an issue of central concern in most discussions of the nature of British government and its workings, at both central and local level.

The Study

It has been established therefore that by reading texts on British government one can quickly come to the conclusion that generalist / specialist divide pervades all elements of governmental activity in the UK and it would not be unreasonable to assume that (without going into too much further detail here about the extensive literature on the subject) policy-making is no different from any other government activity. However, it is contended here that the pervasive notion of the importance of the generalist / specialist divide does in fact seem to be as much a form of ‘conventional wisdom’ as it is empirical fact, hence this paper is based on work which sought to empirically determine the policy positions of a number of generalist and specialist political actors in Scotland as regards sustainable development. More specifically (given the vast scope of sustainable development policy), particular reference will be made to the positions of a number of political actors with regard to the work of Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) which as noted above is the Non-Departmental Public Body with responsibility for the conservation of landscape and wildlife and the provision of countryside recreation in Scotland. SNH was the first UK Statutory body to be charged with a
legal responsibility to ‘secure sustainability’ (Parliament, Statutes, 1991) and as a ‘hived-off’ Non-
Departmental Public Body operates under the guidance of specialists outwith direct political control.

The empirical work was framed against a background of eight ‘known’ postulates, i.e. it was accepted
that the following had previously been determined:

1. what sustainable development means to the Government (Secretary of State for the Environment et al, 1994);
2. what sustainable development means to SNH (SNH, 1993);
3. what sustainable development means to SNH’s staff (Fraser, 1993);
4. what sustainable development means to the public (Wilkinson & Waterton, 1991; McCaig & Henderson, 1995);
5. that the Government is willing to encourage the public to be able to pass judgement on the affairs of
non-departmental public bodies as part of The Citizen’s Charter (Prime Minister, 1991) and that
special importance has been attached to this in relation to sustainable rural development (q.v. Scottish
Office 1992a; Chapman et al, 1996);
6. that SNH does not publicly object to involvement of/scrutiny by the public, as evidenced by its mission
statement, Working Scotland’s With People to Care for Our Natural Heritage (SNH, 1992), although
outwith publicity documents its commitment to this is perhaps not so great. For instance, policy
documents such as Sustainable Development and the Natural Heritage: The SNH Approach (SNH, 1993) do not outline a rôle for the general public;
7. that SNH has encouraged sections of the general public to be allowed a voice in regard to certain
practical aspects of the management of the countryside [although in regard to the broader strategy
which underpins SNH grant-aid and operation only the view of specialists had been sought (q.v. SNH
1994), and in relation to how such management fits with SNH’s responsibility to encourage sustainable
development no structured research had been undertaken];
8. that the Government is unhappy that aspects of SNH’s actions do not match its legislative and policy
obligations (Scottish Office Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department, 1996).

Therefore, it was contended that there would be a discrepancy between those who fund SNH and monitor its
activities (i.e. the Ministers and Civil Servants connected to the Scottish Office Agriculture, Environment
and Fisheries Department, who are generalists) and those specialists comprising a large proportion of
SNH’s staff and who determine its short and medium term priorities.

The hypothesis framed suggested that one could also expect to find a difference between the policy
position of SNH as regards the pursuit of sustainable development and the policy position of the public,
who are, after all, the ultimate generalists and the ultimate funders, whose views are articulated through
their political representatives which in turn guides Ministerial decision-making and the implementation of
such decisions through Civil Servants. Discrepancies were also anticipated between SNH and its partners in
local government. If SNH is to meet its Statutory obligations and encourage sustainable development for
the public good, it was important to test its actual performance empirically, bearing in mind the eight
‘known’ key statements above.

Thus, the nub of the hypothesis was that there would be a discrepancy between the general public’s
policy position (to be established by quantitative empirical enquiry) and the position of SNH, which had
been determined from analysis of their policy statements. Given the existence of the Scottish Office
Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department (1996) policy document which was critical of the
manner in which SNH discharges its duty to ‘ensure sustainability’ it was proposed that there may be a
determinable causal mechanism underlying the differing views of SNH and The Scottish Office. It was
further suggested that insofar as SNH is staffed mainly by specialists and The Scottish Office by generalists,
that it was the generalist / specialist distinction which was causing the observed difference in views. If this
were to be the case then it would be found that the general public’s position would be furthest removed
from SNH’s, as they are to be found at polar opposites of the generalist / specialist spectrum. Local Elected
Members are also generalists, although in all likelihood they would possess a greater degree of specialist
knowledge than the public. As they ought to be more responsive to public perceptions than Civil Servants,
given their elected rather than permanent nature, it would be expected that Elected Members will be found
between Civil Servants and the general public on the generalist / specialist spectrum. Similarly, due to the
part-time rather than full-time nature of their political office it would be expected that Elected Members will
also come between Ministers and the general public on the generalist / specialist spectrum. Finally, local
government officers tend to be specialists, but owing to the fact that their work is tempered by the authority
of generalist Councillors, they would most likely fit into the generalist / specialist spectrum between The
Scottish Office and SNH. The spectrum can be represented diagramatically thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generalist ←</th>
<th>Local Government Officers</th>
<th>→ Specialist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Public</td>
<td>Local Elected Members &amp; Ministers &amp; Civil Servants</td>
<td>Scottish Natural Heritage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In relation to determining policy positions, there were two fixed points on the generalist / specialist
spectrum above, the policy statements of SNH and The Scottish Office. To test the hypothesis it was
essential to determine the views of the general public, Elected Members and local government officers.
This was done through a quantitative questionnaire survey, related specifically to SNH’s rôle in regard to
the management of Long-Distance Walking Routes.

The rationale for the choice of Long-Distance Walking Routes was that as Scotland was too large to be
studied as a whole there was a requirement to accurately identify smaller geographical areas for detailed
study (which were, as far as possible, representative of the broader social, economic and environmental
canvas). There are a great many ways by which suitable geographical areas could have been identified, but
in general terms whichever means of classification was chosen the end result would have been to identify
either a ‘blob’ of land or a linear land corridor (Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront,
1992).” It was the linear land corridor approach which was identified as more likely to provide a
representative basis for the study of Scotland, but rather than adopting the more usual means of identifying
such corridors (river catchment areas), it transpired through consideration that Long-Distance Walking
Routes are in fact a better means by which a transect of land can be identified (and around which the sample
necessary for empirical study can be drawn). To summarise, it was felt that Long-Distance Walking Routes
offered the following methodological advantages over river catchment areas:

1. as there are only three properly designated Long-Distance Routes in Scotland (plus a very short section
   of the Pennine Way), it is much easier to choose the particular cases which will be used to study
   sustainable development than it would be from the much larger number of river catchments;
2. insofar as it was wished that the geographical areas chosen should be representative of the broader rural
   canvas, the Long-Distance Walking Route option was felt to be appropriate. The Scottish Office
   (1992b) regards rural Scotland as consisting of three main sub-groups: the Highlands and Islands;
   North East Scotland; and, Southern Scotland. Thus, it is convenient that: in the Highlands and Islands
   sub-group one finds part of the West Highland Way corridor and all of the proposed Great Glen Way
   corridor; in the North East Scotland sub-group one finds part of the West Highland Way and all of the
   Speyside Way; and, in Southern Scotland one finds the Southern Upland Way and part of the Pennine
   Way;
3. all Long-Distance Routes have been designated according to the same set of guidelines and are subject
to management plans drawn up in accordance with the same guidelines. This ensures that comparisons
drawn are truly on a ‘like for like’ basis. River catchments on the other hand may be subject to a variety of
designations and management guidelines, indeed, even different parts of a single river
catchment may be subject to a variety of designations and management guidelines;
4. SNH is charged not only with responsibility for the award of the Long-Distance Walking Route
designation under the Countryside (Scotland) Act 1967 (the award of this designation is partly intended
to foster rural economic development) but with the responsibility to “have regard to the desirability of
securing that anything done, whether by SNH or any other person, in relation to the natural heritage of
Scotland is undertaken in a manner which is sustainable” under the Natural Heritage (Scotland) Act
1991. This dual responsibility of a single public agency made detailed policy review and hypothesis
development more coherent.
In terms of choosing the general public as a group suitable for sampling, it is important to note that there a number of justifications for so doing, emanating from a variety of policy arenas. Please consider the following:

1. the Brundtland report states that, “. . . the pursuit of sustainable development requires a political system that secures effective citizen participation in decision making . . .” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987);
2. the UK Government has advanced similar arguments through documents such as The Citizen’s Charter (Prime Minister, 1991) and Sustainable Development: The UK Strategy (Secretary of State for the Environment et al, 1994) in which it asserts its belief that any move to sustainable development will require commitment to and from communities and individuals;
3. Scottish Office documents have variously expressed that, “The strength of the rural community lies in the people; it is vital that they be involved in decisions about their future,” (Scottish Office, 1992a), that it is, “. . . right to offer the people of our rural communities a real voice in the decisions which affect the ways in which they live,” (Secretary of State for Scotland, 1995), and that, “. . . rural development benefits from the full involvement of communities . . .” (Chapman et al, 1996).

Thus, it would appear that there is no shortage of support for the notion of the general public being listened to on matters related to sustainable development.

Moreover, as previously mentioned, SNH’s first document, in which it stated its aims and objectives, was Working With Scotland’s People to Care for Our Natural Heritage (SNH, 1992), a phrase which the agency has subsequently adopted as its mission statement. However, it can be seen that whilst small amounts of funding have been devoted to exercises such as that undertaken by Baxter et al (1994), SNH has not outlined any particular rôle for the public in its policy paper on sustainable development (SNH, 1993), nor did it invite comments from the general public on its Long-Distance Routes in Scotland: SNH Discussion Paper (SNH, 1994) on which specialists only were consulted. Whilst it is certainly the case that a number of surveys of the perceptions of the users of Long-Distance Walking Routes have been undertaken by SNH and its predecessor (e.g. Southern Upland Way 1984, Speyside Way 1994, West Highland Way 1981, 1986, 1995), none of these exercises could be said to have addressed users’ perceptions of the importance of Long-Distance Walking Routes to sustainable development. Moreover, an assessment of the perceptions of users is of course not the same as an assessment of the perceptions of the general public. Those who do not use the Routes are nevertheless both electors, on whose behalf political representatives have established SNH and Long-Distance Walking Routes and taxpayers, whose contributions to general and local taxation fund SNH, local government and Long-Distance Walking Routes. Thus, is asserted here that as: (i) it is widely contended that the general public’s input to sustainable rural development is valuable; (ii) the general public pays for sustainable developments such as Long-Distance Walking Routes; it therefore has a valid basis for commenting on these and is entirely justified in expressing its (admittedly non-specialist) views. This becomes even more important in regard to the operation of agencies such as SNH, which although responsible for spending taxpayers’ money is not responsible for justifying this expenditure at the ballot box. In the final analysis, “All public services are paid for by individual citizens, either directly or through their taxes,” (Prime Minister, 1991).

Insofar as it has been suggested that local authority personnel (both elected and employed) are a group which was suitable for sampling, this was justified on the grounds that local authorities act as a go-between or a bridge, standing betwixt and between the public and SNH in regard to Long-Distance Walking Routes and other ‘enjoyment and understanding’ developments. On the one hand, local authorities work in partnership with SNH to provide Long-Distance Walking Routes and are (quite heavily) dependent on grant aid from SNH to do so, which, on the face of it, would tend to suggest that the authorities will be of much the same mind as SNH itself in relation to perceptions of the rôle of Long-Distance Walking Routes. On the other hand however, local authorities are of course dependent on the general public. The policies of local government are set by the elected representatives of the local population and these representatives must take heed of the public’s fears and aspirations, especially in relation to services for which they raise taxation locally (please note that some services such as the administration of Housing Benefit are funded entirely by Government grant). In the particular case of Long-Distance Walking Routes, local authorities spend more money on them than is received from SNH, meaning that much of the balance of such expenditure is raised directly from the local population through the Council Tax. It is definitely in the
interest of local politicians to be responsive to the population which they serve - unlike SNH they gain their legitimacy from direct elections - a repeated failure to listen to constituents or to spend their money wisely would be imprudent. Indeed, despite its reliance on SNH for funding, local government’s responses to Long-Distance Routes in Scotland: SNH Discussion Paper (SNH, 1994) indicate that local authorities are willing to be critical of SNH and are not necessarily of the same mind as SNH in regard to the role of Long-Distance Walking Routes. To ensure however that there was a representative balance of the spectrum of perceptions which are to be found in local government however, views were canvassed from a sample consisting of both local Councillors (who tend to be generalists and who very susceptible to public pressure) and local government officers (who are more likely to be specialists and are less susceptible to direct public pressure).

The Response

The total survey population identified was eight hundred and twenty-six, and all envelopes posted to the general public were addressed in the form ‘Mr. and Mrs. Smith or the occupier’ to indicate that the correspondence was aimed at the occupier of an address rather than at the name drawn from the electoral roll. Although response rates are always difficult to forecast, at the time of distributing the questionnaires a low response rate (circa 10%) was anticipated for the general public group surveyed, and very high response rates (circa 90%) were anticipated for the Elected Member and Officer surveys. The actual response rates are detailed in the table below (where WHW = general public sample, West Highland Way; and PW = general public sample, Pennine Way):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>WHW</th>
<th>PW</th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Officers</th>
<th>TOTALS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Posted</td>
<td>758</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>826</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returned</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivered</td>
<td>753</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responses</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response Rate</td>
<td>24 %</td>
<td>35 %</td>
<td>40 %</td>
<td>100 %</td>
<td>26 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These response rates were quite different from those anticipated, especially in relation to the general public and Councillor surveys (where the former group’s response was far higher than expected, the latter group’s much lower). This was to cause problems in relation to testing the hypothesis by statistically treating the survey findings.

The Findings

The central hypothesis predicted that the questionnaire survey would show a difference in the perceptions of the general public, Elected Members and local government officers. Therefore, the null hypothesis predicted that there would be no statistically significant difference between the views of these groups. It can be seen from the table below that the only statistically significant result to emerge from cross-tabulations is in fact from the comparison of the public/officer datasets, that is, the comparison which should have been most likely to produce a statistically significant result according to the original hypothesis. This limited success may have resulted from the unforeseen problem of incompatibility of dataset sizes. Thus, it was decided to compare the probability (p) values for a range of variables, in case there were any (statistically insignificant) pattern to emerge from these values.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Respondent Type</th>
<th>Public &amp; Officers</th>
<th>Officers &amp; Members</th>
<th>Members &amp; Public</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.382</td>
<td>0.182</td>
<td>0.343</td>
<td>0.703</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.137</td>
<td><strong>0.035</strong></td>
<td>0.343</td>
<td>0.930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.827</td>
<td>0.747</td>
<td>0.343</td>
<td>0.636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.727</td>
<td>0.436</td>
<td>0.236</td>
<td>0.825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.682</td>
<td>0.514</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>0.560</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If the hypothesis had any validity at all, the pattern predicted from the table above is one where the p values for public/officer cross-tabulations are consistently the lowest, when compared with the p values for officer/Member and public/Member cross-tabulations. An examination of the Table shows that, by ignoring variables thirteen, sixteen, seventeen and twenty (due to lack of p values for the officer/Member cross-tabulation), the public/officer distinction appears to be the most significant. Five of the eight p values compared are lowest for this distinction, three of the eight p values are lowest for the officer/Member distinction and none of the p values compared are lowest for the Member/public distinction. This would indicate in turn that the greatest differences in perception are to be found between the general public and local government officers (as predicted by the hypothesis), followed by Elected Members and local government officers, with Elected Members and the general public showing the least evidence of a difference of opinion.

Alternatively, however, it can be argued that one should not ignore the p values for variables thirteen, sixteen, seventeen and twenty insofar as the reason that they could not be calculated was that in response to these questions there was no difference at all between officer/Member perceptions. By including variables thirteen, sixteen, seventeen and twenty on this basis, one finds that seven of the twelve p values are lowest for the officer/Member distinction.

However, given the very small size of the Member and officer samples, it is difficult to make anything other than very tentative proposals regarding the meaning of these probability values. Nevertheless, with reference back to the ‘generalist / specialist spectrum’ as represented earlier in this paper (and regardless of whether one views the Member/Officer distinction as being more or less significant than the public/officer distinction), it is perhaps not surprising that the Member/officer distinction has produced more evidence of a difference of opinion than the Member/public distinction. Insofar as the hypothesis categorised the general public and Elected Members as generalists alike, and local government officers as specialists, the lower p values found when cross-tabulating Member/officer perceptions is maybe further (weak) evidence of the hypothesis having some validity.

However, it cannot be expressed too strongly that this evidence of support for the hypothesis is, in the final analysis, very tentative and possibly tenuous. Stronger conclusions could have been drawn were there a substantially larger sample of officers and Elected Members (or conversely, and perhaps more appropriately given the problems which this study has encountered, a substantially smaller sample of the general public). This would have allowed the data to clearly show whether or not the lack of significant p values is as a result of discrepancies in the size of datasets or whether, more simply, it is because there are no significant p values to be found. It must be recognised however that the end result for the meantime is much the same, the null hypothesis has not been rejected.

In failing to reject the null hypothesis, the original hypothesis has itself been rejected. It is only safe to conclude that there is no generalist / specialist spectrum which determines perceptions of Long-Distance Walking Routes or sustainable development.

References and Further Reading


