

Script

Lord Hennessy of Nympsfield FBA

I've been a fan of R.B. Haldane's for about 30 years – ever since, as the Whitehall Correspondent of The Times in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I read his fabled 1918 report on the 'Machinery of Government' to what was then during the Great War Whitehall's Ministry of Reconstruction.

The bits of the Haldane Report we are here to discuss this evening are essentially fragments about the State's relationship with scientific and technological research which have taken on a mythical – almost mystical significance over the past 97 years (a myth and a mystique that have served us well, as I shall suggest in a moment).

But the piece of Haldane 1918 that caught my eye as a Whitehall watcher – and has resonated with me ever since – is this one:

'We have come to the conclusion that in the sphere of civil government the duty of investigation and thought, as preliminary to action, might with great advantage be more definitely recognised!'

It is understated in a very British way. But what bite it had then; and what bite it still has today.

I never listen to a Queen's speech without thinking of it.

It has served from 1918 to today as a gold standard aspiration – almost a talisman – for that strange and fluid world where politics meets administration and evidence-based policy jousts daily with policy based evidence.

And when one thinks about it, that shining passage in Haldane covers not just science and technology but arts, humanities and social sciences too. For it is about the application of thought to ruling.

When I was preparing my book about 'Whitehall' in the 1980s, I went to see Burke Trend, a man I liked and admired enormously, who had been Cabinet Secretary under Macmillan, Douglas-Home, Wilson and Heath.

Burke was a Greats Man and was fascinated by Haldane's intellectual and practical formation. Trend believed that Haldane's fascination with the principles and practice of administration (rare, he thought, in a politician), was born of a marriage between a philosophy department and the Edwardian War Office where Haldane has been a vigorous reformer and a real force on the Committee of Imperial Defence, the National Security Council of its day.

'He'd been Secretary of State for War', said Burke. 'He thought in terms of Military planning.....[and]..... he was a philosopher, a Hegelian'.

Burke told me that though a long time admirer of Haldane, he 'didn't read him ... entirely' until 1970 when he helped Ted Heath to design the Cabinet's Central Policy Review Staff, what became the fabled 'think tank' under Victor Rothschild – a very Haldanian creation when one thinks about it. Burke Trend told me in 1986 that we needed a new Haldane Committee to help us work out a new relationship between our economy, our society and central government. We still do, in my judgement.

For Trend, the Haldanian legacy was plain and it was caught like a fly in amber in that sentence about *'the duty of investigation and thought, as preliminary to action'*.

Contrast that part of Haldane with the bursts of thought about the relationship between government and science.

When seeking enlightenment from the founding 1918 text, it's striking how people go for difference bits.

Here's Sir Mark Walport before the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology:

'There is one particular paragraph that I think sets out the issue very nicely.... This is paragraph 62 of his report and he says..... "the concentration of a general research organisation upon the advancement of knowledge makes it a primary duty of those engaged in it to keep in touch with scientific workers in various fields throughout the country and to suggest to any administrative departments which may be concerned with the possibility of applying to their requirements the result of scientific inquiries".'

In addition to Sir Mark's, the fragments I would pluck from what one might call Haldane Pure 1918 Chapter IV 'Research and Information' would be these:

- The need to keep in mind 'the pursuit of new truth'
- The disbursement of public money on Science should 'operate without close or habitual reference to the administrative requirements of any Department'.
- Departments need 'to know where the rightful boundaries of their own Intelligence and Research Work are to be drawn' and to be aware laying 'down in advance a series of precepts'.
- Science ignores departmental as well as geographical boundaries..... A generous conception of the scope to be assigned to Intelligence and Research Work for general use will strengthen the hands of all the administrative Departments concerned....'

Haldane was also the progenitor of our Research Councils though it took many decades to cover all the scholarly terrain.

As my friend and fellow historian David Edgerton has shown, it's not Haldane Pure that has come down to us today but rather it is the interpretation of Haldane offered in 1900s by Lord Hailsham – Quintin Hailsham – in 1964 shortly after his time as Minister of Science in Harold Macmillan's Cabinet. This is what that ebullient classicist – who really did believe in the life of the mind – actually said in the House of Commons in December 1964 (he'd renounced his peerage just over a year earlier to allow himself to fight for the Macmillan succession):

'Ever since 1915 it has been considered axiomatic that responsibility for industrial research and development is better exercised in conjunction with research in the medical, agricultural and other fields on what I have called the Haldane principle though an independent Council of industrialists, scientists and other eminent persons and not directly by a Government Department itself!'

It may not be Haldane Pure but it's an admirable mentalité in which the state and the world of research can operate to mutual advantage.

It may be what historians call 'invented tradition'. But 'invented traditions' only take and endure if they reflect a past and a state of mind when they capture.

As Douglas Hurd put it recently (he was talking generally about policy-making; not science and government in particular):

'You must not live in the past but you must be conscious of it.'

To my mind, Haldane is a valuable part of our usable past even if it took a Quintin Hailsham to perhaps misremember it a bit to make it sing.

I have, I must confess a weakness for the very British practice of bundling together custom and practice, past memory and a trail of old white papers and ministerial statements and fashioning them in a potpourri that has continuing utility.

The Mystical British Constitution is like that.

It's partly because as a non-scientist, I've long been struck by the force of George Potter's famous adage:

'There's applied science and not yet applied science.'

So patronage (state funded; research council funded; or private funded) has to be a thing of flair and imagination – a matter, if you like, of intellectual risk capital.

I welcome the government's annual document outlining its science, innovation and growth strategy – but it has to be careful to restrict itself to just that, a strategy, rather than a command model.

I was interested to note in last December's version, OUR PLAN FOR GROWTH, the coalition put the latest version of Haldane rather well:

'It is not the job of a strategy for science and innovation that will last for 10 years to specify in detail the scientific questions to be answered. And when it comes to fundamental research it remains the case that those at the "coalface" of research are best placed to identify the key questions and opportunities to achieve knowledge. However, many of the "grand challenges" for society, the ultimate customer for research, are obvious.'

Then the document lists low carbon sources; energy storage; the use of scarce resources; improving human animal and plant health. Just as Sir Mark Walport before

the Lords Committee reminded his interlocutors that the 'eight great technologies... did not come out of thin air in a sort of dream from the Science Minister. There was he said, much prior discussion with the scientific community and that the eight 'are not fossilized in time'.

When Greg Clark, as Minister for Science, appeared later before the Committee to discuss the 2014 science, innovation and growth strategy, I asked him about the map of Haldane he carried in his mind. This is how the conversation ran:

Lord Hennessy of Nympsfield: Minister, is the Haldane principle not a bit like the British constitution: a thing of mystery and squishiness – a very useful squishiness, because it enables successive Governments and Ministers who have carried your portfolio to run a semi-command economy in many ways, with funds allocated for very necessary purposes, I am sure, alongside an intellectual free market? It therefore has paradox within it, and in each generation it takes a different shape. "Excellence" is the word that we have all collapsed back into. It is a kind of sleeping bag in which we can all keep warm because we all agree about it. It is hugely consensual. Do you have a special insight, now that you have been doing this job for a while, into what the Haldane principle really means?

Rt Hon Greg Clark MP: I read with great interest the discussion that you had with Sir Mark Walport on this. He produced the original Haldane report and you had a very interesting conversation about that at some length. That is reflected in the science and innovation strategy, as you have seen. Lord Hennessy, you will know as a [distinguished] historian that the application of a principle evolves from time to time, and the language of Haldane all those years ago was written for a certain time: it is about the machinery of government, as you know, rather than about science specifically. It has come to have associated with it an understanding, a familiarity, in the context of science policy that has developed a kind of jurisprudence, if I can put it that way, that is not quite what the original Haldane report on the machinery of government was all about. Nevertheless, I think it embodies a pretty well understood principle that you should battle for a science budget and recognise the importance of that. Then, as Ministers of the Crown, you should set up arrangements whereby the scientific experts decide where that budget should be invested. That may not be codified in a single sentence, but I think there is an understanding, both in government and outside it, as to how that works in practice.

An 'understanding' I think there is – though it will never be without its ambiguities and tensions.

Scholars and researchers revel in the mess and uncertainties out of which comes speculation, experimentation and new knowledge.

Governments and Whitehall departments crave order, tidiness and predictability. They also have an insatiable appetite for performance indicators several of which simply do not fit the life of the mind – and the growing preoccupation of the Research Excellence Framework with ‘impact’ has produced a building boom across our universities – all of us have been busy constructing ‘Potemkin Villages’ to satisfy HEFCE and the Treasury.

To my mind, much of this is bollocks-on-stilts, and those of us who ply our trade in lab or seminar room should say so.

However, to conclude, what might be the mythical Haldane has served the country well. It has provided a tradition, a renewed reality which has enabled the state to harness the yield of the awkward squad in our universities and research establishments – part of that peculiar way of doing government, science and research which means as a country, we think so much heavier than our weight in the intellectual markets of the world.

So let’s hear it for Haldane – real or imagined.

Thank you for having me with you this evening.