

From constitutional neutrality to mission-driven capability: oscillatory institutional layering in UK civil service reform (1854–2024)

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From Constitutional Neutrality to Mission-Driven Capability: Oscillatory Institutional Layering in UK Civil Service Reform (1854–2024)

Nada Korac Kakabadse 

1. Professor of Policy, Governance and Ethics, Greenlands campus, Henley Business School, Greenlands, Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, RG9 3AU, United Kingdom

Abstract:

The United Kingdom's Civil Service has been described as both one of the most stable administrative systems in the world and one of the most frequently reformed. Since the Northcote–Trevelyan Report (1854), successive governments have launched major reform initiatives to address capability deficits, weaknesses in performance management, coordination failures, fiscal constraints, and concerns about central accountability. Yet despite sustained reform activity, the constitutional foundations of the Westminster system, merit-based recruitment, political neutrality, permanence, and ministerial responsibility, remain intact. This article advances a model of Oscillatory Institutional Layering (OIL) to explain this paradox of continuous reform alongside structural continuity. Drawing on a structured, coded qualitative document analysis of 23 major reform reports and white papers between 1854 and 2024, the study argues that UK civil service reform unfolds through the cumulative layering of governance instruments, combined with cyclical oscillation between decentralised autonomy and recentralised authority. Reform waves do not replace prior administrative paradigms; rather, they recalibrate coordination tensions inherent in constitutionally bounded systems. The contemporary mission-driven “rewiring the state” agenda is interpreted as a neo-Weberian recalibration within this layered architecture. The article contributes to public administration theory by integrating institutional change, coordination dilemmas, and reform cycles into a longitudinal explanatory framework that may have broader relevance beyond the UK context.

Keywords: Administrative reform, institutional change, institutional layering, coordination, whole-of-government, Westminster model, neo-Weberian state.

INTRODUCTION: REFORM WITHOUT RUPTURE

The United Kingdom's Civil Service occupies a distinctive position within comparative public administration. It is simultaneously regarded as one of the oldest continuously functioning administrative systems and one of the most frequently restructured. From the Northcote–Trevelyan Report (1854) through the Fulton reforms (1968), the Next Steps initiative (1988), *Modernising Government* (1999), the Civil Service Reform Plan (2012), and the Maude Review (2023/25), reform has been a recurrent instrument of political recalibration.

This article focuses specifically on central government civil service reform—that is, reforms addressing Whitehall governance, departmental organisation, centre-of-government steering, and senior civil service management. It does not analyse sector-specific service reforms (e.g., NHS reforms, education policy), local government restructuring, or devolved administration reforms. The analytical boundary is therefore the core of the UK Civil Service, operating within Whitehall

and the centre of government, where constitutional norms of neutrality and ministerial responsibility are most directly institutionalised.

Despite the density of reform activity over 170 years, the institutional core of the Westminster system remains recognisably intact. Merit-based recruitment, political neutrality, permanence, and ministerial accountability continue to define the constitutional identity of the British Civil Service. This coexistence of reform intensity and constitutional continuity presents a theoretical puzzle: ***How can a system experience continuous reform without experiencing institutional rupture?***

Much of the comparative literature interprets administrative reform through the lens of paradigmatic succession. Weberian bureaucracy is followed by managerialism; managerialism by New Public Management (NPM); NPM by post-NPM coordination; and digital governance by platform-state transformation (Hood, 1991; Dunleavy et al., 2006; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). These accounts imply replacement or displacement of earlier administrative logics. Yet the UK case does not conform neatly to such linear narratives. Earlier governance logics are rarely dismantled; they are absorbed and layered.

This article advances a model of Oscillatory Institutional Layering (OIL) to explain reform dynamics in constitutionally bounded administrative systems. OIL posits that reform unfolds through:

1. The gradual accumulation of governance instruments layered onto existing institutional foundations; and
2. Cyclical oscillation between decentralised autonomy and recentralised authority in response to coordination dilemmas.

Under OIL, reform is neither linear nor episodic rupture. It is cumulative and corrective. Each wave recalibrates tensions generated by prior reforms while operating within constitutional constraints that limit displacement. Over time, layering produces increasing institutional density, raising coordination demands and generating periodic corrective oscillation.

The United Kingdom provides an analytically powerful case for theory development. It represents a high-continuity Westminster system with strong constitutional norms of ministerial responsibility and administrative neutrality, combined with unusually extensive experimentation with reform. In comparative terms, it approximates an “intense” or “most likely” case for observing oscillatory dynamics within institutional constraint. If a paradigm shift were to occur, the UK, given its frequent reform, would be a plausible candidate. The absence of rupture strengthens the case for a layering-based explanation.

Three core claims are developed.

- First, UK civil service reform is best conceptualised as institutional layering under constitutional constraint rather than paradigmatic succession.
- Second, reform oscillation between decentralisation and centralisation reflects structural equilibrium-seeking behaviour in Westminster systems characterised by unified executive accountability and distributed operational delivery.
- Third, the contemporary mission-driven “rewiring the state” agenda constitutes a neo-Weberian recalibration within an already layered governance architecture, rather than a paradigmatic break.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 defines the research problem and situates the study within reform theory. Section 2.3 outlines the methodological design. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework, grounding OIL in institutionalism and coordination theory. Sections 4–7 provide a longitudinal empirical synthesis across reform waves. Section 8 analyses the contemporary mission-driven reform agenda as a neo-Weberian recalibration. Section 9 develops implementation implications. Section 10 concludes with theoretical contributions, comparative generalisability, and limitations.

By reframing British civil service reform as patterned recalibration rather than episodic transformation, the article seeks to contribute to broader debates on institutional change, coordination, and administrative resilience in mature democratic states.

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RESEARCH PROBLEM AND CONTRIBUTION

The Puzzle of Persistent Reform

Administrative reform frequently emerges in response to a perceived crisis, economic downturn, policy failure, declining public trust, or governance breakdown. In the UK, reform waves correspond to wartime expansion (Haldane), post-war modernisation (Fulton), neoliberal restructuring (Next Steps), fiscal consolidation (Gershon), digital transformation (Modernising Government), and governance ambiguity (Maude).

Yet a striking feature of British reform discourse is thematic recurrence. Across decades, reform documents repeatedly diagnose:

- Insufficient managerial capability
- Fragmentation across departments
- Blurred accountability
- Weak performance management
- Cultural resistance
- Centre–department tension

The persistence of these themes suggests that reform redistributes rather than resolves structural tensions—an empirical pattern that OIL conceptualises as cyclical equilibrium-seeking within institutional constraints.

Pollitt (2008) describes such patterns as “reform fatigue” in mature administrative systems. Pierson’s (2000) path dependence framework further suggests that institutions accumulate reforms without abandoning inherited structures. Change is incremental and layered; displacement is rare.

This study addresses a gap in the literature. While discrete reform waves have been analysed extensively (Hood, 1991; Talbot, 2004; Hood & Dixon, 2015), few studies integrate the full longitudinal arc of British reform across 170 years within a unified theoretical model.

Contribution

The article contributes in three ways:

1. It develops Oscillatory Institutional Layering (OIL) as a formal explanatory model integrating institutional layering (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010) with coordination dilemmas (Peters, 2018) and reform cycles (Christensen & Lægreid, 2007).
2. It provides a structured longitudinal synthesis of 23 reform documents, treating them as constitutional texts of governance recalibration.
3. It bridges UK reform history with comparative neo-Weberian state theory (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017), demonstrating that the current reform wave represents recalibration rather than rupture.

Where paradigm succession accounts emphasise replacement, OIL explains persistence through cumulative sedimentation and corrective cycling.

Methodological Approach

This study employs a structured qualitative document analysis of 23 major UK civil service reform reports and white papers published between 1854 and 2024. The objective is not to evaluate reform outcomes quantitatively, but to trace the evolution of reform logics and identify recurring institutional patterns across historical phases.

The corpus consists of documents that meet three criteria:

1. Formal status: Government-commissioned reports, Cabinet Office white papers, or officially endorsed independent reviews addressing the organisation, governance, or performance of the UK Civil Service.
2. System-wide scope: Documents focused on cross-departmental civil service structures or centre-of-government arrangements, rather than sector-specific reforms (e.g., NHS-only reforms).
3. Institutional intent: Reports proposing structural, managerial, cultural, digital, or constitutional changes affecting the core machinery of government.

The resulting corpus includes foundational constitutional texts (e.g., Northcote–Trevelyan, Haldane), managerial and NPM reforms (Fulton, FMI, Next Steps), post-NPM integration initiatives (Modernising Government, Gershon, Varney, Lyons), capability and relational reviews (Civil Service Reform Plan, NAO reviews, Baxendale, Kakabadse), and recent centre-focused recalibration documents (Maude Review and associated reform statements).

Twenty-three documents were selected because they represent discrete, identifiable reform moments in which the state formally articulated a need for recalibration of the Civil Service's organisation or governance architecture.

Documents focused exclusively on operational delivery in individual sectors, short-term administrative guidance notes, or purely political manifestos were excluded.

Coding Framework

Each document was coded using a structured analytical template comprising five primary categories:

1. Problem Definition: How the reform diagnosed the core governance issue (e.g., inefficiency, fragmentation, capability deficit, accountability ambiguity).

2. Reform Lever: The principal mechanism proposed (structural disaggregation, performance management, digital integration, professionalisation, central authority clarification, etc.).
3. Implied Theory of Governance: The underlying administrative logic (Weberian hierarchy, managerialism, principal–agent, network governance, neo-Weberian recalibration).
4. Trade-Off Introduced: The coordination or accountability tension generated by the reform.
5. Implementation Constraints: Cultural, fiscal, political, or institutional barriers acknowledged or implied.

Coding proceeded iteratively. Initial coding generated provisional thematic clusters, which were subsequently refined through comparative recoding across reform waves to identify patterns of layering and oscillation.

The analytical strategy combines:

- Longitudinal thematic synthesis across historical phases.
- Institutional analysis grounded in historical institutionalism.
- Comparative public management theory mapping, situating each reform wave within established theoretical paradigms (e.g., NPM, post-NPM, neo-Weberian state).

Rather than treating reform reports as neutral descriptions of administrative reality, the analysis interprets them as authoritative statements of institutional intent, “constitutional texts” of governance recalibration. The focus is therefore on reform logic rather than on implementation effectiveness.

Rigour and Reliability

Although the study relies on a single primary coder, several steps were taken to enhance analytical robustness:

- Iterative coding and recoding, ensuring consistency across historical phases.
- Memoing, documenting evolving interpretations and category refinements.
- Negative case checks, identifying reform documents that did not fit emerging oscillation patterns.
- Cross-theoretical triangulation, testing interpretations against institutional, coordination, and reform-cycle literatures.

This approach reduces the risk of impressionistic coding by anchoring interpretations in explicit analytical categories and established theoretical frameworks.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: OSCILLATORY INSTITUTIONAL LAYERING (OIL)

Institutional Foundations

This section develops the theoretical foundations of **Oscillatory Institutional Layering (OIL)**. The model synthesises three strands of scholarship: (1) institutional layering and gradual change; (2) coordination dilemmas in administrative systems; and (3) reform cycles as equilibrium-seeking adjustments. Together, these literatures provide the analytical basis for explaining why reform in constitutionally bounded systems accumulates sediment while periodically rebalancing autonomy and control.

In Westminster systems, these institutional norms include ministerial responsibility, neutrality, permanence, and collective cabinet government. Reform must operate within these constraints. Skowronek (1982) demonstrates that American administrative development proceeded through cycles of reconstruction layered onto prior state-building phases. Institutions rarely vanish; they sediment. While Skowronek's (1982) reconstruction cycles derive from American state-building, the mechanism of periodic reconstructive steering in response to institutional drift is analytically portable to Westminster systems, where constitutional continuity constrains rupture but does not eliminate recalibration.

Streeck and Thelen (2005) conceptualise gradual institutional change through mechanisms such as layering, drift, and conversion. Layering occurs when new rules are introduced without removing old ones. Mahoney and Thelen (2010) extend this framework, arguing that institutional change frequently results from strategic reinterpretation and incremental addition rather than wholesale displacement.

These insights underpin OIL: reform in constitutionally bounded systems accumulates sediment rather than replacing foundations.

The Coordination Dilemma and Oscillation

Institutional layering alone does not explain cyclical reform patterns. Oscillation emerges from coordination dilemmas inherent in governance systems.

Peters (2018) identifies a core administrative tension: autonomy enhances efficiency and innovation, but coordination ensures coherence and accountability. Administrative systems continually rebalance this trade-off.

Christensen and Lægreid (2007) describe post-NPM reforms as corrective responses to fragmentation generated by NPM decentralisation. Whole-of-government initiatives represent coordination corrections.

Skowronek's (1982) reconstruction cycles illustrate how state-building periodically reasserts central authority in response to systemic drift.

In Westminster systems, oscillation is structurally embedded. Ministerial accountability centralises political responsibility, while operational delivery is dispersed across departments and agencies. The system must therefore continually rebalance autonomy and control.

Oscillation is not inconsistency; it is equilibrium-seeking behaviour.

Defining Oscillatory Institutional Layering

Oscillatory Institutional Layering (OIL) refers to the gradual accumulation of governance instruments, combined with cyclical rebalancing between decentralised autonomy and recentralised authority within enduring constitutional constraints.

Proposition (Oscillatory Institutional Layering): In constitutionally bounded administrative systems, reform unfolds through the cumulative layering of governance instruments onto enduring institutional foundations, combined with cyclical rebalancing between decentralised autonomy and recentralised authority to address coordination dilemmas.

Consequently:

1. Core constitutional norms persist across reform waves.
2. New governance logics accumulate without displacing prior layers.
3. Reform oscillates between autonomy and coordination as equilibrium-seeking adjustment.
4. Institutional density increases over time, raising the probability of corrective recentralisation.

The UK provides a powerful analytical case due to its strong constitutional continuity and extensive reform activity.

OIL, therefore, reframes administrative reform not as paradigm succession, but as patterned recalibration within institutional constraint. It predicts hybridisation rather than displacement and oscillation rather than rupture.

Table 1 operationalises the Oscillatory Institutional Layering model across the six major reform phases, illustrating how decentralising and recentralising movements accumulate governance strata over time.

Table 1: Oscillatory Institutional Layering Across UK Civil Service Reform (1854–2024)

Reform Phase	Dominant Governance Logic	Oscillation Direction	Layer Added (OIL)	Primary Coordination Problem Addressed	Trade-Off Introduced
Constitutional Foundations (1854–1918)	Weberian hierarchy; merit; neutrality; ministerial responsibility	Baseline constitutional centralisation	Constitutional-administrative layer	Patronage; administrative instability	Entrenched hierarchy; generalist dominance
Managerial Professionalisation (1960s–1980s)	Managerial modernisation; professional training; financial discipline	Limited decentralisation within hierarchy	Managerial performance layer	Weak management discipline; capability deficits	Advisory–managerial role tension
New Public Management (1988–1990s)	Agency disaggregation; performance contracts; consumer accountability	Strong decentralisation	Agency disaggregation layer; performance-contract layer	Bureaucratic inefficiency; output opacity	Fragmentation; blurred accountability
Networked & Digital Governance (1999–2000s)	Whole-of-government coordination; shared services; digital platforms	Functional recentralisation through integration	Network coordination layer; digital infrastructure layer	Inter-agency fragmentation; duplication	System complexity; overlapping reporting regimes
Capability & Relational Governance (2010s)	Professional disciplines; functional leadership;	Stabilising recalibration	Professional capability layer; relational	Delivery failure; skills deficits; behavioural misalignment	Oversight intensification; reform fatigue

	relational alignment		governance layer		
Mission-Driven & Neo-Weberian Recalibration (2020s)	Strategic centre strengthening; mission ownership; clarified delegation	Apex recentralisation with operational mission autonomy	Central authority clarification layer; mission governance layer	Opaque delegation; centre–department ambiguity	Risk of over-centralisation; centre–department friction

Table Note: Oscillation direction” refers to the relative movement of authority and discretion within the administrative system. *Decentralisation* denotes expansion of operational autonomy, delegated authority, or arm’s-length delivery. *Recentralisation* denotes the strengthening of centre-of-government steering, coordination, or formalised accountability.

“Layer added” refers to governance instruments or institutional strata accumulated through reform. Layers are conceptual, not strictly chronological; subsequent reforms do not replace prior layers but add to the existing institutional architecture, consistent with Oscillatory Institutional Layering (OIL).

CONSTITUTIONAL FOUNDATIONS AND MANAGERIAL PROFESSIONALISATION (1854–1980S)

Constitutional Foundations: The Layered Base (1854–1918)

The institutional architecture of the modern British Civil Service originates in the Northcote–Trevelyan Report (1854). Its central reforms—open competitive recruitment, meritocratic promotion, permanent tenure, and political neutrality—were designed to eliminate patronage and to entrench administrative professionalism. The Haldane Report (1918) subsequently clarified functional departmental organisation and reinforced ministerial responsibility, establishing the structural logic of Whitehall as a hierarchy organised around policy domains rather than personalities.

These reforms created what may be termed the constitutional base layer within OIL. They embedded what March and Olsen (1989) describe as a logic of appropriateness: civil servants serve the government of the day impartially and remain institutionally distinct from partisan contestation. The Armstrong Memorandum (1985) later codified these conventions, reinforcing neutrality during a period of managerial experimentation.

From an institutional perspective, these foundational reforms exhibit strong path dependence (Pierson, 2000). Once established, neutrality and ministerial accountability became normative anchors resistant to displacement. All subsequent reform waves operated within these constraints.

In OIL terms, the constitutional layer forms the sediment upon which subsequent governance instruments accumulate. It is not periodically revisited for dismantling; rather, it constrains reform trajectories.

The Crisis of the Generalist Model: Early Managerial Layering (1960s)

By the mid-twentieth century, the expansion of the welfare state dramatically increased policy complexity. The Fulton Committee (1968) argued that Whitehall was overly dominated by generalist administrators insufficiently equipped to manage complex technical programmes.

Fulton's critique marked a discursive shift. Reform moved from constitutional propriety toward managerial competence. The report advocated:

- Professional specialisation
- Structured management training
- Modern personnel systems
- Leadership development

The establishment of the Civil Service College signalled institutional recognition of managerial capacity as a reform objective.

However, Fulton did not challenge constitutional neutrality or ministerial responsibility. Instead, it introduced managerial instruments within the hierarchical framework. This reflects layering without displacement (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010).

Cultural resistance limited implementation. Chapman (1970) and Hennessy (1989) document how generalist elites retained dominance. Professional identity in Whitehall remained tied to policy advisory roles rather than operational management.

March and Olsen's (1989) institutionalism explains this persistence: identity structures embedded within elite recruitment networks reinforced legitimacy norms favouring generalist advisory competence. Managerial reform confronted identity hierarchies rather than mere technical processes.

Under OIL, this phase constitutes the managerial overlay layer: performance awareness added atop constitutional hierarchy without eroding it.

Financial Management and Early Performance Discipline (1980s)

The Financial Management Initiative (FMI) (1986) deepened managerial layering. It introduced delegated budgets, explicit objectives, and cost–output relationships.

FMI embedded three core instruments:

1. Delegated financial authority
2. Output specification
3. Managerial accountability

Although often overshadowed by later NPM reforms, FMI represents a critical transition. It operationalised the logic of performance without introducing market analogues. It reflects what Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017) term "managerial modernisation": the insertion of private-sector techniques into hierarchical public administration.

FMI illustrates OIL's incrementalism. It did not replace constitutional hierarchy; it added performance instrumentation. Yet it subtly altered expectations: cost consciousness and output measurement became part of administrative legitimacy.

Oscillation Emergence: Autonomy vs Coordination

Although decentralisation under the FMI was modest, the seeds of oscillation are evident here. Delegated budgets enhanced departmental autonomy, while Treasury oversight maintained central fiscal discipline.

Peters' (2018) coordination dilemma becomes visible: autonomy improves responsiveness, but coordination preserves coherence. Even in this early phase, the system oscillated within bounded parameters.

This managerial phase, therefore:

- Preserved constitutional foundations
- Layered managerial instruments
- Introduced limited autonomy
- Retained central accountability

The oscillatory dynamics were not yet pronounced, but the structural conditions for subsequent decentralisation were established.

Trade-Offs Introduced

The managerial professionalisation phase has been achieved:

- Greater cost transparency
- Recognition of specialist expertise
- Institutionalised leadership training

However, it introduced enduring tensions:

- Advisory vs managerial role conflict
- Partial displacement of generalist culture
- Emerging metric awareness without systemic coordination reform

These tensions created the conditions for a pronounced oscillatory swing toward decentralisation under New Public Management, consistent with OIL's equilibrium logic.

NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE STATE (1988–1990S) From Managerial Overlay to Structural Disaggregation

If the managerial reforms of the 1960s–1980s layered performance awareness onto constitutional hierarchy, the reforms initiated in the late 1980s represented a more pronounced oscillatory shift. Under the Thatcher government, reform moved from managerial refinement to structural reconfiguration. The critique was no longer simply that Whitehall lacked modern management; it was that hierarchical bureaucracy itself constrained efficiency, responsiveness, and accountability.

This reform wave aligns with what Hood (1991) famously termed New Public Management (NPM): a governance paradigm characterised by disaggregation, performance measurement, competition, and customer orientation. Compared with other OECD countries, the UK became one of the most far-reaching adopters of NPM (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). From the perspective of Oscillatory Institutional Layering, NPM represents the first major decentralising swing in the British reform cycle. It did not dismantle the constitutional layer, but it added a powerful layer of disaggregation that reconfigured operational governance.

The Next Steps Initiative: Institutional Disaggregation

The pivotal reform was *Improving Management in Government: The Next Steps* (Efficiency Unit, 1988). The Ibbs Report proposed separating policy formulation from service delivery by creating executive agencies.

Within a few years, over 100 executive agencies were established. These agencies operated under framework documents specifying objectives, delegated authorities, and performance targets. Chief executives were granted operational autonomy, while ministers retained strategic oversight and constitutional accountability.

This institutional shift produced a structural transformation:

- Integrated departmental hierarchy to Semi-autonomous agencies
- Process compliance to Output accountability
- Unified organisational command to Contractual performance relationships

Talbot (2004) describes the UK agency model as one of the most extensive experiments in structural disaggregation among advanced democracies.

Under OIL, this constitutes a thickening of the decentralisation layer. Autonomy was expanded dramatically, but within constitutional constraints. Ministers remained accountable to Parliament. Civil servants remained politically neutral. The hierarchy was not abolished — it was partially segmented.

Performance Contracts and Managerial Incentives

NPM reframed accountability in quantitative terms. Agencies were evaluated against explicit performance targets related to cost, timeliness, and service outputs. Chief executives were granted managerial discretion in exchange for measurable results.

This contractual model reflects principal–agent theory, which underpinned much of NPM’s intellectual architecture (Christensen & Lægreid, 2001). The assumption was that clearer performance contracts would reduce bureaucratic slack and align incentives with outputs.

However, as Power (1997) argued in *The Audit Society*, performance measurement regimes often generate behavioural distortions. Target compliance can displace substantive improvement. Metrics may encourage gaming or risk aversion.

OIL helps situate this development historically. Performance instruments did not replace constitutional accountability; they were layered on top of it. Ministers were now accountable for outcomes mediated through semi-autonomous agencies governed by performance contracts. Accountability chains lengthened rather than simplified.

The Citizen’s Charter and Consumer Accountability

The Citizen’s Charter (1991) extended the logic of NPM to citizen-facing accountability. Public bodies were required to publish service standards and complaints mechanisms. The language of governance shifted from public duty to customer entitlement.

Clarke and Newman (1997) argue that this consumerist turn reframed the citizen as a service user rather than a democratic participant. Accountability increasingly operated through published metrics rather than parliamentary debate.

In OIL terms, the Charter added a consumer-performance layer, intensifying the decentralising movement by strengthening service-level performance obligations.

Yet again, this was layering without rupture. Parliamentary accountability remained formally intact. The Westminster constitutional structure persisted.

Consolidation: From Innovation to Institutionalisation

By the mid-1990s, the White Paper *The Civil Service: Taking Forward Continuity and Change* (1994) consolidated NPM reforms. Agency autonomy, performance measurement, and managerial accountability became institutionalised.

At this point, the oscillatory movement had reached its decentralising apex. Operational autonomy was extensive. Departments resembled holding companies overseeing delivery subsidiaries.

The gains were tangible:

- Enhanced operational focus
- Clearer managerial accountability within agencies
- Increased cost transparency
- Greater visibility of service performance

However, the decentralisation layer introduced structural side effects.

Fragmentation and the Coordination Deficit

Disaggregation generated coordination problems. Agencies optimised local performance metrics, but cross-department coherence weakened. Responsibility was formally traceable — minister to department to agency, yet practically diffuse.

Flinders (2008) describes this phenomenon as the “politics of delegation.” Delegation enhances flexibility but complicates democratic accountability. When authority is dispersed across arm’s-length bodies, vertical responsibility becomes harder to exercise.

Peters (2018) conceptualises this as the autonomy–coordination dilemma. Increasing autonomy improves efficiency but undermines system coherence. In Westminster systems, where ministerial accountability is premised on hierarchical integration, this tension becomes especially pronounced.

Under OIL, this moment illustrates the structural inevitability of oscillation. The decentralisation layer had thickened sufficiently to generate systemic imbalance. The coordination deficit created pressure for corrective reintegration.

Hybridisation Rather Than Replacement

Importantly, NPM did not displace constitutional bureaucracy. Neutrality, permanence, and ministerial responsibility endured. Nor did it erase managerial instruments introduced in earlier phases.

Instead, the British administrative system became hybrid:

- Constitutional hierarchy (base layer)
- Managerial performance instruments
- Disaggregated agency structures
- Consumer-oriented accountability

Mahoney and Thelen's (2010) theory of layering explains this hybridisation. Institutional change proceeds through incremental addition rather than wholesale substitution.

Under OIL, this phase thickened the decentralisation arc while preserving earlier strata.

Structural Oscillation as Equilibrium-Seeking

The NPM phase makes the oscillation dynamic explicit:

1. Managerial layering increases performance awareness.
2. Structural disaggregation increases autonomy.
3. Fragmentation undermines coordination.
4. Pressure mounts for reintegration.

Christensen and Lægreid (2007) describe this as a cycle of corrective action between NPM and post-NPM reforms. Skowronek's (1982) reconstruction theory provides a political analogue: institutional systems periodically recalibrate when governing arrangements lose coherence.

In Westminster systems, oscillation is not inconsistency but equilibrium-seeking behaviour. Strong ministerial accountability combined with distributed operational delivery creates structural tension. When autonomy dominates, coordination suffers; when centralisation dominates, responsiveness suffers.

Thus, oscillation is a systemic feature, not a policy error. Under OIL, such decentralising swings are not ideological anomalies but structurally induced corrections within systems that combine unified political accountability with distributed administrative delivery.

Trade-Offs Introduced and Preparing the Ground for Reintegration

The NPM phase achieved:

- Operational efficiency gains
- Clearer managerial responsibility at the agency level
- Enhanced cost and output transparency

But it introduced:

- Diffuse accountability chains
- Weak horizontal coordination
- Target-driven behavioural distortions
- Increased structural fragmentation

These trade-offs are central to OIL's explanatory power. Reform does not eliminate tension; it redistributes it.

By the late 1990s, policymakers recognised fragmentation as a systemic issue: cross-cutting policy challenges, public health, social exclusion, and national security required integrated responses.

The next reform wave would therefore shift toward reintegration, adding a network-coordination layer to counterbalance disaggregation.

OIL predicts precisely such movement: once decentralisation produces coordination deficits, pressures for recentralisation intensify.

NETWORKED AND DIGITAL GOVERNANCE: REINTEGRATION AND SYSTEM COMPLEXITY (1999–2000S)

Corrective Reintegration After Disaggregation

By the late 1990s, the limitations of New Public Management had become increasingly visible. While executive agencies had improved operational clarity, cross-cutting policy challenges exposed coordination deficits. Departments and agencies optimised their own performance indicators, yet system-wide coherence weakened. Problems such as social exclusion, health inequality, urban regeneration, and national security required integrated responses across organisational boundaries.

The reform response was not to dismantle NPM but to recalibrate it. Agencies remained; performance measurement persisted. What changed was the addition of coordination mechanisms designed to repair fragmentation. In OIL terms, this marks a decisive oscillatory swing toward recentralising integration, though without eliminating the layer of decentralisation. Christensen and Lægreid (2007) describe this shift as a move from NPM to post-NPM, or “whole-of-government,” reform. Peters (2018) similarly identifies coordination as a perennial counterweight to autonomy in administrative systems. The British case exemplifies this corrective cycle.

Modernising Government and the Joined-Up State

The 1999 White Paper *Modernising Government* articulated the reintegration agenda. It called for:

- Cross-department collaboration
- Evidence-based policy
- Digital service innovation
- Citizen-centred outcomes
- Stronger strategic coordination

The language of reform shifted from efficiency to effectiveness. Rather than optimising discrete agencies, policymakers sought whole-system performance. This marked a theoretical movement away from market analogies toward network governance (Rhodes, 1997; Bevir & Rhodes, 2003). Authority remained constitutionally hierarchical, but coordination increasingly relied on:

- Interdepartmental units
- Cross-cutting Public Service Agreements
- Task forces
- Shared outcome frameworks

OIL conceptualises this as the layering of a network integration stratum atop the disaggregation layer. The oscillation had begun its return toward coherence.

The Whole-of-Government Logic

Whole-of-government reform sought to address the autonomy–coordination dilemma (Peters, 2018). Autonomy had improved operational efficiency but undermined collective responsibility. Reintegration mechanisms aimed to restore coherence without fully reabsorbing agencies into monolithic hierarchies.

Christensen and Lægreid (2007) argue that post-NPM reforms represent equilibrium-seeking corrections to NPM fragmentation. In Westminster systems, where ministers remain politically

accountable for integrated policy outcomes, the tension between structural autonomy and political responsibility becomes especially acute.

Under OIL, this oscillatory movement is structural rather than reactive. The constitutional layer imposes vertical accountability; decentralisation stretches that accountability; integration mechanisms emerge to re-stabilise it.

Digital Transformation as Integrative Infrastructure

Digitalisation became a central instrument of reintegration. The early 2000s saw major expansion of e-government initiatives, online service platforms, and shared data systems.

The Varney Review (2006) emphasised multi-channel access, simplified citizen interaction, and shared digital infrastructure. Digital systems were framed not only as service enhancements but as integrative infrastructure capable of bridging agency boundaries.

Dunleavy et al. (2006) conceptualised this shift as “Digital Era Governance,” characterised by reintegration, needs-based holism, and digitisation. In the UK, digital reform sought to overlay integrative platforms onto an already disaggregated state.

Within OIL, digital infrastructure represents a thickening integrative layer designed to mitigate fragmentation while preserving agency autonomy.

However, digital integration introduced new complexities: interoperability challenges, procurement risks, cybersecurity vulnerabilities, and cross-agency data governance dilemmas. Structural reintegration did not eliminate complexity; it redistributed it.

The Gershon Review and Central Cost Control

The 2004 Gershon Review sought to free up resources for frontline services through efficiency savings. It recommended:

- Shared services across departments
- Back-office consolidation
- Procurement reform
- Workforce reduction

Unlike the decentralising ethos of NPM, Gershon strengthened Treasury oversight. Shared services reduced duplication created by agency proliferation.

This illustrates the oscillatory dynamic clearly:

Decentralisation (agency autonomy) → Duplication and cost inflation → Central consolidation (shared services)

Hood and Dixon (2015) later questioned whether such reforms produced sustained cost savings relative to increased complexity. Nonetheless, Gershon represents a decisive recentralising moment within OIL’s cyclical framework.

The trade-off was evident:

- Improvement achieved: fiscal discipline and consolidation
- Trade-off introduced: potential capacity erosion and morale decline.

Lyons and the Territorial Layer

The Lyons Review (2004) extended reform into the spatial domain. It recommended relocating civil service roles outside London to reduce costs and support regional development.

This added a territorial dimension to governance architecture. Reform now shaped not only organisational structure but geographic distribution.

From an institutional perspective (Olsen, 2009), spatial relocation interacts with informal networks, political proximity, and ministerial access. While cost savings and regional growth were anticipated, relocation risked weakening informal policy coordination, which was clustered in Whitehall.

Under OIL, Lyons represents additional layering, this time spatial, further thickening structural density without removing prior layers.

Governance Through Networks: Complexity as the New Constraint

By the mid-2000s, the UK state increasingly resembled what Rhodes (1997) termed a "networked state." Governance operated through:

- Interdepartmental boards
- Public–private partnerships
- Digital data systems
- Shared performance frameworks

Authority is dispersed across interconnected nodes. Coordination relied on negotiation and trust rather than direct command.

However, networks complicate accountability. When outcomes depend on multiple actors, responsibility becomes diffuse. Vertical constitutional accountability remained intact, but operational reality became horizontal.

OIL captures this duality: the constitutional hierarchy persists as a base layer, but operational governance thickens horizontally.

Reintegration addressed fragmentation but generated complexity. As coordination mechanisms multiplied:

- Reporting requirements increased
- Cross-cutting boards proliferated
- Performance systems overlapped
- Decision rights blurred

The system evolved from fragmented autonomy to integrated intricacy.

This illustrates OIL's cumulative dynamic: layering produces density. Each corrective reform adds institutional sediment. Over time, governance becomes hybrid, multi-layered, and difficult to simplify.

The post-NPM trade-off can be summarised:

- Improvement achieved: stronger horizontal coordination

- Trade-off introduced: increased systemic complexity

Fiscal Shock and Capability Exposure

The 2008 financial crisis intensified scrutiny of public sector capacity. Fiscal consolidation exposed weaknesses in commercial negotiation, IT procurement, and project management.

Austerity pressures highlighted the embedded capability deficits within the layered system. Efficiency savings sometimes hollowed out expertise.

This moment set the stage for the next oscillatory movement: a shift from structural integration toward human capability and leadership alignment.

OIL predicts such recalibration. When structural layering produces complexity that exceeds organisational capacity, reform pivots toward enhancing organisational capability.

Theoretical Implications: Hybrid Governance

By the late 2000s, British governance combined:

- Weberian constitutional hierarchy
- NPM performance instruments
- Network coordination mechanisms
- Digital infrastructure platforms

This hybridisation exemplifies Mahoney and Thelen's (2010) layering mechanism. It also reflects Streeck and Thelen's (2005) concept of gradual transformation through incremental adaptation. Rather than paradigm succession (Weber to NPM to Post-NPM), the UK case reveals a cumulative coexistence.

OIL provides a coherent explanation: reform oscillates to restore balance, but each oscillation adds layers rather than removing them.

Reintegration Without Simplification

A striking feature of this phase is that reintegration occurred without simplification. Agencies remained. Targets persisted. Digital platforms overlaid existing systems. Institutional density increased as coordination mechanisms were layered on top of disaggregated agencies, without eliminating them. OIL predicts that such density heightens the probability of subsequent corrective recalibration at the centre.

This structural density would later prompt reflexive reform discourse focused on central clarity and authority, the neo-Weberian recalibration phase.

Reintegration and Its Limits

The networked and digital governance phase sought to correct NPM fragmentation without abandoning performance discipline. It achieved:

- Stronger cross-department coordination
- Shared service consolidation
- Digital platform expansion
- Outcome-focused framing

But it also produced:

- Increased complexity
- Blurred decision rights
- Persistent capability gaps
- Fiscal strain

Within OIL, this phase represents a recentralising swing that restores coherence while deepening institutional layering.

The next phase would pivot again, not toward dismantling integration, but toward strengthening human capability and clarifying authority within an increasingly dense governance architecture.

CAPABILITY, RELATIONAL GOVERNANCE, AND THE HUMAN LAYER OF REFORM (2010S) From Structural Integration to Human Capacity

If the post-NPM phase addressed fragmentation through coordination and digital infrastructure, the 2010s reform wave shifted attention toward a different constraint: capability. By the early 2010s, the British administrative state had accumulated layers of agencies, targets, digital systems, shared services, and cross-department governance mechanisms. Yet delivery failures, major project overruns, procurement weaknesses, and uneven digital transformation suggested that structural reintegration alone was insufficient.

The 2012 *Civil Service Reform Plan* marked a pivot from structural engineering toward human capacity. It emphasised:

- Digital and commercial expertise
- Project and programme management capability
- Strengthened functional leadership
- Greater mobility across departments
- Enhanced central coordination

In OIL terms, this represents the addition of a capability layer, a recognition that accumulated structural density requires commensurate professional competence.

Peters (2018) notes that coordination problems often stem not merely from structure but from inadequate administrative capacity. Similarly, Christensen and Lægheid (2007) observe that post-NPM reforms frequently reveal capability deficits masked by structural complexity. The UK case reflects this dynamic.

The Civil Service Reform Plan (2012)

The Reform Plan framed the Civil Service as too slow, insufficiently commercial, and lacking digital expertise. It sought to professionalise key functions through:

- Creation of cross-government professions
- Central oversight of major projects
- Commercial capability strengthening
- Digital service reform

This shift aligns with Pollitt and Bouckaert's (2017) concept of the Neo-Weberian State, which combines managerial instruments with renewed emphasis on professional competence and strategic centre strength.

Crucially, the 2012 reforms did not dismantle earlier NPM or post-NPM layers. Agencies persisted. Targets remained. Digital infrastructure expanded. Instead, reform sought to enhance the human capital required to operate within this layered system.

OIL conceptualises this as adaptive reinforcement: structural sedimentation necessitates investment in capacity.

NAO Scrutiny and Implementation Discipline

The National Audit Office's 2013 review of reform implementation highlighted uneven progress and the absence of clear metrics. It underscored the gap between reform ambition and measurable outcomes.

Power (1997) describes such audit expansion as characteristic of "audit society" dynamics, where scrutiny becomes central to governance legitimacy. Under OIL, audit mechanisms constitute a corrective sub-layer that strengthens oversight to compensate for systemic complexity.

The oscillatory pattern reappears: Layering produces complexity, Oversight intensifies, and Implementation discipline is emphasised.

Yet an audit does not remove underlying layers. It monitors them.

Talent Management and Workforce Strategy

The 2020 Talent Management Guidance further institutionalised structured workforce planning. Succession pipelines, professional pathways, and diversity objectives were formalised.

From an institutional perspective (March & Olsen, 1989), this phase reflects recognition that governance performance depends on role socialisation and identity formation. Capability is not purely technical; it is normative and relational.

Under OIL, talent management thickens the human layer without reducing structural complexity. Reform now seeks to stabilise performance by reinforcing professional identity rather than through structural simplification.

The Relational Turn: Leadership and "Chemistry"

Perhaps the most distinctive development of this phase was the explicit recognition of relational governance.

The Kakabadse Report (2018) argued that the effectiveness of UK governance depends heavily on the relationship, or "chemistry", between Secretaries of State and Permanent Secretaries. Delivery outcomes were linked not merely to formal structure but to trust, alignment, and behavioural dynamics. The Kakabadse Report (2018) marks an important maturation of reform logic: capability is no longer defined solely by technical skill or structural design, but by leadership chemistry, governance coherence, and institutional culture. Reform discourse shifts from "Are structures efficient?" to "Is the system itself fit for purpose?"

This relational insight resonates with March and Olsen's (1989) emphasis on appropriateness norms and Olsen's (2009) focus on institutionalised roles. Governance is enacted through interaction, not solely through architecture.

OIL extends here into behavioural territory: accumulated layering increases the premium on relational coherence. As structural density grows, misalignment at the top becomes more consequential.

Cultural Resistance and Institutional Identity

The Baxendale Review (2015) exposed difficulties in integrating externally recruited leaders into the Senior Civil Service. Cultural resistance persisted, particularly where private-sector managerial styles clashed with Whitehall norms.

DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) institutional isomorphism theory helps explain this resilience. Organisational legitimacy in Whitehall remains tied to established advisory norms. Specialist and commercial expertise may be formally valued yet culturally peripheral.

Under OIL, new capability instruments are filtered through enduring constitutional identity. Layering interacts with culture; it does not override it.

Capability as Equilibrium Correction

Capability reform can be interpreted as a corrective oscillation in response to structural complexity. As integration and digital infrastructure increase demands on the system, professional competence must keep pace.

Skowronek's (1982) notion of institutional reconstruction cycles provides useful comparative resonance. While developed in a US context, the idea that institutions periodically recalibrate to restore coherence applies here as well. However, in Westminster systems, reconstruction operates within a stronger framework of constitutional continuity.

OIL reframes capability reform as equilibrium-seeking adjustment within a layered architecture.

Trade-Offs of the Capability Phase

The capability phase introduced new trade-offs:

Improvement achieved:

- Stronger professional disciplines
- Enhanced project management oversight
- Recognition of behavioural determinants of performance

Trade-offs introduced:

- Reform fatigue
- Increased oversight complexity
- Potential central encroachment on departmental autonomy

As Peters (2018) argues, strengthening the centre to improve coordination can simultaneously constrain flexibility.

Institutional Density and Reflexive Reform

By the late 2010s, the British administrative system exhibited high institutional density, with constitutional hierarchy, managerial performance instruments, agency disaggregation, network

coordination mechanisms, digital infrastructure, audit oversight, and professional capability regimes coexisting within a single governance architecture.

Institutional density had increased significantly.

Streeck and Thelen (2005) note that gradual institutional transformation often produces complexity that eventually prompts attempts at reflexive simplification. In the UK context, this reflexive moment would emerge in the early 2020s, as calls for clearer authority and a governance reset emerged.

Theoretical Implications

The capability and relational governance phase reinforces three theoretical propositions central to OIL:

1. *Layering is cumulative*: reforms add sediment rather than replacing prior logics.
2. *Oscillation is corrective*: reform shifts to address imbalances created by previous layers.
3. *Capacity lags structure*: human capability often trails structural innovation.

Rather than representing a paradigm shift beyond NPM or post-NPM, this phase deepens hybridisation.

Preparing the Ground for Central Recalibration

As structural density and behavioural complexity intensified, concerns increasingly focused on the clarity of authority at the centre of government. Questions emerged regarding the Prime Minister's delegation, the coherence of civil service leadership, and board governance structures. The next oscillatory movement would therefore not dismantle capability reform but seek to clarify authority within accumulated layering.

OIL predicts such recalibration: when institutional density produces ambiguity at the apex, reform tends to reassert central clarity.

The Human Layer of Reform

The 2010s reform wave shifted emphasis from architecture to people. Capability, leadership alignment, and cultural adaptation became central.

This phase did not replace prior governance logics. It added a human layer to an already layered system.

Under OIL, capability reform represents adaptive reinforcement within constitutional constraint, strengthening the actors who must navigate an increasingly complex governance terrain.

The following section examines the most recent oscillatory movement: mission-driven reform and neo-Weberian recalibration of authority.

MISSION-DRIVEN REFORM AND NEO-WEBERIAN RECALIBRATION IN A HIGH-DENSITY STATE (2020S)

The Contemporary Reform Moment: "Rewiring" as a Mission-Led Response to Delivery Strain

The current reform initiative, frequently framed in political discourse as a "rewiring of the state," emerges within a high-density governance architecture produced by decades of oscillatory institutional layering. By the early 2020s, the UK administrative system combined: (i)

constitutional hierarchy and ministerial responsibility; (ii) managerial performance instruments; (iii) disaggregated delivery organisations; (iv) whole-of-government coordination mechanisms; (v) expanding digital infrastructure; and (vi) capability and audit oversight regimes. In OIL terms, the state had accumulated multiple coexisting layers without displacement, thereby raising coordination transaction costs and intensifying ambiguity regarding authority, responsibility, and ownership of delivery.

Contemporary reform priorities reflect this context. The initiative emphasises: mission-led delivery teams; streamlined approvals; stronger senior performance management; digital and AI-enabled state functions; renewed investment in professional development through a new National School of Government; and a clearer centre-of-government role in steering delivery. While these themes appear novel in their framing—particularly mission language and the prominence of AI—they are consistent with a recurrent reform pattern: a corrective response to the coordination and capability demands generated by prior layers (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Christensen & Lægreid, 2007).

Importantly, in OIL terms, the reform agenda does not signify rupture. It represents a recalibration within constitutional constraint, shaped by the enduring Westminster requirement that ministers remain accountable to Parliament even as delivery is distributed across a complex administrative ecosystem. Where earlier cycles responded to fragmentation (late 1990s) or capability deficits (2010s), the current moment responds to a combined condition of institutional density: delivery strain within an architecture where decision rights, performance responsibility, and centre–department authority have become blurred through accumulated layering.

From Missions to Governance: Why Mission-Led Delivery Implies Re-Centralised Steering

Mission-led governance is often advanced as a mechanism to accelerate delivery on cross-cutting priorities that do not fit neatly within departmental silos. In the UK context, mission delivery teams and cross-government task forces reflect dissatisfaction with (i) the slow transaction costs of interdepartmental bargaining; (ii) the persistence of siloed incentives; and (iii) the limited traction of conventional performance frameworks on system-wide outcomes. In public management theory, mission-led approaches can be interpreted as an attempt to strengthen integrative capacity—aligning strategy, resources, and accountability around outcomes rather than organisational boundaries (Christensen & Lægreid, 2007; Peters, 2018).

However, mission governance is not simply a decentralising innovation. It typically requires central steering: shared metrics, pooled resources, authority to convene and unblock across departments, and a centre capable of adjudicating trade-offs. This is where OIL provides explanatory leverage. Under OIL, mission-led delivery is best understood as a *hybrid instrument* that simultaneously (a) decentralises operational problem-solving into dedicated delivery teams and (b) recentralises strategic control through the centre’s role in priority-setting, coordination, and performance oversight.

This dual character places current reforms squarely on the spectrum of oscillation. Missions devolve delivery discretion to move faster, while strengthening central performance and coordination control to preserve accountability. Peters’ (2018) coordination dilemma is therefore directly activated: autonomy is pursued to increase speed and innovation; coordination is tightened to protect coherence, legitimacy, and ministerial accountability. OIL predicts that such mission-led reforms are likely to proliferate precisely when institutional density increases—

because conventional hierarchical command becomes too slow, but unconstrained autonomy produces fragmentation.

Neo-Weberian Recalibration: Reasserting Authority Without Dismantling Layers

The defining feature of the 2020s reform wave is not only mission rhetoric but the explicit return to questions of authority, delegation, and centre-of-government governance. The Maude Review (2023/25) is emblematic of this turn. It diagnoses the centre's governance architecture as opaque, particularly concerning the delegation of the Prime Minister's authority over the Civil Service, and it recommends clearer formal delegation arrangements, strengthened central leadership structures, and improved board governance. Alongside this, centre-focused analyses such as *Power with Purpose* (2024) and reform narratives such as *Reimagining the State* (2023) emphasise central coherence, strategic capability at the centre, and mission ownership.

In theoretical terms, this wave aligns closely with the literature on the Neo-Weberian State (NWS). Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017) characterise NWS as a reform direction that combines: (i) reaffirmation of the state's role and hierarchical authority; (ii) renewed emphasis on professional competence and legal-rational legitimacy; and (iii) selective retention of managerial performance tools rather than wholesale abandonment. In the UK case, the neo-Weberian element is visible in the reassertion of central authority and the constitutional framing of delegation and accountability. Yet it differs from classic continental NWS trajectories in distinct ways: the UK recalibration occurs *within a system already deeply shaped by NPM disaggregation and post-NPM coordination layers*. The result is a neo-Weberian *overlay* rather than a neo-Weberian *replacement*. This is precisely where OIL matters. In paradigm succession accounts, a neo-Weberian turn might be described as a shift "after" NPM. Under OIL, by contrast, the neo-Weberian moment is interpreted as a *layering correction*—a reassertion of central authority to manage accumulated ambiguity generated by prior layering. In other words, the UK is not moving from NPM to NWS in a linear sequence; it is adding an NWS-type governance clarification layer onto an already hybrid architecture.

Importantly, the UK's neo-Weberian recalibration differs instrumentally from continental variants. In many continental European systems, the Neo-Weberian State has involved reaffirmation of legality-based administrative authority, strong career bureaucracies rooted in public law traditions, and reinforced juridical oversight embedded within codified constitutional frameworks (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). By contrast, the UK operates within an uncoded constitutional order, a historically generalist elite civil service, and comparatively weaker formalised administrative law traditions. Neo-Weberian recalibration in the UK, therefore, takes the form not of juridical re-bureaucratisation, but of clarified executive delegation, strengthened centre-of-government steering, and reinforced professional capability within a managerial and networked architecture. The recalibration is executive-instrumental rather than legality-reconstructive.

Westminster-Specific Inevitability: Why Oscillation Intensifies in Constitutionally Bounded Systems

A key claim of OIL is that oscillation is structurally inevitable in Westminster systems. The reason lies in the institutional configuration of accountability. Ministerial responsibility centralises political accountability in a way that cannot be fully reconciled with extensive decentralised delivery. When delivery is disaggregated across agencies, arm's-length bodies, outsourced providers, or cross-cutting networks, ministers remain accountable for outcomes they do not

operationally control. This produces recurring pressures to strengthen central steering, clarify delegation, and tighten performance oversight.

March and Olsen's (1989) institutionalism helps explain why these tensions persist. The "logic of appropriateness" embedded in Westminster constitutional norms sustains expectations of ministerial responsibility and administrative neutrality, limiting the extent to which managerial or network instruments can displace foundational accountability conventions. Streeck and Thelen's (2005) theory of gradual institutional change further suggests that such systems evolve through layering and conversion rather than replacement—creating precisely the kind of sedimentation that drives subsequent corrective rebalancing.

Skowronek's (1982) account of reconstruction cycles, while developed in a US political development context, provides a useful analogue: when institutional arrangements accumulate drift and incoherence, central authority tends to be reasserted through reconstructive reforms. In Westminster systems, however, such reconstructive impulses are constrained by constitutional continuity, producing *recalibration rather than reconstruction*. OIL therefore reframes oscillation as equilibrium-seeking behaviour: decentralise to achieve delivery responsiveness; recentralise to restore accountability and coherence; layer new instruments without removing old ones; and repeat as new trade-offs emerge.

Comparative Bridging: UK Neo-Weberian Recalibration and Continental Neo-Weberian States

The UK's neo-Weberian recalibration both resembles and diverges from continental European NWS patterns. In Pollitt and Bouckaert's (2017) account, continental NWS trajectories often involve the reaffirmation of professional bureaucracy and legal-rational authority, alongside selective managerial tools, frequently within administrative traditions in which law and career bureaucracy have historically been strong. The UK shares some of these elements, particularly the emphasis on constitutional propriety, professional leadership, and a strengthened centre, but begins from a different institutional baseline: a Westminster model with strong ministerial accountability conventions, combined with comparatively extensive NPM disaggregation.

Consequently, UK recalibration is less a return to Weberian bureaucracy than an attempt to *stabilise hybridity*. Where some continental NWS reforms may appear as re-bureaucratisation, UK reforms are better understood as governance clarification and centre strengthening within a still-managerial, still-networked, increasingly digital state. The objective is not to undo agencies, targets, digital platforms, or functional professions; it is to render the accumulated system governable by reasserting decision rights and clarifying who is accountable for what.

This distinction strengthens the article's theoretical contribution: it shows that "neo-Weberianism" in practice is not a single destination but a family of recalibrations whose form depends on the pre-existing density and layering of national administrative systems. Under OIL, neo-Weberian reform is not a phase that follows NPM; rather, it is a corrective layer that recurs when accountability ambiguity becomes acute.

Mission and Recalibration as the Contemporary OIL Configuration

The contemporary reform wave can therefore be characterised as a specific OIL configuration: mission-led decentralised delivery within a neo-Weberian recentralising frame. Missions devolve discretion to accelerate outcomes; recalibration tightens the centre's authority to preserve coherence, constitutional legitimacy, and accountability. The intended result is not simplification

through dismantling but governability through clarified steering. This configuration, however, carries predictable trade-offs consistent with OIL:

- *Improvement sought*: Faster cross-cutting delivery, stronger performance traction, clearer authority.
- *Trade-off introduced*: Risk of centre–department friction, over-centralisation, and crowding out of local flexibility (Peters, 2018).
- *Implementation hazard*: If mission teams proliferate without decision-right clarity, the system risks reproducing fragmentation in a new form, now layered on top of existing layers.

Thus, the 2020s reform moment does not sit outside the oscillation story; it exemplifies it. OIL predicts that as institutional density increases, reformers will attempt to restore governability through renewed central clarity—while simultaneously experimenting with instruments of delivery autonomy that promise speed. The resulting governance challenge is to ensure that the new mission and recalibration layers do not merely add complexity but instead resolve accumulated ambiguity through explicit decision rights, coherent performance frameworks, and capabilities that match system demands.

Rewiring as Recalibration, Not Rupture

Viewed through the lens of Oscillatory Institutional Layering, the contemporary mission-driven initiative is best understood as a corrective recalibration within a constitutionally bounded and densely layered state. It does not dismantle NPM's disaggregation, post-NPM's coordination mechanisms, digital infrastructure, or capability regimes. Instead, it seeks to render their coexistence governable by strengthening the centre's authority, clarifying delegation, and aligning ownership of performance and delivery with missions.

The theoretical implication is clear: UK reform in the 2020s reinforces, rather than contradicts, the OIL model. Reform continues to proceed through hybridisation, cumulative sedimentation, and oscillatory rebalancing between autonomy and control. The next section develops the cross-wave persistent tensions this configuration reveals and analyses what OIL implies for implementation design in high-density administrative systems.

CONCLUSION: OSCILLATORY INSTITUTIONAL LAYERING, GENERALISABILITY, AND LIMITS

Reform Without Rupture Revisited

This article has argued that UK civil service reform since 1854 is best understood not as paradigmatic succession but as Oscillatory Institutional Layering (OIL). Reform unfolds through cumulative addition of governance instruments layered upon an enduring constitutional core, combined with cyclical rebalancing between decentralised autonomy and recentralised authority. The constitutional layer—neutrality, permanence, and ministerial responsibility—has remained intact across all reform waves. Managerialisation, disaggregation of New Public Management, networked reintegration, digital infrastructure, capability enhancement, and neo-Weberian central recalibration have each added institutional strata without displacing prior layers.

The result is not replacement but sedimentation. Governance logics coexist within an increasingly dense architecture. Reform oscillates in response to coordination dilemmas (Peters, 2018): decentralisation improves responsiveness and innovation but weakens coherence; centralisation restores clarity and accountability but risks constraining flexibility.

Oscillation, therefore, is not inconsistency. It is structural equilibrium-seeking behaviour within a constitutionally bounded system.

Theoretical Contribution

The article makes three principal theoretical contributions to public administration scholarship.

First, it formalises Oscillatory Institutional Layering as a longitudinal explanatory model integrating:

- Institutional layering and gradual change (Streeck & Thelen, 2005; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Thelen, 2004);
- Normative institutionalism and constitutional constraint (March & Olsen, 1989; Olsen, 2009);
- Coordination dilemmas (Peters, 2018);
- Reform correction cycles (Christensen & Lægheid, 2007);
- Reconstructive steering dynamics (Skowronek, 1982).

By synthesising these strands, OIL explains both continuity and change within mature administrative systems.

Second, it challenges linear paradigm-succession narratives. In the UK case, Weberian bureaucracy has not been superseded by managerialism, nor managerialism by NPM, nor NPM by digital governance. Instead, governance logics coexist within a layered architecture. Hybridisation, not displacement, is the dominant trajectory.

Third, it situates the contemporary mission-driven reform agenda within a neo-Weberian recalibration. Rather than signalling rupture, the current “rewiring” initiative represents a recentralising correction within accumulated sediment. Authority clarification and strengthened centre-of-government steering are responses to ambiguity generated by decades of layering.

Lessons for Implementation from the Mission-driven Reform Initiative

The current mission-driven reform initiative yields several implementation lessons when viewed through the lens of Oscillatory Institutional Layering (OIL). First, clarity of decision rights is paramount. In a high-density administrative system, mission teams, central units, and departments must have explicitly defined authority boundaries; otherwise, layering risks reproduces the very ambiguity reform seeks to correct. Second, central steering must be matched with delivery capability. Strengthening the centre without parallel investment in digital, commercial, and project management skills will intensify coordination bottlenecks rather than resolve them.

Third, performance frameworks should reinforce cross-department collaboration rather than silo optimisation. Mission metrics must align incentives horizontally while preserving ministerial accountability vertically. Fourth, reform sequencing matters: capability and data infrastructure should precede acceleration of delivery expectations. Finally, political durability is essential. Oscillatory recalibration requires sustained sponsorship across electoral cycles to stabilise new governance layers before the next corrective swing begins. These lessons suggest that successful “rewiring” depends less on structural redesign than on disciplined alignment of authority, incentives, capability, and accountability within the existing constitutional framework.

Comparative Generalisability

Is OIL unique to the UK?

The oscillation-layering dynamic is likely to be most visible in systems where:

- Constitutional accountability is centralised,
- Executive authority is unified,
- Delivery authority is structurally dispersed,
- Administrative neutrality constrains politicisation.

In such systems, tensions between decentralisation and coordination are structurally embedded rather than episodic. OIL should therefore be most pronounced in Westminster systems, where ministers remain personally accountable for outcomes delivered through fragmented organisational arrangements.

However, elements of OIL are observable beyond Westminster contexts. Continental European neo-Weberian states also exhibit layering dynamics, combining managerial instruments with reinforced hierarchical steering (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). Federal systems may experience oscillation differently due to constitutional divisions of power, yet layering remains evident where reform operates within durable institutional frameworks.

The UK may represent an analytically powerful case—arguably a “most-likely” case—for observing oscillatory layering, given its strong constitutional continuity and dense reform history. Nevertheless, the broader mechanism of equilibrium-seeking recalibration within institutional constraint plausibly extends across advanced administrative democracies.

Future comparative research could test OIL in:

- Westminster derivatives (Australia, New Zealand, Canada),
- Continental neo-Weberian states (e.g., Germany),
- Federal presidential systems where executive cohesion differs,
- Digital-intensive administrative states where platform governance reshapes coordination dynamics.

Such work would help establish the scope conditions of oscillatory institutional layering.

Limitations

His study has several limitations. It analyses reform intent rather than implementation outcomes, examining official reform documents as authoritative statements of governance recalibration without empirically assessing performance effects. The research relies on structured qualitative document analysis within a single-country longitudinal case. While the UK offers strong analytical leverage due to constitutional continuity, cross-national generalisation requires further empirical testing. The coding strategy is interpretive: documents were systematically coded with iterative recoding and negative-case checks, but inter-coder reliability testing was not employed. Finally, the analysis operates at the macro-institutional level and does not model sector-specific or devolved-administrative variation.

Directions for Future Research

Three avenues merit further investigation.

1. *Comparative Testing of OIL*: Applying the model across different constitutional settings would clarify its boundary conditions and refine its scope.
2. *Quantitative Analysis of Oscillation Effects*: Empirical testing could examine whether phases of decentralisation and recentralisation correlate with performance volatility, fiscal outcomes, or public trust measures.
3. *Micro-Level Institutional Dynamics*: Future research could explore how professional identities, informal networks, and leadership relationships mediate layering dynamics within departments.

Additionally, the rise of AI-enabled governance and digital platform states may alter oscillation dynamics by changing information asymmetries between the centre and departments. Integrating OIL with digital governance theory represents a promising frontier.

Final Reflection

The history of UK civil service reform reveals adaptive resilience under constitutional constraint. Reform is cumulative rather than substitutive; oscillatory rather than linear; layered rather than revolutionary.

The contemporary mission-driven recalibration continues this pattern. It seeks to clarify authority, strengthen capability, and align delivery within an already dense governance architecture. Whether it succeeds will depend not on rhetorical ambition but on disciplined alignment of authority, incentives, capability, and political durability.

Oscillatory Institutional Layering suggests that transformation in constitutionally bounded systems is possible, but only through calibrated accumulation and equilibrium-seeking adjustment, not through rupture.

British civil service reform is therefore less a sequence of revolutions than an enduring negotiation between autonomy and control, innovation and stability, adaptation and constitutional continuity.

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