

# In Their Own Words: What Ministers Think of Their Civil Service Support

Comments made by Ministers and former Ministers in interviews carried out in 2009 and 2010.

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## What Coalition Ministers and Former Ministers Say about Submissions



**Nick Harvey MP**

- What helped me immensely was paperwork where the key points were summarised at the outset in no more than two or three sides, with any other material in concise Appendices to which I could refer if need be to clarify points. On some “micro” issues a five minute telephone conversation could narrow relevant points down in advance so a well crafted summary was all that was needed to be the basis of a sound decision
- Civil servants and senior Service officers who briefed me had to exercise a function of isolating issues for Ministerial decisions. In the task of honing down complex issues to manageable proportions and providing Ministers with viable options, this sometimes meant not exposing some issues, options or factors to Ministers. This framing of the agenda was done with the best of intentions but could occasionally seem to narrow down possibilities too much, or avoid exposing to Ministers some dissenting views that it might have been useful to feed into the decision making.



**Norman Baker MP**

- Of least value to me had been briefing which appeared to be prepared on the basis of a risk averse culture, in which bold new ideas tended to be discounted and recommendations were presented which did not range sufficiently widely over possible options. There was sometimes the impression of being “fobbed off” with an analysis which did not stand back at look at issues afresh.
- My briefing sometimes needed to be better focused to meet my particular needs and preferences. I do not need material that I am familiar with to be gone over again and again. I need to be given material which picks out issues with which I am less familiar or which have special sensitivity.



**Rt Hon Vince Cable MP**

- In recent debates there have been times when I felt my briefing was obscuring the wood with trees and the associated paper products: my briefings have sometimes been difficult to access and devoid of effective summaries.



**Rt Hon Peter Hain MP**

- I feel that officials do not always show awareness that submissions are liable to be read late at night or on car journeys – my car is my mobile office. That puts a premium on good communication, which was not always evident.
- Officials need to be able to capture the key elements of the submission – the core message - in three or four lines at the beginning of the submission after the formulaic headings. This enables a busy Minister to focus straight away on the essence of the problem and then read around it as much as he or she wished. In most cases submissions were too long and did not relegate subordinate issues to a few well selected appendices. Nor did they often deal with communication issues which could often be key.



**Rt Hon Des Browne MP**

- A common error was to swamp Ministers with paperwork which was not designed to allow for the inevitable pressures on their time. I found that I needed to have top class two to three page summaries of issues to work with, supported by appendices covering supporting information which I could access as I needed.

- Too often I was presented with large dossiers which had inadequate or over-long summaries, and which contained lots of undigested repetition. A good brief gave me the history, the issues, the salient facts, an analysis and a clear recommendation. The most common deficit in briefing in my experience was a lack of a clear recommendation or even any options. The second most common weakness was to include over-long summaries. The third was the omission of relevant history.



**Rt Hon Lord Norman Warner**

- While some Ministers were not unhappy with long papers accompanied by appendices, many Ministers, myself included, found them deeply irritating, especially if it seemed that information was being included not because a Minister needed to know something but apparently to cover civil servants' backs in case something went wrong later.
- There was a kind of risk averse approach to briefing which saw it as dangerous to leave information out, when the key skill was to know what information to leave in. Too many civil servants did not seem to realise that there was no way that most Ministers could deal with long papers and probe voluminous appendices.



**Rt Hon Charles Clarke MP**

- The quality of briefing varied enormously between departments and officials. It was normally much too long and cautious with officials appearing to be anxious to duck responsibility by dumping all the issues on Ministers and not giving a clear view. In my opinion it was the civil service job to summarise issues expertly and give a robust view

and recommendation. I do not believe that Ministers should be told what they want to hear, though I acknowledge that some Ministers appear to behave that way.



Rt Hon Patricia Hewitt MP

- I found the presentation of information to me was often too dependent on a verbal culture. This approach buried statistics in extended prose and shied away from diagrams and wiring diagrams which might show the links between issues. I nonetheless found tightly written formal submissions with a few well-chosen appendices to be useful. They did give me a quarry of information on which I could draw, both in oral discussions of policy issues and in the subsequent defence of decisions.



Rt Hon Lord Chris Smith

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- Civil servants did not think enough about their responsibility to give Ministers time to take a step back from day to day matters and think about bigger strategic issues. They tended to swamp Ministers with a tidal wave of “stuff.” This meant that they could not see the wood for the trees. Good Ministers needed to concentrate on the big strategic issues. Really effective civil service support should be helping Ministers to do that, not to push paper at them.



Rt Hon Lord Kenneth Baker

- The key skill I relied on was the ability of my advisors to summarise documents accurately, preferably in two sides at most. Some Ministers required even briefer

summaries. These précis needed to cover not just substance but be alert to politically sensitive issues.

## ***What Ministers Say about Correspondence***



*Rt Hon Peter Hain MP*

- I felt that draft letters were often not given the attention they deserved. It seemed to me that slabs of stale prose were often cut and pasted into letters when they demanded careful thought about what the correspondents were concerned about and how they might be persuaded.
- I do not always believe in total brevity for such communications. Sometimes for complex and highly charged issues a troubled correspondent might not feel that their issue had been taken seriously without several pages of carefully argued response. But this had to be in a language and style that someone, say, in a valley in Wales, rather than a corridor in Whitehall, could understand. It needed to be accurate but not technical, persuasive not assertive, sympathetic not dismissive.



*Rt Hon Des Browne MP*

- An area requiring particular reform is the handling of correspondence. Correspondence, especially with MPs and House of Commons groups, is not given sufficient priority or importance and thus is not handled by sufficiently skilled individuals. Moreover departmental systems often failed to distinguish between the simple and the complex letter, and did not provide a quick and standard response to common letters and a more subtle and sympathetic response to complex or sensitive correspondence.



*Rt Hon Patricia Hewitt MP*

- Correspondence handling was frequently an area in all the departments where I worked where groups of civil servants failed to deliver useable material. This was not just because past failures in the education system left people deprived of the ability to spell and understand grammar. It was also because many civil servants seemed too concerned to

flesh out all the detail that they knew to pay attention to impact, logic and narrative. Correspondence needed to explain policies in plain English with good illustrative stories that connected with the experience of the intended recipients. It needed to avoid the kind of recital of clichés or jargon that was sometimes served up.

## What Ministers Say About Lines To Take



Rt Hon Vince Cable MP

- On occasion I find the “lines to take” that I am given for both PQs and other occasions to be anodyne beyond belief.



Rt Hon Lady Estelle Morris

- What I disliked most in material given to me were banal comments about matters I already knew, and even more banal lines to take which seemed to have been poorly thought through and to be presented as standard platitudes. The authors appeared to believe that platitudes could be used to promote policy, when the briefest thought would indicate that any Opposition could attack and undermine them. What I wanted from a line to take was an imaginative way of taking an argument forward, and something to say if challenged on a key sensitive area. I did not want a tired banality. The responses needed to be inventive, bold and politically aware, not safe, dull and vulnerable.



Norman Baker MP

- In PQ briefing I did not find at all helpful voluminous 18 page folders setting out policy issues that I could not use in the House. I want brief insights into what a questioner might raise and key statistics and lines to take that can be deployed in debate. (*Norman Baker*)

## What Ministers say about Speeches



Rt Hon Vince Cable MP

- I find that the drafting of speeches for me has often been poor and it has taken time for people to understand that I am serious about wanting drafts to be submitted in bullet-point form so that I can elaborate them in delivery.
- In draft speeches my own clear preference is not to have enormously long speeches drafted out in full. I want bullet points giving me the essence of the argument on which I can enlarge as seems fit. Civil servants sometimes seem too nervous about giving Ministers this freedom, which for me is necessary to enable an effective speech. The support system needs to be tailored to individual Ministers' needs. (*Norman Baker*)
- Many civil service speeches are in truth undeliverable, though because of time pressures they do sometimes get delivered by Ministers. .. What was often missing was a narrative, something that was not banal and bland. Speeches were of the "it says here" kind rather than ones which capture the imagination and inspire. (*Peter Hain*)

## What Ministers say about their working lives

- I feel that the support offered to me does not always recognise the threat to good decision making that comes from not giving senior people sufficient time to absorb, think about and discuss strategic decisions. Too readily the diary becomes crowded out with a string of meetings, engagements and paperwork which rank too much of the business in the same way. I recognised that to some extent this is in my own control, and can be managed to a degree with the help of a good Diary Secretary, but there is still in my view enormous pressure to put too many decisions to Ministers all the time. (*Vince Cable*)
- Encouraging people to use appropriate brevity was certainly a perennial problem. Officials in both departments where I had had experience appeared to indulge in carpet bombing Ministers with paper, supplemented more recently by high volumes of frenetic email activity. This had created a world in which private secretaries were unable to help Ministers as much as they should because they were captured by their computer screens, and partly as a result most Ministers had huge volumes of paperwork to process. (*Lord Warner*)
- I found that I needed to take 1 or 2 boxes home at night and 3 or 4 at weekends. Even though one box might just contain correspondence to sign, it would take me at least forty-five minutes to work through it. When I ceased being a Minister I won another hour and a

half's sleep at night and immediately felt less tired! It was therefore desirable to find ways of reducing the number of decisions that had to be put to Ministers. (*Nick Raynsford*)

- The practice I developed through experience was to request all the briefings for the next week by the end of the previous week. This gave me time to digest the contents in advance. I was diligent in reading supporting paperwork and had both worked on paper in the office, often starting at 7.30 or 8.00 am in the week and commonly working through at least two boxes in evenings (often late at night in the office) and a similar number at weekends. (*Des Browne*)
- I found in most of my Ministerial career that I had to take home one or two boxes a night with two or three at weekends. Weekend boxes were positively useful for more complex issues where time was needed to read the background and think about an issue. The pressure could be eased if private offices separated material into different folders according to their urgency. They needed to avoid cramming them so full that they refused to open! (*Patricia Hewitt*)
- I made it a guiding principle that departmental business should be managed to foster good decision making and effective time management for me. This meant that I insisted that issues for decision were not dumped on me at weekends, when I would have no time to consider them properly or have access to officials. I refused to take any weekend boxes and only dealt with business at weekends if there was an emergency. I worked from 8.00 am to midnight on Monday to Wednesday and on Thursdays until I left for my constituency, but required official submissions to be delivered by Wednesday night if they were required that week. (*Charles Clarke*)
- Coming into office as a new Minister, I found the official machine much too inclined to overload and overwhelm me with paper. Initially I had found myself being presented with as many as five boxes a night, which was plainly ludicrous. Given the tendency for many Ministerial diaries to be filled with engagements through the day, and for there to be demands from the parliamentary timetable too, boxes were often waiting to be addressed late at night and into the early hours, with unacceptable effects on private life and sleep. That was no way to run a life let alone a country. A better approach required Ministers and their officials to agree the right degree of delegation so that only essential matters for decision were put to Ministers, and more trivial matters – like menus for visiting EU delegations, to give one example – were settled in the appropriate place elsewhere. After effective discussions with my private office, I honed the workload to one box a night. Even that could mean important issues being looked at late at night, but at least they were not being crowded out by trivia. (*Lord Chris Smith*)
- I came to realise that too much was being demanded when people were being organised to have a quick word in the lift while I was on my way out of the building! This was not a reasonable way of doing business for anyone – neither the civil servants concerned nor the Minister. Ministers needed some time on their own with their own thoughts. One tendency that particularly needed to be avoided was the culture that expected Ministers and their

offices to have their time squeezed while other officials took extra time to complete their work. It was unreasonable to dump material on Ministerial offices late in the evening and on Friday nights expecting Ministers to deliver decisions on a compressed timetable over a weekend, for example. (*Lady Estelle Morris*)

## What they say about priorities for improvement

- Civil service processes seemed to assume that it was impossible to have a policy discussion with less than about a dozen officials present, and the whole process often seemed over-complicated and laboured. Even quite simple decisions seem to be handled in the same complex way as more important strategic decisions. I recognise that public sector decisions are often more complex than private sector decisions with conflicting dilemmas to solve without the clarity that comes from running a viable business and its balance sheet. But I think that sometimes not enough effort is made to simplify or to focus effort on value added areas. (*Vince Cable*)
- One way that some submissions could be improved would be to ensure that those writing briefs stand back and think about putting their advice into a political context. Sometimes the advice strives so hard to be objective that it becomes unworldly. I was not looking for politically biased advice but I did want advice that was politically aware: political neutrality was fine, but political naivety was unhelpful. (*Nick Harvey*)
- A new challenge to the civil service that needed to be addressed quickly is how to develop departmental IT and security arrangements so that Ministers who are familiar with IT can be appropriately supported. Some Ministers are already finding it frustrating to be inhibited in their use of laptops and handheld devices. (*Lord Norman Warner*)
- My priorities for reform would be:
  - Better training on communication for officials especially on crisp briefing, effective press releases, engaging speeches and persuasive draft correspondence, with an emphasis on the need for real consideration of the requirements of the intended audience;
  - Better consideration of the consequences and implementation of proposals;
  - More effort on the part of officials to be proactive and innovative rather than reactive and conservative (with a small c).

A lot of the issues around effective support need to be addressed through effective communication between Ministers and officials about preferences, expectations and focus. (*Rt Hon Peter Hain*)

My priorities for better and more effective support for Ministers would flow from three changes :

- Longer term appointments linked to better preparation and appraisal;

- More informal relationships between Ministers and Senior Civil Servants with Ministers and others more involved in reviewing and developing options in the early stages of policy development.
- Greater continuity in support teams of civil servants in policy areas so that teams saw through the initial development of policy, the development of legislation, the implementation process and the review of lessons learned.

*(Rt Hon Nick Raynsford)*

## **Extracts from Chris Mullin's Diaries: A View from the Foothills (Profile books 2009)**

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### **Diary Pressures**

“ I am besieged by invitations to address conferences organised by obscure but no doubt worthy organisations. Mostly they are the crumbs that fall from the tables of my many superiors and my first instinct is to reject the lot. However, they usually come with notes from officials advising acceptance and, reluctantly, I concede. Before long my whole life will be eaten up with pointless activity. One such invite, originally addressed to Nick Raynsford, came with a note from his Private Secretary still attached. It read: “ This is very low priority. I suggest we pass to Chris Mullin.” I wrote NO and waited to see what would happen. Sure enough, as I anticipated, someone was in my office within the hour, explaining why it was really of the highest importance.....” (p 13)

“To Birmingham to open the International Water Exhibition. I made a short speech to a handful of bemused visitors and cut a ribbon, but in fact the exhibition had been open a couple of hours before the time I arrived. “I wondered if you would notice” remarked one of the organisers when I pointed this out. Of course I bloody noticed....So much Ministerial activity is entirely contrived and pointless.” (p 37)

“ I am in danger of falling out with Jessica [his private secretary] who is getting fed up with my constant whingeing about the rising tide of pointless activity that my job seems to entail. “Nick Raynsford worked much harder than you do” she complained, blushing as she spoke. I could tell she was angry. I pointed out that I was usually in the office by 8.30am and worked till 10 or 11 at night. I am frequently one of the last people to leave the building. “When” I ask “ did Nick do all the work that I don't do?” “At weekends” she said. “ He saved his letters until then.” “Weekends” I replied “ are non-negotiable. I have a family.” (p 39)

### **Parliamentary Questions**

“ My first Question Time. A rising sense of terror. Answering is an entirely different art from asking. Gordon Prentice is first up. Needless to say he is asking about Air Traffic Control and bound to attract supplementaries. In vain I try to memorise the brief. In truth, most of the answers are obvious, if only I could relax sufficiently to enable my brain to function. My greatest fear is being struck dumb.” (p 40)

“ Question Time. The second of my incumbency. ...In the closing minutes, just when I appeared to have muddled through, Desmond Swayne, one of the Tory troublemakers, got up and asked “What about particulates?” That’s all he said and then he sat down. I hadn’t a clue what he was talking about. I opened my mouth but no words came. The place suddenly went quiet. The Tories began poking fun. “Help” someone called. ..[John Prescott] ... mumbled something about difficulties with Europe. I duly repeated this with as much authority as I could muster, adding with a smile “The Hon Member can rest assured that our finest minds are working on it.” A masterstroke. The House erupted...Everyone was suddenly on my side. With one leap I was free. Once again disaster narrowly averted, but it is a dangerous way to live. The ice is very thin.” (p 53)

“I have been allocated questions on acid rain in Wales, traffic congestion, empty housing in Burnley, and stamp duty on housing in Torbay. Only the empty housing comes within my remit. Everything else is an adventure.....I scraped by without incident. The relief when it was over was comparable only to that I used to feel as an insecure adolescent, emerging from the Church of the Immaculate Conception, having confessed “impure thoughts” to Canon Wilson.” (p 66)

### **On Parliamentary Question draft replies**

“ A sudden outburst from Jack at this morning’s pre-Questions conference regarding the inadequacy of draft replies. It was prompted by a long essay which he was expected to read out in response to a question about India. “How many times have I made clear that answers should be no longer than 50 words and that they should address the questions? The Foreign Office has been answering questions for 220 years. We ought to be able to get it right by now.” He went on at some length. “Crap” and the f-word featured repeatedly. “If necessary I will make the directors draft the answers personally. Why should Ministers have to spend time redrafting this f-ing crap?” Later a minute was circulated repeating the point, minus the purple passages.” (15 June 2004)

### **Dangers of Superficiality**

“ Today I have addressed a conference of industrial water users in the City, spent an hour and a half in committee debating an Order on aircraft training regulations, addressed an all-party animal welfare group on the regulation of zoos and circuses and held a half-hour telephone conversation with EU Commissioner Neil Kinnock about how to defuse the row between Britain and the US over hush kits. None of these are subjects I know anything about. I live from hour to hour, never staying with any subject...long enough to learn anything useful, praying that I can retain just sufficient information from the briefing to enable myself to bluff my way through without humiliation. As soon as it is no longer required, I press the mental delete button and the information is wiped from my mind, lost beyond recall. This is how it is every day. No wonder barristers flourish in this environment. I am beginning to lose my identity.” (p 53)

### **Speech writing**

“To a posh hotel in Mayfair to address 300 deeply sceptical councillors and officials on the wonders of “best value” , the latest New Labour local government wheeze. The speech, one of Hilary Armstrong’s hand-me-downs, was abysmal. The phrase “best value” featured 43 times without any explanation of what it was about – I bet the hapless official who wrote it didn’t know either. I was simply expected to stand and chant it like a Maoist slogan. I sent it back three times and by the last draft it was just about deliverable.” (p 69)

“ To Westminster Hall for the terrorism debate, armed at last with a competent though bland speech into which I had spent the morning trying to get some life.” (4 November 2004)

### **Focus**

“ I am following Richard Mottram’s advice on day one “Choose two or three issues on which you might make a difference and don’t worry about the rest.” (p 105)