

This is an edited extract of a speech made by Jon Trickett MP, the shadow minister for the Cabinet Office, at the Institute for Government in May 2013

The British [civil service](#) is often celebrated for its professionalism, independence and expertise, but our system of governance is being challenged as never before. We live in a 24/7 society, where technological change is revolutionising the way we do things. We are a less deferential and less hierarchical society, and there is a crisis of legitimacy in our political structures. This means that the old ways of doing things no longer work.

I intend to use the next two years to prepare the ground for the radical change that is needed; a change that will be carefully implemented when [Labour](#) is in office.

Governments are increasingly opening up the civil service to influence from the wider community. It can only benefit from drawing on expertise, including from within the commercial world. But, if not handled properly, this practice can lead to the perception, and perhaps even the reality, of conflicts of interest, which can undermine public confidence in the neutrality of the civil service.

While the public accounts committee has put its finger on an emerging systemic issue, the problem is much wider than indicated in its recent report on the role of secondments from the "big four" accountancy firms into the Treasury. Hundreds of contractors have passed into departmental premises where they rub shoulders daily with civil servants who have responsibility for handling the procurement and management of those contracts. With almost £250bn of contracts managed by our civil service, the rights of access, and even the embedding of contractors into departments, need to be under careful scrutiny, and tighter codes of conduct may have to be developed.

A related matter is the so-called revolving door: where key decision-makers leave their jobs in government and move into the private sector, taking their privileged knowledge with them. The Advisory Committee on Business Appointments regulates such appointments, but its remit is weak.

In France, by contrast, it is illegal for a public official who handles a contract to leave public service and work in the commercial sector, where their knowledge can guide the contractor's actions.

The composition of the civil service at the most senior levels does not mirror the diverse characteristics of Britain. Whether you look at educational background, class, ethnicity, gender or disability, the service is acutely distorted. This matters because the service should include the best that Britain can offer, and unrepresentative corps in the civil service can only widen the gap between the governing class and the governed.

The skills mix in the civil service is an equally vexed problem. Take procurement. Acquiring value for money and high-quality services or goods from the almost £250bn procured from the private sector is a complex skill. However, less than 40% of civil servants who deal with procurement are trained to do so. Too often, public contracts leave taxpayers' money at risk as a result of inadequate technical procurement skills.

The disastrous attempt to procure the west coast mainline contract is an example. Civil servants were blamed by ministers for the errors. Yet only three civil servants were allocated to handle the procurement. Additionally, no senior civil servant oversaw the acquisition.

The existence of a clear delegation and a well-understood hierarchy of decision-making would clarify the issue of accountability. The government has split the tasks carried out by the cabinet secretary before attempting to discuss their purpose. It is not clear how the present arrangement of an effectively twin-headed operation increases clarity and accountability.

We need analysis of the machinery of government. This should be followed by strategic change and, if possible, resolved by consensus, so that each succeeding government does not simply reverse the actions of its predecessors or, worse, repeat their mistakes.