

Australia and Canada highlight the dangers of politicising the civil service

Sarah Nickson

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Those looking to other countries for warning signs of politicising the UK civil service should pay attention to Canada and Australia rather than the US, says Sarah Nickson

The departure of [cabinet secretary Sir Mark Sedwill](#) and the appointment of David Frost as the new national security adviser (NSA) were announced without fanfare on the No.10 website. However, unlike all previous holders of the NSA post, Frost is not a civil servant, and there have also been reports that the prime minister wants the next cabinet secretary to be “a Brexiteer”.

Former ministers, such as William Hague, ex-officials and other commentators have drawn parallels with the US practice of staffing its executive branch with political appointees. But anyone concerned with [creeping politicisation](#) should instead look to Ottawa and Canberra, where the approach to some senior appointments has contributed to problems the UK government says it wants to solve.

Washington-style political appointments would be damaging – but are unlikely to happen in the UK

In the US, vast swathes of the executive ranks are removed with each change of president. Incoming administrations can make around 4,000 political appointments, including top positions in departments and independent agencies, members of regulatory commissions and ambassadors. While this allows an incoming president a huge degree of control over their administration, it also leads to loss of institutional memory and expertise. Finding and appointing suitable candidates, and having them approved by congress, also takes time, and jobs often go unfilled for lengthy periods. These are problems the UK’s permanent, impartial civil service is designed to avoid.

Moving to this system in the UK would be a seismic cultural and logistical change. A less dramatic but more likely prospect is a gradual slide towards the practices seen in Canada and Australia. These are Westminster systems broadly similar to the UK, but with greater prime ministerial control over top civil service jobs and a greater tendency towards politicised appointments.

Senior appointments in Canada and Australia are prone to subtler politicisation

In Canada, although there is a ‘merit-based’ selection process run by its equivalent of the Cabinet Office, the prime minister has a high degree of autonomy over the appointment of the highest ranks of bureaucrats. [Permanent secretaries](#) in the Australian civil service are also appointed by the prime minister, as they are in the UK, but there is no requirement of merit or fair and open competition. They are also employed on fixed-term contracts. While the vast majority remain career civil servants, some have been drawn from the ranks of special advisers, while others, by virtue of their public comments and career histories, have been viewed as ideological fellow travellers.

The reasons, real or perceived, for permanent secretary sackings are also important. As with the departure of Philip Rutnam from the Home Office, some permanent secretaries’ civil service careers in both Canada and Australia have ended because of a clash between an official and their minister. But others seem to have fallen victim to the view they were too close to an outgoing government. Following the 1996 general election in Australia, six permanent secretaries were given marching orders before the new government had even been sworn in, while the removal of four permanent secretaries soon after the 2013 election was attributed to the role they played in delivering the previous government’s policies, including on climate change and immigration. Over time, political sackings can become accepted practice:

as one of the permanent secretaries remaining after 2013 later noted, the more often it happens, the easier it becomes.

Politicised appointments can damage the quality of advice

Despite some [flexibility in the British model](#), the contortions in the Frost appointment shows how far the UK still is from any US-style approach: to make a political appointment to an official role, the government needed to give Frost ambassador status, and he is unable to instruct civil servants. But the UK should not want to emulate the Australian or Canadian models either.

Politicised appointments can erode a culture of impartiality, increase turnover and could even affect the quality civil service advice. The Canadian approach has led to a wider trend of politicisation of the civil service, which has included asking officials to act in partisan ways, dismissing official evidence and pressuring and undermining government scientists. In Australia, the current crop of permanent secretaries has only been in post for an average of two years each, while Martin Parkinson, one of the four dismissed in 2013, noted that officials had received a message that [“you shouldn’t take on roles that could be perceived as controversial, even when all you’re doing is actually carrying out the lawful instructions of an elected government”](#).

The UK government’s next steps will signal how seriously it takes the concept of a permanent, non-partisan civil service. Its commitment to a competitive process to replace Sedwill is a welcome sign. But there are lingering questions, like whether the unusual nature of the Frost appointment remains an exception to the rule, and whether – and why – any other permanent secretaries follow Sedwill out the door.