

Wokery (and Antisemitism?)

Jess Bowie in Civil Service World, September 2022

We take a personal look at a divisive and highly politicised topic, to uncover the real issues which lie behind it

Diversity and inclusion roles in the civil service are a “job creation scheme by the woke for the woke”; the civil service needs “focused learning, not woke folderol”; it should “ditch the woke witch trials” and, while it’s at it, “address a woke civil service culture that strays into antisemitism”.

These are just a few choice highlights from this summer’s Conservative leadership contest.

A word that rose to prominence alongside the Black Lives Matter movement, defined roughly as an awareness of social problems such as racism and inequality, “woke” had already been hopelessly warped in certain parts of the press. Then it became a watchword among the Tory contenders for prime minister. Not just any old wokery though. It was the pernicious effect of wokery in the civil service that really got juices flowing on the campaign trail. So often did it crop up that, at times, it felt as if this was the only issue facing Britain.

Now that Liz Truss is safely ensconced in No.10, she might have one or two other things to fret about. But, given that many of the above claims were made by her (or in her name), this issue is not going to go away.

The nebulous concept of “wokery” – and its relationship to civil service learning and development – isn’t straightforward. Here, CSW attempts to separate fact from fiction and explore the actual challenges around efforts to improve equality in departments.

Why now, and why this?

Over the last decade, political culture in the UK and elsewhere has increasingly become about stoking culture wars rather than bridging divides.

Separately, and more positively, an interest in diversity and inclusion is growing among all employers (public and private), and with it initiatives to make workforces more reflective of society.

Finally, we have a government that loves bashing the civil service. Anonymous briefings – or overt attacks – have been almost a hobby among cabinet ministers for years.

On this last point, however, even Whitehall-watchers were scratching their heads during the campaign at the sudden outrage over civil service L&D – an issue which, against a backdrop of soaring inflation, a cost of living crisis, drought, floods and war in Europe, surely didn't feature among the top 10 concerns of Conservative Party members.

A cynic might be tempted to use phrases like “dead cat” or “dog whistle” to describe what was going on (although in so doing they would have to be relaxed about mixing their domestic animal metaphors). After all, appealing to ideas that the British identity is under threat by hordes of diversity zealots and selling yourself as the great defender of liberty in the face of political-correctness-gone-mad feels a lot easier than pitching concrete solutions to the intractable problems facing the UK economy.

It's also tough to run on a “fresh start” ticket when your party has been in power for 12 years. A recent *Private Eye* cover summed up this dilemma by featuring Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak saying in unison: “Only I can sort out the mess left by the government I was in.”

If you need to trash something and your own record as a politician is off limits, why not focus on civil servants who have no right of reply?

Witchcraft, crystal healing and ‘Check Yo’ Privilege’

Various stories have emerged in recent months which undeniably cast civil service training in an unfortunate light. Witness a wellness session called “A Beginners Guide to Crystal Healing and Deep Relaxation”; an online event called “Lunch with a witch – with Q&A”, and a toe-curlingly titled Cabinet Office course called “Check Yo’ Privilege”.

Let's take these in reverse order, as despite being lumped together in the political mind (woke folderol), they are in different categories. Yes, “Check Yo’ Privilege” isn't the best name for a training course, but having civil servants consider their own advantages in life before making policy that affects the wider population – which, *CSW* understands, was the point of the training – is not just sensible but vital. The same applies to many of the 250-plus courses which then-Cabinet Office minister Jacob Rees-Mogg told the *Telegraph* in early September he had proudly axed in a crackdown on “indoctrination”. One, called “De-biasing Decision-making” aimed to counter cognitive biases in government to produce “better project planning, delivery and policy outcomes”. God forbid.

And so to crystals and witches. Granted, both events were in officials' own time, costing the taxpayer nothing, and the witch Q&A never ended up happening – possibly because of media scrutiny. But such courses aren't a great look.

How typical are they? A senior source in civil service HR offers some context: “There has been a group of spads actively scouring the D&I world of the civil service looking

for examples of wokery that they can ridicule, so of course these things get rooted out. And, frankly, they are deserving of ridicule, not least because they don't meet the civil service value of being evidence-based. But they're not badly intended – this is well-meaning people, often from staff networks, filling a vacuum.”

In the end, the centre made it clear to officials that crystal healing courses should not form part of the civil service learning offer. “Like most large organisations, the civil service runs events aimed at improving the wellbeing of staff,” a statement read. “We are putting in place additional due diligence to ensure our internal offer to staff is appropriate and value for money.”

The “large organisations” part here is key. According to the HR official, the centre’s policy on training is clear: it should be evidence-based and impartial. But the civil service headcount is currently over 450,000. In the words of another civil servant who has been following the wokery wars closely: “You’re always going to find something batshit somewhere.”

“Look at large private sector companies,” they say. “There’s always going to be an away day where managers are hugging trees or something. The question is, what are you going to do about it? If all you want to do is exploit them for your own purposes, there’ll never be a shortage of things you can weaponise.”

Whether the best way to serve citizens is to raise awareness of diversity, rather than fundamentally change the makeup of officialdom itself, we will come to later.

Ministers don’t hate D&I – but some kinds of diversity might be preferable to others

Leaving aside any sense of moral obligation, it is now accepted that diverse workforces help organisations perform better. The business case for this has been proven time and again and it’s hard to imagine any politician in 2022 disagreeing.

Indeed, earlier this year ministers signed up to a new strategy which sets out a standard of how to enact D&I in the civil service. Its objectives include employing officials from a wider range of backgrounds, experiences and locations and reviewing the training on offer – especially for managers – to help them better understand the value of diverse viewpoints.

However according to one civil servant CSW spoke to, not all types of diversity are made equal in the eyes of politicians. “Ministers’ favoured diversity is social exclusion, because they believe the civil service is too metropolitan elite/Remain,” the official claims. “They recognise that action needs to be taken to bring about diversity, just as long as it suits the diversity they want to promote.”

A speech delivered by then-Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove in the summer of 2020 seems to support this theory. During the Ditchley Annual Lecture on “the

privilege of public service” Gove said that his “driving mission” was to make opportunity more equal.

But he also painted departmental leaders as out of touch with the general population and “more sensitive to the harm caused by alleged micro-aggressions” when the public were more interested in tougher sentences for people found guilty of “actual physical aggression”.

Gove suggested government should be asking how it could be “less southern”, “less middle class” and “closer” to the 52% of people who voted to leave the European Union in 2016’s referendum.

Is there an issue with “performative wokery” in the senior civil service?

Some, including inside the civil service, have muttered about this – privately complaining that for all their rallying speeches to staff networks, senior leaders rarely end up taking concrete action to address the challenges affecting underrepresented groups.

One senior official *CSW* spoke to does not deny the issue exists, but argues that it is structural, rather than the fault of “virtue signalling” senior leaders.

“It’s the classic thing in the civil service: because there isn’t enough diversity at the top levels, you end up with a white middle-aged permanent secretary as the race champion, or with an able-bodied permanent secretary as the disability champion. And it’s absolutely not part of their day job, it’s an addendum to everything. So they end up being attracted to the performatively woke stuff, because they need to be seen to be doing something,” they say.

“You’re meant to be the champion for this protected characteristic for the whole civil service but you’ve not got the tools to genuinely make any difference. When it comes to anything remotely meaningful, how are you going to make a decision that affects everyone? You can’t. Because it’s up to individual departments. And so they end up with the performative wokery as a result. They’re in an invidious position.”

Scrapping dedicated diversity officers

D&I roles in the civil service “distract from delivering on the British people’s priorities,” Liz Truss said in August. According to our new prime minister, there are at least 326 diversity and inclusion roles in government departments (*CSW* asked around and no one had any idea where this figure came from) and scrapping them all will “save around £12m a year”.

Sent out to defend Truss’s announcement on Sky News, Rees-Mogg described D&I roles as a “job creation scheme created by the woke for the woke”, saying he did not believe those employees were “doing anything useful” or “adding to the diversity of

the civil service.” Ensuring diversity “is the job of people making the employment decisions, not somebody who is employed as a diversity officer,” he added.

Lucille Thirlby is assistant general secretary of the FDA, which represents the SCS and other senior managers. She specialises in equalities for the union and takes a dim view of these statements.

“Why would ministers choose to take a regressive step and ‘rid’ government of HR specialists, who advise and provide guidance on how to ensure Equality Act compliance, building policy and practice?” she asks.

Thirlby also points out that if saving money is what ministers are after, then it is these same D&I-focused officials who help managers handle complex grievances, and disciplinary or harassment cases – which ultimately should mean employers save on the cost of litigation.

“Ministers should examine what those roles actually do, rather than assuming they are window dressing,” Thirlby says. “HR diversity and inclusion specialists are a fundamental part of the governance and delivery function of the recent civil service D&I strategy, which was agreed by ministers. We can all pretend to be experts, but when it comes to making decisions we would urge all ministers to look at what they need to deliver and make those decisions based on facts, rather than their own bias.”

However, CSW’s civil service HR contact is more glass-half-full about Truss’s proposed cull, and echoes Rees-Mogg’s thoughts about D&I being “the job of people making the employment decisions”.

They say: “Probably you don’t need lots of D&I specialists because actually they are a form of management of failure demand [namely the demand caused by a failure to do something]. It should just be the job of business partners and line managers.

“HR, particularly the central function, should be much more of an assurance function which says: here are the standards, let’s help you make sure they’re embedded into your processes.”

Is it possible to implement a centralised strategy – however good – across a workforce this large

Maybe not. In an ideal world, there would be no separate D&I roles. Standards would be embedded and line managers would follow the guidance. Indeed, efforts are underway, led by the highly-thought-of Cabinet Office deputy director Jason Ghaboos, to implement the D&I strategy.

But when CSW puts this to one senior official (albeit one of a slightly jaded disposition) they point out that the delegated structure of the civil service means that

trying to implement overarching changes across the whole organisation – on any issue – is hugely challenging.

“Just ask [former Cabinet Office minister] Francis Maude. And he was a rare breed of politician who was personally dedicated to civil service reform and had the luxury of being in post for five years. It’s still murder,” the official says.

“And why are you stopping at diversity and inclusion? If you’ve got all your policies right, why don’t you scrap all of HR? Performance, discipline – you don’t need that expertise because all your line managers can just go to the Big Book of How to Do It Properly and that will cover it.”

What is the solution?

Richard Hillsdon, a former senior civil servant and occupational psychologist who has spent years coaching members of underrepresented groups for selection and promotion into all levels of the civil service, believes we must move away from just D&I awareness towards real process changes – and audit. He calls this “cultural rebuilding”.

Hillsdon, who has been a speaker at numerous Ethnic Minorities into Leadership conferences (run by CSW’s parent company Dods) points out that – despite all the training courses and strategies – black and minority-ethnic job applicants are disadvantaged in their success rate at every level of the civil service. They are disadvantaged at the interview stage, he says, and “extraordinarily, in these days of anonymous applications”, at the sifting stage as well.

“We can’t rely on just boosting the confidence and the skills of people who are applying from the protected groups,” Hillsdon says. “We spend a lot of time trying to ‘build the muscles’ of BAME or women candidates and so on, but huge problems still exist with people recruiting in their own image. What we have to do is to start working with the other side of the table as well: with the selector side.”

During his training sessions with employers who have vacancies, Hillsdon says he constantly asks them: “What might diversity look like for this job and how would we capture that in an advert that is attractive to people?”

One senior civil servant, whom Hillsdon is fond of quoting, got to the heart of the problem. That official said: “I am increasingly convinced that inclusion will not be achieved by programmes to make people more like me, and that we need a much greater focus on making people like me shift our thinking and change our behaviour.”

The D&I strategy is, Hillsdon says, “fine”. But he, too, believes that putting it into action is not in the gift of the centre.

“This is about line managers at a local level. There’s that middle or lower senior management – senior executive officers, grade sevens, grade sixes – who are responsible for recruitment campaigns. It’s for them to say: ‘We want to shift this, we want to make sure that we are genuinely diverse and inclusive and that means every advert in our whole campaign must be focused around that.’”

People at the recruiting level must internalise “that almost knee-jerk reflex that D&I has to be built in, and lived and breathed”, Hillsdon says, adding that “at the moment, that is just not happening”.

The trouble is, this stuff is painstaking and can take years to achieve. Like any change that needs to happen across the civil service, it requires a relentless focus and political will behind it. Which brings us back to the crusade against wokery. For Dave Penman, general secretary of the FDA, it serves as a useful distraction.

“There are times when this fake culture war around wokery suits both ministers and employers because actually, when they’re talking about that, they’re not dealing with the reality of diversity and inclusion issues in departments,” he says. “What does D&I mean in terms of promotion, pay, performance and all of the things that ‘equality of opportunity’ mean in a workplace? That’s what they should be concentrating on. Not the name of an event or who’s attending it.”

Sadly to the ministerial mind, that might seem a bit too taxing. After all, wokery and witches make for a far better soundbite.