How to Succeed in the Senior Civil Service

Part 3 - Speaking Truth to Power

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1. Introduction: some won't talk - and others won't listen

On Wednesday 16 September 1992, the British government was forced to withdraw from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM). It was the final defeat in an ongoing battle which had already helped throw the British economy into recession in the early 1990s. Chaos ensued and at one point on 'Black Wednesday', the base interest rate reached an eye-watering 15%. The cost of the saga was later estimated to have cost the economy more than £3 billion.

A post-mortem by the Treasury concluded that a contributing factor to the disaster was the failure of senior civil servants to give advice they feared ministers would find unacceptable. They did not, or could not, 'speak truth to power'.

You might find that extraordinary. After all, isn't that what advisors are for? To advise? But from Ancient Rome to Afghanistan via Hans Christian Andersen (see Chapter 5: Damaging failures to speak truth to power), history and literature are littered with examples which show not only how difficult it can be to speak (and be heard), but how disastrous the results can be. Could the Iraq War have been avoided if legal opinion had reached (and penetrated) the ears of the ministers involved?

This is by no means a problem confined to Whitehall's corridors of power. We can (and must) ask ourselves similar questions in the private sector. For example, would the Royal Bank of Scotland have announced the largest annual loss in UK corporate history had someone successfully challenged Fred 'The Shred' Goodwin? If its ears had been open, could Credit Suisse have saved itself the $2 billion it lost over the Greensill and Archegos failures?

The truth is that it is difficult to speak frankly to people in power. And even if you do, that's not enough – you have to speak in a way that ensures you are heard.

Advice falls on deaf ears unless it takes into account a range of factors about the person the ears are attached to, and their place in the world. To be effective you need to understand their character, their aspirations, and the constraints within which they operate.

This part of *How to Succeed in the SCS* aims to help you understand the obstacles that lie in your path when giving advice to decision-makers of all kinds – public sector, private sector, or even within personal relationships, and suggests some strategies and tactics that help ensure you get yourself heard.

2.1 The problem – Why is speaking truth to power so difficult?

There are many valid answers to this question. Fundamentally, though, policy advisers and their decision-making bosses often have very different motivations and objectives.

Many powerful people are also not interested in detail. Perhaps they don't have the time. Or the inclination. Their decision making may then be based on intuition and gut feeling, or on half-remembered and long discredited theories.

Politicians want to get re-elected, which often means implementing ineffective but popular policies. Expert advice is then annoying.

More generally, and regardless of what they might tell you, no one likes to be told their plans are misguided or their beliefs misconceived.

Let's explore these factors in more detail…

2.2 No one likes truly honest feedback

Most powerful people claim to invite fearless, honest advice but (a) this is nonsense and (b) it seldom happens. Why? Tim Harford summarises the problem very nicely in his book Adapt:

> There is a limit to how much honest feedback most leaders really want to hear; and, because we know this, most of us sugar-coat our opinions whenever we speak to a powerful person. In a deep hierarchy, that process is repeated many times, until the truth is utterly concealed inside a thick layer of sweet-talk. There is some evidence that the more ambitious a person is, the more he will choose to be a yes-man - and with good reason because yes-men tend to be rewarded.
>
> Even when leaders and managers genuinely want honest feedback, they may not receive it. At every stage in a plan, junior managers or petty bureaucrats must tell their superiors what resources they need and what they propose to do with them. There are a number of plausible lies they might choose to tell, including over-promising in the hope of winning influence as go-getters, or stressing the impossibility of a task and the vast resources needed to deliver success, in the hope of providing a pleasant surprise. Actually, telling the unvarnished truth is unlikely to be the best strategy in a bureaucratic hierarchy. Even if someone does tell the truth, how is the senior decision-maker to separate the honest opinion from some cynical protestation?
>
> The resulting filtering can have devastating effects in a steep hierarchy: What starts out as bad news becomes happier and happier as it travels up the ranks -- because after each boss hears the news from his or her subordinates, he or she makes it sound a bit less bad before passing it up the chain.

It's easy to resent inconvenient or unwelcome advice, especially if it carries the implication that we are ill-informed or lack judgement. And who wants to deal with the negative emotions provoked by unwelcome advice? So not surprisingly we take more care when delivering such advice by sugar-coating it with positive feedback before delivering the harder-to-swallow stuff.

Then there's the 'shoot the messenger' problem. Bearers of bad news – even those who have no direct connection to it – can find themselves blamed or tainted. So we soften the message or avoid delivering it altogether rather than risk the wrath of someone with the power to harm us.

Politicians are often especially resentful of advice they consider obstructive or negative. Some will even try to surround themselves with courtiers and 'yes people' (to the detriment of good government). This is why civil servants are charged with 'speaking truth to power'.

Sometimes people don't have the time or the opportunity to frame the message in an effective way. And the wider the power gap, the more difficult it can be to communicate even the most urgent of concerns (See part 7 for the example of junior doctor Rachel Clarke).

In the UK at least, it is very hard to get anyone to be truly open about what they really feel. Australian-born rugby coach Eddie Jones complained in 2019 about "that classic English thing of smiling and nodding and seeming agreeable at the time, but then going off to piss and moan about it in private.

Then there's the sheer power of senior executives and politicians whose often authoritarian personalities predispose them to reject much sensible and well-meant advice. There is more on this below.

2.3 Powerful people are not like the rest of us

Here are some of the reasons why senior executives and politicians often make very difficult bosses.

2.3.1 Power and status change our behaviour and then our characters

I was amused by an actor who recalled her interactions with a runner on her first film set:

- Day 1: "No, no. I couldn't possibly ask you to fetch me a coffee. I'll get my own. And would you like one too?"
- Day 2: "That's very kind of you. A flat white, please."
- Day 3: "Where's my goddam coffee!"

Power and status certainly isolate senior people from the rest of us, and more vitally from their front-line staff and their concerns. Taking decisions for the greater good sometimes means damaging the fortunes of individuals – and the more senior you get, the more challenging the decisions you have to make. Many powerful people lose empathy with those they will hurt; the best of them don't.

Part of the problem is that leaders of big organisations have to think in relatively abstract terms. This is true in all large organisations. An army officer over-sensitive to the suffering of their enemy or their troops is unlikely to be an effective one.

It is also the case that leaders are constantly being criticised – by staff, customers, other stakeholders, voters, media. It makes you develop a thick skin. 'Water off a duck's back?' If you are not careful, you stop taking even valid concerns at all seriously.

The problems of an individual employee or voter can also seem inconsequential compared to the beauty of the bigger picture. Put bluntly, senior executives cannot afford to lose sleep over

another factory accident, another death in a Liverpool jail, another family facing penury because of an incompetent disability assessment, another hunger strike in Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre, or another child waiting in A&E for six days.

Senior people have learned to compromise and to wear their organisation's views like a suit. You don't get to the boardroom or into the Cabinet by being the odd one out or questioning your superiors. What happens when offering politically or ethically wise advice is potentially at the expense of your career ambitions or loyalty to a political cause? As parliamentary sketch writer John Crace puts it in *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden: A Short Guide to Modern Politics*, the Coalition and the General Election:

> [MPs feel] that the normal rules don't apply inside the Palace of Westminster; that the consistency they would expect from themselves and their colleagues in other areas of life can be put on hold. Politics is known as the art of compromise: a world where you rarely get everything you want and end up settling for a lot less. A world where conscience and beliefs are frequently moving targets to be traded for some notion of a greater public good.

2.3.2 But ministers face particular problems…

There are reasons why ministers find it harder than people in the private sector to understand or accept challenging advice:

- The hard knocks of the political world have taught them it's often better to assert infallibility. Any admission of doubt or error might be quoted against them for the rest of their political lives.
- Few ministers have any experience of managing large organisations. They see operational risks as minor obstacles which could easily be overcome if only civil servants would show the right energy, enthusiasm and initiative.
- Some ministers are very charismatic . They and their civil servants get caught up in their mission at the expense of critical thought about where they're headed, and the likely obstacles along the way.
- It doesn't help that government departments inevitably focus on the power and influence of their minister, especially if they have a high public profile. Senior officials will then all too often focus on their minister's wishes, rather than think for themselves or commission analysis which might challenge their leader's views.
- Even if they are not charismatic, a successful politician must be an alpha-male or -female. They all need public recognition in one form or another, and need to be able to survive and enjoy working in an environment that is full of conflict.

Above all, politicians often know what needs to be done - on climate change, for instance. But they don't know how to get elected after doing it. US Congress Representative Barney Frank commented as follows, when talking about Hank Paulson's dilemma in the middle of the Lehman crisis:

> "The problem in politics is this: You don't get any credit for disaster averted ... Going to the voters and saying, 'Boy, things really suck, but you know what? If it wasn't for me, they would suck even worse.' That is not a platform on which anybody has ever gotten elected in the history of the world".

Further back in history, President Kennedy said this when talking to journalist Charles Bartlett in 1963:

> "We don't have a prayer of staying in Vietnam. We don't have a prayer of prevailing there. These people hate us. They are going to throw our tails out of there at almost any point. But I can't give up a piece of territory like that to the Communists and then get the American people to re-elect me"

The Vietnam War continued until the Americans abandoned Saigon in 1975. Estimates of the number of Vietnamese soldiers and civilians killed vary from 1.0 to 3.8 million. Some 300,000 Cambodians, 20,000–60,000 Laotians and c.60,000 U.S. service members also died in the conflict.

Most ministers are also to some extent putting on an act. They wouldn't survive without great confidence in their own judgement and opinions, and they also like having 'great ideas'. The meek do not inherit the political earth.

Few prime or cabinet ministers can resist the temptation to announce some grand initiative before thinking through the detail and there's always the temptation to rush things through to claim credit before the next election or make the change irreversible. Sadly, all too few of them have taken on board Steve Jobs' observation of the lunacy of thinking that says a really great idea is 90 per cent of the work. For examples, think David Cameron's Big Society, Iain Duncan-Smith's Universal Credit, and Brexit. They are not necessarily objectively stupid ideas but they all ran into serious problems because ministers' lack of experience led to there being no serious planning or consultation before they were announced.

2.3.3 Authoritarian?

Many top executives and ministers are naturally authoritarian. And unfortunately for officials, as Professor Ruth Ben-Ghiat notes, a discernible trait of authoritarian and autocratic rulers is ongoing frustration with the inability to make others do their bidding and with institutional and bureaucratic procedures and checks and balances:

The blaming of others is very typical of autocrats, because they have difficulty listening to a reality that doesn't coincide with their version of it. It's part of the authoritarian temperament to blame others when things aren't working.

Authoritarianism also looms large in Professor Norman Dixon's On the Psychology of Military Incompetence in which he argues that many military blunders can be attributed to the authoritarian psychology of certain military leaders and the failure of their subordinates to challenge them effectively (or at all). There are obvious lessons here for government. He defines authoritarians as those who are:

Less likely to:

- Be able to put themselves in others' shoes
- Give full credit to an opponent's ability (likely calling them stupid, feeble and/or evil)
- Accept criticism from below
- Accept blame
- Experiment

More likely to …

- Have strong egos
- Be vain (but lack true self-confidence)
- Be anti-intellectual
- Emphasise the importance of obedience and loyalty
- Take silence as consent
- Dislike those who are 'odd' or 'different' – including those from

- Reconnoitre
- Learn from their own mistakes
- Accept information or advice which challenges their beliefs and assumptions
- Be warm and sympathetic

different social, educational and ethnic backgrounds (which, in the case of ministers, will include many officials)

It's also worth remembering Kenneth Boulding's perceptive comment that, 'The larger and more authoritarian the organisation, the better the chance that its top decision-makers will be operating in purely imaginary worlds.'

2.3.4 Self-Centred?

Michelle Roya Rad has written extensively about leaders with self-centred, psychopathic, narcissistic and/or Machiavellian personalities. Many of their characteristics overlap with those of authoritarians:

- They are arrogant and take too many measures to protect their self-image. Their universe is usually small, with statements that have too many 'shoulds' and 'musts'. They a need to make others believe that their universe is the better one and will usually dislike you if you are unpersuaded.
- They have a lot of friends, but at a superficial level. Friendship is often about quantity not quality. They may be charming, but they have an agenda: to find an ego feeder. They may have found ways to attract a lot of people into their world, but usually only those who feed into their arrogance.
- They do not tolerate difference. They devalue others and put them at a lesser position. They lack the ability to feel confidence internally, and instead find a sensation of superiority by seeing others as inferior.
- They are unable to see different viewpoints. Their viewpoints are fixated and often not valid – the kind of people who only read the cover of a magazine to look smart. They may also harshly criticize others who don't buy into their views.
- They are unable to maintain long lasting relationships. For them, people are either very good or very bad, depending on who admires them and who does not. In other words, if you fulfil their wishes, you're good. They can be your lover one minute and a hater the next.
- They are unable to empathise and when they do it's conditional on what they get back.
- 'What is in it for me?' goes too far. They expect more than they're willing to give. They believe government, society, the people around them and the world in general owe them in return for very little.

2.3.5 Some authoritarian and self-centred leaders

While mercifully few senior leaders display every trait listed above, they all display some of them and it's not hard to think of strong characters who would score pretty highly in a test of authoritarianism and self-centredness. Donald Trump, obviously, but how about Jeremy Corbyn and Boris Johnson? Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown would also score well, I imagine.

There's no shortage of authoritarian and self-centred leaders in the private sector either. One of the best (or worst) examples is former RBS CEO Fred Goodwin whose acquisition of ABN Amro and other strategic errors led to the bank's collapse in 2008 (see Chapter 5 for more detail). A subsequent report condemned his aggressive, macho management style that created a

culture in which staff were in constant fear of losing their jobs, and his lieutenants were said to have prevented employees from speaking out about problems.

Such characters also exist in fiction, of course. One of my favourite novels is Evelyn Waugh's Scoop featuring the newspaper magnate Lord Copper, a character so fearsome that his obsequious foreign editor, Mr Salter, can never openly disagree with him, always answering 'Up to a point, Lord Copper' rather than 'no'.

2.4 More barriers to listening

It's not just psychopaths, autocrats and other extreme personality types who have a built-in resistance to listening. People who lack self-confidence and those with fixed beliefs or prejudices can be equally impervious to reason. Researching the quality of relationships between ministers and advisors, Professor Andrew Kakabadse found that:

> Those secretaries of state viewed as confident, rationalist and evidence-driven were more favoured by the civil servants. These same secretaries of state were reported as inviting comment and challenge, and of having a track record of sustained professional relationships.
>
> The most 'difficult' secretaries of state were those seen to lack self-confidence, and as being overly sensitive to their surrounding circumstances. They were viewed as less likely to accept personal responsibility for decisions, especially when under pressure, and more likely to blame others, particularly the permanent secretary.

As Leo Tolstoy observed:

> The most difficult subjects can be explained to the most slow-witted man if he has not formed any idea of them already; but the simplest thing cannot be made clear to the most intelligent man if he is firmly persuaded that he knows already, without a shadow of doubt, what is laid before him.

Winston Churchill was famously not an easy man to challenge; Sir Hugh Dowding did and was dropped for it. But at least Churchill had the self-awareness to appreciate that his rather cloth-eared and obstinate leadership style contributed to the Fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942 when 60,000 troops surrendered - see photo above. Churchill himself called it 'the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history'. He had insisted that Singapore was impregnable and his staff had not succeeded in challenging the notion. Reflecting on the causes, Churchill asked himself four questions which any senior person would do well to echo after a catastrophe:

1. Why didn't I know?
2. Why didn't my advisors know?
3. Why wasn't I told?
4. Why didn't I ask?

2.5 On over-powerful executives

When an organisation's culture bestows too much power on otherwise decent people the results can be disastrous. Chief executives, senior partners, senior aircraft and ship captains, hospital consultants and so on are given so much power and respect that they can become isolated from other people, including their front-line staff and their concerns.

It doesn't have to be this way. Crew Resource Management, mandatory protocols and generational change are making a big difference in hospitals and transport.

But many top executives have too much confidence in their own judgement and opinions. The problem is compounded when the scale of their role means they have to think in abstract terms. This leads to seeing risks – and even death rates – as mere numbers that need to be managed.

Whole management teams come to characterise anyone (and especially whistle-blowers and journalists) expressing any concern about organisational culture as naive or unworldly. Lord Browne, BP's Chief Executive at the time of the Texas City refinery explosion in 2005 was said by his executive assistant to show 'no passion, no curiosity [and] no interest' in safety.

It's even more dangerous in organisations which are mesmerised by the power and influence of a single individual, someone with a heroic leadership style. Direct reports find themselves spending all their time trying to second guess their hero's wishes, rather than think for themselves or develop analyses which might challenge their leader's views. This was certainly a problem at Toshiba where investigators into a huge accounting scandal found a corporate culture where it was impossible to go against the wishes of one's bosses.

Theranos is another good example. The company was set up with the very best of intentions by Elizabeth Holmes (pictured) who wanted to find a way to make blood testing more convenient for both doctors and patients. John Carreyrou's book Bad Blood describes how it all went terribly wrong:

> 'Elizabeth ... regarded anyone who raised a concern or an objection as a cynic and a naysayer. Employees who persisted in doing so were usually marginalized or fired, while sycophants were promoted. '

The wider the power gap, the more difficult it can be to communicate even urgent concerns. In her book Your Life in My Hands, junior doctor Rachel Clarke described her distress when she failed to challenge the appalling behaviour of one senior consultant:

> Mr Skipton [the patient] ... stared up in trepidation as my boss, impatient to get to theatre as quickly as possible, alighted at the bedside. ... Without so much as an introduction, he broke the news to the patient of his terminal illness by turning away to the bedside entourage and muttering, perfectly audibly, "Get a palliative care nurse to come and see him". No one had even told 'him' he had cancer.
>
> As panic began to rise in Mr Skipton's face, I remember catching the ward sister's eye to see her cringing alongside me. But trying to undo the damage would take so long and the ward round was already sweeping on. I had a moment to act decisively. I could have chosen to earn my consultant's wrath by remaining at my patient's bedside. Instead, to my shame, I scuttled dutifully after my boss, leaving someone else to pick up the pieces.

Akio Toyoda, Chair of Toyota Motor Corporation, recognised that his senior executives were too deferential, but didn't know how to fix the problem:

> "Even if I tell them that I will listen, since I am older and have experience and a higher title, they would hesitate."

At another level, the behaviour of large companies' senior executives has become quite fascinating. One begins to wonder whether big business has succeeded warfare as the most exciting form of competition between human organisations. Some modern boardrooms appear to attract those who would, in previous generations, have sought to command large armies. Instead of invasions, we have corporate takeovers; instead of gold braid and military honours, we have executive salaries. The leading actors therefore remain an odd combination of hugely ambitious, sometimes inspirational, but self-absorbed and disastrously inept. For Haig, Montgomery, Patton and MacArthur substitute Lehman Brothers' Dick Fuld, RBS's Fred Goodwin, and McKinsey & Company's Rajat Gupta.

It certainly seems to be the case that power changes the behaviour of previously decent men and women. 'Power corrupts ... etc.'. Perhaps it's inevitable that the sense of right and wrong of a powerful CEO becomes aligned with the norms and expectations of others who are similarly rich and powerful. Neuroscientist and psychologist Ian Robertson goes further and draws attention to research which shows that power increases testosterone levels which in turn increases the uptake of dopamine in the brain, leading to increased egocentricity and reduced empathy (New Scientist, 7 July 2012). Power also reduces anxiety and increases the appetite for risk.

And yet, as the FT's Lucy Kellaway points out: 'Modern CEOs seem to have no [public] opinions, especially not negative ones. If they feel one coming on, they have been trained by their lawyers and PR advisers to suppress it.'

It is difficult these days for CEOs to correct the mistakes or improve the behaviour of their organisation without laying themselves open to the charge that their previous behaviour fell short of the standards required. Senior managers like to appear infallible (and un-suable) so organisations get locked into defensive modes, from which they find it increasingly difficult to extricate themselves.

This can make the problems worse. as BP's Tony Hayward could attest. He was very badly damaged when he failed to answer questions put to him by US Congress in June 2010. Barclays' Bob Diamond similarly did himself no favours when he responded blandly to UK politicians' questions in July 2012.

2.6 Why decision makers are 'otherly motivated'

Even decision makers who are happy to listen expert advice and analysis often take seemingly perverse decisions. This is often because they have very different aims and motivations to their advisors.

Advisers are tasked with designing policies that work, are properly planned, and are well resourced. But senior executives and politicians want fast results cheaply. They also want to impress their boss, their colleagues, and perhaps voters at the next election.
For private sector executives, a policy success is one rewarded with a juicy bonus, or calls from head-hunters. For politicians, a policy success is:

- One which unites their party (such as the Brexit referendum)
- One which dissuades supporters or floating voters from defecting to other parties. (Jeremy Corbyn's decision not to vote against the income tax cuts announced in the Conservatives' 2018 budget; Tony Blair's 'tough on crime, tough on the causes on crime')
- One which asks 'Which side are you on?' in order to cement the support of existing supporters or floating voters. These are very hard to reverse (Mrs Thatcher's 'right to

buy' and more recent 'help to buy' policies; policies aimed at pensioners such as the state pension triple lock and free TV licences)

Don't forget that powerful people rarely have time for or much interest in detail. And they often base decisions on intuition and gut feelings. This can make sense if they are highly experienced and abreast of changes going on around them, but dangerous if they're relying on half-remembered or discredited theories. And because they don't want to be associated with mistakes or failures, they may refuse to acknowledge that plans are starting to go wrong.

Politicians are particularly susceptible to these problems because of the short time horizons dictated by either the electoral cycle or the possibility of cabinet reshuffles. Refusing to acknowledge that a policy has failed for fear of suffering political or career damage also inhibits learning.

3. Is it easier to speak truth to power in the public or private sector?

For every IT project fiasco in the public sector there are private and non-profit sector equivalents. Decision makers in all organisations are influenced by many internal and external forces – organisational, cultural, legal, ethical and so on. There are laws to be observed, and blunt truths to be faced about what simply isn't possible. And boards in all sectors can place terrific pressure on managers to deliver projects quickly and within a tight budget.

Margaret Heffernan notes in her book Wilful Blindness that a high proportion of executives feel unable to raise issues or concerns with their boss at least some of the time. What's more, senior recruitment processes often ensure that any new managers are the type of people who will fit straight in with the organisation's culture and are unlikely to rock the boat. This is probably even more true in civil service and other establishment roles.

But while there are undoubtedly similarities, I see four big differences between the public and private sector:

1. Private sector senior managers are usually more realistic than ministers, and less subject to political career and media pressures.
2. Private sector managers can usually escape by finding a job in another company. But civil servants generally don't have the option of an alternative career. This is how key policy advisers get locked into behaving more like courtiers than professional advisers, and give up on 'speaking truth to power' – with predictable and depressing results.
3. The UK's Cabinet system of government often leads to permanent secretaries feeling under great pressure to deliver their own department's policies and programmes and not those of the government as a whole. Individual ministers have little leeway once a manifesto has been published and they have no responsibility for delivering any policies and programmes beyond their own department. Senior civil servants understandably cling on to the personnel they value rather than looking at the bigger picture. In the private sector, directors and CEOs will promote a more holistic view of the organisation.
4. Newly appointed ministers can't easily replace their senior advisers even if the officials seem out of touch with social and political priorities, sympathetic to the views of political opponents, and resistant they are to change. Cabinet and permanent secretaries got off to famously bad starts with Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair, and failed to establish an effective working relationship with Gordon Brown both at the Treasury and in No.10. All three seem to have preferred working with people who didn't push back too hard – courtiers even. In the private sector on the other hand, it's not unusual for a CEO to bring in former colleagues with them. Surrounding themselves with people they

know and trust is good, and those people may feel they free to speak freely, but it can lead to 'group think' and other vices.

4.1 The solutions - How to offer persuasive advice

Experienced managers know how to 'manage upwards' but getting CEOs, ministers and the like to really listen to you requires a toolbox of tricks and techniques. This section gathers together advice I've gleaned over many years from experienced civil servants and others whose job relies on being able to speak truth to power.

4.1.1 Make the right first impression

If you want someone to listen to you don't open discussions by disagreeing or confronting them. Easier said than done, of course, especially if important decisions need to be made quickly or the new boss wants to make an immediate mark.

Pity, then, Sir Robin Butler, who was Head of the Civil Service when Tony Blair came to power. Sir Robin tried hard to dissuade the new PM from bringing two political appointees into his office, thus conferring Jonathan Powell and Alastair Campbell with executive authority (It was these appointments which arguably led the way to the 'sofa government' which did so much damage later in the premiership). Sir Robin's opposition meant that he (and the civil service as a whole) got off to a rocky start with the new administration. In his memoirs, Peter Mandelson observes that '[Robin Butler's] huge experience in government, and his intelligence and insight should have been used better. But his initial clash with Tony meant there was an uneasiness, on both sides, in his relationship with Tony's core political team.'

I too got this badly wrong as a civil servant (albeit at a much less exalted level) when I was respectfully but unnecessarily less than subservient in an initial meeting with a minister known to dislike civil servants. I should have known better; that it's wisest to do whatever you can to first convince a minister that you are their loyal and devoted servant. You need to forge the kind of bond that will later allow you to be seen as a critical friend: someone who knows when, and when not, to be brutally honest. If you can, take your time and wait for your boss to accept that you know what you are talking about before you attempt to challenge their views.

The downside is that, if you initially fail to challenge when appropriate, it sets the tone for the relationship. Further down the line, challenge becomes near-impossible. Some critics argue that this is how modern senior civil servants have come to be more like courtiers than honest advisers, and the same thing can happen in the private sector.

James Comey has written eloquently about how advisers who fail to challenge powerful people can become trapped into submission:

> To stay, you must be seen as on his team, so you make further compromises. You use his language, praise his leadership, tout his commitment to values. And then you are lost. He has eaten your soul.

Lack of personal chemistry can also doom relationships as can differences in experience, educational background age, or even class; Tony Blair apparently found Cabinet Secretary Sir Robin Butler somewhat 'patrician'. You need to make sure that your advice is clearly constructive. You are protecting your boss, and want them to succeed.

Ministers and CEOS don't like their staff to be better connected than they are. This can be a real problem when you are well known in your professional world and your new minister or CEO is not. Take care, when introducing them to your world, that you let you new boss hog the limelight and meet all the important people.

But hopefully there will come the moment when you are needed, when you can crystallise the bond that should exist between decision maker and trusted adviser. Providing you've established their trust, been respectful, and not undermined them, most powerful people will be grateful when you help them overcome a problem or find a better route to their policy objective.

I recommend reading *Leading a Government Department – the first 100 days*[1], a short and sensible note by former secretary of state James Purnell and former permanent secretary Leigh Lewis who conclude that:

> Good professional relationships can make most structures work. Those relationships are set in the first 100 days. For many, they pass in a blur of activity, and sometimes crisis. But it is our belief, born of experience, that those who invest in managing that first period in office well – whether as secretary of state or permanent secretary — will reap the rewards.

Along the way, they offer 10 suggestions to each 'side' as a strategy to build a productive relationship:

The first 100 days of a secretary of state

1. Decide whether to define yourself early
2. Decide your priority
3. Establish trust with your permanent secretary
4. Build a ministerial team – or at least establish authority
5. Communicate your direction to the department
6. Meet with 10 major stakeholders for an outside-in view of the department
7. Decide how you are going to behave
8. Understand the money
9. Keep a running list of quick hits and band aids
10. Don't forget you're a politician

The first 100 days with a secretary of state

1. Be there
2. Regard your new secretary of state as your top priority in their first 100 days
3. Reach out to the new secretary of state's political team
4. Go to lots, but not all, of the secretary of state's early meetings
5. Don't disagree with the secretary of state's initial ideas unless they're truly mad or dangerous
6. Present your department honestly
7. Build an alliance with the principal private secretary
8. Don't disagree with each other in a room full of officials
9. Never talk disparagingly about your secretary of state to anyone – ever
10. Never compromise your integrity

4.1.2 Understand what's important to the decision maker

What you envisage as policy is probably only part of the picture in the decision-maker's head. For a boss in the private sector, policy success probably ensures their bonus, boosts the value of their share options, and attracts the head-hunters. For a government minister, policy success

[1] https://www.civilservant.org.uk/library/2012-IfG-Purnell_and_Lewis-First_100_days.pdf

leads to votes at the ballot box and promotion. One minister, bemoaning the lack of media interest in a 2019 pledge to spend an extra £20bn a year on the NHS, complained that, "it was a complete waste of money".

Policy advisers need to understand what's really important to the decision maker. Is it enough that policies achieve their objectives? Or are they really looking to achieve business, political or personal goals?

You can often find clues in the decision maker's hinterland: their social circle, home town, political party, and so on. Decision makers can be very reluctant to take decisions that will be unwelcome close to home. Ministers have to work within parameters set by their constituency party and by the party leadership.

This perspective can help you frame your advice in ways that the decision maker will see as helping them achieve their own goals.

4.1.3 Learn the art of persuasion

Persuasion lies at the heart of selling so there is no shortage of advice to be had from the bookshelves of any airport or railway station branch of WH Smith. Some of it is worth reading. It's not a new phenomenon, of course: Aristotle knew that an audience is more likely to accept a proposition when it's put forward by a credible speaker. And to appear credible, he said, a speaker must display three attributes:

1. Practical intelligence
2. A virtuous character
3. Goodwill

Modern writers still repeat Blaise Pascal's 17th century advice: before disagreeing with someone, first point out the ways in which they are right. Then help them discover a counter-point for themselves so they can change their own mind:

> When we wish to correct with advantage, and to show another that he errs, we must notice from what side he views the matter, for on that side it is usually true, and admit that truth to him, but reveal to him the side on which it is false. He is satisfied with that, for he sees that he was not mistaken, and that he only failed to see all sides. ... People are generally better persuaded by the reasons which they have themselves discovered than by those which have come into the mind of others.

Experienced policy advisers do this almost without thinking. They adopt their bosses' aims as their own, whilst gently – and a little later – suggesting that there might be better ways of reaching the desired objective. They become, in effect, a critical friend ('The only person I can trust to tell me the truth,' as Margaret Thatcher described Willie Whitelaw).

It's important to find ways to challenge the boss's ideas without challenging the boss. Criticising your boss's views, performance, or talent is unlikely to help you win the argument. Fortunately, the English language abounds with weaselly quasi-synonyms to draw on and by which you can soften or disguise any number of critical messages: I'm afraid that ... I'm not sure that ... I wonder, I gather, I imagine, presumably, possibly, probably and so on. The psychologist and industrial management guru Ralph Coverdale was the proponent of a simple word shift that can be used to sugar-pill disagreement – Begin with 'Yes and…' instead of 'No' or 'But'.

Of course, it takes skill to ensure that such linguistic tricks still enable essential advice and messages to reach the recipient.

You can find more detailed advice on persuasive communication on the Understanding the Civil Service website[2].

4.1.4 Know how to challenge and be challenged

Sir John Chilcot's Iraq War Report criticised senior civil servants and the military for not doing more to challenge ministers in the months leading up to the war. Sir John later told the Liaison Committee that senior officials should 'take their courage in both hands and insist on their right to be heard and to record what their advice is, even if that advice is not taken'.

One positive outcome from the report was The Good Operation, a Ministry of Defence document packed with concise and sensible advice on 'offering and receiving challenge'. The report urges people to fight 'groupthink' when developing policy by fostering an environment of 'reasonable challenge' – one in which people are expected to challenge each other, and where it's seen as important that they do so. Challenge, it argues, isn't about proving someone right or wrong: it's about highlighting and exploring alternative options. The report offers guidelines on both giving and taking:

When offering challenge, you should:

- Challenge with courtesy and politeness
- Be prepared to explain the logic and reasoning behind your alternative view and provide evidence. Keep your challenge concise and relevant to the issue at hand.
- Think about the interpersonal dynamics. Keep it professional - it's the issue you're challenging, not the person. Be respectful to the approach form which you are differing.
- Choose your moment and your medium. A one-to-one discussion or a smaller team meeting may be more appropriate than a big meeting at which positions are being taken and decisions are expected; a gently proving conversation or email is better than a confrontational one.
- Raise issues in a timely manner. Don't leave your challenge too late in the process, when changing course could be too difficult.
- Accept if the eventual decision remains unchanged - a decision has to be taken once all reasonable challenge has been considered. Only in cases where regularity or propriety have not been observed should you need to turn to the Department's whistle-blowing process.

When receiving challenge, you should:

[2] https://www.civilservant.org.uk/skills-effective_communication.html

- Not take it personally - the challenge isn't about you, it's about the issue at hand.
- Make it known that you welcome reasonable challenge, and create space in the way you run your business to receive it. Recognise that challenge might result in change.
- Seek real diversity of thought, not just shades of mainstream thinking.
- Give staff the opportunity to fully articulate different views and give them credit for doing so and remember that the person challenging shouldn't be expected to have a solution there and then.
- Demonstrate that you are giving serious thought to the challenge being offered - do not dismiss it out of hand and make sure people aren't just telling you what you want to hear.
- Respond respectfully - never belittle someone's view, and never (even after the event) sideline those offering it.
- If you do not accept the challenge, explain your reasoning, include supporting evidence when necessary.
- Encourage the use of evidence from beyond the immediate organisation, think tanks, academia and other sources.
- Support both junior colleagues and peers to raise a challenge with more senior colleagues.

Airlines and larger shipping companies have taken a similar approach in their crew resource management guidelines, recognising that many accidents in the past could have been avoided if autocratic captains had listened to their crew, and the crew had felt confident about voicing their concerns.

One successful challenge which may have changed the course of history concerns Cyril Newall, Chief of Air Staff, and Hugh Dowding, Air Officer Commanding RAF Fighter Command, during the early years of World War II. Together they resisted Winston Churchill's demands for more fighter squadrons to be sent to France and so enabled the RAF to retain essential defensive air power at home during the Battle of Britain (July-October 1940).

Despite being proved right – or perhaps because of it – Dowding was booted out in November 1940 and retired from the RAF in July 1942. Three decades later Dowding recalled in a BBC interview: "I never was very friendly with Churchill because he had been made to change his very stubborn mind in front of a room full of senior officers and officials. He didn't like that. […] I don't think he very much liked me very much after that, even if he had liked me before."

4.1.5 Feed the need for thinking time

If you're looking for a sure-fire way to get a negative and angry reaction from someone, press them into making an urgent and unpopular decision.

You have to pave the way. If time permits raise the issue tentatively and suggest it as something for discussion tomorrow or next week. Give the decision maker time to get used to the idea of adopting a correct if unwelcome way forward. Hopefully it will become their idea and not yours.

Time is your friend so never delay bringing up a difficult issue. Don't be tempted to wait for more information and analysis or procrastinate for fear of how best to bear unwelcome news. Give your decision maker as much warning as possible. Time is their friend too, giving them the opportunity to:

- Get over the shock
- Assimilate the available facts
- Begin to understand the arguments
- Start thinking about how the decision might be presented
- Consult their colleagues and other advisers
- Requisition further advice and information

Your early warning won't make your intervention any more palatable or you any more popular, but giving them less time than they could have had certainly will certainly achieve the reverse.

4.1.6 Learn to read and convey status signals (transactional analysis)

We all communicate with each other as superiors, as equals or as inferiors and can adopt different approaches to people at different times. When one party's approach does not meet the other's expectations, problems arise.

So what are those expectations? To be treated with respect, of course. But also to have our skills, experiences and perspectives recognised. A civil servant will achieve very little by talking down to a minister (although I've known colleagues to forget this, and I strongly suspect it was a factor in Ivan Rogers falling out with Prime Minister Theresa May during the early stages of the Brexit negotiations.) Nor, for that matter, is a minister likely to move things along by talking down to civil servants. And talking down to us, the public, is likely to at best be a short-term strategy.

The reverse – signalling clear subservience – can be a useful and pragmatic tactic. You may need to defer to your boss if time is short, or they have more experience or knowledge than you, or they've heard enough and just need you to accept their decision. The signal for you to back off is usually pretty clear and it's best to learn to pick up on such cues.

On the other hand, over-deference causes its own problems, opening you up to being perceived as lacking in knowledge, experience, ideas, opinions, usefulness or sincerity. Take your pick, or, rather, let them take theirs.

So if your relationship with your boss seems fraught or distant, or you suspect they actively dislike you, it's worth asking yourself whether you're signalling superiority, equality, or inferiority (and what they are actually looking for).

This analysis can also help improve the effectiveness of your written advice. I was always taught that it was good practice to make clear recommendations – "I recommend that you should…" – but I've noticed recently interviewed Cabinet Secretaries saying they suggested that "the Prime Minister might …", a softer and probably more acceptable formulation at that level.

Several of these tensions come through in Anthony Seldon's summary of the characters of previous Cabinet Secretaries, in The Cabinet Office 1926-2016:

> [Maurice Hankey] was not flawless as Cabinet Secretary. ... he was too ready with his own opinions, and too often mistaken in those he advanced, distancing two Prime Ministers, Baldwin and Chamberlain, in the process.
>
> [Edward] Bridges, whose qualities defined the role of Cabinet Secretary at its best, was always correct in observing the constitutional position of a civil servant. He allowed the prime Minister and ministers to take decisions on the best advice, but it was always their decision. ...
>
> Bridges possessed the essential trait of every great civil servant, the ability to serve different political masters without trace of obsequiousness. He described the trick himself thus:
>
> 'You had to make Churchill feel you were on his side, that you sympathised with his general views, and that any criticism you made was genuinely intended to be helpful. Once convinced of this, he would listen to what you had to say, and you became, so to speak, a licensed critic.' ...
>
> [Norman Brook had] chameleon-like gifts for serving different Prime Ministers and accommodating himself to the different Cabinets. 'Traditionalists could say with some justification that at times he seemed to fall into the trap of over-identification with the Prime Minister and government of the day' wrote Theakston. The position he came to occupy was akin to a 'chief of staff' [but] he avoided the allure of over-identification, though perhaps allowed himself to be overly captivated by the aura of Churchill and was overly protective of him.'

4.1.7 Enlist the support of a trusted source

If your boss doubts your expertise or your commitment to their cause, or is simply unpersuaded by your arguments, a productive way forward is to seek independent advice from a trusted third party (someone they trust, that is):

- Professionals who are active in the policy area
- Lawyers (especially external ones)
- Other professionals such as economists, investment bankers, PR and communications specialists,
- Business people and trade unionists
- Think tanks
- Academics

Ensure your boss is involved in selecting any external advisors to avoid any suspicion that you have somehow conspired to find someone who supports your position.

Research panels can also be useful ways of demonstrating how real people are likely react to policy proposals (providing they are run professionally and objectively).

4.1.8 "On your head be it"

It's a risky strategy but reminding decision makers whose head is on the block can give pause, especially where injury or death might be the price of poor judgement. The Grenfell Tower survivors forced the government to take action on combustible cladding on other high-rise buildings by asking a minister if he would take responsibility next morning 'if something else happens tonight'.

It is perhaps less risky, and maybe more effective, to mention legal liability if were something were to go wrong. Even the most domineering of CEOs can hesitate at the thought of having to appear in court, let alone face jail time.

It's essential to get an unambiguous sign-off for decisions which could be contentious. Before they got to Number 10, both Gordon Brown and Theresa May were said to be very reluctant to take personal responsibility. Mr Brown would look at draft press notices, for instance, but not sign or initial them. This character weakness was a pretty clear indicator that both would turn out to be weak Prime Ministers. Be that as it may, it was the duty of their staff to record their approval for things done in their name – especially if the minister had been recommended to take a different course.

4.1.9 Draw attention to the truisms of budgets and timetables

While reminding your enthusiastic boss that more haste means less speed can be helpful although they may interpret it as you dragging your feet or inventing obstacles. They may, however, recognise the idea that a good project has a natural rhythm – slow and cautious to begin, accelerating to a rapid pace across the finishing line. It's trite but true to say that new buildings are finished soon after their foundations are laid.

Ministers still need to make big bold announcements, but these should allow you time to research and plan the project in detail. As military doctrine has it: 'the first duty of a commander is reconnaissance' and even the best laid schemes are doomed less than the right amount of research, consultation and planning.
Benchmarking is very useful. On being told that "X achieved something similar within Y months after spending Z", powerful people may come to appreciate they're unlikely to do it much faster or more cheaply.

4.2 There's no substitute for good governance

Strong boards (and especially strong chairs and non-execs) are the primary line of defence against private sector CEOs at risk of not listening to their staff. They also offer vital safeguards against changes in corporate culture that risk empowering dangerously heroic managers.
The Financial Reporting Council has published some very useful Guidance on Board Effectiveness which would eliminate many problems if its recommendations such as three-yearly board effectiveness reviews were implemented. The best companies also carry out regular culture audits.

Of course, the worst companies will at best treat these as mere box-ticking exercises and find refuge in the document's stated aim of simulating boards' thinking on how they can carry out their role and encourage them to focus on continually improving their effectiveness. 'Ultimately, it is for individual boards to decide on the governance arrangements most appropriate to their company's circumstances,' the guidance shrugs.

Still, it would be useful to have comparable guidance in the public sector. There are plenty of codes but none of them cover similar ground. So in practice individual minsters and councillors

have the freedom to behave as badly as they wish short of being punished by the electorate, the Prime Minister, or the Council leader. The likelihood of this happening depends very much on the latter's political strength. which is often insufficient to bring a badly behaved appointee to heel.

The Ministerial Code says that 'ministers have a duty to give fair consideration and due weight to informed and impartial advice from civil servants, as well as to other considerations and advice in reaching policy decisions but this formulation hardly leaves room for criticism if a minster asserts that they have given due weight to advice but decided to ignore it.

And departmental policy advisers can expect little if any support from departmental boards. One non-exec member told me that his role amounted to little more than a Christmas tree decoration.

The key problem is that Cabinet ministers believe themselves to be primarily accountable to the Prime Minister, the electorate and Parliament (though not always in that order). They certainly never believe themselves to be truly accountable to their board, nor is any board able to intervene if ministers appear not to be taking proper advice.

4.3 Never forget that silence sounds like consent

Newly appointed advisers to powerful people are often advised to keep their ears open and their mouth shut until they've earned their trust. But this can be dangerous.

Former FBI Director James Comey has some experience in the matter:

> I have some [observations] from four months of working close to Mr. Trump and many more months of watching him shape others.
>
> Amoral leaders have a way of revealing the character of those around them. Sometimes what they reveal is inspiring. For example, James Mattis, the former secretary of defense, resigned over principle, a concept so alien to Mr. Trump that it took days for the president to realize what had happened, before he could start lying about the man.
>
> But more often, proximity to an amoral leader reveals something depressing. I think that's at least part of what we've seen with [others]. Accomplished people lacking inner strength can't resist the compromises necessary to survive Mr. Trump and that adds up to something they will never recover from. It takes character like Mr. Mattis's to avoid the damage, because Mr. Trump eats your soul in small bites.
>
> It starts with your sitting silent while he lies, both in public and private, making you complicit by your silence. In meetings with him, his assertions about what "everyone thinks" and what is "obviously true" wash over you, unchallenged, as they did at our private dinner on Jan. 27, 2017, because he's the president and he rarely stops talking. As a result, Mr. Trump pulls all of those present into a silent circle of assent.
>
> Speaking rapid-fire with no spot for others to jump into the conversation, Mr. Trump makes everyone a co-conspirator to his preferred set of facts, or delusions. I have felt it — this president building with his words a web of alternative reality and busily wrapping it around all of us in the room.

> I must have agreed that he had the largest inauguration crowd in history because I didn't challenge that. Everyone must agree that he has been treated very unfairly. The web building never stops.
>
> From the private circle of assent, it moves to public displays of personal fealty at places like cabinet meetings. While the entire world is watching, you do what everyone else around the table does — you talk about how amazing the leader is and what an honor it is to be associated with him.
>
> Sure, you notice that Mr. Mattis never actually praises the president, always speaking instead of the honor of representing the men and women of our military. But he's a special case, right? Former Marine general and all. No way the rest of us could get away with that. So you praise, while the world watches, and the web gets tighter.
>
> Next comes Mr. Trump attacking institutions and values you hold dear — things you have always said must be protected and which you criticized past leaders for not supporting strongly enough. Yet you are silent. Because, after all, what are you supposed to say? He's the president of the United States.
>
> You feel this happening. It bothers you, at least to some extent. But his outrageous conduct convinces you that you simply must stay, to preserve and protect the people and institutions and values you hold dear. Along with Republican members of Congress, you tell yourself you are too important for this nation to lose, especially now.
>
> You can't say this out loud — maybe not even to your family — but in a time of emergency, with the nation led by a deeply unethical person, this will be your contribution, your personal sacrifice for America. You are smarter than Donald Trump, and you are playing a long game for your country, so you can pull it off where lesser leaders have failed and gotten fired by tweet.
>
> Of course, to stay, you must be seen as on his team, so you make further compromises. You use his language, praise his leadership, tout his commitment to values.
> And then you are lost. He has eaten your soul.

James Thomson famously describes 'the effectiveness trap' in his analysis of the disastrous Vietnam War – How Could Vietnam Happen? - An Autopsy – and it makes for both entertaining and sobering reading: The effectiveness trap is, he describes:

> ... the trap that keeps men from speaking out, as clearly or often as they might, within the government. And it is the trap that keeps men from resigning in protest and airing their dissent outside the government. The most important asset that a man brings to bureaucratic life is his 'effectiveness', a mysterious combination of training, style, and connections. The most ominous complaint that can be whispered of a bureaucrat is: "I'm afraid Charlie's beginning to lose his effectiveness." To preserve your effectiveness, you must decide where and when to fight the mainstream of policy; ... . The inclination to remain silent or to acquiesce in the presence of the great men – to live to fight another day, to give on this issue so that you can be "effective" on later issues – is overwhelming.

Robert Dingwall perceptively noted that those appointed to civil service roles such as Chief Medical Officer can find themselves in no-win situations. "Once the politicians have decided, you cannot publicly dissent. If you quit, you lose any chance to influence what comes next."

4.4 Forgive people their off days

No boss will always welcome your advice. Even the best of them have days when they just want their orders carried out. Even so, it's nice when they are aware of having been less than gracious and seek to make amends. I quite like this story told by Robert Harvey about the Duke of Wellington:

> To his chief medical officer ...who had the temerity to differ with him on an issue he snapped: "I shall be glad to know who is to command the army, you or I?" However, he asked the good doctor to sit next to him that evening by way of atonement.

5.1 What happens when truth fails to be told

Damaging failures to speak truth to power

Failures to speak truth to power are a huge problem in the private and not-for-profit sectors as well as in government. Here are some disasters (not too strong a word) which resulted from very important people either failing to listen to advice or actively discouraging it in the first place.

Credit Suisse and the collapse of Greensill

In the early 2020s, Lara Warner, Credit Suisse's Chief Risk and Compliance Officer', pushed for risk and compliance to be 'more commercial' and 'aligned' with front office traders and dealmakers. Faced with opposition from within her department, Warner removed more than 20 senior managers from their posts. She personally overruled risk managers who cautioned against giving the financing company Greensill Capital a $160m bridge loan ahead of a round of private fundraising. Greensill fell into insolvency shortly afterwards, echoing the fate of Archegos Capital Management, which Credit Suisse had also supported. It's estimated that Credit Suisse's losses from the failures of Greensill and Archegos totalled as much as $2 billion.

Royal Bank of Scotland *and* Fred the Shred

The Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) is generally acknowledged to have earned its place in the UK record books as the most expensive private sector failure of all time. It happened when RBS's Fred 'The Shred' Goodwin continued with the 2007 acquisition of the Dutch bank ABM Amro. He paid three times book value despite the fact that ABN had, during the negotiations, already sold its Chicago based LaSalle Unit – the asset most prized by RBS – and the emerging credit crunch/financial crisis prevented ABN delivering the earnings RBS was expecting. Even ABN expected RBS to seek to reduce the price it would pay but RBS pressed on and paid around £40 billion more than necessary. It seems remarkable that (as far as I know) no none of the non-executive directors nor anyone else seriously challenged Goodwin's decision.

1992's 'Black Wednesday'

British officials are proud of their reputation for willingness to speak frankly to their political bosses. But it seems that, for one reason or another, today's senior civil servants are less likely than their predecessors to speak truth to power. The Treasury post-mortem on the pound's exit from the Exchange Rate Mechanism as long ago as 1992 found that Treasury officials did not offer advice that they feared would be unacceptable to ministers.

The Troubled Families Programme

Jonathan Portes describes the Troubled Families Programme as 'a perfect case study of how the manipulation and misrepresentation of statistics by politicians and civil servants – from the

Prime Minister downwards – led directly to bad policy and, frankly, to the wasting of hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money'. This is an excerpt from his 2016 blog post:

> The point is that it was the government's deliberate misrepresentation of the data and statistics that led to badly formulated targets, which in turn translated into a funding model that could have been designed to waste money. Bad stats meant bad policy.
>
> It was in March 2015, that Ministers decided to pre-empt the result of the evaluation, claiming that: More than 105,000 troubled families turned around saving taxpayers an estimated £1.2 billion. This was untrue. And we – including the civil servants responsible for the press release - knew it at the time … We have, as of now, absolutely no idea whether the TFP has saved taxpayers anything at all; and if it has, how much. The £1.2 billion is pure, unadulterated fiction.
>
> Manchester (for example) have identified, worked with and turned around a staggering 2385 'troubled families'. Not one has 'slipped through the net' or refused to engage with the programme. Leeds and Liverpool have a perfect success rate in each 'turning around' over 2000 'troubled families'. By my reckoning, over 50 other local authorities across the country have been similarly 'perfect' in their TF work. Not one single case amongst those 50 odd councils where more 'troubled families' were identified or where a 'troubled family' has failed to have been turned around.

The Public Accounts Committee subsequently reported:

> The Department had a target of 'turning around' the lives of 117,910 families identified by local authorities as troubled. It made payments to local authorities for 'turning around' the lives of 99% of these. An evaluation commissioned by the Department could not find evidence of whether or not there had been any significant impact. Additionally, publication of the Department's evaluation of the Troubled Families programme was delayed for more than a year, and we consider this delay to be unacceptable. The Department was evasive when explaining the reasons for this delay, furthering the impression that government is reluctant to be open and transparent about the Troubled Families programme.

The Iraq War

The Chilcot Report on the Iraq War revealed that:

- No one sought to record the reasons why the Prime Minster concluded that Iraq was in breach of resolution 1441 despite this being an essential ingredient of the legal basis for the war
- No one ensured that cabinet ministers were provided with proper legal advice
- No one challenged the Chancellor's determination deliberately to keep the Cabinet Secretariat short of resources and repeatedly refusing to give the military sufficient money for soldiers and equipment despite Blair promising from his sofa that it would be made available

Chilcot principally blamed Cabinet Secretary Andrew Turnbull whose defence was that he could not do every component of the Cabinet Secretary job:

- Coordinating policy and 'delivery' (i.e. implementing decisions)
- Head of the Civil Service, including reform

- Oversight of propriety and ethics
- Oversight of intelligence and security
- Managing the permanent secretaries
- Acting as the Prime Minister's principal policy adviser, including making sure that all the right people were involved and active

Interviewed by Civil Service World in 2018, Andrew Turnbull said:

> Blair had got to the end of his first term and he said "I need to reform public services we haven't really achieved anything" so he made it very clear that the people contending to become cabinet secretary had to set out a prospectus of what we would do and reform of public service had to be a part of that. I concluded that there were three jobs of the cabinet secretary: managing day-to-day business and decisions taken; the performance and improvement of the civil service; and being the head honcho in the intelligence programme. In a post 9/11 world you couldn't do all three: my suggestion was that the bit I should hive off was the post of intelligence and security coordinator. People were rather sniffy about it and said "well it meant you didn't play much of a role in Iraq". The reason I didn't play much of a role in Iraq was that Blair wanted to run it himself.

Chilcot acknowledged that 'the Prime Minister had given the Cabinet Secretary a very different agenda ... the new Cabinet Secretary was chosen explicitly on that basis.' The Cabinet Secretary could have 'made a fuss' about that 'but it would have been at the direct expense of not being able to devote the time to sorting out reform and delivery across the government's agenda.' But 'the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary to ensure that members of Cabinet are fully engaged in ways that allow them to accept collective responsibility and to meet their departmental obligations nevertheless remains.'

I agree. The Cabinet Secretary cannot decide (or agree) to ignore one part of his job, no more than a private sector chief executive can sensibly choose to ignore sales, or cash flow, or production, or any other important part of his business. He should have delegated more effectively. He had plenty of talent to which he could have done so. And he should have resisted - if necessary to the point of resignation - Mr Blair's insistence that he look the other way.

Tom Bower, having read the Chilcot Report, thought that blame should be distributed much more widely amongst those who sat round the Prime Minister's sofa:

> Blair did not single-handedly plot the road to war over 16 months. Nor did he deceive the dozens of special advisers, cabinet ministers, generals and senior civil servants who were engaged in the secret discussions. But those outside his Downing Street den were deceived. … [The PM's foreign policy adviser David Manning] was also a doorkeeper who excluded Andrew Turnbull, the cabinet secretary, and David Omand, the permanent secretary responsible for security … Kevin Tebbit, the MoD's Perm Sec, was also excluded.

Tony Blair and the Higher Education numbers

This was all slightly reminiscent of the time in 1999 when ministers and officials outside No.10 were taken by surprise by Prime Minister Blair announcing that 50% of young people should enter Higher Education (up from around 33%). No-one knew how the PM thought the target might be achieved, nor whether he truly meant that half of all children should attend traditional university courses.

Gordon Brown's budget manoeuvres

And no one seems to have dared seriously challenge Chancellor (and later Prime Minister) Gordon Brown who had a dreadful and damaging relationship with Prime Minister Blair. This did catastrophic damage in the run up to the Iraq War (see above). Also, according to Daniel Finkelstein (The Times, 10 August 2016) Treasury officials working for Chancellor agreed to present his Chief Secretary (a minister in the same department) with false budget figures in case the Chief Secretary told Prime Minister Tony Blair what was planned.

Afghanistan

The Afghanistan papers published by the Washington Post in 2019 make depressing reading. Here are some extracts from the Washington Post's commentary:

> Several of those interviewed described explicit and sustained efforts by the U.S. government to deliberately mislead the public. They said it was common at military headquarters in Kabul — and at the White House — to distort statistics to make it appear the United States was winning the war when that was not the case.
>
> Was Al-Qaeda the enemy, or the Taliban? Was Pakistan a friend or an adversary? What about the Islamic State and the bewildering array of foreign jihadists, let alone the warlords on the CIA's payroll? According to the documents, the U.S. government never settled on an answer. As a result, in the field, U.S. troops often couldn't tell friend from foe. "They thought I was going to come to them with a map to show them where the good guys and bad guys live," an unnamed former adviser to an Army Special Forces team told government interviewers in 2017. "It took several conversations for them to understand that I did not have that information in my hands. At first, they just kept asking: 'But who are the bad guys, where are they?'"
>
> In October 2006, Rumsfeld's speechwriters delivered a paper titled Afghanistan: Five Years Later. Brimming with optimism, it highlighted more than 50 promising facts and figures, from the number of Afghan women trained in 'improved poultry management' (more than 19,000) to the 'average speed on most roads' (up 300 percent). 'Five years on, there is a multitude of good news,' it read. 'While it has become fashionable in some circles to call Afghanistan a forgotten war, or to say the United States has lost its focus, the facts belie the myths.' Rumsfeld thought it was brilliant. 'This paper,' he wrote in a memo, 'is an excellent piece. How do we use it? Should it be an article? An Op-ed piece? A handout? A press briefing? All of the above? I think it ought to get it to a lot of people.' His staffers made sure it did. They circulated a version to reporters and posted it on Pentagon websites. Since then, U.S. generals have almost always preached that the war is progressing well, no matter the reality on the battlefield.
>
> Garofano said nobody dared to question whether the charts and numbers were credible or meaningful. "There was not a willingness to answer questions such as, what is the meaning of this number of schools that you have built? How has that progressed you towards your goal?" he said. "How do you show this as evidence of success and not just evidence of effort or evidence of just doing a good thing?"

Brexit

We don't yet know whether officials challenged Prime Minister May's decision to notify the UK's exit from the EU under Article 50 without apparently having any clear negotiating strategy

nor any chance of completing the necessary preparations before the two-year deadline. The memoirs should be quite fascinating...

Chernobyl

Need I say more? Here is just one example:

In his book Chernobyl, Serhii Plokhy tells how a minister told his Congress that nuclear power stations could be built two years more quickly if design and construction took place concurrently. Engineers knew this was a very foolish approach and that the target could not be met. 'But if the party so ordered, and the state managers demanded it, the plant managers had no choice but to fall in line.'

China

Many an essay could be written about the damage done to the Chinese people as a result of their inability to speak truth to their leaders. Prominent examples include President Mao's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, and the Chinese Government's initial failures to listen to those warning of the size of, and so tackle, the 21st century SARS and COVID-19 Coronavirus epidemics. It was deeply sad that Dr Li Wenliang, who was silenced for trying to warn about the new coronavirus, was killed by the disease only weeks later.

And there were some signs that President Xi's dominance contributed to his problems by hampering internal debate. This led to him underestimating both the staying power of the early-2020 Hong Kong protesters and the public support behind them. Beijing academic Rong Jian was quoted as saying that, "It's a paradox. It's precisely because Xi is so powerful that policy problems often arise - nobody dares disagree, and problems are spotted too late."

5.2 Speaking truth (or not) in history

Ancient Rome

I don't suppose it is historically accurate, but drama resulting from failure to listen to sensible advice runs throughout Shakespeare's Anthony and Cleopatra. One example is Cleopatra's lover, Mark Anthony, furiously dismissing the sensible advice offered by General Enobarbus that Anthony should not marry Octavia:

> Thou art a soldier. Speak no more!

To which Enobarbus replies:

> The truth should be silent. I had almost forgot.

Queen Elizabeth I

Queen Elizabeth I offers a good example of how powerful people do not always follow through on their promise to reward truthful advisers. She famously instructed William Cecil as follows:

> This judgment I have of you: that you will not be corrupted with any manner of gift, and that you will be faithful to the state, and that, without respect to my private will, you will give me that council that you think best.

Historians record however that as she got older and more confident in her own opinions she more often became extremely angry with courtiers who argued with her. Alison Weir observes that, 'She did not feel bound to take her councillors' advice, and frequently shouted at them or banned them temporarily from court if they disagreed with her. Many were prepared to risk this minor punishment for the sake of putting their views across.'

The 18th century Dunkirk expedition

Robert Harvey records a lively 1793 argument between the Master-General of the Ordnance and Prime Minister William Pitt who wanted to send an expedition to seize Dunkirk. The army was unprepared and already overstretched.:

> I stated to Mr Pitt that I thought he was going far too fast in his calculations ... that very proper [as] his schemes and ideas were, they were much too vast to be executed within anything like the time he talked of ... I told him that he would find himself mistaken and he said that I should find that he was not, and so we parted in great good humour.

The expedition was a complete disaster incurring 10,000 casualties.

The Naked Emperor

Hans Christian Anderson's *The Emperor's New Clothes* is suuall recalled as the story of an honest young boy. But it is essentially about ministers who fail to speak truth to power. Tricksters pretend to sell clothes which have the 'wonderful property of remaining invisible to everyone who is unfit for the office he held'. Two fearful investigating ministers accordingly fail to tell the Emperor that they cannot see the clothes.

END OF PART 3