

This defence of the modern civil service by (ex-head of the Civil Service) Lord (Richard) Wilson was published in the Daily Telegraph in January 2007. It sparked vitriolic reaction on the Telegraph's website:

## Rebuilding Trust in Civil Servants

Fifty years ago the Cabinet Secretary, Lord Bridges, grouped civil servants with mothers-in-law and Wigan pier as objects of ridicule. He would find the criticisms sharper now, not least from the politicians themselves.

There has always been some ambivalence in the attitude of politicians to civil servants. At its best, the relationship can be enormously productive, and often is. But when the going gets rough some politicians have no hesitation in laying down the reputation of their civil servants to save themselves, knowing that the civil servants cannot answer back.

David Blunkett in his diaries vented his frustration on hapless officials when he found himself dealing with intractable problems in the media spotlight. John Reid has similarly labelled parts of his department "unfit for purpose".

Outsiders have a different worry, that the Civil Service has been politicised. For most posts this is groundless: the Civil Service Commissioners have kept a sharp watch to prevent abuse, supported by the Service itself. However, concern about posts dealing with the press has never been completely nailed.

This partly reflects the cull of Heads of Information in 1997 and the role of some special advisers briefing the press. But it only needs a new entrant, selected on merit, to have some link with the Labour Party for the fears about partisanship to revive. It will require a sustained effort by a new Prime Minister to restore trust.

The reality is that the Civil Service has long been under pressure from politicians to reform, beginning with Harold Wilson, who set up the Fulton Committee 40 years ago.

Edward Heath challenged the Civil Service's policy advice with the CPRS. Margaret Thatcher demanded proper financial management and efficiency, and launched executive agencies. John Major launched his Citizen's Charter. And Tony Blair has created a dizzying array of units for "modernisation" and "delivery" armed with centralised targets and league tables.

These initiatives have been relentless, a kind of managerial version of Mao's permanent revolution. No one can doubt that the politicians have the upper hand.

Civil servants understand all this and accept it. They know that politicians are under enormous pressure to provide better public services. Successive Heads of the Civil Service have put their weight behind reform. The current Head, Gus O'Donnell, an outstanding leader, has launched capability reviews which are rigorous to the point of self-flagellation.

So well and good. But the key question, of course, is what all this activity has achieved. In the early years there were doubters.

Margaret Thatcher, presented with a progress report on her reforms, asked: does this mean the Civil Service is really changing, or have civil servants just learned management jargon? Her comment, circulated around Whitehall by mistake, met with the kind of silence which follows a pile of plates being dropped in a restaurant. She and her successors pressed on and have achieved a lot.

For one thing, the Service is smaller. Staff numbers fell from about three-quarters of a million in the late 1970s to about 460,000 in the late 1990s. Permanent Secretaries accept responsibility for management, leadership and performance in a way which previous generations would not have. The emphasis on professionalism and self-criticism is very different from the old self-confidence.

The Service has done its best to change while remaining true to its traditional values of integrity, selection on merit and political impartiality. Work by Mori shows that over the past two decades, when trust in most professions has not changed, there has been a noticeable rise in trust in civil servants.

Hordes of visitors come from overseas to learn how we do it. But no one could say the task is finished. No one could be complacent when the Home Office is having such a difficult time, or when the Department of Health is struggling to keep the NHS solvent despite massive injections of cash. The drive for reform has to go on.

The real question is whether reform of the Civil Service alone will ever be enough, or whether we must take a more fundamental look at what we can realistically expect from central government.

A proper analysis of the performance of government over the last half century would be instructive. There have been real achievements: sustained peace and prosperity for more than 50 years, improvements in the macro-management of the economy, and many areas of particular success such as, say, the privatisation programme or the performance of our Armed Forces. Civil servants can claim a part in these achievements.

But there have also been areas which have proved intractable. Health, transport, education and law and order – the top priorities of new Labour 10 years ago – are good examples. Is it just that the quality of civil servants is lower in these areas than in those which have been successful? There is no evidence to support this. The answer is more complex.

Part of the difficulty is that the business of government in some areas is extremely difficult. Take the Home Office. Most of its customers do not want to be its customers. They do not want to be stopped from entering the country, or to be deported from it, or to be in prison, or to be put on a register of offenders.

And they usually bring with them complex personal circumstances bristling with legal rights, with free legal support behind them. They cannot simply be dispatched like customers at McDonald's. So business piles up, and the political booby traps proliferate.

Part of the difficulty is that good management is not always good politics. Reform often requires sustained application of effort without launching new products or policies and without being newsworthy. But politics demands visible progress over an electoral cycle, and the media want stories. Westminster also expects managers to be "politically sensitive", something outsiders often find hard.

Some years ago, an entrepreneurial prison governor with a control problem in his prison contracted for an all-weather football pitch, so that his inmates could exhaust themselves playing football rather than rioting. He was nearly lynched in Parliament for treating criminals softly when the local school had had to sell its playing field.

Part of the difficulty is centralisation. The trend in recent decades has been to concentrate more power in the hands of fewer people in central government. Local government has been reduced to agency status. Less collective discussion puts a premium on those in control getting everything right, which no human being can do.

More consultants have been brought in, at huge cost, to help. Legislation has proliferated in an attempt to prove effectiveness, and the size of the Service itself has been allowed to drift upwards again to attempt to cope with the burden (although the drive now is to reduce it). These all tend against good government.

There is a lot to be said for government concentrating on doing well those things which only it can do and letting others, such as local government, share the rest of the burden.

Civil Service reform is important, but it needs to be accompanied by a hard look at the role of central government. As Gordon Brown has said: "The British way is to break up centralised institutions that are too remote and insensitive and so devolve power." We live in hope.

*Lord Wilson of Dinton was Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service from 1998 to 2002*

#### Comments

I will believe that the Civil Service is ready for reform when Heads of Department offer to resign and when the most senior who head up failing departments hand back their various gongs awarded to them by others like them and on the same circuit for little more than surviving a very long time.

A few sackings now and again would also help concentrate the mind wonderfully.  
Posted by Michael Taylor on January 16, 2007 5:00 PM

superb article as written by the one and only Sir Humphrey. Civil service numbers fallen? Or Intermediately Redesignated to Temporary Secondment Roles? rhubarb from start to finish.  
Posted by bill riley on January 16, 2007 4:46 PM

Richard,  
Your piece would have been more interesting if you had mentioned, just once, what role you had in trying to sort out many of the problems which you raise. Or perhaps you didn't have one. Which is odd given you were Cabinet Secretary for the majority of Labour's first term.  
Shirley

**Posted by Shirley Atkins on January 16, 2007 3:15 PM**

We can all identify the major problem with "public services" as being one of overburdened with bureaucracy and non jobs but it is the extent of this burden that is horrifying. Before I retired I worked in a fairly senior financial capacity for a global company established in over fifty countries worldwide. Our products were at the leading edge of technology, in some cases, literally "rocket science". Consider the admin problems of operating across such a broad spectrum, differences in language, cultures, traditions, fiscal systems, legal systems, logistics etc etc. Yet our achieved target was always to maintain admin costs below 10% of income. I spent some time having treatment over a period of two years at a major London hospital and was intrigued by the number of staff wearing badges proclaiming them as this or that kind of administrator or advisor.

When I made some (very) discreet enquiries I was told that admin expenditure accounted for over 50% of all hospital income.

There is no shortage of money in the NHS there is an abundance of wastage and government patronage. To reduce admin to the level of efficiency demanded by my previous employers (and their global competitors) the NHS would probably cost over 350,000 non-medical "jobs". Can you see a Labour government making 350,000 of its voters unemployed, not in our lifetime

**Posted by Jeff Hyman on January 16, 2007 2:47 PM**

The Civil Service acts as blotting paper for the unemployable. This is now its sole function in life. Anyone care to explain how the Empire was managed by so few Civil Servants in days of yore? By the way, in my experience there is very little civility from so called civil servants - or serving if it comes to that.

**Posted by H Hall on January 16, 2007 1:45 PM**

If Richard Wilson really believes all this claptrap, how did he get to be head of the civil service? He says of the Home Office: "Most of its customers do not want to be its customers." It depends how one defines customers. In the warped minds of civil servants, customers are the people who are on the receiving end of the 'public services'. For a normal person, the definition of a customer is someone who pays for a service and receives some benefit ('pays' being the operative word). As taxpayers, we are the customers of the Home Office, not the criminal or the illegal immigrant. Our taxes pay for the Home Office and the benefit that I and other taxpayers get is that the criminal is brought to justice and the illegal immigrant is deported. Until Richard Wilson and his leftie chums in Parliament hoist that in, there is little hope that public services will improve.

**Posted by Paul, Southampton on January 16, 2007 12:59 PM**

Lord Wilson states that pollsters Mori report a rise in trust of Civil Servants. Not from where I'm sitting. Who did they ask - other Civil Servants?

**Posted by Charles on January 16, 2007 12:51 PM**

Ah, of course, the ultimate solution, the "private" sector. Whilst there may be problems in the public sector why does everyone thinking handing everything out to the private sector makes things better. Look at the state of our hospitals cleaning for example, where profit comes before service. Private prisons, a catastrophe!

Walk into any High Street store, stand in a long queue for service, whilst employees either ignore you, chat to their mates, or simply wander off elsewhere. Go into a bank at it's busiest times and see most of the counters unmanned. And who pays for all this? We do, through higher prices and charges!

You can't have it both ways, you moan when you have to wait for a hospital bed, or a policeman, or a tax assessment, yet you want fewer public servants.

Hand the NHS and education and benefits over to private sector? Get the same service as when you call one of these private sector insurance or service call centres, waiting on the phone for hours? That would not be acceptable in the public sector, why do we accept it in the private one? That's

assuming the jobs have not been shipped abroad, where the "private" sector can make more profit. I'm not saying things are perfect, most civil servants just want to do their job, but are constantly facing with changing priorities from governments of all different hues.

Posted by Paul on January 16, 2007 12:31 PM

Self serving piffle. Typical Labour; empty phrases and talk of imaginary success. Consultants, advisors and spin doctors have been employed in their droves to sit above the civil service and order it about, adding hugely to the taxpayers burden. Lord Wilson misses the point completely. He says civil servants are trusted. I don't think they are and useless articles like this confirm the view that the Lords is now stuffed with Tony crony incompetents.

Posted by Ian Cook on January 16, 2007 12:03 PM

Scanning the comments posted earlier, I would appear to be alone in finding Lord Wilson's article interesting, perceptive and informative. It seems to me that he is not an apologist for the Civil Service's failings and that he is diplomatic in laying the blame equally between the government of the day and the Civil Service itself. He says 'A proper analysis of the performance of government over the last half century would be instructive'. I would go further and say that a 'proper analysis' is essential and long overdue. Local government was squeezed with the onset of the First World War and the national emergency that ensued. With the start of the Second World War, the emergency was far greater and lasted substantially longer. Atlee inherited a centralised Civil Service and far greater powers concentrated in Westminster than any other prime minister could have dreamt of. He brought in the Welfare State and clearly wasn't going to let all these centralised powers go to waste in implementing the act and the consequent running of it. The rest of course is history. Unless there is a genuine return to democratic principles and local governance, we will always see a bloated civil service and a bloated state. The prospect of 'New' Labour and Gordon Brown in particular handing over power to the local councils is a mere pipe dream. Micromanagement is the hallmark of a bossy, over-weaning, intrusive government. Things can only get worse if Brown succeeds to Blair's throne. It doesn't appear that there will even be an election within the Labour party to make a proper selection of a successor to the odious Blair. So much for democracy.

Posted by Simon Hunn on January 16, 2007 11:44 AM

Consultants and legislation are no substitute for ideas. The Civil Service exists to execute the orders of the government of the day.

If you get into high office on a lot of fine talk but the truth is you haven't got any ideas - actually you haven't got a clue what to do - then the rest follows...

The Civil Service has both to try to administer the inconsistent and machine gun speed stream of consciousness of a New Labour government which is making it up as it goes along and to run all that in parallel with the confetti raining down from the EU 99% of which is duplication of, or worse, in conflict with, our own laws - and all of which is superfluous in the UK.

Fat Government is what Labour has given us. It is not working and needs to be slimmed down drastically.

The Tories have once or twice mentioned Small Government as being desirable. They won't say too much more for now - as Labour will trumpet this as job losses (having themselves recruited over half a million onto the state payroll, with no noticeable increase in efficiency) as a sop to the Unions.

Comments by a consultant project manager here are a microcosm of all that is wrong in government. The principles by which a commercial organisation stays in business are totally lacking in these departments - since everyone thinks they have a job for life, no competition to be measured against - and no requirement to perform.

Major firms of (not particularly competent) consultants are laughing all the way to the bank with hundreds of millions in fees thanks to this gross mismanagement - total absence of management

more like.

This is an example of something which almost everyone knows about - and yet nothing is done. Ministers are paid to run portfolios, senior Civil Servants to manage - why then do we have a parallel universe of consultants doing both jobs?

The Civil Service has become too PC and too politicised. There are far too many political attachés employed by this government shadowing heads of ministries.

Labour will bleat that there was inbuilt Conservative bias in these departments: not so when you look at the incompetence, the waste and the indolence. This always comes to light under Labour not the Tories.

The lunatics are running the asylum.

**Posted by simon coulter on January 16, 2007 10:50 AM**

Lord Wilson says that the numbers of civil servants has declined from (in round figures) 3/4 million to 1/2 million in the last 30 years; but is this actually the case? Large areas have been separated into nebulous 'Agencies', such as the DVLA and the TV licensing.

In addition, we have a vast hidden civil service: the BBC; almost all lawyers practicing administrative, criminal, and immigration law (which Lord Wilson peculiarly describes as 'free legal support', as if it has no cost); most of the doctors in this country. What about the quangos and 'outsource providers', such as the publicly-quoted Capita?

The dead-weight that such inertia has on the economy - it is always easier to say 'no' than 'yes' - the mediocrity, the time-serving, the covered-up incompetence: this is the true British Civil Service - not forgetting the tone of dreary self-congratulation, exemplified by Wilson's remark that Johnny Foreigner comes to gaze in awe at this mighty bureaucracy.

Left unsaid is the peculiar situation that we now have in this country where the Civil Service sees itself - and in some respects is - the 'permanent government', bearing manfully with its transient political leaders. The direction that this permanent government is leading us is the usual 'gentleman from Whitehall knows best', reducing us all to serfs to be spied upon and directed at will.

**Posted by Michael Holman on January 16, 2007 10:39 AM**

I just couldn't believe this. It flies in the face of all my personal experience, everything I've read in the press, everything I've seen on television. It's not the same officious, hidebound, pedantic, boring bunch of clock-watching jobsworths I've grown to abhor, distrust and revile for many years. But then I read the final bit - "Lord Wilson of Dinton was Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service from 1998 to 2002" and all became clear. One wonders what he did pre 1998 - couldn't've been yet another blinkered civil servant, could he?

**Posted by ex pat Ron in NZ on January 16, 2007 10:30 AM**

I support Jonathan Clarke's view (2:25 am) that the civil service is, in part, a job creation scheme for the otherwise unemployable. This was a view I also encountered while doing some work in the US public sector. Private sector managers viewed much of the public sector workforce as an alternative to inflated welfare budgets. Those post-war days of serried ranks of typists and form-stampers are gone; but the safety-in-numbers management structure mentality remains. It would be very interesting to review the working hours of each civil servant and assess the real value of the fruits of their labours.

but I'm not saying do away with them or any such. Merely, in the same way as the workers in Brussels or the UN - keep them away from me!

**Posted by David on January 16, 2007 10:29 AM**

You make a good point about the tensions between politicians' need for publicity and the steady effort needed for "reform", but you don't go anything like far enough.

One of the biggest operational questions facing the civil service is why so many large computer projects fail. I believe one of the deep reasons for this is that a good project manager's priorities, modus operandi and culture are different from those of the successful minister. This has always been true to some extent, but progress continually widens the gap.

Technological progress means that project managers must forever simplify architectures, fight featuritis and manage complexity. Progress in the political arts seems to mean ever more complex and (temporarily) effective news management, which pushes in the other directions. Project managers must forever be closing down options early, while political managers try to keep all options open forever. Project managers need to work to stable specifications, while political managers need to change the specification every month. As computers become embedded invisibly everywhere, the gap between public and private sector performance is going to get worse.

Posted by [Ross Anderson](#) on January 16, 2007 10:21 AM

Reading Richard Wilson's paeon of praise for the "civil service" I thought I must be dreaming. Unfortunately I then read the comments and found that it was not a dream. It was certainly a con job, but then he was a "civil servant". He does of course not quite understand the meaning of servant, but then why would he as a recipient of Blair's largesse.

Posted by [Derek W Buxton](#) on January 16, 2007 10:09 AM

The thing that never ceases to amaze me is that whenever any government minister in this Country announces that they will reduce the establishment staffing levels of the Civil Service by X%, they increase in size by the same proportion.

Could this be a mathematical quirk, or conformation of how one should always believe the opposite of whatever a politician says?

Posted by [S Shack](#) on January 16, 2007 10:06 AM

ooh did anyone hear about the group of deaf staff inside the Department of Work and Pensions... (fair enough so far.. )..

guess what they are employed as.. yes.. AUDIO typists !!!!!!!

No wonder it takes them a day to type up a letter .. and clearly that's' where the person taking 6 months to write one side of A4 was trained !!!

And this man Wilson wants us to think he is competent and capable ??? He should be paying back all his pension for ruining the country !! I wont stoop so low as to give him a title .. he clearly hasn't earned it and the days when it was a reward for services rendered are long gone given the vast salaries and pension they now get for failure.

Posted by [Adrian Jones](#) on January 16, 2007 10:02 AM

what an incredibly limited and blinkered view !!! No wonder civil servants are getting it wrong if that is the attitude within the civil service.. but then I suppose a pension of £1.5 million for failing to deliver is normal in the civil service.

Try existing outside your monster and get things corrected inside it ... join the real world !!!

Posted by [Adrian Jones](#) on January 16, 2007 9:56 AM

A partial solution to the Civil Service 'problem' would be to devolve more functions and power to local government. 'Small' could be more efficient, transparent and accountable than 'Centralised and Big'. The old great cities of Leeds, Manchester and Birmingham and others created wealth and civic pride. Centralisation devalued local government. The result was that charlatans, mediocrities and crooks took over the cities. A more frightening development has been the even greater centralisation of power in Brussels and Strasbourg. The EU is a bureaucratic behemoth, deaf, blind and unfeeling to a liberty loving people such as the English.

**Posted by Chris Stephens on January 16, 2007 9:36 AM**

Lord Wilson,

If Trevelyan saw his baby, built upon altruistic principle and Anglo- Catholic sincerity, now in its present form he would weep.

I suppose I understand your attempt to defend the monster you have helped to create. After all it gave you your gold plated pension.

**Posted by Minnie Ovens on January 16, 2007 9:29 AM**

It is fascinating that Richard Wilson sees the relentless government legislative programme as an answer to something. There is frankly too much legislation for it to be well-thought out, let alone the upheaval. Does anybody actually get to ask the simple question "How can we make this problem better?" Is, endless radical change the answer. Is not the result that you simply lose your bearings?

What about tens of billions spent on ludicrous IT projects when you could do something good, or just save money? What about the dangers of axing the fences between public service and private enterprise? This is not a convincing analysis of our predicament.

**Posted by John Stone on January 16, 2007 9:22 AM**

The civil service is a monster. My own town is a labour town and has been for almost 90 years. almost all the well paid jobs are at government call centres, town council, hospital, etc. However, the hospital is effectively closing and they may actually be voted out this time.

The civil service have a way of handling government efforts to reform it's called the "look there" method.

Department A says look department B is worse than us. Department B says look Department C is worse than us. Department C and so on until you get back to A.

There is only one way to sort out the departments and that is to target one each year and go through it with a hot poker. Of course some lawyers will start jumping up about fairness and contractual responsibilities but bankrupting the country by obsessive red tape and big brother monitoring is going to be a lot worse.

**Posted by Adrian H on January 16, 2007 9:13 AM**

I have long thought that the best thing to do is to list all public employees in random order, and cross off every third name. After a year, we could see if anyone had noticed. Undoubtedly, we would lose a few good ones, who would easily find productive jobs in the private sector. But overall, it might actually make departments focus on something useful.

I used to argue this flippantly until I took a temporary job with the "Strategic Planning Section" of a London council. In the previous three years, it had increased its staff from 3 to 22. I still have no idea what they all did. The department's main activity seemed to be trying to justify its own existence - during the 6 weeks I was there, it had two all-day, all-hands meetings to decide whether to change its name.

I'm afraid that Lord Wilson's description of the civil service is alien to me.

**Posted by Alex on January 16, 2007 9:05 AM**

Agree with all comments thus far. And it is only the central govt civil service we're talking about. Don't get us started on local government.

**Posted by Andrew Forbes on January 16, 2007 8:58 AM**

Wilson says that:

"A proper analysis of the performance of government over the last half century would be instructive. There have been real achievements: sustained peace and prosperity for more than 50 years, improvements in the macro-management of the economy, and many areas of particular success such as, say, the privatisation programme or the performance of our Armed Forces.

But there have also been areas which have proved intractable. Health, transport, education and law and order – the top priorities of new Labour 10 years ago – are good examples."

Notice anything about these two categories? The successful ones (with the possible exception of the Armed Forces) are areas where the government, and civil servants, now have LESS influence; the failing areas are ones where they have MORE.

**Posted by Richard Teather on January 16, 2007 8:36 AM**

Interesting quote by Gordon Brown - the exact opposite of what he does in practice. Centralising control freak politicians like Brown only exacerbate the problem of governance for everyone.

**Posted by Gervas Douglas on January 16, 2007 8:24 AM**

It is interesting to read the views of a former insider like Richard Wilson in defence of his former employees. As a burdened tax payer I see things slightly differently.

The civil service has been politicised by Blair and Co. It is difficult now to distinguish between any civil servant and Labour. Wilson says that reform must go on. What reform has ever happened under Blair ? Because market forces do not apply within the public sector there is an inexorable growth in the size of the civil service and the public sector generally. Again, as a taxpayer, I do not see the difference between the civil service and the public sector. All that I see is nearly 1,000,000 extra jobs that I help pay for - all enjoying gold plated pension schemes of which the rest of us have been generally deprived.

As for reform, all I see is the massive refurbishment programme of all those buildings in Whitehall at taxpayer cost ( go and look inside the Treasury building and its refurbished luxury); meanwhile our service families live in slum conditions whilst their husbands (mainly) die in Iraq.

The civil service is admirable at self preservation - the 'Yes Minister' approach to life is alive and well. The tactic is to welcome reform as 'brave and courageous' and then to undermine it systematically. When the public sector utilities were privatised - gas, water, telephone, electricity etc - within five years they were able to halve their labour forces without any loss of efficiency. The troubles faced by BA are a throwback to state ownership. Does anyone believe we would have Easyjet/Ryanair prices if BA still had a monopoly ? It has been forced to lower its extortionate prices to survive.

Taking a couple of examples - if the DTI ( formerly under the witless Patricia Hewitt) and Defra ( formerly under the dreadful Margaret Beckett) were abolished tomorrow what would not happen ? If the Home Office was in the private sector there would not be the occasional person suspended ( and then retired inevitably on a full pension) - the whole thing would be wound up. The private sector would be able to find people/secure our borders for example.

No dear boy, you have had a good career out of the civil service and now enjoy a superb inflation proof pension along with a title ( merely for doing your job). What a mug I have been all these years - but on the odd occasion I have had to work with civil servants I have escaped screaming at the end of the assignment ! Systematically we have all been 'Huttoned' by the civil service in the past decade and can do nothing about it.

**Posted by Mike on January 16, 2007 6:41 AM**

As I was reading through this piece, I felt a mounting sense of a commentary upon a parallel planet, a description of a rascal penned by his loving mother; a sort of 'he's a good boy really' apologia. When I got to the end, all was explained by the revelation of Lord Wilson's job 1998/2002. Unfortunately, the analogy with the seriously over tolerant mum only serves to confirm our worst fears.

The talk of 'customers', '..business piles up', 'managers', 'entrepreneurial', 'new products' etc., is the familiar lexicon of contemporary Labour pseudo-business speak.

Of course the House was in uproar over the all-weather football facility; it's like a failing parent, unable to control it's already spoiled child by giving it a bag of sweets to keep it quiet.

Sorry, but this article has left me feeling even more alarmed at the state of our civil service. We are talking here about stark and unalloyed incompetence; the sort of failure to perform, that in private industry would result in instant dismissal, with no hope of redress via tribunal.

The enormity of recent failures is clearly lost on the likes of Richard Wilson. These have been issues seriously affecting the safety and security of the nation, individual decent citizens have suffered and been put at risk by improperly released criminals, no control over immigration has imperilled our economy and artificially boosted property prices - and Richard Wilson makes it all sound like the public just doesn't understand the difficulties.

Civil Servants, far from being the solution, are actually nine tenths of the problem.

Posted by Graham King on January 16, 2007 6:32 AM

As a consultant Project Manager who has worked on 2 government projects, I have been staggered by the level of apathy and indifference in the 2 departments I have worked in. Most days you could walk around the office and see rows of people idly browsing the internet, and the standard working hours were frequently 10 -4pm for much of the staff. People were employed on grounds of race and whether they were friends with the manager of that department. When I asked what some people did I could not get any answer and when I asked them to do what they were supposed to do, it was done incompetently if at all. I think this article is far too generous towards the civil service, which I concluded was the size it currently is to give an income to those that no-one else in their right mind would employ. That and the fact that half of the work undertaken is pointless in what it actually provides as a service to the country.

Posted by Jonathan Clarke on January 16, 2007 2:25 AM

One of the problems of the Twentieth Century has been that the growth in Government spending has enabled the creation of a new social class that didn't exist prior to 1914. We have gone from Governing the whole of India with one thousand civil servants and ten thousand troops to employing hundreds of thousand of officials who contrive to keep our troops in slum barracks and who instruct us in how to peel an apple. This process was not willed; rather it came about, firstly, because it could, since the taxing power of the state is now much greater than it once was, and secondly because civil servants and aspiring civil servants will naturally have a tendency to vote for whatever party is most willing to keep feeding the beast. Tinkering with the system will not help.

Decentralising will simply justify the creation of new posts tasked with communication. Instead, we need a Government with the courage to say that entire functions are no longer the business of central government. The NHS, education, trade and industry - take your pick. Either some of these functions are returned to the private sector, or we will be asking the same questions in ten years time.

Posted by jon livesey on January 16, 2007 1:13 AM