

Professional Detachment and the Civil Service

The recent *Social Mobility Commission report on the civil service* found that civil servants from disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly under-represented in the Civil Service. Even when they 'get in' they struggle to 'get on'. These two excerpts from the report are particularly interesting:

'Emotional detachment and understated self-presentation are seen as the behavioural hallmarks of senior civil servants, perhaps in contrast to their political leaders. But this 'neutral' behaviour can be both alienating and intimidating for those from working class backgrounds.

'The key behavioural code at the top-grades of the Civil Service revolves around mastery of 'studied neutrality ... This incorporates ... an emotionally detached and understated self-presentation.'

Why would those from a working class background find neutrality so alienating? Is it less because of their 'class' and more because they have not been exposed, as children, to 'professional' behaviours?

Lawyers, doctors and teachers (and no doubt other professions) cannot be fully effective if they become emotionally involved with their clients, patients or students. Many professions prohibit such involvement via their professional codes. Civil servants are similarly required by the Civil Service Code to be strictly impartial in the way in which they carry out their day-to-day duties, and in particular to be politically impartial. This has at least three interesting consequences which might bear on social mobility within SW1.

First, professionals are often not very good managers. Successful professionals have very different characters from successful business people – and from the armed forces. Business and military goals are relatively clear and not to be questioned. Leaders in these spheres must have strong organisational, project management and person management skills. And it helps if they have (or can pretend) passionate commitment to their business or country. Professionals, in contrast, are devoted to helping others to succeed whether in business or in hospital or in government. The best will be lauded by their clients etc. and their peers, but they don't need to be great managers, and most of them aren't.

The relative absence of management skills amongst professionals is all too obvious in hospital and schools where managers are nowadays employed in significant numbers alongside their professional colleagues. This creates tensions which are sometimes disastrous but the resultant

teamworking can lead to exceptional results, as has been seen in many hospitals' responses to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The civil service has yet to pull off this trick. It preferentially promotes 'the emotionally detached' compared with committed managers. The previous and current Cabinet Secretaries had no significant management experience but were/are consummate courtiers and fixers, and so hugely appreciated by their political masters.

Some departments, such as Defence, DWP and HMRC, do seem to have great managers at or near the top. Others are not so lucky. And recruits from working class non-professional backgrounds quickly find that they are at a disadvantage in policy-heavy departments compared with the sons and daughters of lawyers and medics who have lived with professionally-detached parents for most of their lives.

Civil Service impartiality has a **second** consequence. New governments arrive in their new offices all too aware that their key professional advisers were only yesterday working for what is now '[Her Majesty's Official Opposition](#)'. Ministers are then reminded every so often that politically impartiality means that there is a limit to how helpful their officials can be.

The same does not apply to doctors, teachers and lawyers. We don't, of course, expect them to go home and lose sleep every time a patient dies, a child fails to fulfil its potential, or a client ignores professional advice. But we do expect professionals always to be 'on our side'. This is in stark contrast to central government where, as the next election approaches, ministers become very aware that almost everyone around them might soon be working (again?) for the Opposition.

Successive governments have found an answer by recruiting [special advisers](#) who have in most cases worked very affectively alongside their civil service colleagues. (It is a huge shame that the exceptions have hit the headlines, and that recent recruitments seem to have focussed too much on spin doctor skills.) Many departments have also recruited experts, including from business, who have made huge contributions. These successes are seldom noticed outside Whitehall.

Looked at the other way, however, maybe civil servants recruited from non-professional backgrounds find it difficult to pretend impartiality, and maybe this damages their career prospects as they climb through the ranks and work more closely with ministers?

The studied neutrality and emotional detachment of senior civil servants has another, **third**, consequence which I find more worrying. They should, and most normal people would, get angry and upset when things go wrong. But Dominic Cummings correctly notes that "it's amazingly rare to find people who *deeply care about results* at senior levels in politics/gvt,

those who do are seen as mad/unreliable & are weeded out". As a result, senior officials (and their ministers') response to Windrush, [Grenfell Tower](#), the social care crisis etc. is to play it long, to worry about political consequences, and to save money. (The Treasury's, HMRC's and DWP's responses to Covid were honourable exceptions.)

Ministers, meanwhile, are also understandably focussed on self-preservation when things go wrong. 'It wasn't my fault' is their first response, whilst putting things right then takes political energy and financial resources, both of which are in short supply. Ministers love mandarins who can help them defend their barricades until the media circus has swept on.

I wish I could point to a solution to this problem. The obvious difficulty is officials who are genuinely passionate find it difficult to work for those politicians who are more focussed on their political career than on improving society. Ministers (and Dominic Cummings) meanwhile find it difficult to work with officials who do not share their political passions. And I suspect that civil servants from non-professional backgrounds find it more difficult to disengage from the real issues and so, to some extent, resent having to pretend neutrality and support ministers obsessed with short term political pressures.

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