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How to Reform the Civil Service

Summary

The current government and Cabinet Secretary are taking welcome steps to encourage innovation and delivery.

As a result of previous similar initiatives, the modern Civil Service looks nothing like its predecessors. It is less stuffy, it employs modern technology, and it is in many ways more efficient. But significant parts of it remain poorly managed and make too many serious mistakes. (See Annex 1) This may be because its fundamental relationships with Parliament, ministers and the public are essentially unchanged since the First World War.

There are frequent calls for those relationships to be revisited and reformed.

Some argue that we need do no more than restore the post-war relationship between ministers and officials. This could be done, though it would not be easy and would need serious political support.

Others argue that more fundamental reform is needed. This paper aims to help anyone interested in planning such reform by listing the principal questions and challenges that would need to be considered during the planning process. These fall into two distinct groups.

The first set of issues are essentially constitutional. Probably the biggest of these would be whether to make it clear that senior officials were no longer required to be primarily loyal to 'their' Secretary of State. We would no longer have Cabinet government but would instead adopt a more presidential approach by creating a strategic centre where decisions could be made more quickly and cross-cutting programmes driven more energetically.

Other major constitutional changes could include requiring senior officials to be more publicly accountable for their performance, and the politicisation of the most senior ranks.

The second group of issues are all to do with the organisation and delivery of the change programme. Who will lead it? How quickly could it be completed? What would be the unintended consequences?

The underlying theme of this paper is that reform will not happen, or it will have serious and damaging consequences, if it is not carefully planned and executed.

Introduction

The UK Civil Service is frequently criticised, often for good reason but sometimes not. (See Annex 1 for more detail.)

The last twenty years in particular seem to suggest that 'Westminster' has abandoned the Westminster Model, or maybe the model failed? Either way, we need either to resurrect it or replace it. That needs deep discussion including contributions from politicians from all parties as well as civil servants and civil society.

Superficial, headline-grabbing announcements will not cut it. Katelyn Jetelina points out that ...

> It is much easier to criticise a system from the outside than to change it from the inside. Big systems are extraordinarily hard to move, not because the people inside them are evil or complacent, but because institutions with decades of regulatory sediment, legal exposure, external influence and deeply entrenched professional cultures are designed, almost by default, to resist disruption.

> Successful leadership requires understanding why the resistance to change is present. ... It requires valuing historical knowledge while also being willing to challenge it. It means clarity of strategy, transparency in execution, coalition building through deep listening and a willingness to admit when you're wrong.

And Adam Smith, many moons ago, warned his readers about the 'plausible plan(s) of reformation' offered by populist politicians who 'though they originally may have meant nothing but their own aggrandisement, become many of them in time the dupes of their own sophistry, and are as eager for this great reformation as the weakest and foolishest of their followers'.

This paper is therefore intended to help those planning serious civil service (or Whitehall) reform identify and think about the reasons why their plans might fail and so hopefully define and manage their reform programme in such a way as to maximise their chances of success.

But first let's be clear ...

What is meant by reform?

Politicians, think tanks and others sometimes use the word 'reform' to include improved management practices, increased efficiency and the deployment of modern technology. These improvements are to be welcomed and are often overdue. But they are not the subject of this paper. They can (or should be) implemented by any competent senior official team with the approval but not the active participation of ministers. If such a team does not exist or if it fails to manage effectively then this is probably evidence of a deeper malaise and, possibly, the need for deeper reform. But better management is not the same as 'reform'.

'Reform' is a big word. It was correctly applied to the Reform Acts of the 19th and early 20th Centuries which first extended voting rights to more middle-class men and redistributed parliamentary seats, and then granted voting rights to all men over 21 and women over 30. The word was also correctly applied to the social reforms which followed the Second World War and created the National Health Service and much of the modern welfare state.

The 1854 Northcote Trevelyan Report and the 1918 Haldane Report also both led to serious and substantial civil service reform.

There has since then been nothing of a similar scale.

There was strident criticism of the Civil Service in the 1950s and 60s, leading to the Fulton Report. But its authors were not allowed to look at crucial questions such as the relationship between ministers and officials, the number and size of departments, and their relationships with each other and the Cabinet Office. Fulton accordingly led to significant managerial and efficiency changes but its recommendations fell short of serious reform, much to the disappointment of the critics.

(Almost?) All Prime Ministers from Margaret Thatcher onwards have expressed frustration with the official machine. Their pressure has led to the service becoming better managed, more efficient and less stuffy in its higher reaches. It recruits some very bright, energetic and personable young people. But none of these Prime Ministers have delivered reform, nor even attempted it. This paper explains what has stopped them and what needs to be done if such reform is to succeed.

In writing this paper I draw heavily on Charles Polidano's internationally researched paper Why Civil Service Reforms Fail. It's probably worth quoting from his introduction:

> **Most reforms in government fail.** They do not fail because, once implemented, they yield unsatisfactory outcomes. They fail because they never get past the implementation stage at all. They are blocked outright or put into effect only in tokenistic, half-hearted fashion.

> Various authors have sought to make recommendations on how to improve the prospects for success ... The difficulty is that quite often, the prescriptions that are offered have as much to do with the content of reform (what sort of initiatives should be taken) as with the approach (**how to go about it**). **Moreover, there is a tendency to stop at prescription without asking why the lessons are disregarded time and again.**

This paper therefore lists the many choices which face any Prime Minister seeking civil service reform. Several of them raise acute constitutional questions. Crucially, I suggest that even one wrong answer or wrong choice will cause reform to fail. Successive Prime Ministers discovered this which is why there has been no true reform since Haldane.

I also draw heavily on fairly standard teaching about 'change management'. This stresses the need to consider the whole system. This means, in the case of the Civil Service, that we need to consider the role of the Civil Service within government, including its relations with ministers and Parliament.

Here then are the questions and choices that need to be addressed, with some commentary as of mid-2026.

Q1. Scope

The first question concerns the scope of the reform programme. Here are the principal choices that need to be made.

Should parliamentary reform be included? There is much wrong with the way in which Parliament fails to hold the executive to account but adding this question would complicate the whole reform programme and likely stir up considerable opposition.

There is a stronger case for considering whether we still need a single civil service comprising less than 10% of, and quite separate from, the rest of the public service. Most other civil services include local government. (There are 5.5 million French civil servants compared with around 0.5 million in the UK.) There might also be a case for breaking down other barriers such as those with the NHS and the police.

A secondary issue might be the relationship between the officials supporting the devolved administrations and their Whitehall colleagues.

But it would probably be best not to stir the hornet's nest of regional government and/or the devolution of power to local government. These are important issues, to be sure, but probably best kept separate from civil service reform.

Q2 Are you willing to abandon Cabinet Government?

This is a biggy!

Here's the problem:- Prime Minister Johnson is said to have asked the Cabinet Secretary, Mark Sedwill, to say who was in charge of implementing a COVID-19 delivery plan? One observer recalled: "There was just silence. He looked over at Sedwill and said, 'Is it you?' Sedwill said, 'No, I think it's you, Prime Minister.'"

This exchange must seem extraordinary to anyone outside Whitehall, but it reflects the reality of Cabinet government. The Prime Minister is 'first among equals'. We do not live in a presidential democracy. The PM cannot issue instructions to his Cabinet colleagues - and the Cabinet Secretary cannot issue instructions to Permanent Secretaries.

Government in the UK is a system, not a command structure. The Cabinet are meant to be a team of equals. Each team member takes responsibility when the ball, so to speak, is passed to them. But there is

no organising mind, least of all in the Cabinet Office. Its main function is to resolve disputes between the players.

This can work well. Most important decisions can be taken following discussions between Cabinet Ministers, refereed as necessary by the Prime Minister or in Cabinet Committee. And it is usually obvious which department needs to be responsible for which delivery programs.

And it sometimes worked OK during the COVID-19 crisis. Neither the Prime Minister nor the Cabinet Secretary needed to tell the Chancellor and his officials how to (or indeed whether to) organise a furlough scheme. Nor did they need to tell Matt Hancock and his officials how to manage the NHS so as to cope with the first spike in COVID deaths.

But it all clearly fell apart when it came to lockdown and related policies. Here, the Health Secretary, the Home Secretary (police, civil liberties), the Transport Secretary, the Business Secretary, and the Chancellor all needed to work together. One of them needed to take charge, but no-one did so. Mark Sedwill appears to have thought that the Prime Minster should have taken charge, but that is hardly Mr Johnson's style. Mr Johnson appears to have thought that officials should resolve all the inter-departmental tensions for him. But he forgot that, while officials could certainly provide information analysis and advice, they couldn't make what were bound to be highly controversial decisions. If the delivery plan was so complex that it could not be led by a single Secretary of State, then there was no alternative but for it to be led by the Prime Minister himself, in effect managing his Cabinet colleagues. He will have looked in vain for robust structures and levers to pull. They aren't normally needed, and they couldn't be magicked out of thin air in a hurry. Put simply, the UK government does not have anything approaching a strategic centre.

Cabinet Secretary Antonia Romeo has pledged to improve the system. Her objectives include:

- Reform the Cabinet Office to be a leaner, more agile strategic centre.
- Deliver an effective programme of cabinet and cabinet committee business, ensuring that decisions are taken in the correct forum, supported by rigorous policy development, analysis and evidence.
- Broker agreements between departments as necessary to reach collective positions on government policy where needed.

Will that be enough or should we switch to a more presidential system? Or at least a more strategic centre as was recommended by the Institute for Government in its 'Shaping Up' report ten years ago? This option is regularly discussed in the context of civil service reform, although it obviously has wider consequences so it is better referred to as Whitehall reform.

It would certainly speed decision making. Ministers and officials can move very swiftly if they don't need to consult other departments. But it can take an age to get others to agree to even innocuous suggestions. They have priorities of their own, and their own stakeholders to worry about. Even worse, one Minister can be very unwilling to support another Minister's great initiative, as they are probably both vying for the next promotion.

A strategic centre would also probably help to ensure that resources could be swiftly moved from one department to another where they are more urgently needed. This is currently a very slow process, given Ministers' and Permanent Secretaries' natural reluctance to lose staff. Even worse, they will if pressed eventually offer to lose staff that they don't want to keep.

More generally, a strategic centre would weaken the sometimes excessive loyalty of senior civil servants to their particular political boss.

Above all, though, isn't it crazy that the Prime Minister doesn't have a powerful team to help him monitor progress on his key priorities, to intervene when progress has stalled, and make those all-

important trade-offs which will, if unaddressed, lead to endless and fruitless debate? (Social care, for instance.)

Keen Whitehall observers will remember that Dominic Cummings was prominent in supporting what is pejoratively called 'centralisation', including 'COBRA style committees' where Ministers and officials would work together on projects. I can do no better than quote Jill Rutter's reaction:

> "He's going to hate this from an ex civil servant – but I think it's a pretty good idea.. Cabinet committees are pretty useless by and large with bored Ministers reading out departmental speaking notes usually written by junior, quite bored civil servants desperately trying to dig up a departmental angle on an issue of which they know little – or conversely fuming at a last minute 'bounce' on an issue in which their department has a big interest. Ministers are expected to pay departmental roles in such committees and leave their broader political judgement at home. This is the system that nodded through the Lansley health reforms."

The problem is that strategic centres and COBRA-style committees would inevitably and intentionally reduce the power and influence of individual members of the Cabinet. This would not have been welcomed by previous administrations' 'big beasts'.

Chancellor Sajid Javid, for instance, objected when line management of his Special Advisers was transferred to No.10 – and he felt so strongly that he resigned:

> "A chancellor, like all cabinet ministers, has to be able to give candid advice to a prime minister so that he is speaking truth to power. I believe that the arrangement proposed would significantly inhibit that." (Detail is here.)

I offer my own case study - where Cabinet government worked as it should - in Annex 2.

So this question involves a difficult trade off:- efficient, strategic, 'presidential' central control v. more cautious, slow-moving and politically Cabinet government. The survival or demise of Cabinet government is one of those apparently simple decisions - no legislation required! - which would have big repercussions. I discuss this further below when I turn to 'The Six Cs' at Q9 below.

Q3. Should civil servants become more accountable to Parliament and the public?

Many argue that civil servants should become more directly accountable to the public and/or Parliament and so unable to hide behind ministers when there are delays or they make mistakes. Senior officials' policy advice would become public so ministers' decision making would be much more transparent and less 'political'. They would meet the media and the public to explain their decision-making (or, more precisely, why they had recommended that minsters should take a certain decision). Whitehall could begin to plan against longer time horizons and/or sort out wicked issues such as Adult Social Care.

Most senior officials are embarrassed by government's recent failings and would welcome improved policy- and other decision-making. But they worry that greater openness would in practice open up areas of conflict with their political masters and that would be new, scary territory.

Former Cabinet Secretary Sir Andrew Turnbull made this point when interviewed on the BBC's Westminster Hour in January 2015. Describing the 'bargain' entered into between Ministers and civil servants, he noted that the former benefit from frank advice and commitment from officials, but the civil servants are not then criticised publicly. If officials were to face public criticism then they would need a right of reply.

They would certainly appreciate the chance to push back when weaker ministers tell journalists that unpopular policy decisions were forced on them by their officials. It was, for instance, 'the Treasury' and

'civil servants who live in the South-East' who were apparently to blame for the decision not to extend HS2 to Leeds. This behaviour could not survive the introduction of true and honest accountability for civil servants.

Anonymity suits senior civil servants, of course, when they do make mistakes. Many are understandably very reluctant to accept blame - especially as there are few comparable jobs outside the Senior Civil Service. Private sector execs who make mistakes can generally rebuild their careers elsewhere. Civil servants cannot.

And yet .... most Ministers tend to value skills which are ill-suited to tackling longer term 'wicked', strategic or management issues. James Ball and Andrew Greenway summarised this rather nicely in their book '*Bluffocracy*'.

> For ministers, the questions at hand are usually related to working out how to manage a current crisis or put through a bit of policy that has landed on their desk. And for those in the civil service, the best way to rise is to look at getting through whatever policy has the minister's eye. Simply managing and running programmes agreed years ago are vital roles, but not good for the ambitious. ... [Quoting Nick Hardwick:-] 'The people who get on ... are those who can write a good minute which gets the minister out of trouble. Not those who can run things so they don't get into trouble in the first place'.

There have already been some tentative and largely unsuccessful moves towards greater official accountability including the introduction of Feasibility Directions, Senior Responsible Officers and Accounting Officer Assessments. But previous administrations refused to introduce Policy and Procedural Directions. There is further detail in Chapter 6 of Civil Servants, Ministers and Parliament but the whole saga shows just how hard it is to make progress in this area.

Former Permanent Secretary Jonathan Slater has nevertheless written very persuasively in support of greater accountability. You can read his paper here.

But wouldn't this be resented by MPs who cherish the myth that ministers are wholly responsible for the performance of their departments, and cherish their right to question departmental ministers? Ministers, too, might feel distinctly unhappy at the thought of being in effect forced to take politically unpopular decisions following official advice. As Sir William Harcourt pointed out: "The Minister exists to tell the Civil Servant what the public will not stand".

Greater civil service accountability is therefore another apparently simple chnage - no legislation required! - which would have big repercussions.

Q4. Should we re-visit the 1854 Northcote-Trevelyan reforms and permit appointment and promotion other than on merit?

As recommended by Northcote and Trevelyan over 170 years ago, almost all civil servants are appointed on merit through open competition, rather than patronage. With the exception of around 120 special advisers, all civil servants are therefore politically impartial ('apolitical'). This undoubtedly makes sense for the lower grades? But why not 'politicise' the Senior Civil Service so that incoming ministers (and a few Spads) aren't left alone to face the serried ranks of non-believer senior officials?

Reform certainly think we should. According to the IfG's Hannah Keenan:

> Recent reporting suggests that a future Reform UK government would dismiss the two top layers of every government department (permanent secretaries and directors general) - and replace these officials with political appointees and external hires, or in some cases promote existing officials viewed as more suitable. ... Danny Kruger , the party's head of preparation for government, suggest[ed] that

reaching the top of the civil service is "a bad sign" as it requires conforming to a "very very strict orthodoxy of belief and practice".

But there would be consequences, including less objective advice from senior officials, sharply different incentives for lower grade officials, and delays in establishing an effective working administration following a change of government - see Q6 below. The senior ranks of the US administration are much more politicised than ours and the Trump administration has taken this to a higher level still, causing Dan Moynihan to summarise its disadvantages. His arguments are summarised at Annex 4.

We wouldn't have to go as far the USA model, of course. There are plenty of effective governments around the world whose senior officials are politically acceptable to their ruling party, whilst remaining politically inactive.

Q5. Should we revisit the Haldane reforms under which the relationship between civil servants and ministers is supposed to be one of mutual interdependence, with ministers providing authority and officials providing expertise.

Here is Edward Bridges, many years ago now, describing the virtues of the ideal mandarin:

> He is less easily elated, less readily discouraged than most men by everyday happenings. Outwardly he may appear cynical or disillusioned, and perhaps to be disinclined to put up a fight for things which excite others. But this is because he has learned by experience that the walls of Jericho do not nowadays fall flat even after seven perambulations to the sound of the trumpet, and that many of the results which he wants to see come about in the most unexpected ways. Once the crust of disillusion is pierced, you will find a man who feels with the fiercest intensity for those things which he has learned to cherish - those things, that is to say, which are of vital concern for the continued well-being of the community.

It is hard to believe that the relationship between modern politicians and these dispassionate officials remains effective when Senior Civil Servants (the SCS) have, alongside their ministers, overseen a serious deterioration in the governance of the UK over the last couple of decades.

The SCS, rather than being respected as experts, too often appear to be 'gifted amateurs' in a world of their own, over-defensive and far too keen to act as Ministers' courtiers, rather than speaking truth to power.

There is also the point that some ministers and their Spads now know as much, or even more, about their subject area than their senior officials who are these days often forced to move to a new job every four or five years, or choose to do so in order to gain promotion and a pay rise.

Also, as Fiona Bulmer remarked in 1995:

> 'One has to wonder about the character of a person who can divorce themselves so completely from the principles of a policy and be so completely dispassionate. At best they must be cold fish, at worst they lack all conviction'.

So is it time to try something different – but if so, what?

As an aside, the current dispassionate nature of senior officials would make reform much easier. Civil servants are, at the end of the day, trained and inclined to be obedient.

Intermission: The Story So Far

The above paragraphs summarise the five constitutional issues which reformers need to think about before embarking on (and preferably before announcing) their reform programme. Reformers do not of course need to press on with change in all those areas but they do need to rule each reform to be either within or without the programme. And serious reform would need change in at least one of the five areas.

But then there are several other questions which need to be addressed in planning the programme.

Q6. Continuity v. Uncertainty

Any reformer needs to consider the extent to which they are willing to disturb existing contractual and other relations both within government and with the private and voluntary sectors and research communities.

Andrew Marr posed the question this way:

> "How do you reform a machine you are using for urgent purposes every day? … [It's] like asking me to jump out of the plane and knit a parachute on the way down."

Civil servants administer contracts, investment and research programmes, and treaties which have very long timescales. Pensions and social care are two obvious areas where individuals are meant to plan and save and accrue rights over the course of their lifetimes. Change needs to be carefully planned. Much the same applies to industrial and inward investment. Companies need to trust that a country's policies will not change very fast or else they will not risk investing.

Widening the argument, if a nation state is to maintain its power, it must maintain itself over time. Authority needs to be transferred from some people to other people while institutions continue to function. This normally happens through well-established processes following general elections.

President Trump, in his second term, chose instead to tear up a very wide range of policies, agreements and research programmes. But who is now going to rely on any of his 'deals' – or his successors'? The consequences in terms of loss of business and research community confidence may take time to become evident, but they will certainly be profound.

Here in the UK, Permanent Secretaries, ambassadors and others are parts of extensive networks in which shared knowledge and mutual trust play a big part. A wholesale Kruger-esque sacking of the top brass (see Q4 above) would therefore certainly be highly disruptive - which is why Andrew Greenway's approach, although almost as dramatic, is to be preferred (see Annex 3).

The four-yearly change of administration in the USA is an interesting example even without Donald Trump. Yes, the top layers of officials swap every time the Republicans and Democrats replace each other in Washington. But it helps that the US is effectively a 'winner takes all' two party state and there are two months between election and inauguration. The transition can therefore be carefully planned although even then large gaps at persist for months or years at lower levels. These can be seriously damaging. The FT recently reported that in several of the Arab states that have been bombarded by Iran - including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait and Iraq - there is no U.S. ambassador present, nor even a nominee waiting Senate confirmation.

Q7. The Chasm

This is a related question. To what extent is it sensible to take risks, move fast and maybe break things?

Some characterise this as whether "to leap the chasm" or whether cross it carefully as if on a tightrope. Is it best go for a wide-ranging, comprehensive set of reforms or limit one's ambitions to a more restrained, incremental programme of change?

Charles Polidano again:

> [This] all boils down to an 'advance on all fronts' argument ... half-hearted reform is almost worse than no reform at all: don't leap a chasm in 2 steps.
>
> [But]
>
> Under most conditions, reform is less like leaping a chasm than crossing it on a tightrope. Stopping midway is not an option: one has to press on. But forcing the pace can lead to disaster. One has to proceed slowly, pace by pace, all the while watching one step very carefully indeed. This does not mean giving up all hope of making major change: an incremental process of change can add up to a radical transformation if it is sustained long enough. It does mean, however, that any hopes of doing it all at once should be discarded.

On the other hand, over-elaborate reform projects which attempt to address too many objectives simultaneously can be impossible to implement. And performance measures can be so problematic that it is often better to begin with experiments and then learn from experience.

Q8. Leadership

Strong leadership is essential, of course, partly because of the constitutional and other choices that need to be made and then defended.

The Prime Minister's support is therefore vital. Officials are much more likely to pick up the baton of reform and run with it if the head of government is breathing down their necks (and the necks of their respective ministers).

Sadly, however, there are a number of reasons why political leaders may fail to pay enough attention to reform. Our current PM is not an exception to this rule. Many politicians believe that civil service reform should be left in the hands of civil servants, and they may be surprised to discover what heavy demands successful reform makes on their time and political capital; they may see reform as an exercise in political window-dressing; or they may be going along with it solely to attract aid money or satisfy conditionalities.

Our current ministers have certainly shown no serious interest in civil service reform. Darren Jones' speech, in particular, was a real disappointment.

It is equally vital that there should be strong and clear civil service leadership.

Antonia Romeo shows welcome interest in innovation, digital transformation and performance frameworks. She also says she will be "relentless in scrutinising our performance and removing barriers to delivery" and is keen to improve the effectiveness of the Cabinet Office (see Q2 above.). That is very welcome, but it may not be transformational.

Then there is Jerome Glass who has recently been appointed as a DG in the Cabinet Office 'to lead civil service transformation'. In announcing his appointment he said that he would be "focusing on improving delivery, innovation and productivity, and culture and pride ... with a mission to build the civil service of the future". But then it became clear that he replaces two people - the Chief People Officer (!) and the

Director General for Reform and Efficiency. These are (or should be) two big jobs. I fear that his HR role will in practice dominate his day to day activity.

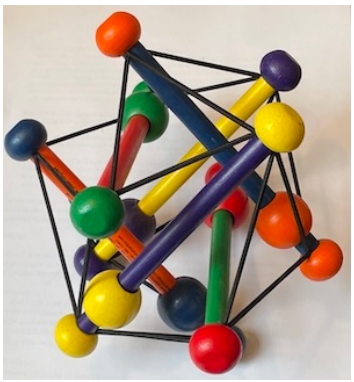
In short, therefore, we do not currently have a ministerial or civil service leadership team interested in fundamental civil service reform and it remains to be seen whether they have the skills or capacity to succeed in the more restricted areas that they have chosen to address. (There is a short note about civil service-led reform at Annex 3.)

Q9. Organisation and Planning - The Six Cs

Different change management experts use different descriptors but they all talk about the need to identify something like "the six Cs":- the key elements of any system, none of which can be permanently altered without simultaneously requiring or causing change in the others.:-

- Constitution:- i.e. organisational structure, reporting lines etc.
- Culture:- new relationship etc
- Communications:- including not only communications whilst the change programme is being implemented, but also new ways of communicating once the changes have been implemented
- Capacity:- i.e. resources, and in particular staff numbers
- Capability (or competence):- i.e. staff skills, training, experience and motivation
- Compensation - salaries, bonuses, appreciation

Put another way, if you try to change one of the Cs without changing the rest of the system then the system will over time, like this child's flexible toy, snap back (revert) to its previous state.



Let's look, for example, at the consequences of centralising power into a Prime Minister's Office.

Well, obviously enough, there would need to be a new **constitution** including the formal relationship between Parliament, ministers and departments. And the government's internal **culture** would need to change. Ministers would be expected to compete much less than they do now and instead work more collaboratively.

External **communications** (including accountability) would also need to be rethought, as would those within government. There would need to be more traffic to and from No.10 and rather less elsewhere.

Significant **capacity** would need to be added to the centre - including premises as well as staff. Supporters of a stronger centre often talk about importing more politicos and experts from the private sector. **Competence**? Politicians would need to be more team-spirited and technocratic than they are now. They would be less free to impede policies which they disliked, or which were unpopular with their supporters. This might not appeal to conviction politicians. And senior civil servants would need to learn how to operate in an initially unfamiliar environment, no longer reporting to and directed by their

Secretary of State but instead having some sort of reporting line to No.10. The extent and nature of this change would need careful thought and might take a while to bed in.

Compensation? The salaries of the additional advisers in the Prime Minister's Office would need some thought. The political staff and other external hires would probably expect significant salaries. Departmental officials would need to understand how and by whom their performance was to be evaluated in this new world.

Understanding, 'selling' and planning for those changes would challenge any team.

Another example: All of the six Cs would need to be engaged if officials were made more accountable to the media and the public. It would of course be a significant **constitutional** and **cultural change** which would take some getting used to, whether as ministers or officials - or indeed the media.

External **communications** would take very different forms and significant **capacity** would need to be added to comms teams, although there might be savings elsewhere, nit least in the quantity .

Competence? Training would be needed and - let's face it - some of the current SCS would not thrive in their new more exposed positions.

Compensation? I can't see that the overall pay bill would need to rise or fall but officials would need to understand how and by whom their public performance was to be evaluated.

Q10. MPs & The Media

These two constituencies may not be directly involved in any reform programme but they would be affected by any change in the way in which accountability is shared between ministers and officials.

Politicians are tribal animals and the vast majority have little or no interest in, or experience of, managing large organisations, or even in policy-making. Their career prospects depend upon their debating and deal-making skills and upon their ability to attract favourable media attention, not on their effectiveness in Select Committees. They gain political advantage by criticising fellow politicians, and ministers in particular, rather than unelected officials. It can be fun to tear into hapless officials, but there are no votes in it.

Most of the media, too, have little interest in government itself, as distinct from its personalities. The media's coverage of the Brexit debates was appalling and it has since then revelled in the successive psychodramas. As Robert Saunders ruefully commented following the First Reading of the Safety of Rwanda Bill in December 2023:

> So much of the news coverage of the Rwanda vote is about what it means for the PM's authority, rather than its implications for policy, for the constitution &, indeed, for asylum-seekers. Respectfully, if that's all we're going to focus on, it might as well be in the sports news

But MPs and the media could easily derail Whitehall reform if they took against it. Great care would therefore need to be taken to 'sell' reform to both constituencies and cross-party support would surely be needed for more fundamental changes. This would seem a distant dream in present circumstances.

Q11. Why Projects Go Wrong

Last, and certainly not least, the reform team would need to be strong enough - and strongly-led enough - to be able to overcome the following perennial problems with Whitehall-led projects:

- Civil servants are reluctant to highlight unrealistic timescales and/or the need for further pilots and planning, as they want to be seen as 'can do'.
- This can generate pressure to hurry the implementation of reforms and projects.
- However, sustainable changes to public services needs a strategic perspective, careful planning and sound implementation.
- A system can only take on so much change at once.

Civil servants do not deliberately resist to Ministers' demands. Instead, there is unacknowledged reality and considerable optimism bias. Officials ignore inconvenient facts and so ...

- They and their ministers present the unlikely upside as the most likely result.
- Major projects under-deliver on benefits and overshoot on time and cost.
- Failure to fully spec projects before beginning them and the consequential changing requirements lead to delays and increases in costs, for example in major defence projects - and HS2! (The design of the Euston terminus remains the subject of debate 13 years after the project was begun.)

Martin Stanley
www.civilservant.org.uk
https://ukcivilservant.substack.com/

END

ANNEX 1

THE PROBLEM

I have lost count of all the government, think tank and individual reports that have recommended civil service reform since the last serious attempt (Haldane) in 1918. (If you want to count them yourself, you'll find most of them in my online library.) They all draw attention to one, several, or all of a familiar list of civil service weaknesses.

There have also been several books and think tank reports which list and examine various government 'blunders' and/or weaknesses across government, Parliament and the media. They all recognise the criticisms of the Senior Civil Service but distribute blame much more widely.

Here are summaries of the most accessible commentaries on significant UK policy failures.

The theme of Patrick Dunleavy's 1995 ***Policy Disasters: Explaining the UK's Record*** is that the UK is a state unusually prone to make large-scale, avoidable policy mistakes, which he defines as mistakes made when decision-makers systematically choose to ignore an abundance of critical or warning voices in order to persevere with their chosen policy. Contributory factors include:

· Weak regional government and highly centralised social security and health systems.
· Weak parliamentary scrutiny of legislation.
· Political hyperactivism – when politicians individually and collectively gain 'points' from making new initiatives almost for their own sakes.
· Whitehall arrogance, including serious weaknesses in the senior civil service.
· Ineffective checks and balances within the executive which allow mistakes to be made and encourage groupthink.

Michael Moran's ***The British Regulatory State***, published in 2003, analysed six high-profile fiascos and concluded that they were caused by (amongst other things) 'club government, evidenced by a devaluation of formally acquired skills and explicit knowledge at the top of government and the craze for downsizing'.

Anthony King and Ivor Crewe's 2013 ***The Blunders of Our Governments*** summarises 12 highly readable policy (and implementation) horror stories. They point to failures of deliberation, accountability and restraint in UK policy-making. Their examples of deficient deliberation include lack of pre-legislative consultation, and inadequate parliamentary involvement. Other problems include the high turnover of both ministers and senior officials and a culture of haste and determination to 'deliver', all exacerbated by failure to learn from past mistakes.

"It's a series of lessons with one overarching theme – that successive UK governments have attempted to do too much, far too quickly and without paying sufficient attention to the 'do-ability' of their policies".

Undeservedly receiving much less attention, Richard Bacon and Christopher Hope's ***Conundrum: Why Every Government Gets Things Wrong – And What We Can Do About It*** was also published in 2013. They identify similar problems to other commentators but are less critical of politicians:- "If we are to have a democracy, then we need to take it warts and all … By all means let us have [more expertise] but let us not suppose that this will yield a clear answer to every question.

And they are more ready to ask: "Are Civil Servants up to the job?". Their answer to this question is that …

> Ministers have a nearly impossible job. And for civil servants the outlook might seem just as unpromising. Civil servants need to be god managers to do their job properly but for 150 years they have been recruited on their … analytical abilities … not for their ability to make things happen. … most top civil servants don't want to be managers – they have culturally disdained 'management' – and they also know that becoming a top manger will not guarantee their promotion to the top.

The Institute for Government's Report ***All Change Report*** draws attention to Ministers preference for reinvention rather than continuous improvement.

> "Government has a tendency to recreate policies and organisations on an alarmingly regular basis. New organisations replace old ones; one policy is ended while a remarkably similar one is launched. In this report, we demonstrate this through an in-depth examination of three policy areas where change has been especially acute: further education (FE), regional governance and industrial policy.

As recently as 2019, Bob Hudson has argued that "***We need to talk about policy failure – and how to avoid it***", listing four broad factors leading to policy failure:

- Overly optimistic expectations
- Dispersed governance
- Inadequate collaboration &
- Vagaries of the political cycle.

Ministerial propensity for delay was rather nicely highlighted by ***David Lammy's reaction to Boris Johnson's Racial Inequality Review:***

- "There are 35 recommendations in the Lammy Review. Implement them.
- There are 110 recommendations in the Angiolini Review. Implement them.
- There are 30 recommendations in the Windrush Lessons Learned review. Implement them.
- There are 26 recommendations in Baroness McGregor-Smith's Review: Implement them."

Finally, two recent and excellent books:- Ian Dunt's ***How Westminster Works ... and why it doesn't*** and Sam Freedman's ***Failed State***.

ANNEX 2

CASE STUDY - A Prime Minister's Department?

It is hard to argue with those that believe that Whitehall needs 'a stronger centre', or 'a new Department of the Prime Minister'. But I have two caveats.

First, this would be a major constitutional change. The UK is not a presidential but a parliamentary democracy in which the Prime Minister usually needs the support and consent of the 'big beasts' in the Cabinet before acting.

Second, it would be a major organisational challenge which would need careful, years-long planning and resolute implementation

Such abstract concerns can sound unconvincing; 'the blob' resisting change, as ever. So I thought it might be helpful to describe a real world example of an inter-departmental argument in which I was an observer and minor participant - and consider how it might have been handled by a more powerful No.10 machine. The following example is pretty dated now but that avoids the analysis being confused by more recent politics.

This dispute took place in the mid-1980s when the Thatcher-led government was in the final stages of the privatisation of the warship-building yards. Warship-building itself was at a low ebb with Yarrow (on the Clyde), Swan Hunter (on the Tyne) and Cammell Laird (on the Mersey) all running out of work. Unemployment was a serious problem in all three regions - and shipyards and their suppliers were major employers. But it was very unlikely that all three yards could survive whether inside or outside public ownership - 'though there was one Ministry of Defence (MoD) order that might save one or more of them: Four Type 22 Frigates.

The first two of the four (HMS Cornwall and Cumberland) were ordered from Yarrow, so safeguarding the future of that yard. But the question of the destination of the final two orders remained open.

The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI - my department) was responsible for both shipbuilding policy and the privatisation process. Its Secretary of State Norman Tebbit and his officials both agreed that the other two frigates should be built on Tyneside. Cammell Laird should close unless it could attract other orders such as for oil rigs and submarines. This would create a relatively strong Swan Hunter able to compete with Yarrow after privatisation and so ensure downward pressure on defence spending - whilst also maybe winning orders overseas. It would also probably facilitate the forthcoming privatisation.

But the orders needed to be placed by the MoD. We suspected (maybe we knew?) that MoD officials agreed with our analysis but they were in fact supporting their Secretary of State, Michael Heseltine, who had led the regeneration of Liverpool following the 1981 Toxteth (Liverpool) riots. He believed, understandably enough, that at least one of 'his' frigates should be built on his beloved Mersey.

Heseltine and Tebbit came from absolutely opposite wings of the Tory Party. Heseltine was an interventionist outlier. Tebbit was much closer to the Prime Minister and to Chancellor of the Exchequer Geoffrey Howe. Howe had previously urged Prime Minister Thatcher to refuse funding for Liverpool's renewal and leave the city to a fate of "managed decline".

The DTI v. MoD argument was conducted along traditional Cabinet Government lines. Interdepartmental correspondence was followed by officials' meetings chaired by the Cabinet Office and then a ministerial discussion in a Cabinet Committee - and finally a Prime Ministerial decision - to allocate one frigate (HMS Chatham) to Swan Hunter and one (HMS Campbeltown) to Cammell Laird.

Both yards were then privatised. Neither yard built another surface warship and both closed in 1993 although some ship repair etc. business continued. Here is a photograph taken as the workers left Swans for the last time:

So ... Did Cabinet Government work well?

> **Yes?** Two very senior politicians, one of whom saw himself as a future Prime Minister, knew that their arguments had been given a full airing and properly scrutinised. Neither felt disrespected and both therefore felt able to accept Mrs Thatcher's political judgment.
>
> **No?** It was the wrong decision. It doomed both yards and increased government spending as a result of reduced competition. Liverpool's economy was not greatly helped by the decision and Tyneside certainly suffered. The inter-departmental fighting wasted time and political energy. It would have been much better if the decision had quickly been referred to the Prime Minster via officials and political team in No. 10 - and Tebbit and Heseltine told to just accept the result, whatever it was.

Looking back on it, therefore, Norman Tebbit's Spads and officials might have wished No.10 to have been stronger. The right policy (in economic and regional terms) might then have been imposed on Michael Heseltine. And Mr Heseltine, in this scenario, would not have been too upset. He would have known, when he joined the government, that such contentious decisions would be taken (a) quickly, (b) centrally, (c) by the Prime Minister advised by political advisers and various experts in No.10, and (d) for the greater good of the UK. He would have known that his role would have been more like that of a very senior civil servant - to argue his case as best he could but then, like a good soldier, to accept the decision of the No.10 team. (Those that know Mr Heseltine will recognise that this is an unlikely scenario.)

Alternatively, maybe, the centrally-strong No.10 machine would have included politicians such as Tebbit and Heseltine who would take decisions based on advice from civil servants in departments that did not report to politicians. Such advice would, again, have been strongly in favour of closing Cammell Laird.

But it is possible that the argument could have been thrashed out within No.10 itself and the decision taken more quickly than it was.

It is possible, too, that a much stronger (expert-advised?) No.10 might not have taken the post-Toxteth decision to pump lots of money into Liverpool. There were quite a few voices, at the time, who argued that Liverpool was too remote - too near the end of the line - from the London, South East, West Midlands, Manchester economic powerhouse.

Now - Please don't shout at me if you disagree with any of the above regional, economic or political analysis. It really doesn't matter. Much of it is hypothesis.

My point is that a strong centralised government would operate in quite a different way to the way Cabinet government operates - or should operate. **And it would take different decisions.** Senior politicians would be less influential and/or they would not run their own departments. There would less inter-departmental argument and less challenge. Those working in No.10 would have more power, with real consequences for decision-making. Those who would be more powerful would include future versions of Steve Hilton, Dominic Cummings and Morgan McSweeney.

Does this sound attractive? Maybe not - but a more powerful Prime Minister's machine would be able to drive change much more effectively. The Prime Minister is currently almost a supplicant, begging his ministers to get on and deliver on manifesto promises. And the inability to tell Cabinet ministers what to do can be a serious problem when faced with a cross-government emergency such as Covid ... or absence of growth.

What About Parliament?

A centralised administration would require a substantial change in ministers' relationship with Parliament.

In the above example, for instance, Michael Heseltine will have answered Parliamentary Questions about "his" decision to "rob" Swan Hunter" and "favour" Cammell Laird. But what if the decision had clearly been taken by a beefed up No.10? Would he still have been required to account for the decision even if he had clearly not taken it? That would have reduced his role to being a mere government spokesperson. That's not very attractive for any politician, let alone an ambitious one. And MPs, too, would surely feel that they had not been allowed to question the true decision maker.

Constitutionally, therefore ...

A more powerful centre may therefore, or may not, be a good thing, but it would certainly represent a significant constitutional change.

(And it would probably be much better than the regime preferred by recent Prime Ministers - an uneasy compromise in which they are surrounded by weak or subservient Cabinet ministers and so try to act 'presidentially' whilst pretending that they continue to lead a Cabinet government.)

Concluding Comment

I have no doubt that a stronger centre would offer some advantages over the current arrangement. But it would represent a significant break from the past and require detailed planning and much difficult decision-making. I find it hard to see how this could be done by a government under pressure. Cross-party agreement would help, but this currently seems unachievable.

ANNEX 3

CIVIL SERVICE LED REFORM

Why does the civil service wait for something to be done to it, rather than address some of its problems themselves? Many think tank reports acknowledge that a good proportion of the SCS themselves recognise that something needs to change. Jonathan Slater persuasively argues that the civil service could do much to improve its own performance without involving ministers - but it doesn't.

Part of the problem is that many senior officials, like many other senior professionals, are not good managers. They don't have significant delivery experience, they don't address quality problems that seem obvious to others and the aren't particularly interested in efficiency. It is more likely to be outside observers that argue that departmental HQs should de-layer - and maybe re-learn how to work efficiently, holding fewer meetings and becoming less distracted by emails and other modern sludge ... even if they don't go so far as Andrew Greenway:

> There is a character in Avengers: Infinity war where a character snaps his fingers and half the population immediately disappears. One of my less acceptable opinions is that if you did something similar to the current top 200 civil servants, even at random, and paid the remaining half 1/3 more, I strongly suspect you'd get better outcomes.

But there are some Whitehall-specific challenges that impede progress.

The first is the distributed nature of power inside Whitehall. The Cabinet Secretary's power is limited in a way that surprises those outside the system. Like the Prime Minister, she can try to pull various levers, but few of them are connected to any change in the world outside the Cabinet Office. Permanent Secretaries resist being told what to do by the Cabinet Secretary, let alone her underlings.

Charles Polidano suggests that one way of finding the necessary balance might be to develop a certification scheme whereby performance improvements by line departments are audited and formally recognised. (This sounds a bit like Gus O'Donnell's Departmental Capability Reviews, although their scope was pretty circumscribed.) The political imperative reform would then take the form of a demand that line departments seek and gain certification for key functions. In this way, departments would have a clear direction to follow while retaining the leeway to respond in a way that is tailored to their needs and circumstances.

ANNEX 4

POLITICISATION

Writing in or around 2025, American commentator Dan Moynihan argued that politicisation erodes both state capacity and performance.

He offered these links to relevant research:

- A cross-national review of 52 countries found that non-politicized, merit-based hiring and tenure protections were associated with higher performance and lower corruption.
- Comparison of program evaluations during the George W. Bush era for programs run by political appointees relative to those run by career officials show the appointees are associated with lower performance.

- Historical State Department Inspectors General reports finds that career officials perform better than appointees in diplomatic positions.
- In certain areas, we see direct evidence of performance improvement using historical records that track the introduction of merit systems. The use of merit systems improved the performance of police departments in reducing violent crime. A study of the postal system found that its performance increased after the introduction of the civil service system in the 1880s.

And he suggested that these reasons might be amongst those that cause political appointees to perform less well than those appointed on merit:

- Prioritizing political loyalty leads to the hiring of more politically connected but less competent individuals.
- Public employees are more likely to exit when they have experienced more politicized work environments.
- Politicization replaces moderates with zealots. Civil servants tend to have more moderate political views than political appointees, and are more accustomed to organizational norms that they must temper their political preferences compared to appointees who seek to quickly implement their partisan agenda. Zealots are more likely to make errors, and neglect constituencies not part of their coalition.
- Politicization replaces experienced managers with inexperienced managers. The average time in office for political appointees is 18-24 months. Performance differences between political appointees and career officials is explained by less task-specific experience among appointees. The improvement in Post Office performance after the introduction of the civil service system was because of a reduction in turnover, especially in election years.
- Employees will have less reason to invest in maintaining and expanding their skills. Individual employees have little incentive to invest in their own skillset in an environment where they can be easily removed, and where expertise is devalued. A history of the US civil service system is consistent with this expertise model, showing that tenure creates an incentive structure where employees invest effort in building skills of particular value to the public sector. Contemporary public managers who face politicization are less likely to make investments in expertise.
- Politicization creates a chilling effect that damages the flow of factual but uncongenial information. For example, on-the-record government sources are not contradicting Musk's lies about government programs.
- Politicization invites waste and corruption. Procurement processes represent a huge portion of spending, equivalent to about half of domestic discretionary spending. Investments in civil service capacity reduce costs, giving the state greater capacity to manage contractors, while a reliance on consultants is associated with higher costs in infrastructure. Maintaining sufficient capacity to monitor private providers of public services is essential to constraining waste. For example, every dollar in spending on civil servants to monitor Medicare overspending saves between $24-$29. Historically, civil service systems limit the ability of politicians to spend in ways designed to ensure their re-election. Even with civil service systems, federal departments with more political appointees are more likely to provide non-competitive contracts and see greater turnover with contracts, indicating political favoritism in the provision of public spending.
- Politicization reduces democratic responsiveness to other legitimate actors and other legitimate values, such as transparency. More politicized agencies are less responsive to information requests from Congress and the public. This lack of responsiveness to Congress is especially pronounced when members of the opposite party make information requests, either about policy or constituent services. Right now, Democrats cannot get straight answers to basic questions about what the Trump administration is doing.

END