



# Civil Servants, Ministers and Parliament

## Chapter 5 - Blunders and Criticism

Previous chapters have described the role of the civil servants within the UK constitution and have focussed in particular in the relationship between officials, Ministers and Parliament. But no-one can sensibly claim that this *Westminster Model* of government has produced uniformly good results. This chapter explores what might be wrong.

In no particular order, I have divided the analysis in this chapter into a number of separate (if slightly overlapping) parts.

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### 5.1 What happened to Speaking Truth to Power?

A fundamental feature of the Westminster Model of Government is that Ministers are not free to ignore official expertise. "Ministers have a duty to give fair consideration and due weight to informed and impartial advice from civil servants, as well as to other

considerations and advice in reaching policy decisions"<sup>1</sup>. Officials must accordingly not hesitate to 'speak truth to power'<sup>2</sup>. Ministers should, for instance, be told in no uncertain terms if officials believe that their programs could not be delivered within the resources and timescales allocated to them.

But many critics argue that the modern delivery-focussed civil service has become much less good at challenging Ministers, and might even have become somewhat politicised. The initial Universal Credit program, for example, seemed unrealistic. Departments' press releases are becoming a little too economical with the truth. And Permanent Secretaries are agreeing too easily to implement Ministers' short-sighted management decisions.

In total contrast, however, other powerful critics - including many Ministers -think that the civil service is far too obstructive. They would be pleased if – but do not believe that - the civil service has indeed become more willing to energetically carry out Ministers' wishes. It is not many years since *The Times* reported "*Whitehall in Worst Crisis ... [officials] think it's their job just to say "No" ... "The Civil Service sees itself as a check and balance within the political system, and that's a problem."* Many other governments have felt similar frustration. This hardly suggests that officials have forgotten their challenge function.

One difficulty is that we just don't know whether the challenge function of the civil service has indeed been degraded over time, and if so whether that is a good thing. It has long been thought that one necessary consequence of the close and occasional stressful relationship between officials and Ministers has been the invisibility of civil service advice. But how can we resolve the conflicting arguments, and reduce the amount of blundering, without piercing Whitehall's veil? The rest of this chapter, and the next one, explore these questions in some detail.

## 5.2 Government Blunders

Let's begin by examining the evidence that something has gone badly wrong as evidenced by the extensive list of policy and delivery failures over recent years.

Richard Bacon and Christopher Hope's *Conundrum* and Anthony King's and Ivor Crewe's *The Blunders of our Governments* were both published in 2013.

The King/Crewe book analyses the causes of a wide range of blunders, including:

- the poll tax,
- personal pensions mis-selling,
- the Child Support Agency,
- the UK's exit from the Exchange Rate Mechanism,
- The Millennium Dome,
- Individual Learning Accounts,

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<sup>1</sup> This is from the Ministerial Code - <https://www.civilservant.org.uk/library/2019-MINISTERIAL-CODE-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.civilservant.org.uk/richborne\\_publishing.html#STtP](https://www.civilservant.org.uk/richborne_publishing.html#STtP)

- Tax Credits,
- the Assets Recovery Agency,
- the farmers' Single Payment Scheme,
- various IT projects,
- the London Underground public-private partnership, and
- identity cards.

I have prepared my own list of more recent blunders. The full list can be found on my civil servant website<sup>3</sup> and a shorter, abbreviated list is below.

Here is my abbreviated list:

- Ministers decided to build two new aircraft carriers, despite the money not being available to pay for them.
- The incoming coalition government subsequently decided to proceed with the construction of the ships but not to equip them with aircraft for some years.
- David Cameron's announcement of The Big Society lacked clarity, including clarity of purpose. One official said that it was "like publicising a new car badge without first designing the car". (This did of course follow similarly empty announcements made by previous governments, including Citizens Juries.)
- It was difficult to understand the real reasons for the apparent failure of successive governments properly to equip our armed forces in Afghanistan. Was this another example of a failure to resolve the underlying tension between Ministers; wish to provide all possible support for our troops and Ministers' equally strong desire to save money?
- Successive administrations have wasted "obscene" amounts of money on government information technology, according to the Commons Public Accounts Committee reporting in July 2011. The MPs said that "Over-reliance on a few large contractors and poor public sector purchasing and management skills have produced a recipe for rip-offs".
- The performance of a small part of the civil service came under severe scrutiny when Virgin Group forced the Department for Transport (DfT) to withdraw its offer of the West Coast franchise to First Group, blaming civil servants for failures in economic and financial modelling and - it was hinted - for concealing the problems and/or giving too strong assurances to Ministers that all was well.
- The UK's bid for the Olympics assumed a public sector funding package of £2.4 billion. London 2012 eventually cost the public purse around £6 billion more than the original estimate.
- In September 2013, the NAO published a devastating report on DWP's 'over-ambitious' Universal Credit program managed by a team with a 'fortress mentality' in which 'only good news was allowed'

Many politicians and others thought that one solution to Westminster's obvious weakness might be to delegate much decision-making to arm's length experts in the form of regulators. The experience of post-privatisation regulation of telecoms, energy etc.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.civilservant.org.uk/library/all\\_blunders.pdf](https://www.civilservant.org.uk/library/all_blunders.pdf)

convinced them it was much better to have such decisions taken by apolitical experts who were willing to think long term and well beyond the electoral cycle. This thinking lay behind Chancellor Gordon Brown's decision to delegate interest rate-setting to the Bank of England. Crucially, too, it meant that Ministers could avoid blame when energy prices rose, or patients were refused access to expensive medicines, or mortgages became more expensive.

These trends are discussed in greater depth in my *Understanding Regulation website*<sup>4</sup>. But regulators, too, turned out to be flawed - or under-resourced - or under-powered - and this inevitably led to

- the 2008 financial crisis,
- the Jimmy Saville and Rotherham child abuse scandals,
- the Mid-Staffs Hospital scandal,
- the Grenfell Tower disaster, and
- many more failures of regulatory systems which central Government had designed and for which central Government retained final responsibility.

And then, whatever you think of the UK's decision to leave the European Union, or the politics of the Johnson government,

- there are very few who believe that Brexit implementation has gone smoothly, and
- the government's preparation for, and initial response to, the Covid pandemic led to a UK death rate far higher than most comparable countries<sup>5</sup>.

### 5.3 So .. What Caused These Blunders?

King and Crewe, in particular, seemed genuinely puzzled by the fact that our politicians and civil servants are so prone to serious blundering:

[British governments] screw up more often than most people seem to realise. .. Governments of all parties appear equally blunder-prone. .. in spite of government's incessant blundering, the United Kingdom is in many ways a well-governed country. [The majority of] our political leaders ... are genuinely concerned with both the British people's welfare and the country's long term future. .. Compared with the political elites of some countries .. most British politicians and civil servants are models of both rectitude and public-spiritedness. .. these very qualities make the frequency with which they commit blunders the more surprising and disappointing."

They went on to divide the causes into two main groups – human errors and system failures – but they do not specifically criticise civil servants. According to its index, 'civil servants' and 'officials' are mentioned on only five pages of a 400+ page book. This seems odd. After all, the Senior Civil Service outnumbers Ministers by around 40 to 1 and so can hardly avoid

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.regulation.org.uk/index.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.civilservant.org.uk/skills-crises.html>

taking a share of the responsibility for the blundering. And isn't it supposed to be brilliant at analysing problems and 'speaking truth to power' - and being heard?

One theme seems to be a failure to learn from previous failures - or even reconsider policies when they are going badly wrong. Neither Ministers nor officials are incentivised to identify and resolve problems as policies are being rolled out, because they will then be associated with what will be characterised as a mistake or a failure. Similarly, they will later not acknowledge that a failure has happened, for fear of suffering political or career damage. This clearly inhibits learning.

There were also systemic problems with the delivery of the government's various programs. Professor King, writing in the Financial Times in April 2012, commented that:-

'Part of the problem is the sheer velocity with which most Ministers evidently feel compelled to act. With the prime Minister either urging them on – or, more probably, not restraining them – they advance rapidly and simultaneously on all fronts: NHS reform, local government reform, law reform, school reform, planning reform, welfare reform, the list goes on. The spectacle resembles a 19th-century cavalry charge, with some horsemen and their mounts inevitably cut down.

The contrast between Mr Cameron and Margaret Thatcher could hardly be more striking. He is hell bent for leather and makes a speech almost every day as though to ram home the point. Mrs Thatcher was at least as radical a prime Minister but far more focused and cautious. She had a clear sense of direction but travelled only slowly during the most successful phases of her premiership. Following her first electoral triumph in 1979, she was in office for fully three years before launching her most ambitious projects: trade union reform and privatisation. It was not until 1982 that she abandoned her step-by-step approach towards reforming the unions and encouraged Norman Tebbit (who needed little encouragement) to radically overhaul trade-union law. It was not until 1984, well into her second term, that her government began to undertake the wholesale privatisation of state-owned industries, starting with British Telecom. She looked before she leapt, until, to her cost, she lost the habit.'

The analysis so far does not address the question whether the blunders are at least in part the result of poor advice from officials, or the result of Ministers not accepting good advice. The next section summarises the views of both senior officials and interested academics.

#### **5.4 The World is Now Very Different**

The Westminster/Haldane system of government has in principle remained unchanged over the last 100 years, but the world around, and indeed government itself, would be unrecognisable to previous generations. Is *the Westminster Model* still be fit for purpose? Here is what some senior officials and others have said to me:-

**In wider society:-**

- Public and media have become much less deferential over several generations. This a good thing - but Ministers have responded by requiring Whitehall to become much more defensive, less open to considered criticism, and less willing to consider options before reaching policy conclusions.
- Freedom of Information has accordingly become seen as a threat instead of a codification of what should be done naturally.
- The media – including social media – are now so massive that government has to put a lot more effort into communications activity – but, even so, we all know that a lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is still getting its boots on. Government pronouncements are therefore often rushed, and lack subtlety and accuracy.
- Globalisation, immigration and our past membership of the EU also mean that the government’s audience is much more varied than in the past. This exposure to other cultures has many advantages but poses problems for the government’s communications teams.
- There is some evidence that society is becoming more polarised, which can lead to ignorance & cognitive dissonance on both sides of the arguments.
- Prosperity has generated a number of ‘wicked policy issues’ as we have more to spend on food, drugs and alcohol – and on mobile phones and other consumer goods that are so tempting for the criminally minded.

#### **Within Whitehall:-**

- Ministers don't understand implications of the cuts in staff numbers that they have ordered. The resultant loss of experience will mean that they will not have Civil Service support when they need it, nor of the experience/quality that they need.
- Senior officials in particular are now over-stretched, and have little time for getting out and understanding the policy areas and sectors within which they work.
- Civil servants have learned that there is little point in challenging major decisions, however, short-sighted. They instead focus on controlling the (devil in) the detail.
- The market-based approach to appointments led to greater turbulence and less depth of knowledge.
- HMG in many areas no longer acts as a supplier; it instead buys services from and for others. But its procurement and negotiations skills are still pretty weak, and its lawyers are too often out-gunned by their expensive heavyweight private sector opponents.
- ‘Fast stream’ recruits no longer have a career anchor/home department – they are all nominally employed by HMRC - and their 6 month appointments, rotating around departments, mean they can't gain a deep understanding of any one department’s issues, nor gain experience in a Minister’s Private Office.

Many of the above comments are echoed by academic commentators:-

**Professor Jeremy Richardson** makes these points:

- There have been important changes *within* government departments, namely a change in the balance of power between senior civil servants on the one hand, and Ministers and their Special Advisers on the other.
- Many Ministers (and their external advisers, both official and informal) arrive in office with a thorough knowledge of their policy portfolio and their own strong priorities on what policy change is needed. This has led to a shift from civil servants warning Ministers and keeping them out of trouble, reflecting the traditional risk aversion normally attributed to British government, towards ‘carriers’ of Ministerial ideas, willing to try to implement policies even when lacking broad policy community support.
- There are big risks inherent in the new policy style under which consultation is much more constrained.
- Professor Richardson quotes David Halpern (Head of Number 10’s Behavioural Insights Team) as describing life behind the shiny black door of Number 10 as akin to a hospital Accident & Emergency Department:- ‘in such a world, there’s often not the time, nor the patience, for the answer to be “more research needed”’ There is more than a hint here of a ‘pop-up’ style of policymaking where chaps (mostly!) with seemingly clever policy ideas get to implement them without the need to consider the views of, or seek the support of, the affected interests.

And here are some extracts from Professor Anthony King’s *Who Governs Britain?*

- Ministers now] believe ... that if they are to impress ... they must constantly be seen to be taking initiatives [and] if change is desirable ... then it is desirable *now* not at some unspecified time in the future ... Post-Thatcher Ministers are characterised by their impatience. [They] have no incentive at all to think about the longer term future.
- The traditional British civil service ... was dynamic. Generations of senior civil servants regarded it as part of their mission ... to promote causes.
- [The post-Thatcher] change of role meant a corresponding change in the role and mind-set of officials. From now on, officials were to be civil *servants* in reality, at their master’s beck and call, eager to do their master’s bidding. ... By the time New Labour came to power in 1997, there were few if any of the old style mandarins still in place.
- Many Ministers, with much expected of them and suspicious of their officials, turned for help and advice to ... special advisers ... and ... think tanks.
- More than two decades after the fall of Margaret Thatcher, the vast majority of officials, including the most senior, give the impression of having settled into their new, more subordinate role. ... .. “We wanted”, one of them said, “to avoid a Sir Humphrey image. We became afraid to say “No, Minister”. [Another said ...] “Can-do man was in and wait-a-minute man was out.
- ... officials, once the embodiments of departmental continuity, are now at least as transient as their political masters and therefore at least as liable not to have a very firm grasp of what they are doing.
- [A cabinet Minister complained] that his own department’s collective memory was so short ... that “... people deal only with the instant they are living in, rather than

drawing on any kind of history or knowledge of the detail and background to a particular issue.”

**Professor Kakabadse** says that:

- [Senior] civil servants admit to misunderstandings, misjudgements, feeling inhibited to speak up and, in certain circumstances and with particular Secretaries of State, not knowing how to speak truth to power.
- Even middle-ranking and more junior civil servants described feeling defensive and reluctant to offer opinion, fearing reprimand or being viewed in a negative light.

Longer excerpts from these three academics’ writing may be found on my website<sup>6</sup>.

## 5.5 Whitehall Thinks it Knows Best

The problem with the above analyses is that they are offered by friends of Whitehall - serving or current officials and friendly commentators. Some knowledgeable critics, including a fair number of modern politicians, argue that political elites have for too long been making decisions without reference to the public. The role of the electorate has been to do little more than legitimise politics, rather than to be involved in politics.

*The Westminster Model* of government, they say, is to a great extent predicated on the view that 'Government knows best'. It assumes that the public does not have the information necessary to make the right decisions. Key decisions are therefore taken by Ministers and/or officials, approved as necessary by parliament.

Secrecy is supposed to ensure that the right decisions are made in the interests of the people. A responsible government is empowered to take strong decisive action, even when opposed by a majority of the population. This is a leadership rather than participatory view of democracy, but it is legitimised by regular democratic elections, when representatives can be held to account for their decisions.

*The Haldane Model* (mutually interdependent Ministers and officials) also encourages concentration of power at heart of the British political system and 'Government by the elite'. This concentration of power means that senior civil servants can be powerful whilst simultaneously maintaining the polite fiction they are "only advisers". Politicians can, at the same time, continue to maintain that they are really taking all the decisions. In practice, of course, the relative power and influence of senior officials varies very much from Government to Government, and with the characters and experience of the officials and their Ministers. But critics argue that the Westminster/Haldane model is in effect a facade which works to the benefit of both politicians and civil servants, but which disguises the truth from the population at large.

Shielding the inner workings of government can also easily morph into hypocrisy and cover up. The Establishment used to be pretty good at hiding its infidelities, homosexual activity

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.civilservant.org.uk/library/The\\_Westminster\\_Model-Academic\\_Commentary.pdf](https://www.civilservant.org.uk/library/The_Westminster_Model-Academic_Commentary.pdf)

and drunken misbehaviour. A good thing, many would say. But it may also have been pretty good at hiding police corruption, paedophilia and other nasties. Not quite the same?

And what about the Establishment's ability to resist policies that it regards as dangerous or illiberal, such as leaving the EU, ditching Trident, bringing back hanging or cutting immigration and overseas aid. Whitehall, like so many other large organisations, already harbours a good deal of group think - often described as 'showing good judgment'. No promotion-hungry Whitehall civil servant was ever going to admit to voting for UKIP, or agreeing with the Scottish Nationalists. A good thing, some would say. Is there not something to be said for initial civil service resistance to the more dramatic or far-reaching pressures for change, at least so as to give the electorate and Ministers time to think again? But it is hardly democracy in action.

There were critics of the secretive nature of the British civil service as long ago as the 19th Century. Sir James Stephen doubted that any bright individual would wish to pursue a career in which ...

'He must devote all his talents ... to measures, some of which he will assuredly disapprove, without having the slightest power to prevent them; and to some of which he will most essentially contribute, without having any share whatsoever in the credit bestowed on others, ... and if any accident should make him notorious enough to become the suspected author of any unpopular act, he must silently submit to the reproach, even though it is totally unmerited by him'.

The modern electorate certainly seem to believe that 'the Westminster Village' is incompetent and/or out of touch with the concerns of those who live outside cosmopolitan London. They see a hypocritical establishment, much more inclined to tell voters to 'do what I say' rather than 'do what I do'. This seems to be leading to declining numbers voting in elections, and declining membership of the main political parties. Many voters seem to be totally disengaged from politics. There was (and is) little persistent anger with those responsible for the financial crisis, for the Iraq war and for the approaching 200,000 Covid deaths, let alone for the other blunders listed above. *The Institute for Government* has reported that there is no correlation between things that the public thinks that government 'should' prioritise and what it 'does' prioritise.

It seems, therefore, that Whitehall needs to work much harder to involve citizens in decision-making. This implies opening to public scrutiny the debates between Ministers and officials.

## 5.6 Whitehall Does Know Best! - The Case for the Defence

There are many who continue to believe in the fundamental strength of the Westminster/Haldane model. Commentators such as Daniel Finkelstein and Matthew Parris argue that the public do not understand the complexity and long-term nature of government. Politicians (they say) know when they are blundering. They know what needs to be done – at least in the 'wicked areas' such as the environment, tax, foreign policy, pensions, drugs. But they just don't know how to get re-elected after doing it.

Politicians (they say) are not unaware of evidence, but they are often forced to ignore it given the pressure to be re-elected and the influence of pressure and focus groups, and social and other media. Greater civil service accountability, for instance, would not help. The faults in the system (in their view) lie outside government in the ill-informed or unforgiving nature of the electorate and media. Politicians and officials should be allowed to debate, quite privately, how to negotiate the tricky shoals of public opinion.

### **5.7 Would it Help if Civil Servants were Publicly Accountable?**

It is not only politicians who live in the Westminster Village. Is it not time that officials became more accountable for their advice and their actions – or absence of action? Some of them have been intimately involved in the ineffective planning, in ignoring warnings, and in delivering the faulty policies. Surely they cannot avoid taking some of the blame?

It is interesting to consider how officials would react to greater public scrutiny. Many of them, I suspect, would have no problem in principle. Those who have been Agency Chief Executives, or have led Non-Ministerial Government Departments, have generally enjoyed the experience, and have been glad to account for their decisions and performance both in Parliament and via the media.

And Accounting Officers and others are often very uncomfortable (though they seldom show it) when faced with the real world consequences of Ministerial decisions. One example was the Public Accounts Committee tearing into Ministry of Justice officials for failing to identify all the unintended consequences and costs arising out of Ministers' decision to lop £300m off the legal aid budget – and to do it very quickly. I'll bet a pound to a penny that officials would much rather have dragged their feet and not implemented this policy at this speed, and I'll bet they were acutely aware of its consequences, not least for the disadvantaged. Would we not be better governed if the public had had access to those officials' advice and concerns, which might have helped ensure that Ministers did not achieve their policy objectives?

But some MPs are not too worried about exposing differences between officials and Ministers. Cabinet Office Minister Francis Maude saw no problem in such public debates. "A Minister who is confident about what he or she has decided should have no problem in publicly defending it". By way of example, he said that he would like to see much more use made of the 'constitutional safety valve' of written Ministerial Directions to Accounting Officers. They should become 'much more normal' and no longer seen as the nuclear, relationship-destroying option. Indeed, he believed that the fear of using Directions may well have led to officials failing to challenge decisions with which they are uncomfortable, but then failing to implement those decisions.

Lord Maude's and others' encouragement does seem to be having some effect. A number of interesting recent developments are discussed in chapter 6.

### **5.8 It's Just as Bad (or Worse) Elsewhere**

Before we get too depressed about the state of British government, it is important to be aware that there are plenty of other blundering governments, so maybe the 'Westminster Model' is not solely, or even mainly, to blame for the UK's dismal performance. Here are some extracts from James Thomson's entertaining and sobering analysis of the disaster that was the Vietnam War: *How Could Vietnam Happen?: An Autopsy*<sup>7</sup>. In his article, Thomson identifies a number of factors that shaped Kennedy and Johnson's disastrous Vietnam policy - and many if not all of them can be seen to contribute to other major blunders in the UK and elsewhere.

The first factor was ignorance of prior history and false perceptions of current developments in the Far East, exacerbated by the absence (or banishment) of real Vietnam or Indochina expertise.

"Here the underlying cause was the "closed politics" of policy-making as issues become hot: the more sensitive the issue, and the higher it rises in the bureaucracy, the more completely the experts are excluded while the harassed senior generalists take over (that is, the Secretaries, Undersecretaries, and Presidential Assistants). The frantic skimming of briefing papers in the back seats of limousines is no substitute for the presence of specialists; furthermore, in times of crisis such papers are deemed "too sensitive" even for review by the specialists.

Another underlying cause of this banishment, as Vietnam became more critical, was the replacement of the experts, who were generally and increasingly pessimistic, by men described as "can-do guys," loyal and energetic fixers unsoured by expertise."

Then there was the Effectiveness Trap (see chapter 4.6) and Bureaucratic Inertia, ...

"... the collective inertia produced by the bureaucrat's view of his job. At State, the average "desk officer" inherits from his predecessor our policy toward Country X; he regards it as his function to keep that policy intact —under glass, untampered with, and dusted—so that he may pass it on in two to four years to his successor. And such curatorial service generally merits promotion within the system. (Maintain the status quo, and you will stay out of trouble.) In some circumstances, the inertia bred by such an outlook can act as a brake against rash innovation. But on many issues, this inertia sustains the momentum of bad policy and unwise commitments—momentum that might otherwise have been resisted within the ranks."

... not to mention Wishful Thinking and Bureaucratic Detachment

"By this I mean what at best might be termed the professional callousness of the surgeon (and indeed, medical lingo—the "surgical strike" for instance—seemed to crop up in the euphemisms of the times). In Washington the semantics of the military muted the reality of war for the civilian policy-makers. In quiet, air-conditioned, thick-carpeted rooms, such terms as "systematic pressure," "armed reconnaissance," "targets of

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<sup>7</sup> [https://www.civilservant.org.uk/library/1968-James\\_Thomson-How\\_Could\\_Vietnam\\_Happen.pdf](https://www.civilservant.org.uk/library/1968-James_Thomson-How_Could_Vietnam_Happen.pdf)

opportunity," and even "body count" seemed to breed a sort of games-theory detachment. ...

Perhaps the biggest shock of my return to Cambridge, Massachusetts, was the realization that the young men, the flesh and blood I taught and saw on these university streets, were potentially some of the numbers on the charts of those faraway planners. In a curious sense, Cambridge is closer to this war than Washington."

Last, but not least there was the investment in Human Ego.

"Men who have participated in a decision develop a stake in that decision. As they participate in further, related decisions, their stake increases. It might have been possible to dissuade a man of strong self-confidence at an early stage of the ladder of decision; but it is infinitely harder at later stages since a change of mind there usually involves implicit or explicit repudiation of a chain of previous decisions.

To put it bluntly: at the heart of the Vietnam calamity is a group of able, dedicated men who have been regularly and repeatedly wrong—and whose standing with their contemporaries, and more important, with history, depends, as they see it, on being proven right. These are not men who can be asked to extricate themselves from error.

## 5.9 Some Structural Issues

Finally ... it is important to recognise that the issues discussed in this book are part of a wider discussion involving many constitutional and political issues.

Numerous attempts to achieve significant 'civil service reform' have failed because they have been too narrowly focussed. They have in particular not been willing to consider changing the relationship between civil servants and Ministers, and between both of these and Parliament. This problem is discussed in more detail on my *Civil Servant website*<sup>8</sup>.

There are also separate interesting questions concerning the effectiveness of Cabinet government. Does modern government need a strong centre and, if so, what does this do to the role of Cabinet Ministers - and of No.10? The 1960s Labour Government had two-day Cabinet meeting. Would that be unimaginable today, or a welcome development? A 2005 House of Commons Research Paper<sup>9</sup> discusses these issues in some detail.

It is interesting, too, that recent developments have strengthened the position of senior officials who wish to challenge the feasibility of Ministers' policy decisions - that is the government's ability to carry out the proposed policy effectively and credibly. This is discussed further in chapter 6.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.civilservant.org.uk/csr-homepage.html>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.civilservant.org.uk/library/2005-HoC-The\\_Centre\\_of\\_Government.pdf](https://www.civilservant.org.uk/library/2005-HoC-The_Centre_of_Government.pdf)