

The House of Lords & the Civil Service

The House of Lords engaged in a debate about the Civil Service on 28 November 2024. It won't be of interest to everyone but it does provide an interesting snapshot of the Establishment's concerns about the current state of the Civil Service.

As the debate (in reality a polite discussion) lasted nearly three hours I have extracted what seem to me to be the most interesting parts of the most interesting contributions. I have also added **an occasional emphasis**.

Former Cabinet Secretary, Lord (Robin) Butler introduced the debate:

My contention is that wise Governments combine the political impetus given by spads with the objective advice and continuity that the Civil Service provides on the other side. I fear that at the highest level this balance has gone awry.

I welcomed the appointment of Sue Gray as Sir Keir Starmer's chief of staff, although many of my former colleagues did not. I thought that the experience and advice of Sue Gray, a former senior Cabinet Office civil servant, would help the Labour Party prepare for government. But, for whatever reason, that arrangement did not work out.

The balance now between political appointees and Civil Service staff in the Prime Minister's office has completely changed. Following Sue Gray's departure, the political staff in No. 10 have taken over almost completely. Morgan McSweeney is now chief of staff. Special advisers occupy the roles of deputy chief of staff, head of political strategy, director of policy, director of communications, press secretary, speech-writer and director of digital strategy. All of them have politically appointed staff supporting them. At the last count, there were said to be 41 spads in No. 10.

There is currently a mystery about the Civil Service post of principal private secretary. A month or so ago, it was reported that Nin Pandit had been appointed to the post. I do not know her, but she is said to be first class. However, her career was in the National Health Service and she has never worked in a Whitehall department outside No. 10. That would be the first time in 100 years that the principal private secretary in No. 10 has lacked such Whitehall experience. Her lack of experience of the Treasury or any other

Whitehall department is bound to be a disadvantage in that linchpin role. More recently, however, a competition for the post has been advertised and applications will close in the next few days. I ask the Minister, when she replies to the debate, to tell the House what is going on. Is a fresh competition for the post of principal private secretary to the Prime Minister being conducted, and will Ms Pandit be free to apply?

More recently, Jonathan Powell has been appointed national security adviser as a *spad*, not a civil servant. I make no criticism of his suitability for this post. It seems that he is well fitted for it, both by ability and experience. But **the occupation of this crucial post by a *spad* is bound to throw some doubt on the objectivity of the National Security Council's advice to government.** The dangers of that are illustrated by the experience of the Blair Government in the lead-up to the Iraq war, on which the commission I chaired reported.

This brings me to my second point, which is the number of appointments to senior positions in the Civil Service without any open competition.

Whatever the merits of such appointments, it seems to me that, overall, a clear pattern is emerging. We have moved to the American pattern of replacing senior civil servants with political appointees when the party of government changes. As one of my former colleagues said to me, civil servants in the centre of government have become an endangered species.

I make no criticism of the calibre of the current political appointees, of whom I know nothing. But it seems to me that we should not abandon, without noticing it, the balance of a permanent Civil Service providing continuity and experience, which has served this country well for the last 150 years, since the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms. I note that President-elect Trump has announced that, with the help of Elon Musk, he plans to purge the career civil servants in the United States and replace them with staff entirely loyal to him. Is this a direction that it would be sensible for our country to take?

This country has been well served by a permanent Civil Service, providing continuity and constructive advice to whatever Government our democratic arrangements produce, with the aim of helping them to implement their policies. I believe that that help on the part of the Civil Service should be unstinting. I ask the Minister, when replying to this debate, to confirm that this constitutional arrangement, which is embodied in legislation, is one which the Government support and will foster.

Former Cabinet Minister (and soon to be our Ambassador to the Court of Donald Trump), Lord (Peter) Mandelson:

When my grandfather left government in the 1950s and went to Nuffield College—a great college in a very great university—he wrote and published *Government and Parliament: A survey from the inside*. For him, good government boiled down to

“an intelligent Minister who knows what he or she wants, commanding the understanding, co-operation and support of his civil servants.” “Intelligent” and “commanding” are the operative words. We need lots of Ministers who are like that—people who can both direct and drive government with a real sense of purpose.

But good Ministers also need good, seasoned and sometimes more specialist advisers in order to do their jobs. When I was a Minister, my principal political advisers were actually my civil servants, not because I was politicising them in any way in a party sense, but because they were there to explain things and to warn and caution me about the policies I was developing and implementing. I want to stress that they welcomed the one or two additional advisers I recruited to my department. Indeed, they found them indispensable, as did I, because they often introduced an important external dimension to the work we were undertaking. So I do not share the view that a Minister, or even a Prime Minister, bringing in an appointee should be seen in any way as a sinister move—that they are incapable of serving the national interest. In that category I would firmly place Jonathan Powell, at the heart of whose work is his belief in and desire to serve the national interest.

So, while I understand the concerns of the noble Lord, Lord Butler—and no doubt Labour may make, by the way, the occasional mistake—I think he is at best overstating them and at worst being slightly unfair to some of the individuals he has named, and to the processes that have brought them to their jobs. I feel very deeply that there will not be anything like the systematic undermining of the Civil Service that we have seen in recent years: when half a dozen Permanent Secretaries were fired at the whim of Prime Ministers Johnson and Truss; when ingratiation was being encouraged as the route to career advancement; when “Not one of us” was a bar to promotion; when individual public appointments were scrutinised for loyalty to Brexit; and when government policy was conducted by private What’s App, rather than on properly considered Civil Service advice.

Former Cabinet Minister, Lord (Francis) Maude:

I start by repeating a strong commitment to our current system of a permanent, politically impartial Civil Service. Answering the question of whether we should continue this system is sometimes interpreted as a statement that everything in the current arrangements is fine, and I am afraid I do not believe that everything is fine with these arrangements. There is a simple proposition: that Ministers are responsible and accountable for everything their departments do, yet they have very truncated authority to influence the appointment and management of the officials who do it. It is not a bad principle that authority and accountability should be aligned, but this is not the case. The authority of Ministers over these important resources, for whose actions they are accountable, is severely truncated.

Your Lordships may be aware that, 12 months or so ago, the report of a review I undertook on the accountability and governance of the Civil Service was published.

I made some recommendations for how the arrangements could be changed. There is no time to go through them, but the key point I made was that any addition to Ministers' ability to influence or make appointments must be balanced by enhanced oversight by a genuinely independent regulator—in my view, the Civil Service Commission. Any new arrangements should include, but not be limited to, allowing an incoming Government to make some appointments, but the key is transparency and oversight. They should not be appointments made as some kind of indulgence, or a kind of turn-a-blind-eye, hole-in-the-corner dodge at the discretion of the Civil Service leadership. I do not blame the Government for the controversy that ensued when they came into office and made some appointments; I blame the consistent failure, including my own, to put in place sustainable and transparent arrangements that will regularise such appointments and make them routine.

Finally, it is time that we should follow the other countries that have similar systems to ours and make the head of the Civil Service, ideally, a dedicated, full-time head of the Civil Service, accountable for the health of the Civil Service to an external monitor or regulator—again, in my view, the Civil Service Commission. That would include responsibility for ensuring that the sort of changes I advocate do not imperil the political impartiality that is so important.

Former Permanent Secretary, Lord (Michael) Bichard

The really great organisations are self-critical, and I think that it—I almost said “we”—needs to be self-critical at this moment, too. For example, on several occasions I have recently drawn attention to the failures of integrity and trust

evident in the infected blood scandal, the Post Office Horizon scandal, Grenfell, Windrush, Hillsborough—I could go on. These can no longer be treated as isolated incidents, [nor?] were—I say with some shame—they the result of honest mistakes honestly made. Taken together, they suggest that **there is an issue around the integrity and trust on which the reputation and credibility of the Civil Service has been built, and it needs to be addressed.**

A particular failing in all those cases was a complete lack of transparency and openness, in spite of that being one of Nolan's Seven Principles of Public Life and a requirement of the Civil Service Code. Whitehall has long struggled with the concept of openness, and I welcome the new Government's proposal to introduce a duty of candour. It remains to be seen whether it will be wide enough or sufficiently enforceable to restore confidence.

There is frustration, too, at what is seen as a lack of political nous. That is not about politicising officials—it is asking officials to be shrewd politically, and politically astute, to be able to engage in a conversation about the political realities of life. We do not put that highly enough in the development of the Civil Service.

Finally, to retain confidence the Civil Service needs to be genuinely creative in the advice that it gives. I do not think that the evidence suggests that we are now up there with the very best nation states in that function; that is another thing that we need to address.

I do not support politicisation—I really do not—but I can see why some people argue for it. What people and Ministers want is a Civil Service which, at the very least, anticipates and solves problems, delivers decent services, can be trusted, and has political nous. That is how we will resist the arguments for further politicisation, by delivering that.

Former Cabinet Secretary, Lord (Andrew) Turnbull

The issue is a different one, but equally troubling. It is that, over time, more of the work of civil servants, particularly policy advice, is being done by special advisers. So the correct diagnosis is that the Civil Service is being marginalised and not being used to best advantage.

In the Civil Service, my predecessor, the noble Lord, Lord Wilson of Dinton, initiated a reform programme, one of whose components was a working group called Bringing In and Bringing On, which recommended that many more vacancies in the senior Civil Service should be filled by competitions and more

of those should be open to people outside the Civil Service. Under this initiative, many talented people have been brought in and have made a significant impact—we have the noble Lord, Lord Bichard, here as an example. The top of the Civil Service is no longer a closed freemasonry.

Taken together, these changes have greatly widened the insights available to Ministers. But is the right balance being struck? I doubt it. The pushing out of civil servants is seen most clearly in the new arrangements at the top of the Prime Minister's office, where there is a chief of staff, then two deputy chiefs of staff and a director of communications, all filled by special advisers. We still do not know the position of the principal private secretary. The Code of Conduct for Special Advisers makes clear that their role is to provide an additional source of advice for Ministers, so that political considerations can be brought to bear on official advice. However, the code also states that, while spads can offer their own advice, they should not “suppress or supplant” the advice of civil servants. Thus, it was clear that these two streams are to be complementary to each other and not in competition.

Some of the problems derive from the concept of chief of staff. In my view, this is like chewing gum and Halloween: an unwelcome import from the United States. The title of chief of staff, in the UK context, is a nonsense. The special adviser code makes it clear that the chief of staff cannot manage Civil Service staff. When Jonathan Powell was appointed with that title, the rules were changed to allow him to do so, but he found that it was not necessary for him to fulfil his role and the power was allowed to lapse.

How then should departments be organised? There should be a special adviser cadre with its own leader, and an official cadre led by of the head of the Civil Service or the Permanent Secretary. Neither should attempt to outrank the other. They should collaborate to make the best use of the different skills and experience that each side can bring.

Former Cabinet Minister, Margaret Hodge:

I also say that, in my 12 years as a Minister, I enjoyed working with countless dedicated, capable and effective civil servants. I learned that the best way to deliver the best for the country is through a strong partnership between civil servants and Ministers, working constructively together, still challenging each other but not wasting energy criticising and attacking, but rather focusing on delivering the priorities and programmes on which the Government were elected. I would question, however, whether some traditional protocols remain

fit for purpose today. It is these matters that lead to the challenge on impartiality. In the limited time, I will raise two issues.

The doctrine of ministerial accountability, asserting that civil servants are accountable to Ministers who in turn are accountable to Parliament, needs reform. Established in 1918, it was most recently affirmed in the late Lord Armstrong's 1985 memorandum. But in 1918, there were just 22 civil servants in the Home Office. Today, there are around 40,000 in that one department. It is absurd to expect Ministers to be accountable for the actions of such a large number of people working in a much more complex organisation.

It is not just that people such as Charles Clarke, Amber Rudd and the noble Baroness, Lady Hughes of Stretford, lost their ministerial jobs because of the actions of civil servants of which they were mostly unaware. If civil servants cannot defend themselves because they are solely answerable to Ministers, they too can find themselves treated unfairly. I think of Jonathan Slater, Sir Tom Scholar, Stephen Lovegrove and the noble Lord, Lord Sedwill.

There is a further flaw at the heart of the doctrine. Ministers cannot recruit, promote or dismiss civil servants because that would breach the doctrine of impartiality. But how can anybody be held responsible for the actions of people whom they cannot hire or fire? In European countries and America, the powers of the administrative class and the political class are separate. In the UK, we consider them inseparable. We need to think about that, revisit the doctrine of ministerial accountability and introduce greater transparency, well-defined accountability and proper enforcement into a reformed system. We need to do that to protect, not undermine, impartiality.

Secondly, too many civil servants come from too limited a background. Institute for Government research claimed that 75% of current Permanent Secretaries went to Oxbridge; only 16% got the top job from a previous post outside the service and only 22% had experience of leadership outside government. The concept of an impartial Civil Service does not sit well when it is so unrepresentative of the society it serves. Furthermore, I have seen too many talented people, like the late Lord Kerslake, rejected by the Civil Service club because they were outsiders. Impartiality is not just a matter of politics; it is also about who we appoint and promote to foster it. I ask the Minister and the noble Lord to consider these issues as we strive to improve the effectiveness of our highly esteemed Civil Service.

Director, The Institute of Ideas, Baroness (Claire) Fox

My Lords, we all remember senior civil servants openly in tears the morning after the Brexit vote, or the Civil Service union threatening to go on strike over the Rwanda scheme. Those are troubling examples of a politicised Civil Service, but I will focus on a more insidious trend that is in denial.

The Civil Service is drowning in identity and diversity

groupthink. However, there is an obstinate refusal to acknowledge that a particular outlook on, for example, gender or race is political at all, let alone one that could compromise impartiality. It is hiding in plain sight. Every time you get an email with pronouns in the signature, or see civil servants wearing those rainbow progress lanyards, it is a one-sided display of an allegiance to a contentious political ideology. You might agree or disagree with the ideological positions that these markers point to, but there is no doubt that signing off “She/her” is as partisan as ending an email with the slogan “Adult human female” or “From the river to the sea”.

This is not to just blame the blob; the politicisation is perhaps the unintended consequence of policies and legislation initiated by politicians. Take the public sector equality duty in the Equality Act: by obliging public bodies to focus on staff action plans around protected characteristics, expansive and monolithic HR departments have created an internal culture dominated by EDI priorities. In typical mission-creep fashion, there is an ever-growing plethora of diversity training courses, identity-based staff networks and allyship schemes.

But inclusion does not include dissent. I have two brief examples. The relatively new Civil Service Sex Equality and Equity Network—SEEN—believes that biological sex is binary and immutable, and operates across 50 government departments, including here in Parliament. SEEN has not been welcomed to the network fold, and is regularly subject to obstruction and persistent abuse. Earlier this year the chair of SEEN, Defra lawyer Elspeth Duemmer Wrigley, faced legal action, accused of harassment for expressing at work gender-critical views such as “only women menstruate”—which is true, by the way. While that vexatious complaint was eventually dropped, Elspeth’s anonymous accuser is now suing Defra for allowing SEEN to exist at all, claiming it creates an intimidating, humiliating and offensive work environment.

In the second example, the hostility is not from a grievance-mongering colleague but is top-down. In 2023, DWP civil servant Anna Thomas won a £100,000 settlement after she was wrongfully fired by her department. Her alleged gross misconduct was that she whistle-blew about the DWP’s embrace of political ideologies, such as critical race theory, which she feared breached the Civil Service Code. Part of her complaint was an all-staff memo from the

Permanent Secretary about transforming the department into an “anti-racist organisation” in the wake of the George Floyd killing. This included circulating BLM-inspired materials asking white staff to assume they were racist.

Do we really believe that such white privilege-obsessed officials or the Defra complainant provide objective and impartial advice to Ministers? Would they think to seek out diverse opinions on any given policy area? Kemi Badenoch recently revealed that when she wanted to investigate problems at the Tavistock clinic, officials repeatedly lined up the usual progressive charities, academics, NGOs and experts. The civil servants were not being malign, but their worldview is so narrowly focused that they could not conceive of why anyone would want to hear counternarratives as well. The consequence was that both officials and Ministers missed evidence of the awful harms being done to children—a terrible price to pay for this aspect of a politicised Civil Service.

Former Chief of Defence Staff, Lord (Jock) Stirrup

The second issue is the problem of bureaucratic inertia, something I certainly experienced at first hand. This phenomenon is not exclusive to government but rather a function of size; large companies face exactly the same challenge. The trend of government centralisation and the expansion of responsibilities that this entails, though, have exacerbated the problem. Institutional inertia is best addressed not by replacing one group of people with another but by business practices focused on outcomes rather than process. Overcoming it requires people to be incentivised to achieve things rather than to protect the status quo.

This brings me on to the third issue: that of culture, and in particular our whole approach to risk. **We as a nation seem to favour risk avoidance rather than risk-taking, and this trend is perhaps most obvious in government.** Departmental officials expend a lot of effort preparing their Ministers to defend themselves in Parliament—fair enough—but a defensive posture can make an organisation resistive to innovation. We need to strike a much better balance here. We need to see risk, and a certain amount of failure, as necessary to progress, and not as an automatic cause for condemnation. Accountability is important, but so is tolerance for responsible risk-taking.

While there are aspects of the Civil Service that would benefit from improvement, efforts to change its fundamental nature would in my view be aiming at the wrong target. Reducing departmental responsibilities to manageable levels, creating structures and incentives that promote and reward achievement, and embracing a greater degree of risk-taking and tolerance of a

degree of failure would do far more to promote effective government than further politicisation of the Civil Service.

Former Cabinet Minister, Lord (William) Waldegrave

I take it for granted that there should be now, as in the past, political assistants to Ministers. They should be few and under discipline—preferably under the discipline of the Permanent Secretary—for their ethical and other behaviour. I have always favoured a Cabinet system on the European model, where they fit into the discipline of a structure. There should be expert advisers—such as the noble Lord, Lord Levene, who left us today—as there have been since the days of Lloyd George and Churchill, also fitted into discipline and structure, but not too many and not running wild; nor do we need to politicise the Civil Service itself to answer what is the usual argument for doing so. **The usual argument is that the inherent bias of the Civil Service—to the left, say the Conservatives; to the right, say the socialists—stops Ministers doing what they have promised.**

This is rubbish. Did the Civil Service stop Margaret Thatcher, Geoffrey Howe and Nigel Lawson turning the previous approach to economic policy in this country upside down? Of course it did not. Did the Civil Service stop the same Government, with assistance from me, introducing the poll tax, which vanishingly few civil servants thought to be a good idea but which, after the electorate and the Cabinet endorsed it, we pursued? No, it tried to make a bad policy better, as perhaps it is doing now in other matters, but it carried it through. Only weak or muddled Ministers, or those without backing from the Prime Minister, the Cabinet or the House of Commons, complain about deep-state conspiracies stopping them from carrying out their wonderful projects. Politicisation is unnecessary for even radical Governments. That is my first point.

My second point is that this country, like all democratic countries whether or not they have written constitutions, depends on having a plurality of institutions to check and balance power. As poor delivery by Governments on what they have promised, allied to social media, feeds short-term populism, such checks and balances matter more and more if we are to avoid what the late Lord Hailsham called an “elective dictatorship”.

I do not know whether what Mr Tim Shipman wrote in his book was correct. I have heard no denials from the dramatis personae concerned. He tells how, on 4 October 2019, members of the Government and their political advisers told senior civil servants they were contemplating ordering them to break the law. He records Helen MacNamara, a deputy secretary in the Cabinet Office,

replying that in that case, “None of us can work for you. The police don’t work for you; like me, they work for the Queen”. Her answer was, in my view, exactly correct but could derive only from an apolitical, confident, professional Civil Service doing its job right at the centre of government. Who is to say, whether from left or right, whether such pressure might be exerted again? Checks and balances are needed and will be needed again. One of the greatest is an independent, apolitical, professional Civil Service.

Former Senior Medic, Baroness (Elaine) Murphy

My Lords, I add my voice to thank my noble friend Lord Butler for introducing this debate. I hovered on the edge of one arm of the Civil Service, in the shape of the Department of Health, and have observed since 1997 the total politicisation of that department with some astonishment and some despair. There is, in fact, no longer a Department of Health and Social Care; there is only a department of National Health Service management.

My first brush with the department was in the early 1990s, when I became the Chief Medical Officer’s personal adviser on mental health and ageing. I was given a somewhat daunting list of 14 telephone numbers. I remember counting them and thinking, “Oh wow—all these experts!”, but the phone numbers were those of civil servants in the department, or else in what was the Home Office and is now the Ministry of Justice, or in the Department of Education and in what is now the Department for Work and Pensions. They were all policy specialists on mental health or ageing. Most had worked in their department for five, 10 or 15 years. Many were frighteningly bright, and all carried in their heads the history of policy positives and negatives. I found them inspiring.

Along came the 1997 election, and Tony Blair swept in with reforming zeal. As an NHS manager by then, I was delighted. I thought, “This is what we want: a bit of delivery of policy”. Shortly after the election, I was having lunch in a Norfolk pub with the much-missed Baroness Hollis of Heigham. Patricia had just been appointed in the new Government as a Front-Bench spokesman on social security. She said, “We’re going to get rid of all those Tory civil servants and get a new lot in who haven’t been contaminated”. I was somewhat surprised but thought that she could not possibly mean the upper middle grades of the Department of Health, and I am sure she did not. But over the next five years, all bar one of my contacts had taken early retirement, voluntary redundancy or moved out to NGOs or other careers.

What has happened since then? There is a department obsessed with the English National Health Service and interested in acute hospital performance and not much else. Mental health and learning disability

policy in effect stopped. We have got a new Mental Health Bill in 2024 that is in fact the same as the 1983 Act. Learning disability hospitals were meant to close, but that stopped. Public health policy was eventually all but destroyed by sending it out to local authorities—which was the right thing to do, but they had to find their feet all over again. When the pandemic came along, there was nobody at the centre insisting on responding in the time-honoured way. Track and trace was a farce. Links with the justice system never progressed, children’s mental health was largely ignored, maternity services fell off anyone’s agenda and went downhill, and social care is still being ignored. There has been minimal focus on the antecedents of ill health. Alcohol policy, obesity, lack of exercise and deterioration in family cohesion have all generated nothing except passing interest and a few reports.

Having refocused, did it work to have NHS performance taking over the whole of the DH? Perhaps I shall ask my colleagues around the House whether they think that the NHS has got better. Every three years, we have a new Minister, a new policy, some old policies are recreated, and everything is changed yet again. It has not been a happy story. I think it was happier when we left policy to the Department of Health to get on with what it could do, and we should let managers in the health service—out of the Civil Service—be separated into something quite independent. That is my experience of the politicisation of the health service, and I do not like it.

Journalist & Author, Lord (Charles) Moore

I bring a particular and slightly odd perspective to this question because, like most journalists, I had far more professional experience of politicians than of civil servants.

This changed when I began work on the biography of Mrs Thatcher because, in order to see the relevant government papers not yet released, I was positively vetted as if I were a civil servant—I was not, I hasten to say, paid from the public purse. I spent nearly 15 years inspecting those papers in the Treasury. My titular boss was Sue Gray, of blessed memory. **I learned then how preposterous are the claims made by some politicians that civil servants just get in the way. No Government Minister could work effectively for a single day without the careful attentions of professional civil servants. Politicians inevitably know little about process, yet government cannot function without process.**

I also saw, from studying those papers, what great civil servants can achieve. Perhaps the finest surviving exemplars of such public servants, whose apogee

was the 1980s, are the noble Lord, Lord Butler, and the noble Lord, Lord Powell of Bayswater, who I do not think is present. The former was Mrs Thatcher's principal private secretary, and later her Cabinet Secretary. The latter was her Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs, although that title does not do justice to his extraordinary role. The noble Lord, Lord Butler, revealed to me that there came a point when the two men, though friends, were so much at odds that the noble Lord, Lord Butler, tried to shift the noble Lord, Lord Powell, from his post and pack him off to a foreign embassy.

In the careers of these two remarkable men, so well recorded by the very high standard of written communication that existed in the Civil Service at that time, can be traced the necessary tensions of Civil Service life: between the needs of neutrality and propriety on the one hand, which the noble Lord, Lord Butler, rightly sought to uphold as Cabinet Secretary, and, on the other, the enforcement of the authority of the Prime Minister, which the noble Lord, Lord Powell, as a vital private secretary, rightly sought to advance. Thanks to them and many like them—some present in this Chamber today—a balance was achieved, and we were as a result well governed.

I support the spirit of the noble Lord's Motion, but where I differ from him, if only in emphasis, is that **I fear the neutrality of the Civil Service is today compromised not only by politicians but by the Civil Service itself—only the noble Baroness, Lady Fox, has raised this so far.** Things have happened that would never have happened in the days of the noble Lords, Lord Butler, Lord Wilson of Dinton and Lord Turnbull.

The Civil Service has politicised itself in several ways. I have time to mention only one, but it speaks for many others. In the summer of 2020, after the tragic killing of George Floyd, many government departments decided—through Permanent Secretaries, not Ministers—to take a view. At the Ministry of Justice, the Permanent Secretary, Sir Richard Heaton, declared that “racism takes many forms; that privilege takes many forms. It's why the Black Lives Matter movement is so important”.

Similar thoughts emerged from the Department for Education, the Ministry of Defence and elsewhere in Whitehall. BLM hashtags often appeared on officials' communications. BLM was not then, and is not now, at all politically neutral. It is a hard-left organisation committed to defunding the police and the propagation of racist attitudes towards white people—yet British officialdom metaphorically took the knee. This was a collective abnegation of neutrality, and it was unrebuked by the Cabinet Secretary.

The senior Civil Service has increased its numbers by 64% since 2012—not to the public benefit. It fusses about pronouns at the bottom of emails, but its understanding of the grammar of good government has markedly declined. Comparable accusations may be made against politicians, often rightly, but to debate more fully this demoralising and historically un-British situation, we must acknowledge the degree of fault on both sides.

Former Cabinet Secretary, Lord (Richard) Wilson

Looking around the Chamber during this debate, I have seen 11 Cabinet Ministers of different parties whom I have worked for. I do not think they have any idea what my own political views are. The joy of the Civil Service is the ability to take a Minister as your client, to work for them and to give them your very best support to make things happen, whatever their political allegiance. Politics is a bit of a nuisance.

None the less, I have to say that I am worried at the moment. I think No. 10 is going awry. The skill of the Civil Service with an incoming Government is to enable them to appear to have been in power even when they are learning the job, but that has not happened. That is a sign that the balance is wrong—the noble Lord, Lord Butler, is right.

More generally, the job of Governments and Ministers is more difficult than it used to be, if only because of social media, where you have to comment all the time rather than stopping, thinking and taking advice. The job of the Civil Service is weakening because of Brexit, which was a huge blow in terms of management, followed in no time by the pandemic. The loss of people at the top has been very bad: Tom Scholar is the worst, but there have been others that are pretty bad.

I could speak at greater length, but my view is that we need a royal commission on the Civil Service. Too many things are going wrong. I could give the House a longer list, but the noble Lord, Lord Bichard, spelled out some worrying things. HR management is going wrong, as are many other things. This debate should be the prelude to a more serious look at what is happening.

Former Special Adviser, Baroness (Simone) Finn

As a former spad, I echo the noble Lord, Lord Butler, in recognising the crucial role of special advisers in connecting politics and civil servants to support Ministers' priorities. Like my noble friend Lord Godson, whom I congratulate on the excellent reports of Policy Exchange in this space, I welcome Labour's decision to remove the arbitrary cap on the number of special advisers from the

Ministerial Code. Far from undermining Civil Service impartiality, spads shield officials from political pressure, allowing them to maintain their objectivity while enabling Ministers to make informed decisions. They are a vital element of the machinery that preserves the integrity of the Civil Service, but their presence should not lead to a progressive exclusion of officials from controversial or challenging political crises. At best, government is a symbiotic blend of political advisers and permanent officials, as I can attest from my time in Downing Street. The noble Lord, Lord Mandelson, and my noble friend Lord Waldegrave reinforced this point.

However, we must confront the widely acknowledged challenges facing the Civil Service. While we should celebrate the professionalism and dedication of many civil servants, **it is an open secret that the quality of the highest leadership within the service has, in some cases, fallen short of expectations**, as the noble Lord, Lord Bichard, illustrated. **This failure was brutally exposed by the Grenfell and infected blood inquiries and stands in stark contrast to previous generations of leaders who exemplified the finest traditions of public service, many of whom have spoken in today's debate. It also stands in contrast to the achievements of previous generations of Ministers, who have successfully harnessed the Civil Service to deliver political, and sometimes controversial, goals.**

The decline in leadership quality cannot be ignored, as it impacts the effectiveness of the Civil Service and, by extension, the Government's ability to deliver for the public. The leadership has a responsibility to ensure that the Civil Service can continue to serve future Governments and perhaps encourage more of the responsible risk taking advocated by the noble and gallant Lord, Lord Stirrup. For this reason, I raise the opacity surrounding the Senior Leadership Committee, a body ostensibly tasked with overseeing appointments at Permanent Secretary and director-general levels and maintaining the capability of the service.

The House of Lords Constitution Committee, in its recent report on appointing and removing Permanent Secretaries, highlighted the troubling lack of transparency in the committee's operations. We still lack a clear public record of its deliberations, or the business cases presented before it. This lack of accountability erodes trust in the system and raises legitimate questions about the fairness and propriety of senior appointments.

Lord Butler again, winding up:

The debate was also heartwarming because I think there has been general support for the concept of the impartial and permanent Civil Service—that

really has not been challenged. The other theme to it is, however, that the Civil Service needs improvement. The Civil Service should never be complacent about that; it should always be challenged. The noble Lord, Lord Bichard, I think, made some points that struck very deep. So there is work to be done there, and the Civil Service and those who lead it should not shrink from it.

Martin Stanley

Discussion about this post

[Eliot Wilson](#)
[The Ideas Lab](#)

Just a few quick observations. There is a common theme from some former ministers which is worth acknowledging, which runs along the lines of "Of course *my* civil servants were wonderful but something's gone wrong since then". It may not always be false but it's a perception issue in part.

There's also a tendency to conflate two critical propositions made by different people, first that the system isn't functioning properly (you need your car repaired) and second that the system itself is no longer sustainable (you need a new car).

It seems to me, in passing, that a lot of the aspects which cause so much irritation, rather than dysfunction, necessarily, stem from what are essentially peripheral issues: lanyards, email signatures, nomenclature, training courses, internal campaigns and "champions". Of course these can be signs of a more deep-seated problem, but I also wonder if these would arise less often if the civil service did less and stayed within stricter boundaries.

A final thing because it is always worth saying and it speaks to the man's character: I was fleetingly clerk of a European Sub-Committee in the House of Lords, and Lord Butler of Brockwell was one of the members. I was away for a week when I had to go home for my father's funeral, and at the next committee meeting, Lord Butler, on his way in, just stopped momentarily behind me, put a hand on my shoulder for a second or two, and said "I was sorry to hear about your father". That was it. But the sheer, unprompted, instinctive kindness of that is still with me. A good man to his core.

1 reply by Martin Stanley 🇺🇰

Perceptive comments!

I think it would be helpful to resolve two fundamental questions.

First, do we still have Cabinet government of (near) equals, or a more centralised (Presidential?) system? If the latter, we need to strengthen the centre.

And wouldn't it better if senior officials were more accountable as argued by Slater, Rycroft et al?

And I absolutely agree re Robin Butler. I got to know him quite well for various reasons and became a real fan.

Ally

Thanks for posting these Martin, some interesting comments but would it be too harsh to say a lot of this is 'more of the same'? I think there is currently a big gap in this long running debate around the 'how' of making change beyond the usual high level recommendations; and related to this, a glaring lack of voices bearing heard from those who are lower down the chain at 'working level' (I.e. not ministers or ex Perm Secs).

1 reply by Martin Stanley 🇺🇰

No - not too harsh at all. Almost all the criticisms and recommendations have been made time after time, in report after report, over many years if not decades. The only exception, I guess, was the ant-woke stuff.

And, yes, the voices of working level officials are seldom heard.

I do my best to make these points in my writing and appreciate your thanks. I wasn't at all sure that there would be any interest in the Lords debate - but there was, so I am glad I reported it even if - as you say - it didn't move anything forward.