

**Letter from Christopher Jary
(address deleted)**

31 March 2012

The Rt Hon Francis Maude MP
House of Commons
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Today sees the final closure of the National School of Government, where I taught for exactly half my 35 years in the Civil Service. My career working with and around ministers began at the same time and in the same place yours did: with Peter Morrison at the Department of Employment in 1984. My early encounters with him revealed that we shared a distaste for impersonal bureaucracy and a commitment to respectful public service and practical accountability. I found him refreshingly direct, receptive to advice, open-minded and demanding: a good minister for a young civil servant to cut his teeth on. Twenty years later, ten years after his death, I acknowledged my debt to Peter in my handbook for civil servants, *Working with Ministers*. All this prompts me, now that my miniscule part in government is over, to write one last letter because I think you have made a grave mistake.

I am no apologist for the School. It had its weaknesses, most of which in my experience stemmed from non-existent leadership and consistently poor management at senior levels. Specifically, in the last fourteen years, its senior managers:

- neglected to get to grips with the workings of the organisation: its strengths, weaknesses, capabilities and potential
- failed to define a clear, simple purpose
- failed, therefore, to explain that purpose internally or externally
- dissipated its resources and effort on peripheral activities
- failed to develop simple, cheap, effective management systems
- too often appointed managers on the basis of compliance, rather than ability
- and failed to manage staff performance, allowing a few ineffectual staff to continue unchecked and much valuable work to go unrecognised.

Seen from outside and at senior level, the School may not, therefore, have seemed to you an impressive institution. From my perspective, however, I saw:

- more than our share of highly committed teaching staff, many of them leaders in their field and highly respected in the Service and sometimes beyond
- a remarkable – in my experience unique – commitment from people in supporting jobs (in administration, finance, the library and elsewhere)
- an admirable spirit of service, teamwork and community which made the place a model of good manners, hospitality, co-operation and professionalism for all who came there
- and, above all, an outstanding level of results from many of our courses and a real, lasting influence on the professionalism of the Service we existed to serve.

The School's closure will therefore be a greater loss than I think you have yet realised. To replace it and other classroom training with training on the job and e-learning, in my view, is a second mistake. My hard experience is that few senior civil servants manage, let alone train their staff.

They are untrained to do it and, since most don't value training and many work in a perpetual state of upward-looking chaos, it simply won't get done. While e-learning can convey facts and provide a useful introduction to a subject, it's no substitute for classroom teaching and cannot teach *skills* – including our work helping ministers decide and present policy in private, public and in Parliament. For helping professionals to grasp the ethos of their profession, although useful, it will be inadequate. (I have no axe to grind here. I spent some of my last few years helping to develop, write and launch *Understanding the Civil Service*, a large, Service-wide e-learning programme to teach civil servants about most aspects of their work.)

The Institute of Government's recent open letter to you argues that *within a smaller and reshaped state, a confident and effective Civil Service remains essential to the success of government*. I would add that, to produce a smaller, confident and effective Civil Service, we need excellent training and professional education. Although I concede that some of the School's work fell short of this standard, much of it did not. It required only informed, critical and targeted reform to gear up to provide exactly this. Instead, it has been dismantled at precisely the time its service was most needed.

To replace us with a tiny unit mainly commissioning training is a third mistake. Some training we provided was generic, but much was not. A better approach, in my view, would have been to reduce our provision, confining it to things that are peculiar to civil servants. Ministers and Parliament, for example, are unique to the government environment. Who now will teach Civil Service ethics, the relationship with ministers and Parliament, the working reality of public accountability and the practical skills and understanding required of civil servants serving ministers? I fear one or any combination of three possible results:

- these things will not be taught
- they will be bought cheap off the shelf from private sector "trainers" who don't understand them but will go through the motions and probably teach the wrong things
- the Service will be taken to the cleaners by expensive consultancy firms who know we have thrown away our professional capacity to teach them ourselves.

In any of these circumstances the professionalism of the Service will be damaged and those we serve – ministers, Parliament and the public – will suffer the consequences.

I realise this is a grim warning and I've little doubt that it will be unwelcome. This is my last effort at *truth unto power*. After nearly 18 years trying to improve Civil Service professionalism, I take no pleasure at all in predicting damage of this kind and would prefer to be proved wrong. In one sense – except as a tax-payer – it is now none of my business, but one doesn't easily slough off caring about government and public service, about a Service one was a tiny part of for 35 years, or about an institution and people one loved. In fact, I hope I never shall.

I am copying this to Lord O'Donnell and Sir Bob Kerslake.

CHRISTOPHER JARY