

Interview with Home Office Permanent Secretary Matthew Rycroft

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‘Permacrisis’ may have been Collins Dictionary’s Word of the Year for 2022, but it’s been part of the Home Office lexicon for decades. What’s it like leading such a closely scrutinised department while trying to transform its culture at the same time?

Who’d run the Home Office? Veterans who have done the job and lived to tell the tale speak of constant jeopardy; a place where something, somewhere is always going wrong – but you don’t yet know what it is.

While ministers often come into the Home Office to fill a vacancy left by a scandal, this is not normally the pattern for its permanent secretaries. Except in Sir Matthew Rycroft’s case. Rycroft’s arrival at the department in March 2020 followed a dramatic televised statement by his predecessor, Sir Philip Rutnam, who vowed to pursue a claim for unfair dismissal after the Priti Patel bullying row. Relations between officials and ministers in the department were at an all-time low, and that was not the only challenge.

“First of all, I started on the day lockdown started,” Rycroft says. “Secondly, taking over from someone who had resigned. Thirdly, with almost no notice and very little preparation time, and fourthly it was a week after the publication of the Windrush report – which was very close to saying the Home Office had been institutionally racist.”

There has been little let-up since this baptism of fire. Alongside the day job of leading a department whose remit is to fight terrorism, control the border and oversee police and fire services in England and Wales, Rycroft has also been trying to overhaul the Home Office’s entire culture.

He wears the strain well. When *CSW* suggests he has barely aged since we last spoke in 2018 (when Rycroft was perm sec of the then-Department for International Development), he jokes that while he’s only been in his current job for three years, “it feels like 20” because Home Office years are “like dog years”.

Our hour-long interview is wide-ranging, covering the Windrush response, compassion in policymaking, asylum backlogs, and the uneasy scenes Rycroft faced last summer when Home Office staff seemed to be in open revolt over the government’s controversial scheme to send asylum seekers to Rwanda.

Observing Rycroft from a distance, particularly since he assumed the Home Office brief, one gets the sense of someone with the clout to tell it like it is. “He’s confident but not arrogant,” as one Whitehall-watcher puts it. Another person CSW spoke to – from a partner organisation that works closely with him – says: “He’s straightforward; you know where you stand with him and his team. He’s a good broker in a tough gig.”

This straightforwardness was out in force last year after Boris Johnson reportedly threatened to “privatise the arse off” HM Passport Office if it failed to get on top of delays. Rycroft used a Home Affairs Select Committee hearing as an opportunity to calmly push back. When a HASC member complained to him about a terrible experience her staff had had with the MPs’ Passport Office hotline, Rycroft – after apologising for the poor service – said: “Please use that example the next time anyone suggests to you that the way to reduce the size of the civil service is to privatise it, because the only bit of the passport function that has been privatised is that.”

Some of his self-assuredness may derive from Rycroft’s Foreign Office career. He was once ambassador to the UN – a job that involves standing up to the Russians, the Chinese et al, and also speaking publicly on difficult issues. As one ex-senior official points out: “You are further from ministers as a diplomat and it gives you your own professional personality.”

Rycroft is also unstinting in backing his officials. He took the rare step of issuing a statement to rebut a Telegraph article which attacked Passport Office director general Abi Tierney for working from home. The story “totally ignored reality”, Rycroft said, before adding that Tierney worked “day-in, day-out with teams around the country delivering vital services for the British public” and that her work location had “zero bearing” on delays at the agency.

Today the perm sec – who dedicated his recent knighthood to “unsung” public servants – prefaces a number of his interview responses with praise for civil servants. When he came into the department he was “pleasantly surprised” by how connected everyone was to the mission of keeping the country safe and secure (even if, he admits, that mission “needed to be harnessed and turned into something positive”). When asked about asylum backlogs, he lauds caseworkers for the “outstanding work” they are doing in such a “politically sensitive area”.

“Because a lot of [civil servants’] work by its very nature must remain behind the scenes, it’s incumbent on those of us who do get the occasional opportunity to talk publicly about what our colleagues are doing,” he tells CSW.

Transformation

That Rycroft takes Wendy Williams’s 2020 Windrush Lessons Learned Review seriously was clear when he told HASC – without a hint of flippancy – that he “hangs on to [her] every word”. Indeed, the One Home Office transformation programme he

has been spearheading was designed as a direct response to Williams's damning report.

Rycroft tells *CSW* the department is on "a journey". There is "definitely further to go", he says, but he is "proud of the steps we've taken so far". While three years have felt like 20, "it's actually quite a short time in terms of changing the culture of a large department of state".

One of Williams's original recommendations had been to improve the diversity of senior staff. Yet 18 months later, in March 2022, she found that "success in this respect remains elusive". Is Rycroft happy with the pipeline of future leaders, if not the current state of diversity at senior levels?

"Wendy Williams was largely positive in her overarching judgement [on our progress], which I agree with," he says. "Within that there were areas where there was either insufficient or limited evidence of progress, which I also agree with. So I accept all of her points, but I think we need to think about them in total. There are a significant number of areas where we've made really good progress and I'm really proud of the work that everyone's put in."

He acknowledges, though, that the department still has "a good way to go".

"We are starting from a pretty low base. So to take one issue which is particularly important for me: the ethnic minority representation in the senior civil service. Last year, we went up from 7.8% to 9.5%. Clearly, 9.5% is not high enough – we need to be at the labour market average, which is about 14%. But we're headed in the right direction."

Challenge

Another major issue flagged by Williams was that of officials feeling unable to challenge decision making. If the Home Office's Civil Service People Survey results are to be believed, this has only become more of a problem. Between 2018 and 2021, successive surveys show that – on the metric 'I feel able to challenge the way things are done' – things have got worse. Combined with the PCS union's threats of staff mutiny over the Rwanda scheme, it hardly suggests an atmosphere where staff feel comfortable speaking out.

"It's very important for me that civil servants know what our proper role is at every stage of the policymaking and operational process," Rycroft says in response. He adds that the Home Office's work on Windrush and "all the other issues that have come along since" have sharpened his thinking about this.

"Before ministers decide on a policy or a new process, our job as civil servants is to provide maximum challenge," he says. "It's all part of the robust policymaking process. That necessarily needs to be behind the scenes, and we need to have the

latitude and the openness to have that sort of challenging conversation. I firmly believe the more challenge you can get in early on, the better for eventual policy.”

Challenge doesn't need to be confrontational, he adds. It includes things like ensuring the operational teams who will be implementing a future policy are involved in helping create it.

“After ministers have taken a decision, our job changes. Our job isn't then to challenge it, just because we happen not to agree with it. It's irrelevant whether we agree with it or not. If a minister has decided it, and it's lawful, our job then is to implement it.

“Of course there is still space for challenge in implementation. You can always improve the implementation process. But you no longer, as a civil service, have a particular role in opposing that policy. And that's really important. Whether you're a member of a union or not, your job as a good civil servant, thinking about the civil service code and the value of impartiality, is to get on with it.”

A clear and sensible philosophy. Why then is that People Survey metric so bad?

“So our mantra – of maximum challenge then maximum support – is designed to help with the metrics. It's designed to show people that not only is it okay to challenge, actually we have a duty, at that early stage of the policymaking process, to challenge. And, if we're more senior, to create the circumstances that allow other people to challenge. So it is a part of our efforts to improve that aspect of the People Survey.

“There are others as well: there is training so people can really understand how to challenge and what counts as effective challenge; and there are lots of things which we in the executive committee seek to do to signpost when there have been good, effective challenges. But we have much, much further to go, obviously.”

Sticking with Rwanda, and when it is – and isn't – appropriate for civil servants to challenge decision-making, *CSW* asks Rycroft about an online staff meeting in April last year, in which he faced a barrage of questions from officials about that controversial immigration policy. The message with the highest number of thumbs up from participants – 224 – said: “Somewhere down the road, when the inevitable ‘what went wrong with Rwandan outsourcing’ inquiry takes place, the Home Office cannot say that nobody spoke up at the time. We're speaking up. This is a bad idea – don't do it! I think a lot of staff feel this way. Can this be escalated?”

Where do moments like that fit into the “maximum challenge” mantra?

“There are two answers to that. The first is that the maximum challenge before/maximum support afterwards works best for the people who are involved in the challenge beforehand, clearly, because they will have been part of the journey of

policymaking and it will absolutely be easier for them to accept the end result, even if it's different from the one that they originally advocated.

“On Rwanda, it was a very sensitive topic with only a small number of people who even knew about it, nevermind had the opportunity to challenge it. And everyone else had to take my word for it that there was a robust level of challenge beforehand. And there was – I'm very proud of what the small number of people involved beforehand did do by way of stress-testing and improving the policy.”

Although he says that people must take his word for it, Rycroft does have evidence of part of the challenge he mounted – in the form of a ministerial direction which flagged concerns about the scheme's value for money. On that direction, Rycroft says that the success of the policy will not be measured by the thousands of people who get relocated to Rwanda, but by the thousands of people who don't risk their lives in crossing the Channel. “The direction was not saying ‘it cannot be value for money’. The direction was saying ‘we just don't know yet whether it will be value for money, and so we cannot go ahead with spending without the direction.’”

Rycroft's “second answer” to the question of where Rwanda fits into maximum challenge is that the department's legal advisers, the courts and the attorney general ruled that the policy was legal. “If they hadn't, obviously we wouldn't have gone along with it and it wouldn't be right to loyally support it now. It's not for us as individual civil servants to decide, in our own internal legal system, that it is unlawful. So that's why my maximum support mantra applies also to Rwanda.”

Compassion

In response to Williams's report on Windrush, the Home Office published a Comprehensive Improvement Plan in which it pledged, among other things, to adopt a more compassionate approach, putting “people first” and taking “proper account of the complexity of citizens' lives”. The Home Office values now include compassion – a rather novel inclusion in a corporate document.

On embedding this new approach throughout the department, Rycroft admits the Home Office must go further. “Being compassionate in relation to, for instance, the communities that we serve, is a very significant shift in culture. And it's a difficult thing to do. Compassion, from my perspective, is about really understanding and feeling things from other people's perspective. If you are a caseworker, it's a really important attribute. Because the decisions that you are taking are hugely important for that individual. But it doesn't happen overnight: this is a long-term journey.”

It's also a very tricky one. The department works on sensitive, complex and emotive issues. Home Office officials are well used to thinking about integrity, impartiality, honesty and objectivity as they navigate divisive issues and offer advice to ministers – but compassion? Doesn't that add extra complexity to the balance of challenge and support that Rycroft has just eloquently explained?

“I agree with your point about the scale of the challenge,” he says. “These are knotty, almost impossibly difficult issues to grapple with. But that’s why we go into public service: to have a role in grappling with them. I’m pretty sure it’s why many of our politicians go into politics as well: they want to grapple with them too, from a different perspective.

“Our values, as a result of all of this transformation work, and in addition to the civil service values, are ‘respectful, courageous, compassionate and collaborative’. The compassionate value means that we act ethically, with honesty, care and sensitivity, seeking to understand the realities and perspectives of the people we serve, to build trust and confidence. That’s our definition, if you like, of what compassionate means in this context.

“So it’s definitely not a test of each policy. It’s about how we work on whatever the policy is,” Rycroft says, adding that part of the Home Office’s transformation plan is to give people tools, such as ethical decision-making frameworks, which can guide them as they do that work.

“When you think about it that way, it’s absolutely possible to abide by those values – especially when you’re working on an issue that is so difficult. If an elected minister has chosen to do something, which is lawful, our job is to implement it in a compassionate way, whatever it is.”

About Brexit...

Rycroft on... Efficiency versus resilience

“We have to build in agility, so that whatever the world is currently throwing at us, we are ready for it to throw something different at us. Although we are, like the rest of the civil service, finding efficiency savings wherever we possibly can, we do also have an uplift in recruitment for the very specific tasks announced by the prime minister and the home secretary to tackle irregular migration.

“Building resilience at a time when we need to demonstrate value for money with all of our ongoing work means we need to be great at prioritisation. We also need to be very clear with our decision making and enable the top decisions to flow all the way through the organisation so that when prioritisation is done, people see that things are being stopped.

“Resilience also comes from how we work. You can have a structure which is resilient – as I’ve sought to set up here – but we also need ways of working that allow people to invest in their own personal development, for instance. If you’ve cut corners on things like that, then you might think you’re getting a short-term benefit, but you’ll absolutely not be getting a long-term benefit.”

Agile working

Rycroft lives in Kent where the youngest of his three daughters is in sixth form. He says he tries to stay fit, going for the occasional run, and is interested in music. The

double bass was his instrument in a previous life and while jamming sessions don't currently feature in his hinterland, he may pick it up again one day when he has "more time and energy". He's yet to see season two of *White Lotus* (but enjoyed season one) and is a big fan of Ian McEwan novels. His morning train ride into the office is reserved for work emails and reading the daily media summary on his phone – including, one assumes, a fair few Home Office headlines from hell.

Alongside thorny policy issues, the Home Office deals with huge operational challenges. And, like the policies, these are often a source of negative media attention. In recent months, the spotlight has been on the backlogs in processing the cases of asylum seekers who are already here. In October, ex-Home Office perm sec Philip Rutnam told an Institute for Government event that he sometimes wondered whether the UK had the right model. "We generally use executive officers as the asylum decision makers. It's a relatively junior level for making a very important, life-changing decision," he said, adding that in Switzerland, asylum decisions were made by officials "three full levels higher".

Rycroft says that his Home Office is in fact "trying to go the other way". He explains that because there are ways of separating out cases by their complexity, efforts are under way to get administrative officers – a grade more junior than executive officer – involved in processing the simplest cases and save the EOs for the more complex ones. "If there are extremely complex or sensitive cases then yes, you would need a decision maker that was more senior than an EO. But in terms of numbers, those are absolutely the exceptions."

According to IfG research, the initial training for asylum decision makers is in-depth and impressive, but caseworkers have complained about a lack of ongoing support: not enough time with their managers, too many people to each manager. What are the plans for the wider development and professional support for decision makers?

"It's a good challenge," Rycroft says, explaining that even though the department has recently increased the number of caseworkers by 80% in response to the backlogs, this has actually caused an initial drop in productivity as experienced caseworkers spend time training new hires. But he says that giving all these new employees a sense of value and a long-term career trajectory will be a key part of improvements.

To this end, the department has brought all its caseworking teams together into a customer service group, headed by a single director general. "So now, if you work on passports or visas or asylum or some of our other casework, you're all in this single group," Rycroft explains. "You may have a particular role in a particular bit of that group, but it is increasingly easy, I hope, for us to move resource around agilely in response to different challenges."

CSW's Marsham Street sources suggest that while internal communication from Home Office ministers about the transformation agenda hasn't exactly been deafening

in recent months, Rycroft's personal commitment to the Windrush reforms has been heard consistently and loudly even at junior levels.

For someone who says he still thinks of himself "as a diplomat who happens to be at the Home Office for the moment", Rycroft seems rather well suited to running vast, operational departments. Useful skills if one wanted to go all the way to the top...

Where does he see himself in five years – and is it as cabinet secretary? He laughs and then says a firm "no".

Would he enjoy that job?

"What you're going to do in five years' time' is a good one," he says, politely sidestepping the question. "I ask it in interviews myself quite a lot because it gives a sense of where people are on their career journey and of their ambitions... Although I have to say at this at this stage of my career, it is harder to answer – publicly, anyway."

"Can I email you my answer?" he then asks with a grin.

A few days later, an unexpected email arrives. "I hope to still be in the civil service," Rycroft writes, "but if not, then my pipe dream is to run a breakfast café on a beach somewhere!"

It was a difficult question for a perm sec to answer and one word springs to mind when summing up Rycroft's reply: diplomatic.

Rycroft on... Fostering growth

"The departmental vision, which fits with our values, is for a safe, fair and prosperous UK. The 'prosperous' bit of that is designed to really surprise people, because they weren't expecting the Home Office to be a growth department.

"But work at the border is doing two different things. It's obviously trying to keep out people and things that should not be coming into our country, but it's also trying to facilitate the entry into and out of our country of people and goods who should be and who are entitled to be here. [...] So the work that we lead on the border is also about prosperity and growth.

"Another example: the national security part of the department has an important role in generating growth too. The UK has a strong tradition of not just a defence industry, but a security industry that is good at this sort of thing. And I think there is a valuable role for the Home Office to play in promoting that sort of prosperity for the UK as well."