

From spy chief to Prince Harry's bête noire — the many lives of UK Cabinet Secretary Simon Case

Chaos has a habit of following the UK's top civil servant around.



One civil servant described Cabinet Secretary Simon Case as 'a worm' |

Tolga Akmen/AFP via Getty Images
BY EMILIO CASALICCHIO

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LONDON — The past year has seen unprecedented turbulence in Downing Street. Three prime ministers; four chancellors; more than 100 police fines for those attending lockdown parties in No. 10.

Boris Johnson was forced out as U.K. prime minister over the endless scandals. Liz Truss swiftly followed after crashing the U.K. economy. But as 2023 dawns, the man at the center of both tumultuous operations still stands tall at the heart of Whitehall.

Cabinet Secretary Simon Case, the U.K.'s most senior civil servant, was in the room when crucial decisions were taken that sent financial markets into freefall last

September. He had been in the room, too — quite literally, on occasions — as the Downing Street [‘partygate’ scandal](#) unfolded.

Case largely maintained a public silence as scores of junior officials were fined by the police over Johnson-era misdemeanours; and again when one of his most respected colleagues was fired by Truss and her pals in an act of revenge. He has allowed Cabinet ministers to be reappointed to senior roles despite serious concerns about their conduct. He even tried to [smooth over the cracks](#) of Johnson’s grubby [wallpaper scandal](#).

Yet Case, a quiet, establishment figure in his early 40s whose career already spans the royal household, the U.K.’s Brexit negotiating team and spy agency GCHQ, has emerged untarnished from each and every government misstep.

Jill Rutter, a former senior civil servant who now works for the UK in a Changing Europe think tank, describes Case as “the ‘Teflon’ Cabinet secretary — now onto his third prime minister, and surviving scandals where some of his predecessors might have felt the need to consider their positions.”

Around two-dozen private conversations with current and former government officials who worked with Case paint a picture of a highly-politicized player working at the center of the Whitehall machine — a civil servant who operates more as ministerial courtier than the traditional, faceless mandarin.

While some colleagues question Case’s integrity, few doubt his competence or intellect. But his ability to emerge unscathed where more junior colleagues— not to mention prime ministers — have been fined, fired or moved from their jobs has left him with a target on his back.

“I hate that man — he’s a worm,” spat one civil servant who has worked in numerous government departments. The sentiment is not uncommon.

Internal civil service surveys, seen by POLITICO, show satisfaction with Whitehall’s senior management has fallen dramatically on Case’s watch — in particular at the Cabinet Office, the central hub of government at No. 70 Whitehall, which Case most closely oversees.

Just 41 percent of Cabinet Office staff said they were satisfied with internal leadership and the management of change in 2022, a dramatic 20-point fall compared with the last time the questions were asked. A third of staff were outright negative about their bosses.

Alex Chisholm, the permanent secretary at the Cabinet Office and one of Case’s right-hand men, admitted in an internal memo to staff last month that “we must improve our leadership.”

Dave Penman, chief of the FDA union for senior civil servants, said the collapse in morale was predictable. “Every Cabinet secretary’s term comes with its own big challenges but these are usually around events or policy,” he said. “During Simon Case’s

tenure, this has also included integrity at the heart of government, which has been challenged on an almost daily basis. It's no surprise that morale across Whitehall is in decline, with faith in its leadership plummeting."

Allies insist Case is a highly competent public servant who cannot be blamed for the failings of the prime ministers he has worked alongside.

"Simon is brilliant," one senior ex-Downing Street official said. "He sees round corners, he zooms in on problems. There is never a drama, never a fuss."

Johnson's man

Case was brought into Downing Street by Boris Johnson in 2020, reviving a lengthy Whitehall career which many had assumed was over when he departed to work for the royal household in 2018.

Johnson wanted a safe pair of hands to help manage the response to the COVID-19 crisis, and after initially bringing in Case on secondment from Kensington Palace — where he was working as private secretary to Prince William — swiftly appointed him permanent secretary at No. 10 Downing Street.

Allies of Case say he was approached by then-Cabinet Secretary Mark Sedwill for the job; other officials claim he had been actively seeking a return to Whitehall. One former government aide who worked closely with Case said it was in fact Dominic Cummings, Johnson's controversial ex-adviser, who wanted to bring Case in. "He was brought in by Dom, to do what Dom wanted," the person said. "Dom wanted to shake things up, change the way [the civil service] worked. That's what he was there to do."

Regardless, it was a significant elevation for Case, who had started his Whitehall career in 2006 as a junior official in the Ministry of Justice and worked up through various departments to become a civil service aide to prime ministers David Cameron and Theresa May.

But his rise did not stop there. Four months after his return to Whitehall, in September 2020, Johnson sacked Sedwill from the Cabinet secretary job and [replaced him with Case](#), putting him in charge of the 500,000-strong Whitehall machine at the age of just 41. He was the civil service's youngest head in more than a century.

Predictably, the appointment rankled other senior civil servants, some of whom had been discussing possible director-general roles for Case — much more junior posts within their own leadership teams.

His Whitehall detractors point out that he remains the least experienced civil service chief in modern times, having never even run a Whitehall department. "It was not an appointment greeted with high hopes," said one former permanent secretary.

But it was Case's reputation as a political operator which fellow officials found most disconcerting. "For a team of 500,000 to be led by a courtier is not inspiring," the same person said.

But to some who have seen him in action, the appointment made sense.

“He’s good at smoothing things over; spotting things that might go awry and making that little intervention that helps keep the show on the road,” said Alex Thomas of the Institute for Government think tank, who worked alongside Case in Whitehall under Cameron and May. “He’s a good fixer. He’s good at anticipating problems and seeing them off.”

Thomas — like numerous others who have worked with him — described Case as calm, collected and super-smart. But his time working for Johnson would be far from smooth.

Case to defend

From the off in Downing Street, Case found himself working in a chaotic environment, alongside a rollercoaster prime minister with little regard for public standards.

But it was only after the worst of the pandemic had subsided that it became clear what had been going on behind the famous black door.

In November 2021 [a scandal began to break](#) when it emerged aides had held parties — some of them raucous — inside No. 10 at the height of the pandemic. Johnson insisted no rules were broken, but as the pressure mounted was forced to order a review into the issue.

He appointed Case to lead the inquiry. But less than two weeks later, [POLITICO and the Independent revealed](#) gatherings had been held in his office too.

While others in London were being ordered to work from home and not socialize indoors, Case attended a drinks event in mid-December 2020, at which 15 to 20 staff sipped on wine and Prosecco and ate crisps around tables scattered with Christmas decorations. Under pressure following the report, Case swiftly [recused himself](#) from leading the investigation.

The Cabinet Office insisted at the time that allegations of partying were “categorically untrue,” and continues to litigate about the detail of what happened. Officials point to the [eventual investigation report](#) which said the event was a quiz that turned into a drinking event, at which Case stopped and had a beer before heading home. Case never received a fine from the police for his attendance.

Neither was he fined for attending an impromptu birthday celebration for Johnson in Downing Street, for which both the PM and his then-Chancellor Rishi Sunak [received penalties](#). The decision of the police not to punish the Whitehall chief left some Downing Street aides bewildered.

A senior government official who defended Case argued that the mandarin walked into the parties culture when he arrived at Downing Street and tried to fix it. “He inherited a mess and he did his best to clean it up,” the person said, adding that Case had accepted a “share of the responsibility” at a select committee hearing with MPs.

Another government official, however, said Case had attempted to account for the parties debacle during a private meeting of Whitehall's permanent secretaries, but bombed. Some senior civil servants remain shocked he did not resign over the whole affair.

"One of the tasks of the Cabinet secretary is to oversee the conduct of officials in the Cabinet Office and in No. 10, and that was a woeful failure," the former permanent secretary quoted above said. "I can't think of anything like it in terms of failures of conduct."

Rise to power

The public scrutiny Case faced over the Partygate scandal was painful for a man who has spent his career as a backroom operator.

For years he had worked quietly and diligently in the shadows on delicate issues such as intelligence, national security and the Brexit negotiations — all thrilling fare for a constitutional obsessive fascinated with the operations of the British state.

His intelligence roles in particular allowed Case to bask in a world of spies and espionage that had long captivated him. Having attended Bristol Grammar School and then Cambridge University, Case took a PhD at Queen Mary University in east London in the mid-2000s about the government approach to intelligence and its impact on the Cold War.

His tutor, the respected journalist and Whitehall historian Peter Hennessy, [told the BBC](#) that "not only did [Case] know more about his subject than I did after about two weeks, he showed a muscularity of mind and an intellectual curiosity which was really outstanding."

Case and his contemporaries set up the Mile End Institute, a policy group that would invite senior Whitehall and intelligence figures to give lectures about the workings of the state. One fellow academic at the time said Case was obsessed with Whitehall history, and slipped smoothly into the networking circles of powerful people in and around government.

Jon Davis, a fellow PhD student with Case and still a friend, said new documents from the Cold War were being released at the time, which Case lapped up. "It was like a new frontier," he explained. "There was a buccaneering spirit and he was absolutely central to that."

Case, Davis and some of the others would tour pubs and restaurants in London's east end, and were season ticket holders at West Ham Football Club. Case has long been a sports enthusiast; a rugby-lover and a competition rower at Cambridge.

Davis, now a professor at King's College London, where Case sometimes appears to give guest classes, described his friend as "super focused" and offered a glimpse into the struggles he faces keeping the Whitehall machine on track. "It's a hard life, and you've

got to believe in the public realm to want to do that,” Davis said. “It’s a tough job, and a pretty thankless one too. It’s a very heavy crown to wear.”

Case would later get the chance to delve deeper into his love of Cold War themes during a 2015 stint at Government Communications Headquarters, known as GCHQ, one of the U.K.’s central intelligence agencies.

There he worked on a new law aimed at curbing the abilities of the state to snoop on its citizens in the wake of the Edward Snowden revelations, under senior GCHQ official Ciaran Martin.

Case had previously worked under Martin at the Cabinet Office, where his experience ranged from nuclear security to the delicate management of the Northern Ireland peace process.

“He has a lot of expertise in quite niche areas of government that are important to prime ministers,” Martin noted. “It’s an eclectic mix of the monarchy, nuclear security, the Northern Ireland peace process and intelligence. Those tend to be non-partisan areas, but things prime ministers care about.”

Getting Brexit done

Case was able to burnish his Northern Ireland credentials further when he was drafted in to help with the Brexit negotiations under then-Prime Minister Theresa May, in 2017.

It was a difficult period, not just because he was working on the most complex aspect of a notoriously complex issue (indeed, the Northern Ireland conundrum is [still to be solved](#)), but because he butted heads with May’s chief negotiator, Olly Robbins.

Robbins took a different approach to Case, according to people with a view into the talks at the time. Robbins wanted to keep the circle of information tight to avoid leaks, while Case pushed to involve more people in the discussions, either to ensure Cabinet ministers and crucial stakeholders had signed up to the approach, or to see how new positions might land with hardline Brexiteers. Some believed he was networking and maneuvering to further his own ambitions.

At one point, the U.K. team was debating two possible options to square the Northern Ireland circle, with Case insisting that Brussels would never accept either one. In the end, he was proved right — but not before May had presented one to EU leaders, and been laughed out of the room.

“He probably saw the weaknesses of the Robbins strategy,” said David Davis, a Conservative MP who was leading the Brexit negotiations at the time.

Robbins was also suspicious that Case was briefing journalists on the talks, despite a clear edict from No. 10 that all developments must remain under wraps.

It wasn't the last time Case was accused of leaking to the press. Suspicions were raised in Johnson's Downing Street when [a profile](#) of the PM's then-girlfriend and later wife Carrie appeared in the high society magazine Tatler.

One quote comparing Carrie to Kate Middleton and Meghan Markle, the women who married the sons of King Charles III, was attributed to "a mandarin who has worked with both the palace and Downing Street." Top aides close to Johnson sensed the hand of Case, though nothing was ever confirmed.

Other officials privately suspect that he keeps in contact with certain political journalists and conducts clandestine operations behind the scenes, actively intervening in stories on occasion. Indeed, numerous people inside government view Case more as political operator than civil servant, and claim that at times he acts like a special adviser, or SpAd — the energetic young political aides who toil to protect their ministers at all costs.

"Too often he almost imagines himself as another courtier who would rather be a senior special advisor or minister's right-hand civil servant, rather than the Cabinet secretary," said one former Johnson aide. "He's always seen himself as being something of a player."

Palace intrigue

In the end, amid tensions with Robbins and pressures at home that made spending time in Brussels difficult, Case abandoned the Brexit job to become private secretary to Prince William — then the Duke of Cambridge, and now the first in line to the throne.

One former colleague at Kensington Palace said he took the job to indulge his fascination with how the British state works, and because it was a rare chance to work in such a senior royal role.

The job involved maintaining communication between the various royal palaces, as well as being chief of staff to the household and advising the future king. He is said to have had a good relationship with William, offering practical and, at times, emotional support, and worked on high-profile events such as the duke's trips to Israel and Pakistan, as well as the fallout from Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's departure for California.

"It sounds corny, but the guy is fully motivated by improving outcomes for people," said the former colleague. "He has taken jobs that are difficult because he's hoped he can actually make a difference, or because he has been asked to do them to make that difference."

Harry appears less convinced by Case's approach, however, judging by reported extracts from his new memoir.

The tabloid website [Mail Online reports](#) Harry had unsavory nicknames for the three senior royal courtiers who dealt with his departure — dubbing them 'The Bee', 'The Fly' and 'The Wasp.'

“The Fly,” Harry reportedly writes in ‘Spare’, had “spent much of his career adjacent to and, indeed drawn to, s***. The offal of government and media and wormy entrails, he loved it, grew fat on it, rubbed his hands in glee over it.” Westminster is rife with speculation that he is referring to Case.

It was from the Palace that Case moved back to Downing Street under Johnson — but his reputation as courtier came with him.

“I like Simon, but he’s a snake,” said a senior Tory who worked closely with Case during the Johnson era. “He was never going to be one to tell Boris how it is.”

A former special adviser added: “He’s like a heat-seeking missile, in that he seeks out where the power lies — and toadies to it.”

But for the non-political staffers in Whitehall, it’s his reputation for not standing up for civil servants which rankles most. One departmental official, asked how the workforce feels about Case, said: “‘Spineless’ is the word I hear most often.”

Taken on Truss

Indeed for many senior Whitehall colleagues, Case’s most serious misdemeanour was his failure to intervene over the sacking last September of Tom Scholar, the top civil servant leading the all-powerful U.K. Treasury. Scholar was fired without warning by new PM Liz Truss and her Chancellor Kwasi Kwarteng in their very first week in Downing Street.

The decision caused uproar within the civil service and among retired grandees, with much of the anger [directed at Case](#) over his apparent acquiescence. A number of senior figures went public to accuse the Whitehall chief of failing to stand up for his team, with some even calling for his resignation.

“He let one of the only men in the U.K. who can bring us through this economic crisis be sacked,” said the official who called Case a worm.

“Now everybody knows they could be fired,” complained another senior Whitehall official. “It may have been what the politicians wanted, but no one is safe in their job now. Simon Case doesn’t have the backs of any of us.”

But the official who defended Case above insisted he had stood up for Scholar behind closed doors and believed he had an agreement with the incoming administration there should be no rash moves, but was ultimately ignored.

“Simon is a champion for the civil service in the rooms where the decisions are taken,” the person said. “Cabinet secretaries tend to become lightning conductors for their administrations,” the person added. “That’s the nature of the game.”

Nevertheless, the sacking of Scholar was just an *hors d’oeuvre* for the Truss administration and its refusal to listen to Case.

Two weeks later, Truss and Kwarteng [unveiled their now-infamous fiscal plan](#), throwing the markets into chaos.

Case had voiced his concerns, according to a former aide who worked under Truss, but the PM and her chancellor pressed ahead regardless, sending the U.K. economy into a tailspin. “Simon did what he could,” the former No. 10 colleague quoted at the top of this article insisted. “Really you have to ask where the Treasury were in all this.”

Finally, three weeks after Truss’ mini-budget was announced, Case made his decisive move. [According to ‘Out of the Blue](#), a recent biography of Truss, he and new Treasury chief James Bowler told the PM that unless she changed course, it would take two decades for the U.K. to recover from the economic damage she was inflicting. She bowed to their pressure.

Fans of Case insist this shows he was the right person to stick around to help manage the aftermath of the crisis, bashing heads together across the government.

“Sometimes officials are unfairly blamed or maligned for certain things that go wrong, and sometimes they get away with things because they point at the politicians,” the former Truss aide said. “But Case handled himself pretty well throughout the whole six weeks [of Truss’ premiership], not least because it was unprecedented.”

The question now is whether Case’s reputation as Downing Street’s great survivor can continue. To do so he must now retain the confidence of a third prime minister, Rishi Sunak, as well as the skeptical departmental bosses he is tasked to manage.

Sunak’s allies would not comment on Case’s future under the new PM, but insisted the two men get on well. “They enjoy a good working relationship,” one said. “Simon is thoughtful in meetings and has a professional, calm manner that is respected by those he works closely with in No. 10.”

Case is said to be optimistic he will remain in post until at least the next general election, expected in 2024, and hopes to stay on significantly longer. But others in Whitehall are less certain about his future.

“The question mark over Case is whether he has any remaining credibility with his permanent secretary colleagues to corral them successfully in support of his new prime minister,” noted Rutter, “and whether Sunak ultimately decides he would prefer a Cabinet secretary of his choosing who might be a more effective champion of his declared ambition to restore integrity and professionalism to government.”

But if his resilience through what has appeared endless career tumult is any indication, Case still has fuel in the tank. As the ex-Johnson aide quoted above put it: “This is a man who would literally sell his mother to survive.”

Tim Ross and Jack Blanchard contributed reporting.