

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee Inquiry into the work of the Civil Service

Written evidence from the Rt Hon Sir Oliver Letwin MP

From 2010 to 2016, when I was involved in securing the implementation of the government's policy programme, I dealt with a wide range of civil servants from most Departments – at all levels from Grade 7 to Permanent Secretary. (I was also heavily involved on a daily basis in meetings with the Cabinet Secretary, the National Security Adviser, and other officials in Number 10 and the Cabinet Office.)

I should preface what I have to say about capability by saying that, in the course of literally thousands of encounters with civil servants across Whitehall, I found them almost invariably helpful, cooperative, politically impartial, courteous, intelligent, hard-working and conscientious. I like civil servants – or, at any rate, the civil servants we have.

I also found that the central Departments (Number 10, Treasury and Cabinet Office) tended to have officials of the highest capability. My view is that the Cabinet Secretaries with whom I had the luck to serve were the very finest examples of what a civil servant should be – and I was hugely impressed, within the Cabinet Office, by the work of EDS, NSS, CCS, the Implementation Unit, the Policy Unit and the Private Offices. There was, in my view, little that could be improved in these areas.

However, in dealing with officials outside the centre, although much work was impressive, I found significant deficiencies in the way that many of the people concerned were trained; in the culture that frequently prevailed; and in the results that too often emerged.

So far as training is concerned, my observations were that:

- Many officials, especially (but not exclusively) in more junior positions found it difficult to write clearly. On probing the causes of the unclear, jargon-ridden and ill-evidenced papers that too frequently came my way, I often found that the problem was not just a stylistic inelegance, but rather an inability to think clearly about whether a proposition being put forward actually

corresponded with the facts.

- Sometimes – indeed, distressingly often – officials had put together a ‘view’ or ‘recommendation’ without knowing the essential facts. It is, of course, very often difficult in government to discover what is actually happening on the ground. The statistics can be horribly delayed; there may be conflicting reports about what is happening from apparently reputable sources; and much of what is at stake is complicated and subtle, so that it is not immediately obvious which facts are really relevant. But my impression was that Departments had a strong inclination in too many cases to avoid the hard work of examining facts at first hand, and were all too willing to resort instead to prolixity and jargon as a way of disguising the lack of factual basis for their advice.

So far as the culture was concerned, I was alarmed to discover that Departments seemed frequently to place more emphasis on the ability and enthusiasm of their officials to participate in the ‘leadership’ of the Department itself than on the ability of officials to help ministers implement government policy efficiently and effectively. I got the sense that promotions too often depended on the willingness of individual civil servants to ‘play the game’ rather than on the quality of the work done by individual civil servants on behalf of the government and the citizen. For example:

- I observed some very capable civil servants who knew their subject intimately after years labouring away at complicated and difficult topics, who seemed to be ‘stuck’ at a fairly low grade; whereas others, markedly less competent, were moved up because of supposed skills in ‘management’. There seemed to be no way in which a supremely effective and knowledgeable official could be promoted and celebrated whilst continuing to do what they were good at.
- The desire to move people around over the course of a career appeared to have reached the point of mania. Very few high-flying officials seemed to remain in a post for long enough to acquire a deep knowledge of the issues and facts – no doubt partly because all the brightest officials had spotted that remaining in one place for a considerable period had adverse

effects on their careers. The effect was that, by the time I had been in my own post for 6 years, I frequently knew more about the history of the issues with which we were dealing than the supposedly 'permanent' civil servants who were meant to be providing me with expert advice.

- Finally, and most disturbingly, I had the impression that a heresy had spread. According to this heresy, there were three distinct activities – “policy advice”, “technical advice” and “operational management”. The implicit suggestion was that an official could give useful policy advice without understanding the technical issues and without having a clear understanding of the operations involved in implementing the policy. Likewise, there was an implicit suggestion that the technical experts (legal, accounting, economic, ITC etc) didn't need to understand either the policy or the operations; and that the operational management could be carried out by people who were 'managers' unconscious of policy. Obviously, these suggestions are arrant nonsense. In practice, what is needed to conceive, elaborate and implement a complicated policy effectively is a single, persisting team of people who combine an understanding of the policy issues, the technical issues and the operational issues. One member of the team may have much more of a background in one domain than another – but all of them need to understand one another and to work as a single team. This culture, of unified, persisting project teams seemed to be almost absent.

The result of these deficiencies was frequently the very sort of problem identified by the NAO. For example, a group of ICT specialists (whether in-house or contracted or both) would design a computer system that didn't properly enable the operation of the policy it was designed to facilitate; the 'policy people' would disavow any real understanding of the computer system; and the 'operational people' would be landed with something they couldn't operate.

In short, my view is that:

- The great majority of our civil servants are fine, impartial and conscientious people.
- In the central departments, there is a concentration of exceptionally capable civil servants.

- But, in line departments, deficiencies of training and culture too often mean that -- instead of acquiring real and solid understanding of facts, policy issues, technical issues and operational issues that can be put to efficient use as part of effective, persisting project teams -- officials instead make progress rapidly through the ranks by 'managing' increasing numbers of other officials and by focussing on jargon-ridden 'leadership' of the Department.
- And the results for the public we are here to serve are too frequently sub-optimal.

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