

These are Dame Antonia Romeo's first two messages to staff.

A message from the Cabinet Secretary



Dame Antonia Romeo was appointed as the Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service on 19 February 2026. In her first message to the organisation, she set out her reflections on the role and her pride in public service.

Dear colleagues,

I still remember my first day in the Civil Service, 25 years ago. I was an economist on a temporary contract, with limited understanding of what the Civil Service was or what it did - just a powerful belief that government could change lives for the better. 25 years later, I hold that same belief more strongly than ever.

The Civil Service is a remarkable institution, which I love. I've had the privilege of working in some extraordinary departments on some extraordinary things: from global trade negotiations to courts and prisons, from economics to national security. I've seen first-hand the expertise and commitment of colleagues - in frontline services, across departments and agencies, and across the country. So it is with a profound sense of pride that I take up this role as your Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service. I don't take this responsibility lightly.

Our job is to deliver for the Government. I want us to be known for excellence in delivery, and to serve the government with purpose, and with the pride that comes from high-performance. The Prime Minister has an ambitious agenda for the country that will require us to work at pace, collaboratively, and with agility. The challenges facing our country are significant and the public's expectations of us are, rightly, high. Everything we do should move us closer to the outcomes that matter for the public. We must be curious about why we are doing what we are doing, and relentless in scrutinising our performance and removing barriers to delivery.

The Civil Service has deep skills and expertise, but we need to continue to modernise and innovate. I have spent much of the past five years talking to civil servants across the country about what they want from the Civil Service. What you have told me is that you want to change the things that get in the way of you doing your jobs. You want us to be more productive, to do things differently. You want to be proud of what you achieve. Civil Service modernisation needs to embrace your ideas and have innovation at its core.

I have given my career to public service because I care passionately about the country and the importance of democracy. No one will be a stronger advocate of the Civil Service than I am. I will stand up strongly for the Civil Service and I will work with you all to maintain and build trust in our institution. In 25 years I have seen civil servants respond to huge challenges with creativity, resilience, and determination. I know what we can achieve together.

Finally, my commitment to you as your Cabinet Secretary is to provide the energy, direction and support you need to excel. I will always take pride in what we do. You do some of the hardest jobs in the country - and you do them because they are hard, not in spite of them being hard.

That is the heart of public service. Every single person in the country, every day, depends on our work. That should be a matter of pride for us all, and something we should all carry with us.

I'm looking forward to working with you.

Antonia

Dame Antonia Romeo

Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service

Two Photos, Seven Decades of Progress

Last month, Dame Antonia Romeo was appointed as the first female Cabinet Secretary. To mark International Women's Day, she has written about the first photographs that she put up in her office after being appointed.



2017 UK Civil Service Female Permanent Secretaries Portrait

Almost nine years ago, I was appointed to my first Permanent Secretary role, at the Department for International Trade (now the Department for Business and Trade). I was the 35th female Permanent Secretary ever to be appointed.

The first female Permanent Secretary was Baroness Evelyn Sharp. She was appointed in 1955, at the Ministry of Housing and Local Government. Remarkably, it took 62 years to appoint 35 female permanent secretaries. As of 2026, there have been 61 women appointed Permanent Secretary - that's 26 in 9 years alone.

The Civil Service is a remarkable institution, which I love. After 25 years in the service, to be appointed last month as the first female Cabinet Secretary and to lead the half a million civil servants across the UK and around the globe is the unrivalled privilege of my career.

One of the first things I did when I moved into the Cabinet Secretary's office in 70 Whitehall was put two photos on the wall. Both show (almost) all the living female permanent secretaries at the time they were taken. One in 2017 when I had just been appointed, and the other in 2024.



2024 UK Civil Service Female Permanent Secretaries Portrait

Left to right from top row:

Clara Swinson CB, Anne Keast-Butler, Jo Shanmugalingam, Jessica de Mounteney (Next Row) Beth Russell CB, Dr Jo Farrar CB OBE, Susannah Storey CB, (NR) Sarah Munby, Sam Beckett CB, Susannah McGibbon, Susan Acland-Hood ,

*(NR) Tricia Hayes CB, Tamara Finkelstein CB
Angela MacDonald CBE, Sarah Healey CB CVO (NR) Madeleine Alessandri CMG,
Leslie Evans, Dame Bernadette Kelly DCB, Dame Shona Dunn CB (NR) Dame Shan
Morgan DCMG, Dame Clare Moriarty DCB, Dame Elizabeth Gardiner DCB KC,
Dame Jil Matheson DCB FAcSS (NR) Dame Una O'Brien DCB, Moira Wallace OBE,
Cat Little CB, Dame Antonia Romeo DCB, Dame Ursula Brennan DCB, Dame Sue
Owen DCB (Front Row) Dame Karen Dunnell DCS FAcSS, Dame Sue Street DCB,
Dame Valerie Strachan DCB, Dame Stella Rimington DCB.*

*On International Women's Day, these photos tell a story of how far we have come,
and remind us how far we have to go. They also highlight that progress doesn't just
happen by accident. It happens because people in institutions choose to change
them, including the pioneering female Civil Servants of previous decades.*

*Leadership is about people, and creating the conditions for them to thrive. If we want
to draw on the talents of the widest possible range of people, we need the Service to
be a model for a workplace where merit counts.*

*I want the Civil Service to be known for excellence in delivery. I want us to serve the
government with purpose, and with the pride that comes from high performance. And
I want us to build an inspiring, dynamic, can-do Civil Service - one that draws on the
talent of everyone in the country.*

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