

The Westminster Model - Academic Commentary

This is an annex to chapter 4 of Civil Servants, Ministers and Parliament.

Professor Jeremy Richardson said this in a 2018 blog:

There have been important changes within government departments, namely a change in the balance of power between senior civil servants on the one hand, and Ministers and their Special Advisers on the other.

Many ministers (and their external advisers, both official and informal) arrive in office with a thorough knowledge of their policy portfolio and their own strong priorities on what policy change is needed. This has led to a shift from civil servants warning ministers and keeping them out of trouble, reflecting the traditional risk aversion normally attributed to British government, towards 'carriers' of ministerial ideas, willing to try to implement policies even when lacking broad policy community support.

Civil servants are accordingly now less able to strike a consensus with interest groups, as the civil servants often arrive at the table when decisions have already been made, rather than willing to engage in a process of mutual learning and exchange in order to generate policy solutions. The zone for negotiation is often much smaller than hitherto, and this fundamentally changes the nature of the interaction between civil servants and groups, and hence the policy style itself.

There are big risks inherent in the new policy style under which consultation is much more constrained.

Professor Richardson quotes David Halpern (Head of Number 10's Behavioural Insights Team) as describing life behind the shiny black door of Number 10 as akin to a hospital Accident & Emergency Department:-

'in such a world, there's often not the time, nor the patience, for the answer to be "more research needed"' There is more than a hint here of a 'pop-up' style of policymaking where chaps (mostly!) with seemingly clever policy ideas get to implement them without the need to consider the views of, or seek the support of, the affected interests.

And he quotes Crewe and King (The Blunders of Our Governments):-

'there is at the heart of the British system a lack of deliberation'. Their studies show that a lack of consultation, or ignoring the messages resulting from consultation, was often a cause of policy failure. For example, they see the massive failure of Mrs Thatcher's Poll Tax as in large part due to the fact that the Government 'conferred with almost no one outside Whitehall (and ignored the views of two outside assessors whom they did consult)'.

My worry is that there have been some re-enforcing trends at work in Britain over the past thirty years that have shifted the central focus of the policy process from better policies towards more overtly political ones. The austerity and reform turns; the strengthening of the centre in relation to policy departments; the increased role of political advisers in initiating policy change; a drift towards a more subservient civil service; and an apparent increasing number of cases where interest groups are marginalised, can have a cumulative adverse effect on the quality of policy-making. 'Strong government' has a nice ring to it, but it is high risk too.

Now here are some quotes from

Professor Anthony King's Who Governs Britain?

Ministers

[Permanent Secretaries at Mrs Thatcher's introductory dinner] came over as supercilious, sullen, resistant, resentful and ... defeatist. The word soon went out. The prime minister was determined to be the boss in her sphere. Her ministers has also better make sure they were the boss in theirs... Ministers who hesitated, buying into the ingrained caution of their senior officials, could expect to have their careers terminated. What had once been expected to be a collaborative relationship between ministers and officials ... was now expected to be more strictly hierarchical. By the time Thatcher left office, the doctrine of the constitution had not changed in any material way, but the feel of it certainly had.

[Ministers now] believe ... that if they are to impress ... they must constantly be seen to be taking initiatives [and] if change is desirable ... then it is desirable now not at some unspecified time in the future ... Post-Thatcher ministers are characterised by their impatience. [They] have no incentive at all to think about the longer term future.

Officials

The traditional British civil service ... was dynamic. Generations of senior civil servants regarded it as part of their mission ... to promote causes. [References to Rowland Hill, James Kay-Shuttleworth, Robert Morant, Eyre Crowe, Frank Lee.]

[But] the majority were not [dynamos]. Their essential role was to serve ministers by helping them promote their chosen causes and ... by doing their best to prevent them from making mistakes ... They should be custodians of their department's institutional memory.

[The post-Thatcher] change of role meant a corresponding change in the role and mind-set of officials. From now on, officials were to be civil servants in reality, at their master's beck and call, eager to do their master's bidding. ... By the time New Labour came to power in 1997, there were few if any of the old style mandarins still in place.

Many ministers, with much expected of them and suspicious of their officials, turned for help and advice to ... special advisers ... and ... think tanks.

More than two decades after the fall of Margaret Thatcher, the vast majority of officials, including the most senior, give the impression of having settled into their new, more subordinate role. ... Undoubtedly there are some ministers [such as John Hutton] who like to have their propositions challenged and who become uneasy when their officials appear over-anxious to oblige. ... But ... that would appear to be a minority view. [After references to a couple of blunders] "We wanted", one of them said, "to avoid a Sir Humphrey image. We became afraid to say "No, Minister". [Another said ...] "Can-do man was in and wait-a-minute man was out.

Fortunately, can-do man (and woman) is quite often able to do ... their successes, precisely because they are successes, typically go unremarked. ... Nevertheless, there are good reasons for believing that the civil service ... is increasingly no longer capable of providing ministers with the knowledge, the long experience and the 'ballast' that they require – in other words, that cracks are beginning to appear in one of the two might pillars of the British state.

... officials, once the embodiments of departmental continuity, are now at least as transient as their political masters and therefore at least as liable not to have a very firm grasp of what they are doing.

[A cabinet minister complained] that his own department's collective memory was so short ... that "... people deal only with the instant they are living in, rather than drawing on any kind of history or knowledge of the detail and background to a particular issue."

The message ... is – or should be – clear ... although individual civil servants can still be highly influential, the collective influence of the British civil service is now scarcely a shadow of what it ought to be. ... mandarins have been all but expelled from their former Garden of Eden. Ministers' Spads have not replaced them.

The result is that activity can easily trump genuine action, orotund pronouncements morph into a substitute for careful planning.

Finally, here are some extracts from ...

[The 2018 Kakabadse Report](#)

The Secretary of State/Permanent Secretary relationship emerges as one of inbuilt tension between the urgency to deliver on key political imperatives versus the civil servant's realistic assessment of the landscape of misaligned interests potentially undermining the realisation of the Secretary of State's goals. The Secretary of State/Permanent Secretary relationship is a critical 'fracture point' whereby [up to around half] of such interactions have a dysfunctionality that could damage not only the relationship but also derail policy delivery. In comparison, government emerges in a more favourable position than the broadly equivalent private sector relationship between chair and chief executive officer (CEO).

Respondents noted the 'risk averse', 'overly polite' and 'indirect' nature of many civil servants.

"It is unbelievably polite as a culture. It's a very nice environment in which to work but in which excessive directness is considered a bit aggressive, those are very deeply ingrained cultural things." – Director General

"I have heard a lot of ministers make remarks about the Civil Service being slow or being obstructive. I do think some of it is the fault of the Civil Service. My colleagues are very bright and very committed, but they're not very direct." – Director General

Those Permanent Secretaries who developed positive relationships with successive Secretaries of State emphasised the high levels of attention given to understanding 'how to get onto the Secretary of State's wavelength'.

"It's not just listening in the meetings, it's watching the broadcasts and reading the print. I've shifted from buying the Guardian to the Telegraph because I wanted to know what was going on in the minister's context, and the way in which people (including the minister) were thinking. There was no point in me reading the Guardian because it had all the wrong language in it. Even though I quite enjoyed reading the Guardian, I needed to read the Telegraph to understand." – Permanent Secretary

Those Secretaries of State viewed as confident, rationalist and evidence driven were more favoured by the civil servants. These same Secretaries of States were reported as inviting comment and challenge, and of having a track record of sustained professional relationships. The most 'difficult' Secretaries of State were those seen to lack self-confidence, and as being overly sensitive to their surrounding circumstances. They were viewed as less likely to accept personal responsibility for decisions, especially when under pressure, and more likely to blame others, particularly the Permanent Secretary.

"...lowest ebb, I think it was very low in the Francis Maude days, but it's pretty low now. I think a number of things are making it worse at the moment... The default is that we're to blame for everything. We're to blame for Brexit being difficult; if we say Brexit's difficult, we're blamed for being remoaners." – Permanent Secretary

“...we worked hard on integration, keeping the minister fully informed and involved, then he calls a meeting and tells us we are lagging behind, we are not pulling our weight. None of us understood why, other than this was a political statement which we did not deserve. The sense of betrayal has affected me.” – Director General

“You do need some grit in the oyster. You do need at times to be a bit abrasive in running a department, because it mustn’t be allowed to become overly comfortable. People need to understand that when a minister says, ‘look, I’ve heard all the arguments about why I should go north, but I’ve decided to go south and now I want everyone on the bus’, that there needs to be sufficient incentive for everyone to do that.” – Permanent Secretary

“...being totally honest. It’s what I expected from my civil servants, but it’s also what I thought the Secretary of State and other ministers had every right to expect from me. They might not like it, whatever it was, but they never had any doubt that I was telling them the truth as I knew it. The second thing I believed is that if there was bad news, and you had any opportunity to do so, the Secretary of State needed to hear it from you first.” – Permanent Secretary

“I think you’ve got to stand up and speak truth unto power if that is what is needed. Then when people have had that information and the decision is taken, our role is to get on and implement it, and to do it according to whatever timescale.” – Permanent Secretary

“I’ve got a very hyperactive Secretary of State; he/she’s very ambitious, he/she wants everything done very quickly. That means that sometimes he/she gets frustrated at the pace of change that we’re able to execute for him/her and that creates some sensitivities. How do we make him/her understand what’s needed to deliver his/her policies in a way that he/she can have confidence? I’ve had some very difficult conversations myself with him/her, where I have had to explain why the thing he/she wants us to do cannot be done, and that’s quite a difficult conversation.” – Permanent Secretary

“...if there’s one single message, and it’s perhaps even more relevant now, it’s behave with courtesy, professionalism and respect towards all of those you are dealing with, and in particular your civil servants. That absolutely does not mean that you need to accept any piece of advice that they give you, that you can’t be critical, and indeed highly critical, if they deliver service, advice, delivery which is clearly not good enough.” – Secretary of State

“I remember one of my low points when I went to the Secretary of State and said, ‘I am sorry. We have badly let you down. It is completely unacceptable and I will do anything I can to ensure this does not happen again.’ I am hugely sympathetic to my ministers. So, what I learned to say is, ‘Minister, please let me know what you would like me to do better.’” – Permanent Secretary

“I want the minister primarily to be clear about the direction they want to go in, provide the appropriate framework for us to work in, to appropriately challenge but actually at a level that recognises that the people who are responding generally want to deliver what ministers want them to deliver.” – Permanent Secretary

In most cases, the civil servants felt that the Secretary of State had sound, logical reasons for changing direction and priorities. But, at times, the only logic identified was the poor relationship between them and other Secretaries of State. Interviewees outlined how one Secretary of State impeded the progress and policy delivery capacity of another. Despite civil servants being uncomfortable in discussing such cases, the resentment one minister held for another emerged as the strong motive for a change of political direction.

A further point raised is the Secretary of State’s response to supposed underperforming Permanent Secretaries. If seen as not meeting the demands and urgencies of the Secretary of State, then a complaint may be lodged with the Cabinet Secretary requesting a change of Permanent Secretary. Numerous Permanent Secretaries and DGs described the lengths they would go to prevent such a demand being made. The ‘black mark against one’s name’ is taken very seriously.

Ministers are identified as handling their relationship with civil servants in two ways. Certain ministers adopt a collaborative approach, viewing civil servants as an invaluable and trusted resource, as a sounding board, checker, insightful policy adviser and guide on how to work around obstacles. Other ministers have viewed and continue to view civil servants with suspicion, and remain sceptical of their competence and loyalty. This is particularly so with Brexit, where civil servants report they are seen by some as inhibiting or subverting negotiations, and delaying or thwarting the minister’s ambitions. The civil servants consider that these ministers need to be ‘won over’.

Certain civil servants outlined the challenge they faced in truly understanding the minister. Unless a possible misreading of the minister is quickly rectified, a strained and difficult relationship can take hold.

“I really misjudged my Secretary of State. I thought from the way he/she operated, he/she was gregarious and outgoing and so I put him/her in front of many people. He/she actually is more introverted and insecure than I imagined, and I should have had him/her meet in smaller groups and in a less exposed manner. To this day, I believe he/she has not forgiven me and must feel that civil servants are obstructive. I blame myself but it really took me three months to understand (him/her).” – Director General

“[After a presentation to the Secretary of State] I was thrown out of the office and told not to come back, but the situation was so pressing, I was back in front of the Secretary of State some months later. He/she liked what I presented and said fine let’s go ahead. The political adviser attending said to me after that meeting, ‘Am I wrong, but did you present more or less the same as you presented those months

ago?’ Yes, it was the same, but what I learned was how to show the advantages for him/her as Secretary of State and how he/she will gain. It took me three months to learn that.” – Director General

In turn, ministers also emphasised how impressions of civil servants were deeply formed in the first few months in office.

“I had a clear idea about the way forward when I took up office. The civil servants kept telling me you cannot do this. I know they meant well, but after a while it felt as if they obstructed. Then that happened in the next department, so I learned to be wary of civil servants.” – Secretary of State

For ministers who repeatedly experienced an unsatisfactory initial three-month period from one department to the next, the image of the civil servant as conservative or even obstructive can all too easily take hold.

However, civil servants admit to misunderstandings, misjudgements, feeling inhibited to speak up and, in certain circumstances and with particular Secretaries of State, not knowing how to speak truth to power.

I conclude that civil servants sincerely work through demanding challenges. But, due to the complexities and misunderstandings in the relationships, certain ministers continue to view civil servants as being negative and undermining.

A problematic relationship between Secretary of State and Permanent Secretary is reported as impacting on junior ministers and on civil servants lower down. Interviewees described the increasing tension in relationships cascading down the hierarchy. Even middle-ranking and more junior civil servants described feeling defensive and reluctant to offer opinion, fearing reprimand or being viewed in a negative light.

Under these circumstances some civil servants felt their perspective is likely to be disregarded. Some junior and middle-ranking civil servants outlined an emergent schadenfreude when talented individuals are thought by colleagues to have been moved on for attempting to address known concerns.

Such negativity was clearly identified as stemming from an unduly tense Secretary of State/Permanent Secretary relationship, which permeated into the culture of the department. However, the interviewees also emphasised that this was not the core nature of the culture of the Civil Service. The view frequently expressed is that the Civil Service is composed of many cultures determined by legacy, personalities, the mindset of the Secretary of State/Permanent Secretary and the pressures and demands on the department.

ADVICE

The chemistry of the Secretary of State/Permanent Secretary relationship is shaped by the level of tension between the Secretary of State pursuing multiple political imperatives and the Permanent Secretary's realistic appreciation of the landscape the Secretary of State is required to negotiate. In effect, the relationship is characterised by the tension between urgency versus realism.

Civil servants highlight two dimensions to the chemistry between Secretary of State and Permanent Secretary: common ways of thinking and emotional appreciation of each other. In effect, do both parties have a shared view of the world? Can each engage with the other?

My research into the chair/CEO relationship in the private sector identifies a similar finding between chair and CEO on the dimensions of common ways of thinking and level of emotional engagement.

And yet, in comparison to the private sector, the Secretary of State/Permanent Secretary relationship emerges as more positive and favourable. Having separately conducted the private sector study, I note the distaste and disrespect that can arise between the corporate chair and CEO. In companies, the relationship between chairs and CEOs can become highly combative unlike the conciliatory approach adopted by the Permanent Secretary.

Further, this study shows that, to date, the challenging relationship between the Secretary of State and Permanent Secretary has been largely handled at the personal level. Confidential discussions on how to better address certain problematic 'chemistries' have been held behind closed doors or have become the subject of media drama (and satire). Yet the repercussion of a poor chemistry between these two critical roles significantly impacts on the whole system of government. Thus, in order to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of policy delivery, addressing the chemistry factor needs to be elevated to the 'systems level' of government. In this way, attention can be given to the relationship before it reaches crisis point. The blame culture and its toxic effect on the rest of the department can be more easily handled and improvements made. Further support in terms of coaching and facilitation can be offered more quickly on a confidential basis. Through greater public acknowledgement of the chemistry factor, greater recognition and support can be given to civil servant efforts to make the relationship work.

Further mention needs to be made of a phenomenon that is not observed in the study but is a concern in private sector entities. A particular feature of larger companies is the emergence of a second fracture point between senior/middle management where different views arise on how strategy should be operationalised. This tension can occur at the level of country or area where the local management holds a different view to the corporate centre on how to make strategy work due to the unique nature of local circumstances.

No such second fracture point is identified in government. Irrespective of distance from government in London, no consistent and damaging tensions emerged

between regional/local areas and London. The reason is the deeply held values of the Civil Service across and within departments. A greater cultural cohesion exists in the Civil Service than with other large and complex organisations in the private sector.

I conclude that the three-month transition can be reduced to three weeks through coaching and drawing upon evidence-determined feedback. Such a service could be part and parcel of the induction experience of the Secretary of State and Permanent Secretary.

No intervention in the Secretary of State/Permanent Secretary relationship should be made during the first three weeks in office. Both parties should be free to learn and appreciate each other (or not). During that time the Secretary of State will specify their objectives and form a view of the capability of the department and the Permanent Secretary to deliver. During this initial period, the nature of the relationship, its tensions and strengths, and the reality of the department's capacity to perform will become clearer to both parties.

A robust relationship is the basis for speaking truth to power. Robustness of relationship is nurtured over time and is dependent on the growing level of trust between the two parties. This inquiry has shown that realising high levels of trust currently relies on the efforts of the Permanent Secretary.

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