

CSW

CIVIL SERVICE WORLD 



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Exploring the Army's contribution
to the Covid-19 response

GOVERNMENT REFORM

What the Gove plan means

GERMAN ENGINEERING

How the civil service in Berlin
balances government and politics

**SUSAN
ACLAND-HOOD
ON A YEAR
AT THE HELM
OF DFE**

CLASS ACTION





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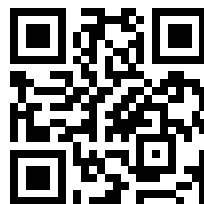


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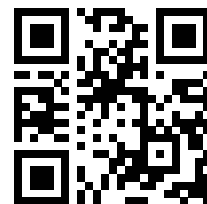
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Presented by CSW editors Jess Bowie and Suzannah Brecknell, The Civil Service World Podcast is an essential tool for navigating the challenges facing public servants today.

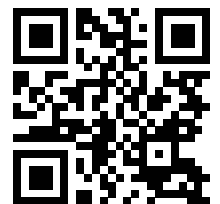
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A photo of Susan Acland-Hood taken by staff in the Department for Education

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FROM THE EDITOR



Civil service reform plans are like buses. You wait for a decade for one and then two come along almost at once.

Ok, so this isn't quite true (changes to government are never that far from a PM's to-do list, and I've lived in places where it feels like you have to wait longer than a decade for a bus). But the publication by the prime minister and the cabinet secretary of the Declaration on Government Reform, followed by the report from the independent Commission for Smart Government within a month, feels like a watershed moment.

We now have, for the first time since Francis Maude's Cabinet Office tenure in the early years of the last decade, a clear statement from the top of government about how it wants to change - to respond to both issues revealed by the coronavirus pandemic and longer-standing concerns. And in the commission's report - the development of which was helped by two former perm secs and a host of other Whitehall big hitters, including Baroness Simone Finn before

she was named No.10 deputy chief of staff in March - there are proposals that could form the basis of how to get there.

The two were clearly written with half an eye on the other (Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove launched the declaration at the commission and returned to speak when it launched its own report), so it is worth those with an interest in the civil service keeping abreast of both.

So that is what we do in this summer double issue of CSW. We take an in-depth look at the declaration, and how it matches up with the man with whom this particular reform drive will always be synonymous: Dominic Cummings. The former top No.10 adviser came into government with long-standing - and well-documented - criticisms of the civil service. The detail of the plan, it turns out, has a lot in common with Cummings's critique, including that it comes after a shock like the coronavirus pandemic. Cummings once argued change would come to Whitehall because of what he called at the time a "beneficial crisis".

We also have reflections on the roadmap - and what it is missing - from Ciaran Martin and Colin Talbot, while Dave Penman looks at the commission's proposals and finds a clear action plan - even if he disagrees with some of the prescriptions.

But reform will be difficult. As Penman notes, this government has showed time and again that, politically, it can be bold, but civil service reform requires strong and consistent action. Not because, as some would posit, the civil service is uniquely institutionally allergic to reform, but because changing any organisation of the size and scope of the civil service - all while delivering vital and increasingly complex services - is something that takes dedication, pragmatism and clear

and considerate leadership.

Few people over the years have shown themselves to be capable of it, but there is clearly a willingness from the top of government, at both political and official level, to try. With many issues that civil servants themselves would like to see addressed, one can only wish them well. But as Cummings has recently highlighted, this is not a prime minister famed for his intellectual consistency and project management nous. Perhaps we can only hope that the path from here doesn't distract too much from the vital work of delivering public services to those who need them. Like improved bus services, for one. ■

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INBOX

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PAY CHECK

Readers weighed in on the latest Senior Salaries Review Board report, which said a review of the purpose, size and composition of the senior civil service and the implementation of a simple pay progression system are “well overdue”.

“For everyone else too!”

Mark Ryan commented.

Rachel Aston wrote: “Does the churn of SCS not also reflect the nature of the job – there is a lot of churn in the work itself, with to-ing and fro-ing around decisions, churn of lower grade staff; not to mention having to manage the politics of it all. Is more money the answer or is it addressing the over-responsive nature (certainly in some departments) of the organisation?”

And Peter Drummond commented: “It’s not the SCS pay that needs reform, it’s the totally inadequate pay freezes that the whole civil service have encountered at the hands of this government.”

And not everyone was sympathetic. “SCS do all right where I live. I’ll save my sympathy for someone else,” The **Dissident Civil Servant** wrote on Twitter.

OUT OF COMMISSION

The Commission for Smart Government’s radical ideas for civil service reform – which included cutting the number of officials, increasing pay and replacing permanent secretaries with chief execs – prompted some reflections.

“Well now you have heard it from this think tank: salaries are considerably lower than our private counterparts,” Peter Drummond wrote.

“Unions have been saying this for years and yet we still get offered the worst paydeals.”

Mark Ryan added: “Increase pay! Earn less than the private sector! That’s hilarious as the Treasury keep telling us our pay is way above the private sector which is why our pay is frozen or subject to restraint!”

Kaide Seager said the policy paper “is great but misses a fundamental reason for joining the civil service: mainly the desire to serve the British people and the British nation. Public service in my opinion should always take precedence over trying to compete with the private sector.

“The civil service should celebrate and encourage people to join with increased patriotism aimed at the devolved nations and regions of the UK, with emphasis on local and national civic duty. With a new sense of British independence, the civil service should embrace our global vocation by increasing the opportunity to allow Commonwealth citizens to join its ranks. Many are well-skilled and actually from British diaspora. The Bank of England recently had a Canadian as governor and former PM of Australia Tony Abbott is now an advisor to the UK Board of Trade. The Commonwealth offers an unlimited pool of talented, diverse and pro-British people. Sometimes the future lies in the past. Often united by language, monarchy, culture, history, ethnicity and common law. Let’s go, Commonwealth!”

QUALIFIED SUCCESS

Labour Party deputy leader Angela Rayner’s call for the civil service to ditch its

“ingrained snobbery” over qualifications – by shifting the focus from A-levels and degrees to encourage a wider range of talented and experienced applicants for government jobs – struck a chord with some of our readers.

“I was always led to understand that the civil service recruited on merit as a key part of the candidate assessment/selection process,” Trevor Chenery said.

And Tahmid Chowdhury commented: “I found this quite odd when first reading as in practice most civil service jobs I’ve seen don’t actually ask for university degrees explicitly. That being said, I think there’s more to be done to stop making it an expected norm, particularly in central departments where you certainly get that ‘certain type’”.

Sharon Brookes shared her own experience. “Having joined the civil service in 1992 with only my GCSEs and experience of work through the YTS (Youth Training Scheme for those too young to remember) I am now a Grade 6, only now finishing a work related MSc. I have had lots of judgement placed on me during my career in various forms,” she said. “When promoted to C2, a colleague asked what uni I had attended – when I replied I didn’t go she questioned how I could get promoted and she couldn’t when she has a history degree!”

“When I was promoted to G7 my SCS line manager told me at my [end of year meeting] that I had been performing above expectations and I was head and shoulders over my peers at interview. However, he added he maybe shouldn’t have promoted me as I don’t have a university education!”

“That had a considerable impact on me and still does (hence now doing a work related degree). I agree that in specialist areas employees will require A-levels and uni degrees but definitely encourage re-

moval of this prerequisite where knowledge, skills and experience can count for far more.”

But not everyone agreed. “Most pure subjects are not directly transferable to the work place but that doesn’t detract from their value,” Rachael Griffiths wrote. “Let’s not devalue the considerable effort of those who leave school with minimal qualifications but then go on to subsequently improve themselves, often because there is a bar to achieve. This [argument] implies throwing all that away – that’s tosh.”

Mark de Buisseret added: “If you don’t want to be centered on degrees and the like it is quite easy. Dispense with the fast track scheme and recruit everyone no matter what their [qualifications] at just one level.”

CENTRE OF ATTENTION

Opinions were divided over the prime minister’s pledge to devolve more powers across England as part of the government’s levelling-up agenda.

“Love it. Power to the regions!” Kaide Seager said.

But Geoff Eales disagreed. “Counties already have democratically elected councils and leaders. This is not levelling up. It is concentrating power and control.

“Regional assemblies are a very different matter to county mayors. Counties are already represented by elected county councils and leaders. This is not power to the regions but power over the regions from the centre and by a self-serving crony corrupt government which should concern us all.” ■

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

We speak to Dr Jenny Harries, the chief executive of the new UK Health Security Agency, about founding the body in response to Covid, and preparing for future threats

Declaration versus Dom

The prime minister's former top adviser made civil service reform a key plank of his time in No.10. Now that the official plan has been published, how much of his vision remains? **Richard Johnstone** investigates

The government has finally published its reform plan for the civil service, after months of speculation.

This current round of civil service reform was kickstarted when incoming prime minister Boris Johnson brought Dominic Cummings into No.10 Downing Street in July 2019. Cummings was a long-standing critic of the civil service, having called the permanent civil service “an idea for the history books”. Although the reform drive has been taken on by Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove and the department's permanent secretary and civil service chief operating officer Alex Chisholm, it will be viewed by many through

the prism of Cummings – who said Whitehall reform was one of his four key conditions for working for the prime minister.

Although the proposed reforms have come from many quarters, it is striking how much seems to match elements of the former No.10 adviser's critique.

Cummings has argued for nearly a decade that government “is programmed to go wrong” and believes “failure is normal, it is not something to be avoided”.

Let's take a look at the Declaration on Government Reform to see where it shares its ideas with the firebrand former adviser.

The plan is made up of three strands: people, performance and partnership.

People

The first strand is focused on “ensuring that the right people are working in the right places with the right incentives”. Changing the incentives of government recruitment is one of Cummings's long-standing desires. A lot of problems stem from the incentives for promotion in departments, Cummings said in a 2014 talk for the IPPR think tank, which set out a number of frustrations with government that he has continued to highlight.

He hit out at HR practices across government and their ability to deliver policy. He said the system is bound to “create crises and frequent spectacular failures”.

“The people who are promoted tend to be the people who protect the system and don't rock the boat,” he said of government. “It promotes people who focus on being important, not getting important things done.”

This means that civil servants do not have the skills to tackle big problems, which ministers cannot change due to recruitment rules, he said.

A number of the detailed points under this heading in the declaration also chime with long-standing Cummings priorities. These include looking “beyond London to all corners of the UK”. Cummings has long lambasted what he sees as the groupthink of metropolitan London, once famously telling journalists: “You guys should get out of London. Go and talk to people who are not rich Remainers”

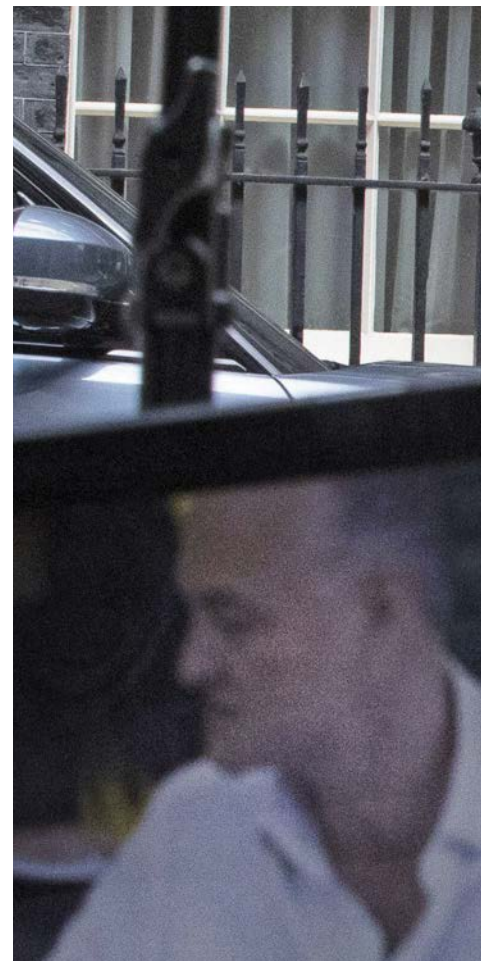
The pledge in this section to “improve the way we recruit and the way we manage moves into and out of government” also builds on a Cummings critique. In his famous blog calling for “weirdos and misfits” to join government, he said: “We need to figure out how to use such people better without asking them to conform to the horrors of ‘human resources’ (which

also obviously need a bonfire.)”

The declaration doesn't go that far, but it does lay out a plan for greater flexibility. “It should be natural for people with careers and skills built in business to serve in government for a period, and for those in public service to spend time in organisations which are not dependent on public money.”

To this end, there is a pledge to open all senior appointments to public competition by default, the lack of which Cummings criticised in his evidence to the parliamentary Covid lessons learned inquiry.

There is also a pledge to give ministers “visibility of senior civil service appointments”, another key Cummings reform that he highlighted before MPs in May. Cummings said Covid had made it clear in a “disastrous” way that while ministers were nominally in charge of hiring and firing in their departments, it was not something they could actually do.





The accompanying pledge to “promote mixed-disciplinary teams and avoid hierarchies slowing down action”, and the use of “red teams” to challenge conventional thinking, were among the suggestions made by Cummings in his 2014 IPPR speech.

Pledges to “assess perma-

“It’s ludicrous to suggest the solution to Whitehall’s problems is a bigger centre and more centralisation”

nent secretaries more transparently and systematically against departmental performance” also chime with Cummings’s 2014 remark that when he wanted to pursue the civil servant who had been responsible for a project that had gone wrong it prompted “shocked faces in Whitehall”.

Performance

The performance section is focused on “modernising the operation of government, being

clear-eyed about our priorities, and objective in our evaluation of what is and is not working”.

It is led by a pledge to “rein-vigorate the principle of departmental accountability”, with departments trusted to deliver by a “smarter centre”. In June 2020, Cummings signalled big changes coming to how No.10 and

the Cabinet Office work, with “a smaller, more focused and more elite centre” being required.

He told special advisers at the time: “Anybody who has read what I’ve said about management over the years will know it’s ludicrous to suggest the solution to Whitehall’s problems is a bigger centre and more centralisation.”

The declaration pledges to establish a new evaluation task force to bring some of

the red-team ethic to policy development by acting as “an inhouse scrutineer not just of value for money in programmes but effectiveness against published ambitions”.

The promise to improve cross-government functions – such as digital, commercial, finance and human resources – is a long-standing Whitehall one, but the commitment to “put data at the heart of our decision-making” links to Cummings’s past comments.

Cummings led the establishment of a data science unit in No.10, which he said had greatly aided the government’s ability to respond to Covid-19 after the first wave. “By September, we had built that team and it made a huge difference,” he said.

The declaration’s pledge to “champion innovation and harness science, engineering and technology to improve policy and services” again appears to be share elements of Cummings’s thinking.

Partnership

The final section focuses on “strengthening the bond between ministers and officials, always operating as one team from policy through to delivery, and between central government and institutions outside it”.

There are four key recommendations in this area, focused first on creating “more opportunities for ministers and officials to discuss and hone policy collaboratively”. Being able to create teams around policy was one of Cummings’s responses to Covid.

“There is an obvious question about responsibility... and about who is actually in charge of things and who can actually form teams,” he said in his evidence to MPs.

“You need to get a great team that knows exactly what the goal is and exactly who is responsible for what. The Whitehall culture of how responsibility is deliberately diffused is intrinsically hostile to high performance management.”

The declaration highlights lessons from the pandemic and Brexit as showing “that the best decisions are made when both ministers and officials contribute to discussions in mixed forums, rather than relying on the traditional approach of a minister alone representing their department”.

It concludes that it is “intended to make government work better and help us focus on our most important priorities, so we must move quickly to implement them”.

Indeed, according to Cummings’s previous thinking, this could be a good time to make reforms. Although he acknowledged the difficulty of reform in his 2014 IPPR speech, he predicted that change would come to Whitehall because of what he called at the time a “beneficial crisis”.

The nation has definitely faced a crisis in the pandemic. If change is to come, it could be now. ■

MATTHEW GILL GETTING THE RAILWAYS ON TRACK

THERE REMAINS A GREAT DEAL TO DO TO TRANSLATE THE GOVERNMENT'S HIGH-LEVEL VISION INTO A CONCRETE PLAN

Rail watchers have long awaited the outcome of the Williams Rail Review, a root and branch look at the structure of the rail industry and the delivery of passenger rail services, which began in 2018 but was interrupted by the pandemic. Its conclusions were finally published in May this year as the Plan for Rail, co-authored by Keith Williams and the transport secretary Grant Shapps.

The key announcement was the formation of Great British Railways, which will run and plan Great Britain's rail network (Northern Ireland Railways is not affected by the reforms), including receiving fare revenue and setting most fares and timetables.



“Little detail has so far emerged on GBR’s remit, operational freedoms or governance”

It will also maintain the network's infrastructure, previously the role of Network Rail. In place of the current franchising system, GBR will contract with private firms to run trains to specified timetables and fares while incentivising them to meet other objectives including punctuality and demand.

The Plan for Rail acknowledged that there is much to do. The rail network is currently fragmented and complex. It suffers from a lack of strategic direction, inefficiencies associated with the array of bodies involved, and unnecessary confusion for customers. Both industry insiders and passengers agree reform is needed, and the announcement of GBR has generally been well received. But little detail has so far emerged on GBR's remit, operational freedoms or governance. It is essential to get these right for the new body to

deliver against the high expectations to which it will be held.

First of all, the government should set GBR clear objectives that enable it to trade off priorities such as reliability, capacity, cost, service quality and indeed climate change (which is identified as a priority in the Plan for Rail). GBR will need a leadership team that can understand the tensions between these priorities and reconcile them in the context of a clear overall strategy for the railways.

Ensuring the private companies that will still run passenger services under the new structure deliver on government's objectives will be a further challenge. Their contracts will be tricky to write and enforce, and will need to avoid the current tendency towards what the Plan for Rail describes as “blame culture”. Transition to the new system will require an appropriately phased plan and careful leadership to ensure public confidence in GBR survives an inherently complex and messy period of change.

GBR is being established to create a clear common brand as

well as a seamless operation, and with many rail lines crossing not just local authority borders but national ones, its success will require close collaboration with governments at the local and devolved level. For some, GBR's branding will help to build British identity; for others, it will grate. The new body cannot be expected to manage these tensions itself and will need ongoing political support. Government will need to establish a robust decision-making process for selecting – and rejecting – major projects that engages local and devolved leaders such that they do not simply demand the earth and blame GBR when they do not get it. GBR will also need to build the skill and capacity to interact with local and devolved stakeholders and to partner effectively with them when they hold the salient knowledge and expertise.

Given these challenges, if GBR

is to run the rail system more simply, the Department for Transport must resist ongoing micro-management and must delegate operational independence to the new body. Among other things, this will entail clarifying how its 30-year planning horizon will align with its five-year funding settlements. In the aftermath of the pandemic and with travel patterns and transport technology changing rapidly, 30 years is a long time. Despite its resilience since the nineteenth century, Britain's extensive rail network has an uncertain future and GBR will need to look ahead with clarity to ensure it meets the needs of the next generation. ■

Matthew Gill is a senior fellow at the Institute for Government. The paper on which this article is based is available at [instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/great-british-railways](https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/great-british-railways)

DAVE PENMAN BOLD IDEAS AND RECIPES FOR CHAOS

A NEW REVIEW OF THE CIVIL SERVICE IS A SERIOUS PIECE OF WORK, BUT DO MINISTERS HAVE A CLEAR STRATEGY FOR THE REFORM THEY WANT?

Talking about government reform at a social occasion would once have been “a guarantee that people would try to distance themselves from you”, Michael Gove said at the launch of the Commission for Smart Government’s *Four Steps to Smarter Government*. Not now, apparently. Like mentioning you are an epidemiologist, you’re guaranteed to be the focus of attention.

I don’t know the type of social occasions the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster attends but they sound very different from mine. Try talking about government reform down the George and Dragon in East Tilbury and you would have always got an engaging dialogue about the challenges of delivering cross-cutting public service delivery in a fragmented and delegated civil service.

The commission has apparently evolved from GovernUp, which came to life in 2014 with a series of papers looking at government reform and which itself is an offshoot of the Project for Modern Democracy. I’m sure think tanks used to be much simpler. The former policing minister Nick, now Lord, Herbert is still involved and it has retained its cross-party – and no party – schtick, including private and public sector commissioners.

There is a series of papers supporting the report and, it has to be said, a fairly decent analysis of some of the issues that need to be fixed. Identifying problems and finding solutions are two different things though, and my expectations are not high, as too often these kinds of reports seem more concerned with pleasing an internal stakeholder audience rather than delivering meaningful reform. It has to be said, nevertheless, that there are some not terrible ideas in this report, and that’s not just because they quote me at one point.

Recommendations that No.10 should be beefed up with its own department, to give greater strategic oversight, is not new but is quite comprehensively explored and argued. A new Treasury board within it, seeking to dilute the power of the Treasury and chancellor, is more novel. Though was apparently previously vetoed by Gordon Brown in the Labour years, if Tony Blair’s former chief of staff Jonathan Powell’s letter to *The Times* is to be believed.

The report makes a lot of the difficulty for government in being strategic and effecting change across a number of departments. Many would agree, though I sense there is more than just a little

concern that, whilst this has always been the case, this is partly driven by a lack of broader strategy within the current government, including a sense that individual ministers are not filling the void. The report also generated headlines with its suggestion that ministers should be brought in from outside parliament, a “cabinet of all the talents” no less – who said it was original?

The commissioners were at pains to emphasise that this is not simply about civil service reform; upskilling ministers and looking at the support they have in departments was also key. Their solution, however, was an

advisory council based on the premise of extended ministerial offices, staffed with quasi-civil

servants personally picked by ministers. That, together with the renaming of permanent secretaries as chief executives, seeks to drive a wedge between the policy advice role of the civil service and the delivery role. Once again, we’re seeing the suggestion, dressed up in different titles and structures, that if only ministers surrounded themselves with clever “experts” who all agree with them, then everything would be hunky dory.

Despite the assurances provided, this would of course dilute the role of a permanent civil service able to give the best impartial, evidence-based advice. That advice would now be filtered through a new hand-picked team, housed separately from the department with the minister in a new ministerial hub. But it would also result in the chaos of the entire leadership cadre of departments changing if, just to pluck an example out of the air, a minister might have to resign after inadvertently appearing on candid camera.

This is only a snapshot of the proposals but, overall, you get the sense that this is actually a very serious piece of work. No one is likely to agree with all of it and there are some issues which I would vehemently oppose, but it does have a much more strategic and comprehensive feel to it than the Declaration of Arbroath, or whatever the chancellor of the Lancastrian duchy launched a few weeks ago. There is also much to commend in the declaration, including the point made by Gove that it was a collaborative effort between ministers and officials.

There was a sense that the commission see the post pandemic world as an opportunity that should not be given up to be bold. This government has showed time and again that, politically, it can be bold. Whether it has a clear strategy for the reform it wants remains to be seen. ■

“It has to be said, nevertheless, that there are some not terrible ideas in this report, and that’s not just because they quote me at one point”



Dave Penman is the general secretary of the FDA union. He tweets @FDAgensec

COLIN TALBOT WHAT THE DECLARATION MISSES

THE GOVERNMENT'S PLAN FOR CIVIL SERVICE REFORM DOESN'T ENGAGE WITH THE REALITY OF THE DEVOLVED UK

The government has published a grandly titled Declaration on Government Reform, signed by the prime minister and cabinet secretary no less. It was apparently agreed at a meeting of the whole cabinet, with all permanent secretaries in attendance.

The document claims to be in response to the Covid-19 crisis, which has affected the whole of the country. But reading this document through, you could almost miss the fact that the United Kingdom now has four, arguably five, governments.

Devolution of powers over health, social care, education, policing and many other

public services has meant that the devolved governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have never been more obvious or prominent to everyone in the UK as they

have been during Covid. First ministers Nicola Sturgeon, Mark Drakeford and (until recently) Arlene Foster have become much more familiar to everyone, and their different policies on the Covid response have appeared on nightly TV news almost every day for over a year. They run governments.

The declaration lists some of the areas where the “public’s priorities” have to be delivered on in the wake of Covid: housing; police and crime; environmental enhancement; health; education; science; and jobs. Yet you would not know this from the declaration that they are wholly or partly devolved.

I said the UK has four or, arguably, five governments because one of the confusions with our system is that the Westminster/Whitehall government is really two governments in one. On housing, police and crime, environmental enhancement, health and education, the government of England is in charge. On others, it is the UK government.

It has some residual UK-wide powers in some of these areas – but during the pandemic, the health and public health aspects of the Covid crisis have been managed by the devolved governments.

The subtext in the declaration is quite clear: devolution was a mistake. It is full of references to “Britain” and “all parts of the country”, by which it clearly means the whole UK.

There is one other deep confusion throughout the document – it

constantly conflates the civil service and wider public services and uses the two terms interchangeably. The civil service is only about one in ten of public service employees. Very few of the other 90% are controlled directly by Whitehall. They are very, in different ways, at “arms-length”, or even further, from direct ministerial control.

The document concentrates almost entirely on the relationship between (Whitehall) civil servants and their ministers – as if that is all that matters.

There are few – but very few – new ideas in the declaration. There is a strong commitment to more diversity, which is welcome. There is a commitment to “zero tolerance” for bullying. There are some interesting ideas about challenging “groupthink”, the use of

“red teams”, more multi-disciplinary work, and better collaborative working across government.

Even some of this is not entirely new. The New Labour government tried more “joined-up” government through things like its “cross cutting reviews” and regional government offices.

Some “new” reforms go back even further. Trying to keep subject expert civil servants working in their specialisms is hardly new – it was proposed in the Oughton Report on career management in 1993.

Similarly, creation of a physical campus for civil service leadership training is also retrod – from 1970 we had one at Sunningdale, as first the Civil Service College and then the National School of Government – until the Tory-led government shut it in 2012 and sold it off for retirement homes.

Ideas like departmental plans, and targets, and a “refreshed delivery unit” are all straight out of New Labour’s playbook from the early 2000s.

But the biggest weakness by far is the failure to recognise that the UK is a union of three nations and a binational province. And although the declaration has supposedly been made in response to the Covid-19 crisis, there is little sign any of the obvious problems in governance that occurred during this crisis will be addressed by anything in this document. ■

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“The subtext in the declaration is quite clear: devolution was a mistake. It is full of references to ‘Britain’ and ‘all parts of the country’”



CIARAN MARTIN TAKE THE DECLARATION SERIOUSLY

THE DECLARATION ON GOVERNMENT REFORM MAY NOT EXCITE THE CULTURE WARRIORS WHO WANT TO TEAR DOWN WHITEHALL, BUT IT SHOULD INTEREST SERIOUS PUBLIC SERVICE REFORMERS

The most remarkable aspect of the government's Declaration on Government Reform, published last month by prime minister Boris Johnson and cabinet secretary Simon Case, is what it is not rather than what it is.

It is not the latest salvo in the "culture war" ripping through British public life. Over the past year, even amidst the pandemic, the government has seemed unable to deal with a major British institution other than through the prism of divisive political signalling. Museum bosses are publicly summoned to be admonished for their presentation of imperial history. Of all the challenges facing universities, the one the government sees fit to trouble a crowded legislative programme with is the thinly evidenced "problem" of "no-platforming" at university events. A few seconds of ill-judged giggling from BBC Breakfast presenters leads to a hurried change in flags and emblems policy and a ramping up of briefing against the corporation. Key public appointments are subject to remarkably politicised briefing before interview panels have even met to sift the candidates.

So it is striking – and to the credit of the cabinet secretary and indeed to the prime minister and Michael Gove, the minister responsible – that the declaration is, by contrast, spectacularly dull. Whilst it's consistent with critical government objectives – for example, its emphasis on moving power and opportunity outside London and the south – it is a profoundly serious attempt to improve the performance of the state rather than send signals to particular political constituencies.

This shows unusual political restraint by the government, not least because there is considerable truth in the claim that the overwhelming majority of the senior members of the permanent state were pro-Remain, even if there is no truth in the accusations that post-referendum they tried to overturn the result to leave the European Union. And it is this very conventional nature of the declaration – there is very little in it that could not have appeared in one of Tony Blair's many papers on reforming the state – that may upset that wing of modern conservatism that favours uprooting what they see as a complacent, weak and unambitious mandarinate.

"It is precisely because the paper is demonstrably not a substance-free verbal assault on the civil service that there may be more to it than initially meets the eye"

To see the declaration as either weak or a triumph of the so-called "blob" would, however, be mistaken, or at least premature. It contains some interesting seeds for substantial public service reform, cleverly hidden under the bland, Blairite headings of people, performance and partnerships. For sure, old technocratic favourites such as enhancing appraisals, opening up job adverts to outsiders and that hardy perennial of relocating outside London make their obligatory appearance.

And yet, some proposals are profoundly interesting if properly developed. The plans to enhance the role of data in the civil service and address the profound gap in scientific and technical skills could be genuinely transformational. Mandating interoperability in new IT systems and a single login for government services shows the government has been listening to people who know what they're talking about. And all of these ideas challenge established power structures, vested interests, and departmental silos more than the banal drafting suggests. For example, the proposals for more unconventional, multi-disciplinary teams hints at intent to repeat the successful innovation of the Vaccine

Task Force, an open challenge to any thoughts of a civil service monopoly. These may not excite culture warriors, but they should excite serious public service reformers.

And it matters that these plans have been published in a formal document. Like any set of institutions, Whitehall has its own currency of power. Public documents signed by the prime minister and cabinet secretary drive activity in a way that the Johnson administration's efforts on civil service reform to date – firing a few permanent secretaries *pour encourager les autres*

and making the odd ministerial speech – do not. The framing of the declaration in a way that is boring to external readers but very useful in internal bureaucratic struggles to overcome resistance to reform suggests a seriousness about delivery. This makes the declaration a necessary but not sufficient basis for reform: what matters is what happens now.

The plan has its faults and, even in respect of the good bits, there is no chance all of the plans in the declaration will be implemented successfully: that never happens. But it is precisely because the paper is demonstrably not a substance-free verbal assault on the civil service that there may be more to it than initially meets the eye. ■



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ANDY COWPER A PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY LECTURE

THE PM HAS GONE AHEAD WITH THE COVID UNLOCKING, BUT THE NEW HEALTH SECRETARY HAD TO GO NEARLY STRAIGHT INTO ISOLATION AFTER TESTING POSITIVE. SAJID JAVID ALSO GOT TO GRIPS WITH HIS IN-TRAY, INCLUDING SEARCHING FOR THAT PLAN FOR SOCIAL CARE

As the UK surfs the third wave of Covid-19 to a soundtrack of “pings” from the app, it’s been hard not to detect the end-of-term vibe in the political world as parliament finally wound its way into recess.

It’s been quite a month-and-a-bit. At one very special Downing Street briefing, the prime minister presented the nation with the most spectacular false binary choice you’ll see this year over the plan to end all of the Covid-19 stage four restrictions on 19 July.

“If not now, when?” has become the prime minister’s replacement for “data, not dates”.

Magnificently, the PM with a peerless reputation for betraying people and lying also gave out about the nation’s need to move to “personal responsibility”. A prime minister whose own sense of personal responsibility couldn’t be found with nanotechnology urged the country to show personal responsibility and caution.

It would be fun to believe that Johnson’s premiership is an exercise in seeing just how far you can take irony, but he’s genuinely not that clever.

Enter ‘The Saj’

New health and social care secretary Sajid Javid took over, following the spectacular self-immolation of Matt Hancock (who actually tried to stay on once he’d been found out shattering his own pandemic rules by conducting his affair during work time, in the office, with an employee. Even more amusingly, the PM tried to let him do so).

The Saj’s position on the more economically dry wing of the Conservative Party could make the run-up to the next spending review interesting (he is such an Ayn Rand fan that he reads a scene from a film based on her books every year).

Certainly, The Saj’s health consequences hit the headlines when he got Covid-19 and had to self-isolate. This gave us the beautiful spectacle of perhaps this government’s fastest U-turn yet, as No.10’s initial effort to pretend that the PM and chancellor (both in close contact with Javid at a long meeting the day he tested positive) could avoid having to self-isolate because they’d been randomly picked as members of a “special testing scheme” were reversed in under three hours following huge public outcry. (No, you wouldn’t know this special testing scheme: it goes to another school.)

Do U-turns matter? Well, Javid’s Harvard thesis from December 2020 stated that in a pandemic, U-turns are an “essential feature of good policymaking”. He wrote “for the politician, the tendency for decisions to become psychologically and emotionally anchored in identity makes U-turns so difficult – we are wired to stick to our guns... making U-turns easier is important, and can be made easier through a focus on storytelling, on reframing, on articulating its commonality in other contexts (eg business), and on its healthy role within democracies.” We shall see.

Javid has plenty else on his plate beyond the pandemic.

The latest NHS performance statistics are ugly: there were 1,436,613 attendances at major A&E departments in June 2021, 102,476 (7.7%) more than the 1,334,137 visits in June 2019. The waiting list for consultant-led elective care reached 5.3 million by the end of May 2021, an increase of 182,832 from the 5.12 million patients waiting at the end of April 2021.

A total of 336,733 of those waiting had waited over 52 weeks at the end of May 2021, compared to 385,490 at the end of April 2021. 1,728,981 (32.6%) of patients on the waiting list had waited longer than the 18-week standard by the end of May 2021, compared to 1,811,899 (35.4%) by the end of April 2021.

Meanwhile, in the NHS, speculation is rife that departing NHS England boss Sir Simon Stevens – now Lord Stevens of Birmingham – will be replaced by his deputy, NHSE’s chief operating officer Amanda Pritchard.

The unbearable triteness of Cummings

The NHS was a mainstay of the latest round of the self-publicity roadshow of the PM’s ex-chief adviser Dominic Cummings: a man whose farewell tour duration could put Dame Nellie Melba to shame.

In his interview with BBC political editor Laura Kuennsberg, Cummings addressed Vote Leave’s misleading £350m NHS bus claim, he started to grin, and grin, and grin some more with evident self-satisfaction. “I wouldn’t say we used it misleadingly”, The People’s Dominic grinned, going on to say “we used true figures”. Grin, grin, grin. You got the sense that he’d cuddle himself if he could.

The interview moved to the subject of Boris Johnson’s (lack of) character and suitability to be PM, especially as re-

gards the pandemic. There’s something darkly funny about the delayed realisation that was on show here: Cummings on the real nature of Johnson (utterly unfit to be anywhere near power); Kuennsberg’s on the real nature of Cummings (ditto) – Cummings was, of course, Kuennsberg’s principal source during his time in 10 Downing Street advising the PM.

Things get thoroughly sinister when Cummings grins, “we were planning to get rid of him (Johnson) as PM and replace him within days” of the 2019 general election. It’s quite a thing that this person was at the very centre of government for a year after the general election.

Social care – still no plan

Social care has had its time in the political sun over the past few weeks. Sadly, the conversation’s been all over the place like a startled rabbit.

“It would be fun to believe that Johnson’s premiership is an exercise in seeing just how far you can take irony, but he’s genuinely not that clever”

The government’s internal arguments over social care reform have prompted so many leaks over the past fortnight that we’ll be on for a drought, even after the flash floods that have hit London.

The Times front page led with the report that national insurance will rise by 1% (employers’ and employees’ contributions) to fund health and care.

National insurance is, of course, the tax that retired people specifically do not pay any more. This is getting baroque. (And of course, social care is not just for older people with dementia care needs, but that’s the bit the public may slightly understand.)

So, 1% on NI to fund health and care. Mmm... where have I heard that before? Ah yes... they’ve reached the “New Labour tribute act” stage of the political cycle, then.

The Times’s Steven Swinford reported that “the new health and social care tax will initially be used to address the NHS backlog following the pandemic”. And then after that, it will pay for whatever social care reform may be coming.

The *Spectator*’s Katy Balls shares a nice anecdote in a piece for the *i*, revealing that Johnson’s July 2019 vow on becoming PM that “we will fix the crisis in social care once and for all with a clear plan we have prepared to give every older person the dignity and security they deserve” landed as such a surprise to the Department of Health and Social Care hierarchy that one special adviser (at that moment, in the lobby of the House of Commons) ran out of parliament and spent the day in hiding to avoid journalists’ questions about it.

As if by magic, later that day the *Guardian* reported that the proposals cannot be expected before the autumn, because Johnson, Sunak and Javid cannot agree the deal to be done by Zoom. What a mess. ■

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LEARNING CURVE

Susan Acland-Hood

took on her dream job as Department for Education permanent secretary amidst a pandemic and following a national row over A-Levels. Ten months on, she tells **Beckie Smith** how the department is working to move from a reactive mindset to a long-term one

Last September, Susan Acland-Hood was offered what she says has been her “dream job for quite a long time”: leading the department where she began her civil service career. Just over two decades after joining the Department for Education as a fast streamer – and just a couple of days after being taken on as its second-highest ranking official – she was named permanent secretary.

But despite her excitement at getting the role, Acland-Hood says it wasn’t her dream set of circumstances that led to the appointment. When she moved from leading HM Courts and Tribunals Service to become second perm sec last August, it was to help deal with, among other things, the aftermath of a huge row over A-Level results. Two days later, it was announced that the prime minister wanted “fresh official leadership at the Department for Education”, and that then-perm sec Jonathan Slater would step down in September.

Acland-Hood admits that taking on

the top job under that cloud, and with all the challenges that DfE was facing at the time, “was difficult”. She says: “I think it would be ridiculous to pretend anything different. [But] you have to stand back and say, who gets their dream job in their dream circumstances? You have to make the best of situations.”

And she says that while coronavirus posed an “enormous challenge” for the department, it was “incredibly focusing”. Back then, officials were planning for the full reopening of schools after months of closures; gearing up for the return of students to university; and working with the Department for Work and Pensions on the government’s Plan for Jobs.

DfE civil servants had been under constant pressure since the beginning of the pandemic – from navigating school closures and drawing up key worker lists to managing meal voucher contracts and providing guidance to universities. All of this was under intense scrutiny from parents, educators, students, and the public.



“We have to think about our accountability for real people. I’ve never been a slopy-shouldered person who says ‘that’s someone else’s business’”

“My job coming in was to try to keep people well through those things that we all had to do together, and keep reminding people what a good job they were doing – but also what a big job we had to do, and that we had to keep going at it,” Acland-Hood says.

She says it’s difficult to describe exactly what all this felt like to anyone who hasn’t experienced it. “We were in a reactive space where we never quite knew what was coming next, and there was a sense that we were never quite as ready as we wanted to be for the next thing.”

People were also working incredibly hard “doing things they couldn’t have conceived of doing at other times”, while also “feeling a bit beleaguered” amid the intense scrutiny – and often criticism – of their work, Acland-Hood says. Her job was to support them, while working to move the department out of that “reactive space”.

“One thing I’ve been trying to do over the last 10 months is to try and keep lengthening the time horizons we’re thinking about: recognising that we’re in the middle of a pandemic, and stuff is still going to happen that is unpredictable. But we want to be in a place where we’re responding rather than reacting,” she says.

To do this, the department has been working on a piece of work on future insights, intended to think about long-term trends in education and how the system might change. “This is partly about reminding ourselves that we’ve got this long-term role, and partly about trying to make sure that we didn’t lose sight of some of those strategic things we need to do,” Acland-Hood says.

Among those things, DfE published the Skills for Jobs white paper in January, as well as launching a review of children’s social care. “We’re really thinking about the future of the system, not just about what needs to be done in the moment,” she says.

She also points to the £1.4bn education recovery plan the department unveiled last month, which she says has focused on the “best-evidenced” interventions. It includes £1bn for tuition and an extra £150m to train early-years staff.

“We know that fundamentally, teacher quality is the single biggest determinant of what happens in the classroom. And we also know that where you’ve got children left behind... one-to-one or small group tuition that’s well integrated with what happens in the classroom is really powerful.”

The plan’s announcement was in no small way overshadowed by the resignation of education recovery commissioner Sir Kevan Collins, who just four months earlier



had been tasked by the prime minister with overseeing a “comprehensive programme of catch-up” from the pandemic. Collins said it was not “credible” the £1.4bn package could do that, and later confirmed the funding was a tenth of what he had asked for.

Does Acland-Hood think Collins was right to call the funding “inadequate”? “I think funding is always part of the story,” she says.

“For me, the critical thing is always spending it well... that we try and keep on working on the things that help everybody in the system spend their whole budget as well as they possibly can on the things that are going to make the most difference for children and for young people.”

She adds, noting that her press officers might prefer she didn’t, “I’ve definitely been involved in things in the past where the government has managed to throw lots of money at things without [it] necessarily working.”

Acland-Hood argues, too, that it’s “mildly artificial to totally separate out education recovery – which is fundamentally the business of trying to help children learn as well as they possibly can, having lost some learning – from the business that the education system is in every day of every week, which is trying to help people learn as much as they possibly can anyway”.

And she quotes the often-repeated ministerial claim that schools funding has just seen the “biggest uplift in a decade” even before the uplift. (Shortly after the interview, the NAO found the proportional increase in per-pupil spending was much lower than it appeared, because pupil numbers have increased, and that schools in deprived areas have actually seen real-terms funding cut.)

While all that is going on, Acland-Hood says, “I think there’s something really important about not declaring the pandemic over too soon.”

She says DfE is now in a phase of “action learning”: looking at what it’s done well and poorly so far during the pandemic, and trying to improve on that each day, rather than waiting until an unknown endpoint to learn lessons.

Indeed, many would agree that the department has lessons to learn.

The decision to use an algorithm to award A-Levels and other qualifications after the pandemic forced exams to be cancelled – and a lack of transparency around the algorithm itself – has been fiercely criticised. It sparked protests when students who were awarded lower grades than expected lost out on university places and jobs, before a U-turn when it was decided they could opt to use teachers’ predicted grades instead.

With this summer’s round of A-Level exams also cancelled, grades will be determined by a combination of mock exams and coursework. Is Acland-Hood nervous that we could see a repeat of last year’s dismay? “I think it would be appropriate to be at least mildly nervous, because these are things that matter and so we should care about them enough to worry about them,” she replies.

She says DfE staff have worked with organisations across the education sector to plan out the department’s approach to this summer’s exams. “As you would completely expect after last year, we’ve put in place quite a lot of safeguards and checking mechanisms and ways of trying to give ourselves assurance,” she says.

But she admits awarding qualifica-

tions without the normal exams is “tricky – and what we’ve tried to do is face into the trickiness and accept that it’s not going to be perfect and immaculate”. She adds: “But I’ve got a lot of confidence in the work that has been done.”

Another major furore for the department over the last year has been over free school meals. Last summer, the footballer Marcus Rashford forced the PM’s hand on providing meal vouchers for poorer pupils through the holidays, days after No.10 said otherwise, by spearheading a public campaign.

But further controversy followed in January. Schools had been given the choice of providing supermarket vouchers for pupils eligible for the meals or food parcels using their existing caterers. The worst examples of those food parcels quickly emerged on social media – revealing opened and amateurishly-rewrapped pasta, bread and even tuna, meagre handfuls of vegetables and shoestring budget custard creams – and quickly became the symbol of hardship for families already struggling through a pandemic. The offending contractor, Chartwells, later said the woefully-overpriced parcels fell short of its standards and blamed “short notice” for the lapse in quality. Parents were quickly offered vouchers instead.

Perhaps the biggest criticism of DfE at the time was that it shouldn’t have taken parents complaining on Twitter – their voices amplified by Rashford, food writer Jack Monroe and others – for the department to know there was a problem.

Acland-Hood says DfE set up a hotline for people to report subpar food parcels soon after the first images emerged.

“The numbers [of reports we got] were absolutely tiny,” she says. “So there wasn’t a massive, endemic problem across the system, though there was some incredibly bad practice in some particular places.”

But she says she regrets DfE did not set up the hotline earlier. “It really did make us think about assurance mechanisms. That was a school contract, but we still have to think about our accountability for real people. I’ve never been a slopy-shouldered person who says ‘that someone else’s business’. How do we work with schools to make sure that there are routes for people to say ‘I’m not very happy about this’ before they take to social media to get it fixed?”

The voucher scheme, too, was criticised after the National Audit Office concluded DfE did not know if the supplier, Edenred, was making a profit and had not elected to

look at its books. Acland-Hood told MPs in January that DfE had not sought to renegotiate the contract during the pandemic and had found no “strong market alternative”.

The NAO also noted difficulties at the beginning of the pandemic, when only a limited number of supermarkets accepted the vouchers, but said the department and outsourcer had “worked hard to get on top of these issues”. Acland-Hood adds that Edenred “worked really hard to try and sort out the issues last spring, but they were moving at this extraordinary pace”.

She adds that while there wasn’t a competitive tender for the contract because of the speed at which the scheme was set up when schools closed last March, Edenred had gone through a tender to provide employee assistance vouchers for the civil service, under a separate contract. This made

“We were in a reactive space where we never quite knew what was coming next. There was a sense we were never quite as ready as we wanted to be”



them the only voucher provider that had been through a competitive process with due diligence checks. “In that moment, that was the best balance between... we haven’t just picked them out of thin air, and we can get them running really quickly,” she says.

DfE could have attempted to negotiate when it extended the deal to cover the summer holidays last year – but Acland-Hood says this would have required a competitive process and left people without vouchers. The PM’s U-turn on funding meals over the holidays only came in mid-June.

The department did, however, “get a somewhat better deal” from Edenred when it extended again in January, Acland-Hood says. It’s now going out to tender to put a longer-term arrangement in place that can be called up if needed.

“I think there’s lots to learn, but I

think the department made a reasonable judgment at each stage of that process, and then tried to keep learning and improving at each stage,” she says.

Acland-Hood gives the air of someone who approaches these challenges with cautious optimism – or maybe optimistic determination. But she is always quick to temper that optimism with a reminder that things rarely go exactly to plan.

The proudest moments of her career – which has included stints at the Treasury, Home Office and Cabinet Office, as well as advising then-PM David Cameron and his deputy Nick Clegg under the coalition government – have been seeing the difference her work has made. Early on, she was a deputy director in the Cabinet Office’s social exclusion task force. One paper she worked on there, on transitions to adulthood, shared

evidence that the most disadvantaged people in society are forced to make “much more rapid transitions with much less support [than other people]”, she says. “That influenced the debate that was raging at that moment about raising the care-leaving age to 18 – that feels like quite a big thing.”

Another career highlight was working on the national fair funding formula for schools during a stint at DfE from 2013 to 2015. “Everybody thought we were going to have a school places crisis, and we didn’t. Some of the things you’re proud of in your career, I think, are the dogs that didn’t bark and the bad things you stopped happening.”

But the flipside to those successes, she says, has been “managing the fact that when you set yourself to do really big and hard things, you hardly ever totally succeed”.

“There’s almost always something where you think, ‘oh, I wish I’d just managed to do a bit more of this’. So you have to learn to accommodate yourself to the good things about keeping on working to make things better every day without beating yourself up in an unhelpful way when it’s not exactly how you wanted.”

She adds: “You have to care to be in this business. But if you care too much, there’s a risk it’s destabilising, or it actually makes you less able to go on and do the next thing. And so [you have to try] to find a way of channelling the things you really care about. It’s not that you don’t care when things aren’t as good as you want them to be, but you care in a way that is productive, and is taking you forward, and it’s helping you learn and grow.” ■

COP-ING

STRATEGIES



The UK government has some world-leading pledges on carbon reduction ahead of the Cop26 conference later this year. But have the policies to meet them followed? **Mark Rowe** investigates

Winter is an unlikely time to have your day in the sun but this November Glasgow, with its shortened daylight hours, will see the UK host a key United Nations environment conference.

Known as Cop26 (the acronym refers to “Conference of the Parties”), the meeting of the world’s environment ministers and many heads of state has been rolled over by a year because of Covid-19.

The gathering is widely regarded as the most important of its kind since the Paris Accord of 2015 because it is scheduled to provide a “school report” on the extent to which the nations of the world

eye-catching targets include an announcement earlier this year that by 2025 all new homes will be banned from installing gas and oil boilers and will instead be heated by low-carbon alternatives; and that new cars and vans powered wholly by petrol and diesel will not be sold in the UK from 2030 (though hybrids will be permitted).

Some elements of the plan to get there have also been released. The government launched an industrial decarbonisation strategy in March, covering metals and minerals, chemicals, food and drink, paper and pulp, ceramics, glass and oil refineries, as well as the hardest sectors to decarbonise: steel manufacturing and cement production.

However, more is expected soon. A net-zero strategy, with development being led by the Treasury, is expected to be published shortly to show how the government plans to incentivise change and pay for the policies, and more sector-specific work will then follow.

As ever, it will be the civil service that ensures that domestic intentions become reality and that Cop26 actually achieves meaningful change. To this end, the conference has been assigned its own discrete team of civil servants, drawn from across government.

“There is a huge amount of work going on behind the scenes to create the right forum to facilitate these crucial international agreements,” says Ros Eales, chief operating officer of the Cop26 unit. “Without our dedicated team of over 160 civil serv-

ants, who bring expertise from across Whitehall and beyond, none of this would be possible. Cop26 wouldn’t happen without the UK civil service.”

The nature of the Cop26 team reflects the cross-departmental approach required to tackle climate change, Eales says. “This demands a whole government response, so it’s natural we have staff from across the whole civil service – climate experts, diplomats, comms specialists, event management expertise, people

“Without our dedicated team of over 160 civil servants, who bring expertise from across Whitehall and beyond, none of this would be possible. Cop26 wouldn’t happen without the UK civil service” Ros Eales

have stuck to the pledges they made six years ago and put in place a further combination of carrots and sticks.

As well as hosting the event, the UK has made some admirable declarations of intent itself, with the Climate Change Act of 2008 locking emissions reductions into law. In April 2021, the UK government set what it declared to be the world’s most ambitious climate change target into law to reduce emissions by 78% by 2035 compared to 1990 levels. Other



from an industry background and security experts.” Tasks include liaising with peers in other governments, sitting at the negotiating table in UN subsidiary body climate change talks, briefing Alok Sharma (the Cop26 president) for key bilateral meetings, and engaging with stakeholder groups from civil society and business. “There is a huge amount of work powering the diplomacy that underpins our Cop presidency,” Eales says.

Due to Covid-19, novel approaches have been implemented. “Teams have been really innovative in the way that they’ve applied digital solutions to keep our priorities alive throughout the pandemic,” Eales says. The civil service has enabled the Cop26 president to participate in 80 virtual ministerial conversations with more than 60 countries and international organisations. “We’ve also had Cop26 champions doing virtual visits to other countries, and even hosted international ministerial meetings over video conference,” Eales adds.

Dame Meg Hillier, chair of the Public Accounts Committee, believes that the event should be used as a springboard for greater impetus across government and not be seen as an end point. “Cop26 is a moment in time, a team has been assembled specifically for Cop26 and it will have drawn on a wide range of civil service talent,” she says. “At the end of it, what happens? They get scattered to the four winds and the individuals use it as a means to get promotion elsewhere within the civil service.”

Instead, there’s a clear opportunity to use the Cop26 team as cheerleaders and to oversee the long-term implementation of climate change legislation, says Hillier. “Those individuals will have made incredible contacts over the months running up to Cop26, they are framing the debate for Glasgow, they will be personally proud of what they’ve done. It makes sense to keep them together.”

Beyond Cop26, civil servants are having to finesse the nitty-gritty of domestic policy in the real world. Hillier cites the electric vehicle deadline as an example. “It’s laudable in theory but what does that mean for people who live in flats? Where do they go to charge a car?” In such circumstances, Hillier believes the civil service needs to work closely with local authorities, identify a council that has anticipated the issue, and see how a solution might be scaled up by piloting extensions around the country.

The challenges and the targets have been spelled out, yet when it comes to implementing mitigation measures, the signs are not universally encouraging.

Mr President Alok Sharma



Warning sign “For every month of inaction, it is harder to get on track”



In June, the Committee on Climate Change produced its 2021 progress report to parliament, which highlighted the government’s “historic climate promises in the past year, for which it deserves credit”.

However, it warned that the government has so far been too slow to follow these promises with delivery. “This defining year for the UK’s climate credentials has been marred by uncertainty and delay to a host of new climate strategies. Those that have emerged have too often missed the mark. With every month of inaction, it is harder for the UK to get on track.”

It flagged that the government is “taking a high-stakes gamble to focus everything on a new net-zero strategy in the autumn” to achieve the necessary policy progress and public buy-in.

“It is absolutely critical that the new strategy is published before the Cop26 climate summit, with clear policy plans, backed fully by the Treasury,” the committee said in a statement. “It must be accompanied by a commitment to prepare the country for the serious climate risks facing the UK, as the next cycle of adaptation planning begins.” The report also outlined the wide-ranging demands for the civil service that will involve “big cross-cutting challenges of public engagement, fair funding and local delivery.”

Earlier this year, Hillier too concluded the government had set itself a huge test in committing the UK to a net-zero economy by 2050, but given “little sign that it understands how to get there” and almost two years after pledging greater detail “still has no plan”.

A second CCC report, its independent assessment of UK climate risk, echoed PAC's concerns by noting: "Alarming, this new evidence shows that the gap between the level of risk we face and the level of adaptation underway has widened. Adaptation action has failed to keep pace with the worsening reality of climate risk." All 10 of the warmest years in the UK's temperature record have taken place since 2002, while rainfall over Scotland is up 10% from the start of the 20th century. Despite this, the CCC report pointed out that, since its previous assessment five years ago, more than 570,000 new homes have been built that are not resilient to future high temperatures and since 2018 over 4,000 heat-related deaths have been recorded in England.

Duncan Brack, a former climate change adviser to Chris Huhne in the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition government, said the civil service will find it difficult to marry what appear to be contradictory demands. "There are glaring inconsistencies in the government's approach to climate change," he says. "The net-zero commitment is excellent, but if the commitment was really mainstreamed throughout government, they would not have scrapped the Green Homes Grant scheme without

what are the implications and alternatives for revenue? I see hard-pressed civil servants being pulled in different directions."

The challenge is also recognised by the CCC. "Siloe thinking remains a problem for addressing climate change risks or opportunities where responsibility for adaptation falls across more than one government department," a committee spokesperson says. "A single hazard, such as a flood, will often have knock-on impacts across a range of sectors, amplifying the resulting risk or leading to cascading impacts. Cross-departmental working is critical to ensuring the government can achieve its aims in the face of climate change."

Policies and plans related to health, sustainable businesses and social stability need to consider a large number of risks across different sectors and different government departments, the CCC suggests. "It's important to understand that many of the risks are not exclusively owned by the departments that will be directly affected, such as the risks to health from overheating in homes, where health departments own the impact - mortality and morbidity - but planning and business departments own the policy response

Energy and Industrial Strategy on issues such as the latter's SME Climate Hub but also with the Department for International Trade's Business of Resilience campaign.

Brack wonders whether the civil service requires two strong voices, one from within its ranks and another at the political level, in order to reassure officials that one part of government will not undermine the work of another. "Nick Clegg provided that strong voice but since 2015 there's been no equivalent, so while many (though not all) ministers at BEIS, Defra and [the former ministries of] the Department of Energy and Climate Change and the Department for International Development have been pretty good on green priorities, there's still no strong push at the centre."

Such a figure would encourage the civil service to be bold in policy implementation, which can go against an instinctive and innate wariness of squandering public money. Hillier says measuring outcomes is crucial but a degree of boldness is required. She draws parallels with Covid-19 vaccine procurement. "There was risk with that but by using real experts you reduce it so that you have a reasonable balance of success," she says. The CCC spokesperson says the response to Covid has been encouraging in this regard. "The pandemic has provided insights into globally complex and cascading risks, and tested how risk planning operates across departments and government."

Hillier wonders if the CCC may be able to play a long-term role but whether it will also require cross-party support and a political leader who rises above party issues. Such figures, envisaged by Brack, could also provide the long-term oversight required to ensure that institutional memory is retained and that deadlines 20 years away are stuck to even when individuals move on. Select committees may also have a role, she suggests, as long-term members of parliament tend to develop specialisms and particular interests.

Hillier says government should consider whether Defra and the Cabinet Office, the departments tasked with coordinating climate change policy, need a second permanent secretary dedicated to the job. She has even heard informal talk of establishing a delivery unit for climate change legislation, which she points out would take the civil service back to the Blair/Brown era. At that point, civil servants, who see politicians of all party colours come and go, may then truly believe there is nothing new under the sun - even if the sun only makes a fleeting appearance in Glasgow this November. ■

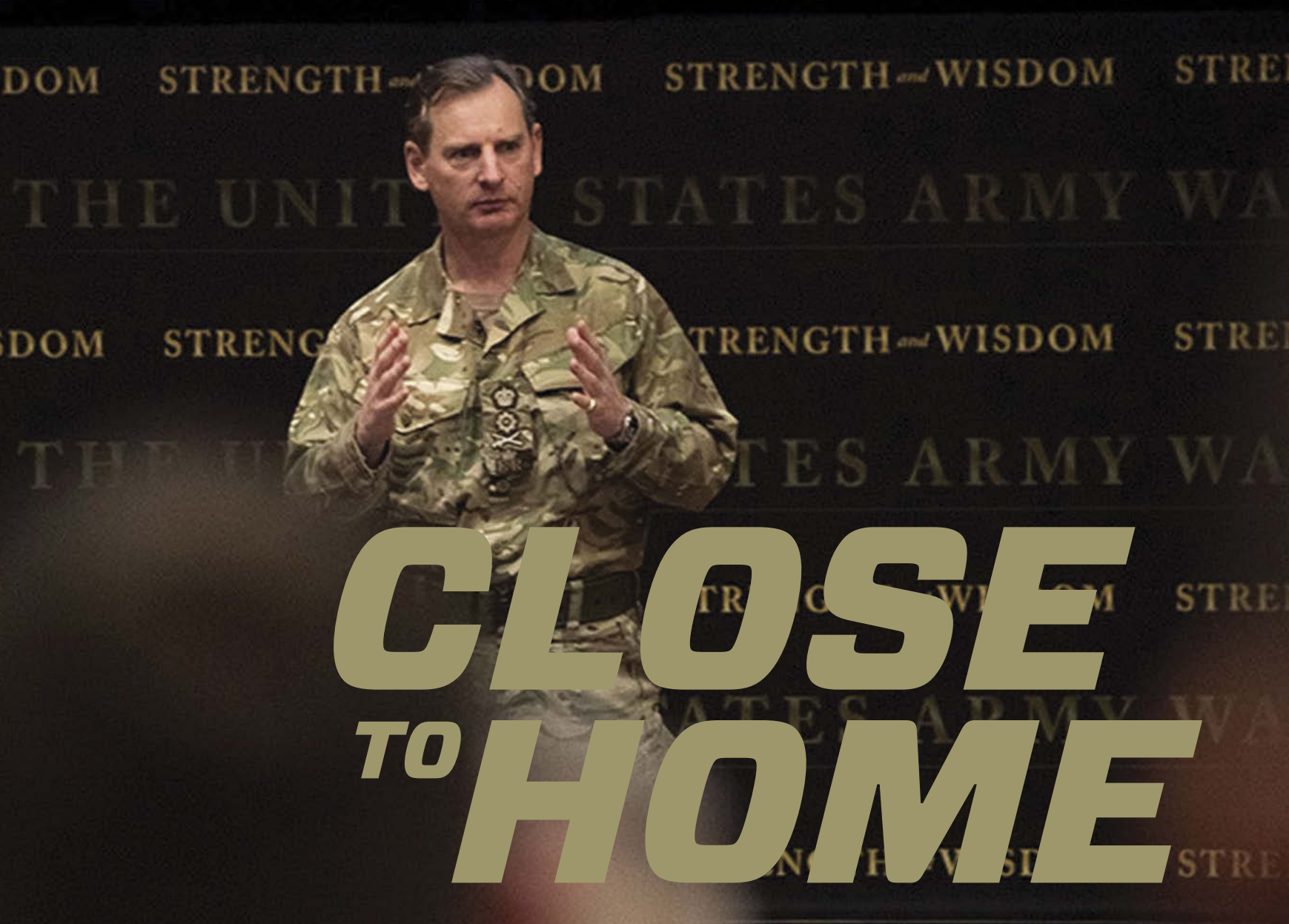
"A team has been assembled for COP26 and it will have drawn on a wide range of talent. At the end of it, what happens?" *Meg Hillier*

putting anything in its place, or gone ahead with the new Woodhouse Colliery coalmine in Cumbria, or granted new licences for oil and gas exploration in the North Sea. All these ask different things of different government departments."

Moves towards a greener economy requires cross-government cooperation to iron out such contradictions, Hillier says. "The intention to replace petrol cars with electric is good but it will mean phasing out fuel duty, which is a huge earner for the government," she says. "Is the Treasury having conversations with Defra and the Department for Transport about that -

that involves building regulations and planning," the spokesperson adds.

This is all the more urgent, the CCC points out in its independent assessment, as it identified eight top priorities that should be addressed in the next two years at the highest levels of government - including flooding, drought, damage to crops, soil health and risks to homes - and jointly across departments and between UK government and the devolved administrations. This would mean, suggests the CCC, that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs would work closely with the Department for Business,



CLOSE TO HOME

The government's coronavirus response was assisted by the military, placing the forces unusually close to the domestic frontline.

In this exclusive interview, the head of the Army, **Mark Carleton-Smith**, shares the lessons of a year like no other with **Richard Johnstone**

The Army is an organisation that commits itself “body and soul” to its endeavours.

So says General Sir Mark Carleton-Smith, who has led the organisation as chief of the general staff since June 2018. So when coronavirus struck, the Army brought that absolute commitment to the daunting mission of assisting the government, even if the terrain was closer to home than many soldiers were used to.

“There was no single department of government that was involved in the national response that didn't have some measure of military contribution inside it,” Carleton-Smith tells CSW. These contributions ranged from support for testing to the logistics of rolling out vaccinations and soldiers helping

with the day-to-day running of busy hospitals. “Everywhere we have supported we have been fully integrated into the civilian organisations and this provides a really positive example of the collective achievement that the nation's military and civil service can deliver,” he says.

And although “in UK operations the Army is not in the lead, the civilian agencies are”, Carleton-Smith says this demonstrates “just how adaptable the Army is”. “The professional toolkit and skills that are honed for the very specific requirements of the battlefield are actually underpinned by a very entrepreneurial, innovative, and dynamic spirit that can turn itself to whatever the immediate challenge is of the day.”

While it is unusual for the Army's assistance responding to a domestic emergency to stretch over such a long

certainly by September. And here we are, over a year later [when we spoke in late June] with a very significant portion of the country doubled-jabbed, but very significant disruption still in significant parts of our national enterprise. We are now coming up to that 18-month point, and we're not through this yet."

However, he highlights that the Army has not "missed a step" in terms of meeting its own operational requirements. It has been lending support to Estonia in the Baltics and the UN mission in Mali, as well as winding down the UK's residual contribution in Afghanistan.

"We've managed all that, really without breaking stride, which I think is testament to the resilience of our own training pipeline," he says.

This has been achieved with the assistance of the Army's aforementioned band of civil servants, who work closely with the force's military personnel as part of what Carleton-Smith calls "a unique workforce".

"We have people performing all sorts of roles all over the world - from more conventional civil service roles like finance, HR, policy and project delivery, to others like security guards, fire officers, vehicle technicians, teachers and instructors, which you wouldn't immediately jump to when thinking about your traditional civil servant."

In May 2018, CSW spoke to Carleton-Smith's predecessor General Sir Nick Carter, who is now chief of the defence staff, about the relationship between civil servants and soldiers. Carter was discussing the development of the Army Advanced Development Programme - a two-year training scheme that has been specifically designed to bring the two sides of the Army workforce - military and civilian - closer together.

The scheme was developed for two reasons, according to Carter - to ensure the Army had the skills to "run the business" and to improve its offer to civil servants.

ployment on the home front. "I think we've been able to demonstrate the full breadth and value of our people at a moment of peak national crisis."

The Army's support to the civilian departments of state is organised through the UK Strategic Joint Command, the standing headquarters that deals with military assistance to civilian authorities. It has a series of liaison officers across the UK who act as the first port of call for the civilian agencies and help them with their requests for support. Then, once a refined requirement is submitted, the Ministry of Defence works with the Army's land operations command to identify the right bits to help.

The coronavirus was, in Carleton-Smith's words, a "strategic shock" to government, and the Army was also able to loan some of its own civil servants to other departments in a range of roles.

Last April, he says, the Army thought the pandemic was going to cause "major disruption for anything between 12 and 18 months".

"That was our first stab at how long we thought this was going to affect us, and we've been on that rolling assumption ever since," he says.

"That was an important horizon, because when one takes oneself back to April last year, I think there was an expectation that this would pass, and we would all be back to normal,

period, he highlights that its men and women "are used to sustained operations", serving overseas for up to six or nine months at a time.

"Therefore, suddenly having to turn their hand to a different sort of challenge - and one that was at home - didn't feel so very different from the experiences of Iraq or Afghanistan and having to commit oneself, body and soul, 24/7, to the project," he says.

Indeed, the Army was "very pleased to be as engaged as we were" given that so much of the challenge in the response to the pandemic covered areas - around command and control structures, logistics, and crisis management - that form the foundations of how the military works.

"We have learned a lot from that experience," says Carleton-Smith of the de-

"I'm a subject matter expert in terms of the application of the military instrument, but I wasn't an expert with respect to navigating issues through Whitehall"

This programme has continued under Carleton-Smith, with more than 30 people having completed their training and a further cohort due to finish shortly. "We are pleased to have had a mix of military and civil servants working alongside each other and successfully graduating from the programme. In this time, members of the development programme have undertaken projects in support of key transformational programmes and are thereby developing the skills the Army needs to run its business at the highest level," he says.

"The mixed cohorts of military and civil servants have driven change by working collaboratively and bringing a diversity of thought and initiative to some very complex projects." His team has been running the application process for this year's intake, who will >>



take up the programme at the end of August.

The scheme is of increasing importance as the government's flagship Integrated Review of security, defence, development and foreign policy called for a closer working relationship between military officers and civil servants.

The Defence in a Competitive Age paper, which set out the military response to the review, highlighted the creation of the Secretary of State's Office for Net Assessment and Challenge that will bring together the best of the civil service, armed forces, academia and business, and challenge accepted wisdom and ways of doing things.

Carleton-Smith says that the challenges presented by the Integrated Review – “how do we better use the workforce types available to us? And how do we ensure that our various contributions are recognised and valued?” – illustrate possible changes. “Our organisation will need to constantly transform and evolve to react to the threats faced by our country and so there will always be ben-

efit in testing and adjusting the way we work together.

“There is no rigid model for us to adhere to, but we must recognise and respect the relative contributions involved. This is about bringing to bear the right skills when and where we need them, using the collective expertise and innovation of our nation in order to meet the threats and challenges of the future.”

In particular, he says “it is imperative that we nurture the military-civil servant relationship”, adding: “The jobs can be very different but the importance of the relationship between these two workforces remains crucial in ensuring the Army delivers in the most effective way.”

Carleton-Smith has himself had a very diverse career. His frontline operational roles, including serving as commander of the SAS special forces unit,

have been interspersed with stints in the Ministry of Defence and the Army's head office.

“That juxtaposition has given me a very rich tapestry of experience and exposure with my civil service colleagues, that I've really enjoyed,” he says. “And I've learned from civil service colleagues.

“I'm a subject matter expert in terms of the application of the military instrument, but I wasn't an expert with respect to navigating issues through Whitehall or managing the wider interdependencies that defence is reliant on. My civil service colleagues were, and I've learned as much from them in the balance of

my career as I have from my other military colleagues.”

In particular, he recalls working closely with civil servants as the MoD's deputy director of policy planning in 2005, after returning from Afghanistan. “I learned very early that we were going to be much stronger together, and that has proved to be the case,” he says.

He acknowledges that his shift to that Whitehall job “couldn't have been more stark”. “I'd spent two and a half years in Iraq and Afghanistan commanding the SAS – at the height of the insurgency in Iraq, and just as we were beginning to prepare the ground in Afghani-





now a director in the Cabinet Office; Dominic Wilson, now the director general for security policy in the MoD; and Damian Parmenter who went on to become director of the defence and security industrial strategy at the MoD.

“They certainly kept me sharp,” recalls Carleton-Smith. “And they were not predisposed to take military advice as self-evidently being either logical, or the single answer to the question. And it was frankly stimulating, rewarding and challenging to have those conversations with them.”

He says that the challenge of these different roles “brought out the best in me” and is a strength of the MoD overall. So what would his advice be to colleagues – both military and civilian – who want to take advantage of this kind of permeability? “When I reflect back on nearly 40 years in defence, the first thing I’d say is that life is really all about making bold decisions, and I encourage them to make the most of the extraordinary breadth of

“I had lived a very robust, unsparing, expeditionary existence for a long time, so to suddenly find myself parachuted into the fourth floor of the Ministry of Defence was not the easiest transition”

variety that service with the Ministry of Defence does offer.

“It’s all about developing and learning, and continuing to nurture that professional curiosity. I think you can really only do that by continuing to stretch yourself, and taking yourself very deliberately out of your comfort zone, and not limiting your horizons.”

This includes not limiting horizons within Whitehall. “We are paid in defence to be the subject matter expert, and those who are best at that are those who have thought deeply about our profession and our responsibilities and have studied it both in its breadth and its depth,” he says.

“But it is also those who can see defence in its wider context, across government and Whitehall. And I think that does speak

to people who are prepared to pack their kit back up and expose themselves to the fresh challenges of working in other government departments – and then harnessing that experience and bringing it back and applying it again, inside defence.”

He says that within government, the MoD is probably still seen as “somewhat insular, maybe overly hierarchical and siloed, and speaking in hieroglyphics”.

He concludes: “We need to break that down, and our best ambassadors are our youngest, brightest and best, who are telling the defence story among colleagues in other departments.”

This, he hopes, will lead to an increased diversity of experience among officials as they progress in their careers, with an increased ability to forge a consensus around an issue – what he deems the “litmus test” of success in Whitehall. “It is much more important, I think, the more senior you become, to be able to establish a consensus around an issue, rather than be the only person in the room who’s actually right.” ■

stan for the extension of the NATO mission down into the southwest, and very specifically into Helmand for the UK.

“I had lived a very robust, unsparing, expeditionary existence for a long time, so to suddenly find myself parachuted into the fourth floor of the Ministry of Defence – but not into the operations directorate that was actually dealing with war on two fronts, but into a much more rarefied intellectual atmosphere associated with policy definition in its widest sense – was not the easiest transition to make. I had to decompress from one particular atmosphere, and culture and experience, and I had to grow another set of intellectual muscles in order to contribute to the policy planning team.”

Among those he worked with are senior civil service figures like Gavin Barlow,

WHAT NEXT FOR THE UK'S DATA PROTECTION REGIME?

“**T**his will be welcome news to businesses, support continued cooperation between the UK and the EU, and help law enforcement authorities keep people safe.”

This was how digital secretary Oliver Dowden greeted news at the end of June that the European Commission had – “after more than a year” of discussions, the cabinet minister admitted – granted data adequacy status to the UK.

The decision, which allows data to flow between organisations in this country and the remaining 27 EU member states, ratifies that the UK's laws “ensure a level of protection for personal data... that is essentially equivalent” to the EU.

Although approval took longer than many had hoped – coming six months after the end of the Brexit transition period – it is perhaps no surprise that the UK received the green light in the end. A UK version of the EU General Data Protection Regulation has been signed into our domestic law, alongside the Data Protection Act, which offers similar assurances.

Jon Baines, senior data protection specialist at business law firm Mishcon

de Reya, tells CSW that, for organisations moving data between the EU and the UK, the continued absence of an adequacy decision would have meant every transfer would have come with “a need for contractual arrangements... [and] every time you would have to add in a list of clauses”.

“It would have added significant costs in terms of time,” he says.

Indeed, a November 2020 report from the New Economics Foundation and UCL European Institute – to which Baines contributed – estimated that the collective cost to the UK economy of failing to obtain adequacy would be as much as £1.6bn.

The decision means that data can now flow in both directions, in the certainty that the legal protection it receives in this country matches and complies with that of any EU nation.

But not covered by the adequacy decisions is the processing and transfer of information for the purposes of immigration control or enforcement.

This is because, in those cases, the UK Data Protection Act effectively provides an exemption that means personal data does not enjoy the same rights and protections as when it is being used for other business, public service, or law enforcement purposes.

The EU may have granted its former member state adequacy, but there will be many more issues to resolve in the coming years. **Sam Trendall** explores.

The commission's decision to exclude immigration data from the adequacy framework – which marked a divergence from the draft decision the commission published earlier this year – came in light of a successful legal challenge to the act's immigration exemption, which the Court of Appeal recently ruled is incompatible with UK law.

“The commission will reassess the need for this exclusion once the situation has been remedied under UK law,” it said in a statement when granting the adequacy decision.

‘IT IS NOT JUST WHAT THE LAWS LOOK LIKE ON THE PAGE’

Outside of this exception, general personal data and law-enforcement data is now free to move between public bodies and businesses throughout the EU and those in the bloc's one former member.

But, even with this approval now granted, there are important caveats to bear in mind.

Most obviously, there is a “sunset clause”, stipulating that the decision applies for only four years, before it requires review and renewal.

Even during those 48 months, European legislators will be keeping a close eye on the UK.

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Canada, the Faroe Islands, Guernsey, Israel, the Isle of Man, Japan, Jersey, New Zealand, Switzerland and Uruguay. South Korea is in the process of obtaining adequacy.

Among those not on the list are Australia, India, Brazil, Russia, China, the whole of Africa and, perhaps most notably, the US.

EU, the US remains a third-party country which, like another 150-plus nations around the world, is not considered to have adequate protections for personal data.

But now, for the first time, the UK has the ability – in theory, at least – to take a more permissive approach to transatlantic data transfers.

“Where it gets interesting is whether there will be a divergence between the UK and the EU,” Baines says. “It is possible that the UK could take a bold decision on the US to make data transfers easier. But that would almost certainly present a risk for the EU adequacy decision.”

He adds: “For all third-party countries around the world, the government has said

that we going to look at our own adequacy assessments. And each of those is going to be scrutinised by the EU. While we have some freedom to set our own data laws and apply our own data regime, none of this is going to happen in a vacuum.”

Since Brexit was formalised

earlier this year, there have not yet been any significant changes in the UK’s data-protection landscape. But there has been a shift in the tone adopted by politicians when discussing the matter.

“There have been a number of developments from the government in terms of policy aspirations which use the type of language that suggests that the UK wants to be ‘innovative’ in how data is used and wants to promote the data economy,” Baines says. “It is possible that there might be some pushing of the boundaries which might just give European legislators pause for thought.”

“There is so much politicking going on,” he adds. “It wouldn’t surprise me to hear [in the next few years] that the commission is concerned by developments in the UK – then there will probably be a little bit of rowing back, and then there will be an announcement then another [counter] announcement.”

After five years of Brexit, parties on both sides should, at least, be quite used to that. ■

“The right to the protection of personal data is seen by the EU as a fundamental right, and they will look at whether the UK has respect for this. And they will look at it in the round.”
Jon Baines, Mishcon de Reya

While the UK government has often trumpeted the UK’s newfound ability to set its own laws, untethered from the framework of European legislation, the importance of maintaining adequacy is such that making any significant variance from the EU data protection mechanisms could be a very tricky move to pull off.

The respective relationships with the US will be an area that is watched particularly closely; between 2016 and July last year, data transfers between EU countries and the US were covered by the Privacy Shield agreement, which enabled US processors to self-certify their compliance with European data law.

But that arrangement has now been struck down by the Court of Justice of the EU, which found that Privacy Shield, and the wider US data-protection regime, do not provide protections for citizens’ data sufficient to comply with European law.

Unless and until a replacement framework is agreed, for both the UK and the

“It is not just what the laws look like on the page – they will look at enforcement. The right to the protection of personal data is seen by the EU as a fundamental right, and they will look at whether the UK has respect for this. And they will look at it in the round,” says Baines, who is not a lawyer himself, but rather a specialist adviser, as well as a former public-sector data protection officer.

Beyond how existing law is interpreted and enforced by the Information Commissioner’s Office, there is also the issue of how the UK chooses to interact with other countries, and the boundaries it sets for data transfers with the rest of the world.

The UK became the 13th addition to the list of countries or territories that have been, at least in part, been granted EU adequacy. It joins Andorra, Argentina,



EXPLORING GERMANY'S SYSTEM OF POLITICAL CIVIL SERVANTS

The federal government in Germany has developed a third way between the models of the UK and US civil services, with political control over only the top jobs. **Werner Jann** sheds light on this hybrid system

While the United States changes its top civil service leaders with every new president (see the recent CSW article by Lorenzo Castellani), and the UK, at least in theory, sticks to a model of apolitical civil servants who can serve any government, Germany has developed a system of “political civil servants”, which places it somewhere between the US and the UK.

This model is neither very well known nor well understood outside Germany, but the institution of political civil servants, and a tradition of political retirement for civil servants in Germany, dates back to the middle of the 19th century – around the same time as the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms in the UK. During this period in Prussia, the “lifetime principle” for civil servants was introduced. This meant that officials could no longer be dismissed unless they committed a civil offence, and this raised the question of how to constrain their power – and how to secure a degree of harmony between the monarch and top civil servants. Therefore, in 1849 (when quite a few civil servants had shown sympathies with the failed 1848 revolution) a new ordinance was introduced in Prussia that set out a number of leading positions within the administration that could be temporarily retired by the king at any time. In the following decades, this concept of political civil servants was introduced in most German *länder*, or states, and from 1871 on, in the new German empire. And it is still in place today.

According to section 54 of the German law on federal public servants, civil servants in the two highest hierarchical ranks in federal ministries – administrative state secretaries (the official administrative heads of ministries, like permanent secretaries in the

UK) and directors general (heads of directorates) – are defined as political civil servants. Most of them are career civil servants, but they serve at the request of their ministers and can be retired at any time without any reason given, while they keep their earned pension rights. They can also be recalled at any time. The basic idea is that ministers should be able to choose civil servants they trust as the most important officials and advisers in their departments and if this trust – for whatever reason – no longer holds, to replace them.

Alongside the federal chancellor, there are currently 15 federal ministers and 35 parliamentary state secretaries, so all in all 50 ministerial positions in the federal government, and about 160 political civil servants – less than 1% of all 22,000 civil servants in all federal ministries. All other civil servants – the heads of sub-directorates, heads of divisions and all lower hierarchical ranks – are career civil servants in tenure positions. But this does not mean that they do not fulfil politicised functions in policymaking or have no party affiliation.

One important and defining feature of the German system is that all civil servants, from the lowest to the highest level, can be members of political parties, and very often are. Allowing party membership (even for soldiers) is one of the many lessons the founding fathers of the federal republic drew from the experiences of the downfall of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Nazi Germany, which was strongly supported from inside the civil service. A famous liberal constitutional lawyer already in 1930 characterised the apolitical civil servant as the “living lie of the authoritarian state” (*lebenslüge des obrigkeitstaates*).

As a result, Germans prefer their civil servants not to hide behind a false veil of political disinterest. This does not mean that all civil servants are members of a political party, but that being a member is legitimate. For many civil servants – but certainly not for all – their political preference is therefore well known. This political orientation does not impede their role as civil servants; indeed, their loyalty to serve all democratically elected leaders is taken for granted. In practice, the party political activities of civil servants are much less restrained than in many other countries. Highly visible activities for left or right-wing radical parties are, however, forbidden.

Empirical studies examining the career background of the political civil servants in federal ministries have repeatedly shown that many of them gain professional experience in civil service positions close to politics, such as personal assistant to a minister or head of a minister’s office in the federal chancellery, or as party staff in parliament while being on leave from their position in the ministry. All those positions are not only suitable to acquire political knowledge, they may also reflect a civil servant’s party political attachment. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that many higher civil servants in Germany are party members. A recent biographical study found that 46% of all state secretaries between 1949 and 2013 belonged to their minister’s party, 13% to another government party, and the remaining 40% were nonpartisan at the time of appointment. Recent studies show that about 60%

of state secretaries are members of political parties. The percentage is much lower at lower positions, but there is no data about the entire civil service.

Promotion to the top positions in federal ministries thus depends both on professional competence and on party political attachment and loyalty. Political civil servants are mostly, but not necessarily, members of the same political party as the minister and most of them are replaced after a change in government. But between elections it is not unusual for political civil servants to be sent into early retirement when their relationships with ministers go sour. The share of top officials who are party members or have clear party political loyalties is high, even among heads of sub-directorates and divisions, which are not part of the political civil servant group, and there is no doubt that party mem-

“Germans prefer their civil servants not to hide behind a false veil of political disinterest”

bership is relevant for top administrative careers in the German government. But while top civil servants may depend on politi-

cal support for their careers, this relationship cuts both ways. Ministers are as much, or perhaps even more, dependent on the support, loyalty, professionalism and expertise of top civil servants. The result is that, among others things, there is not a class of special advisers, separate from the civil service in Germany, as in Britain.

In sum, in German ministries (also at the regional *länder* level) the institution of political civil servants is key. While Prussian public administration was a key factor in the development of the idea of a merit-based bureaucracy, the political relevance of top civil servants has, nevertheless, been acknowledged since the middle of the 19th century.

Political civil servants, therefore, act as linkages between the professional bureaucracy and the political leadership, helping to create mutual understanding, trust and softening misunderstandings and suspicion between both spheres. The typical blame games between politicians and civil servants, or even “a government of strangers” (a well-known description of the US system), are therefore rather unusual in Germany. The relationship between politics and administration, between elected politicians and appointed civil servants, is never without tensions and conflicts. But the German politicised civil service, both in functional and party political terms, seems to have led to fewer conflicts, misunderstandings and blame games than in other democratic countries.

Top civil servants in Germany need both professional expertise and political craft. They do not pretend to be apolitical, and both politicians and the German public usually know where their top officials come from and what they stand for. ■

Prof Dr Werner Jann is the senior professor emeritus for political science, administration and organisation at the faculty for economics and social sciences at Potsdam University. For more information see his and Sylvia Veit’s contribution in a new handbook on [Public Administration in Germany](#).



LESSONS FOR THE GOVERNMENT CONSULTING HUB

The government has confirmed that it plans to go ahead with the creation of a central consultancy hub. How should it work? **Iain Greenwood** explores the issues

The government has set out plans to set up a consulting hub, effectively an internal consultancy for government, as part of efforts to cut departments' use of external consultants – which Cabinet Office minister Lord Agnew has said has infantilised the civil service.

This is not the first time that the government has aimed to control consultancy costs, and there are lessons

“The government will need to find the balance between starting out too small, and not being able to meet the needs of programmes, or growing too quickly, which could lead to non-delivery”

from what has gone before that need to be considered for a successful internal consultancy to survive and thrive.

The first thing to consider is to be clear about what the key aim is for running this function. Is it for cost savings, public sector efficiency or to boost the skills of civil

servants? It is important to be clear here, as this will influence the final model used.

Added to this, the government needs to look at whether there is an existing organisation that is being run that could be used as a model, or developed into an internal consultancy. Examples that should be considered before starting afresh could include the Infrastructure and Projects Authority and the Government Commercial Organisation (including the complex transaction team).

It is also important to consider what skills are really required to run this or-

ganisation. What is the optimum mix of internal and external staff? The ideal scenario, in line with Lord Agnew and Cabinet Office permanent secretary Alex Chisholm's aims, will be for civil servants to make up most of the team. However, this is never as straightforward as it seems

and there is likely to be a degree of reliance on external support. This needs to be identified at the beginning with a ratio agreed (and stuck to) where possible.

It is also important to consider size and scalability. The government will need to find the balance between starting out too small, and thus not being able to build a positive reputation quickly enough and to meet the needs of programmes, which may lead to it fizzling out. Similarly, trying to grow too quickly without the right people and processes could lead to non-delivery. If this happens, it would likely lead to management consultancies being brought in to turn things around, ultimately defeating the object. In short, they don't want run before they can walk.

And, once they can walk, what is the optimum amount of time for consultants to stay in this organisation? To ensure that burnout and elitism does not take over, and there is a breadth of fresh ideas, consultants should rotate out around every two years. This will also assist with greater knowledge transfer.

But government will also need to consider attraction and retention more broadly. Once these civil servants have been in the hub for a period of time it will become a hunting ground for management consultancies (who can offer much higher salaries). The government will need to consider how they make themselves more attractive than the Big Four or other management consultancies to retain them, which could be a problem within renewed pay restraint. So what can the government do to retain these individuals in the longer term?

This is just one of a number of questions around incentives. How will this organisation gain buy-in? Many organisations, particularly in certain areas of central government, do not like paying for services. Another question concerns working practices of civil servants working the hub. Traditional management consultants work all hours to deliver for the customer not just to do a good job, but also to win more business – and often those leading teams have financial incentives. How can the Treasury incentivise the civil servants to deliver at the same pace with similar outcomes?

Decisions on each of these issues are critical to creating and successfully running a consulting hub or internal consultancy, and should not be taken without clear analysis. ■

Iain Greenwood is a former civil servant, where his roles included working on assurance on Cabinet Office consultancy cost controls.



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