

Civil Service Effectiveness

with Chair of the Public Administration & Constitutional Affairs Committee,

Sir Bernard Jenkin MP

31 January 2019

Sir Bernard Jenkin MP spoke with PCF and ACE members, from the perspective of his role of Chair of the Public Administration & Constitutional Affairs Committee, (PACAC). Last year, the Committee published its report, [The Fulcrum of Whitehall Effectiveness](#), which examined civil service capability and the relationship between ministers and officials. He began by thanking our members for their work in the public sector, appreciating the important work they do, recognising it is often undervalued. He also noting that they are accountable for matters beyond their control and influence, and can be confined by events and people around them! Whilst he recognised that are always legitimate areas for improvement, he said they should feel great pride to be part of an administrative system that is the envy of the world, and would not be so without their hard work.



Sir Bernard said the Committee was concerned with faith in the civil service and the institutions around it, and its core purpose was to provide robust scrutiny and create conditions where the public has justified confidence in public services and government.

The foundation report for this work was [“Truth to Power: How Civil Service Reform can Succeed”](#) Many reforms implemented were failing because there was no comprehensive understanding of why things continued to go wrong. Ministers often came up with policies but did not necessarily consider why they were not successful. It was concluded that there needed to be a change in culture, including behaviour, which was a difficult thing to achieve and talk about, and also took far longer than civil servants were likely to remain in their role.

The latest report examined the relationship between the civil servants and ministers. It identified that how a minister starts his role in the department can have far reaching consequences. Whilst it was found that ministers and permanent secretaries are capable of transitioning to new roles and tasks swiftly, there should be no shame in having external facilitation to assist the relationship. A structure for inducting ministers would help develop trust and understanding. Public bodies have to nurture the relationship with their minister - if it is strong, it can be good for the organisation. He advised they also consider the relationship they have with the relevant select committees.

The PACAC report noted the high turnover in Whitehall, and the serious long-term consequences this had on reforms, and the damage to projects as people leave before they are completed. This was highlighted in a recent report by the [Institute for Government](#). Turnover can also impact on ministers as knowledge is lost and so the quality of advice is affected. An example of this was Universal Credit, which over five years had six senior responsible owners. Ministers rely on officials to provide policy advice so the civil servant's experience and knowledge is important. Sir Bernard felt as well as the civil service pay structure impacting on turnover, there is also a culture within the civil service of moving frequently. He added that this can reinforce the 'cult of the generalist', where civil servants do not develop knowledge in depth. Jobs are created that broaden their experience and lead to people moving posts, rather than developing a depth of knowledge.

PACAC has highlighted the poor recruitment processes and Sir Bernard believes that the appointment of the Government Chief People Officer, Rupert McNeil, is evidence of the desire to change. He advised the importance of having a long-term strategy for recruitment and retention.

PACAC has started work on a new inquiry, "[Strategic Leadership in the Civil Service: Building Future Capacity](#)". This is considering how the civil service should sustain itself as an institution; building its capacity; the provision of learning and development; what civil servants need to know; and the balance between generalists and specialists.

During the Q and A session, the following points were made:

Ministerial churn was recognised as having an impact. Ideally, there would be more longevity in their terms of office, in addition to considering the capability of those appointed. But the culture is political and this is the disadvantage of a parliamentary government. Inductions can improve the relationship between the minister and their civil servants, however when they are appointed, they are keen to get to the department. PACAC has recommended the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme, which gives MPs experience of the armed forces, and Sir Bernard felt there should be something similar for MPs not involved in defence, available when they have time for such education.

A member commented that risk aversion can lead to paralysis, even though a lack of action can be a bigger risk than not taking action in the first place. It was viewed that the civil service operates in silos with an absence of proper planning across functions. Whitehall could learn from the failure of Carillion and how risk is understood differently. Here, there was a misunderstanding that because the government was a customer, there was no risk. However, when they are the only supplier, the risk of the supplier is also the risk for the customer. Risk appetite varied hugely between Carillion's board, who could be paid large bonuses so would take high risks, to those delivering the services, where risk appetite is small, for example, on a ward of the NHS.

Submissions put to ministers itemise many risks, which can encourage risk aversion. A flatter structure with greater leadership, where people are paid to make decisions may avoid this, although this does not sit well with the current system of accountability.

Civil servants are not trained to focus on planning, analysis, or delivery. This could be transformational. Those that are attracted to the civil service are bright and committed. Although Civil Service Learning provides instructional courses of professional skills, there is little reflective or experimental learning, which would develop personal qualities.

Ministers do not take advantage of the role the department non-executive directors could play. Only a third of departments have a NED that leads on the HR function. Similarly, financial management is lacking through project delivery.

A remuneration policy that competes with the private sector would enable the civil service to employ and retain people on a wage equivalent to those they may be dealing with in the private sector. Otherwise, they may choose to leave the public sector and work with the contractor, which can lead to conflict and propriety issues.

People brought in at lower levels can learn leadership roles and it has become common amongst the more successful to leave the civil service to spend some time in the private sector, before returning. Sir Jeremy Heywood, former Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service, was an excellent example of this.

To stop the 'brain drain', Sir Bernard would like the civil service to value people by assuring them that they may be on the project for many years, but that during this, they will be promoted and trained, developing skills and aspiration.

The 'nudge unit' has been successful in changing behaviour. A stronger culture of leadership is needed in the civil service, where people are able to make decisions, listen, empathise and support. Whilst some are born great leaders, there are many who can be trained to be good leaders. Staff engagement can demonstrate how well a body is functioning.

Staying within a department for one's career gives people the knowledge and experience to tell ministers what will and will not work. Those in the Fast Stream no longer join a department but instead join the civil service. They only stay for six months in a post and whilst they learn skills, they do not develop an understanding of the department. Those in the Fast Stream would benefit from going to work in the office of an MP and on a select committee to learn about parliament. There could be benefit to seconding civil servants to MPs in opposition to help prepare them for entering government and improve trust.

Much could be learned if public bodies collaborated to learn from the experience of others who have gone through similar changes. It was noted that ACE and PCF can provide this function.

The Public Service Leadership Academy should provide space for reflective learning and networks. This could instil the values of the positive work of the civil service. Short-termism, using information as a competitive tool in forging a career, not communicating information due to mistrust or to protect oneself or others, and concentrating purely on one's career are the hallmarks of poor behaviour in the civil service.

Being able to tell the truth upwards is important. The report into the Kegworth air disaster transformed the way people were trained because it demonstrated the importance of telling people what you know – many disasters are a result of failing to pass on information that is known. There can be a culture of 'entitlement to rule' amongst ministers, which can lead to civil servants not telling them when they are going to make a mistake. When a minister is going to act against civil servants' advice, Sir Bernard would like to see a mechanism for making the advice a matter of public record. However, this has been rejected.

During the event, a number of books were recommended for members and Sir Bernard to read:

- The Fifth Risk, Michael Lewis
- The Executive Edge: An Insider's Guide to Outstanding Leadership, George Kohlrieser
- The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right, Atul Gawande