



Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Civil Service Leadership and Reform](#), HC 201

Tuesday 21 November 2023

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Members present: Mr William Wragg (Chair); Ronnie Cowan; Jo Gideon; Mr David Jones; John McDonnell; Damien Moore; Tom Randall; John Stevenson.

Questions 1 - 50

Witnesses

I: Dr Hannah White OBE, Director, Institute for Government and Alex Thomas, Programme Director, Institute for Government.

II: Charlotte Pickles, Director, Reform.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Reform](#)
- [Institute for Government](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Hannah White OBE and Alex Thomas.

Q1 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. Today, the Committee is holding its first oral evidence session in our inquiry on civil service leadership and reform. The civil service in the United Kingdom was based on the model of an independent and impartial civil service that serves the Government of the day and is distinct from its political masters. The political independence of the civil service is accepted, upheld and protected by successive Governments, regardless of their political colour. Recent high-profile tensions between Ministers and their officials, however, have called into question whether this model remains fit for the 21st century or whether a fresh understanding of the relationship between the Government and the civil service is needed.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Our witnesses this morning are spread across two panels. Our first panel consists of Dr Hannah White, director of the Institute for Government, and Alex Thomas, programme director for the civil service and policymaking at the same organisation. Good morning to you both. Will you introduce yourselves for the record?

Dr White: I am Hannah White. I am the director of the Institute for Government. I have been at the institute since 2014. Prior to that, I worked briefly in the Cabinet Office, running the Committee on Standards in Public Life. Before that, I was a House of Commons clerk.

Alex Thomas: I am Alex Thomas. I am a programme director at the Institute for Government. I lead our work on the civil service and policymaking. I have been at the IFG since the start of 2020. Before that, I was a civil servant working in the Cabinet Office, DEFRA and the Department of Health and Social Care.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you. I will start with quite an open question. Hannah, how would you characterise the relations between the Government and its civil service?

Dr White: To start on a positive note, they are better now than they have been in recent years. Even in the last few weeks and months, we have seen a stabilisation of the relationship between Ministers and civil servants. However, if we look back a little further, we have been through what I would call a very rocky period. In the period, particularly, from 2019 to 2022, there was a great deal of friction, which was created to some extent from the top down—from No. 10, from Dominic Cummings' active antagonism towards the civil service, from his "hard rain" that he decreed, which I think cast quite a long shadow over relations between civil servants and Ministers. We saw a number of abrupt sackings of senior civil servants, some of which may have been justified and some not, but the process by which those were implemented was very unclear, so it was difficult to tell.

I would say that things are getting better but that there is probably an underlying fragility, which no doubt underpins your reason for wanting to undertake this inquiry.

Alex Thomas: To add briefly to that, there is evidence of that recent improvement in relationships—this also shows how contingent it is on individual relationships—in the reported remarks of James Cleverly, when he joined the Home Office: "I accept that civil servants do good work behind the scenes. I'll have your back if you make mistakes. I will front up to them and I won't blame you for them". That is a really healthy sign of constructive relationships between Ministers and civil servants, as they should be, but that does seem to have been quite contingent on individual personalities and approaches.

Q3 **Chair:** Moving on to the contingency on individual personalities, does that relationship have a sufficiently robust basis? I think you have



HOUSE OF COMMONS

recommended a greater legislative framework for the civil service. I want to reflect on that and would be interested in the response you have received from the Government.

Alex Thomas: To start with the principle, I think there is a tolerably good understanding of the formal roles of Ministers and civil servants. Ministers are accountable to Parliament; civil servants are accountable to Ministers. That relationship still exists and I think is still quite live in the minds of civil servants and Ministers. However, there has been some quite long-standing criticism that the sheer breadth of ministerial responsibilities makes real accountability very difficult to get your arms around. Can you really hold a Minister accountable for things that happen in the bowels of a very big and complicated Department?

Also, increasingly, and this is one reason we found ourselves arguing towards a clearer statutory basis, the responsibilities for civil servants and Ministers, particularly around something like contingency planning, felt very slippery—slipping off the shoulders of both Ministers and civil servants in the uncomfortable way that we have seen evidence of during the covid inquiry recently. Combined with the so-called “hard rain” dismissal of senior civil servants and lots of briefing against the civil service, that led us to recommend a clearer statute that would set out the sphere of responsibility, as I think of it, for civil servants and, by implication, Ministers. I do not pretend that that is a simple thing to do. The distinction between policy and delivery is not a nice, clear, bright line and civil servants and Ministers need to work in a relationship of trust.

On your point about how our recommendations went down, as with any good recommendations from a think-tank trying to push the boundaries of the argument, there was some scepticism from Government about whether you could do this, and what the value would be of further codifying and putting the relationship on a statutory basis—does that create more risk? But, and it has been gratifying to see this over recent months and years, I think there is an increasing recognition of the problem—see the covid inquiry, particularly—and the fact that clear responsibilities would be beneficial. I also think, as Ministers and others have seemed to attack the civil service, that the benefits of extending the statutory basis seem clear to me. We have what is sometimes called a dab of statute in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act around the Civil Service Commission and the civil service code. Extending that to provide further parliamentary protections for the civil service would be good.

My final point is to note that we were very pleased to see that the Brown commission report fully accepted our recommendations around the statute and recommended that an incoming Labour Government should treat that as a priority.

Chair: Do you have anything to add, Hannah?



Dr White: Only that, as Alex says, there does seem to be widespread agreement now that there is a problem to be fixed. Our analysis of the problem is very much shared by Francis Maude in his report. This is also not just for the benefit of the civil service. We have seen lots of indications from Ministers that they sometimes feel there is an unfairness to the ambiguity of accountabilities at the centre of Government that could be fixed, we argue, through a statute.

Q4 **Chair:** To develop what you have just said, Hannah, I think your organisation suggested that Ministers are not always conscious of, nor indeed respectful of, the role of the civil service and even its values. What can be done to resolve that? We have touched on further codification but it is a cultural issue, is it not?

Dr White: Absolutely, and it comes down to the approach taken by Ministers and civil servants. There are responsibilities on both sides. Alex gave the example of the speech that James Cleverly gave to Home Office staff when he arrived. It is perfectly possible for Ministers to be very clear about what their responsibility is and what they are accountable for, and respectively, what civil servants are accountable for. However, it is also the responsibility, I think, of senior civil servants to make that clear and make it clear to the people they manage.

As for what the role of civil servants is, there are different ways of doing the job for Ministers. Sometimes Ministers come in relatively early in their careers, having only recently become MPs, and they do not necessarily understand the full range of ways of doing the job. We do a series of what are effectively exit interviews with Ministers when they leave their jobs—some people around the table have done them for us—and one of the interesting things is the different range of ways in which Ministers can do their jobs. It is particularly interesting to see those who talk about the way they can work with the civil service and how to get the most out of it. A particularly interesting recent one was with George Eustice, who focused quite a lot on his approach to the civil service. I think it is important for incoming Ministers to learn from their peers about how to make the relationship effective.

Q5 **John McDonnell:** When a new Minister is appointed, is there any process in which they are taken through codes of conduct, what is expected of them and what the relationship should be?

Dr White: There is a process in the Cabinet Office. I should let Alex, who has been in that role, answer that question.

Alex Thomas: Yes. You could always toughen the process up, but the way it tends to work is that during a reshuffle or a first set of appointments, Ministers go in, are appointed by the Prime Minister and are then shuffled through a series of rooms, in one of which is a discussion with the propriety and ethics team, who will give them a copy of the "Ministerial Code", explain the relationships with civil servants, and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

talk them through declarations of interest and all that stuff. It is at the first initial appointment that that happens.

What is more important, I would say, is when, having had the official version, new Ministers go into their Department, to their private office. "Here is all the stuff you can't do" is probably not the first thing you say, because you want to crack on with the job, but then over the course of days, weeks and months, the private office would say, "Here is where the boundaries lie", explain the civil service code, be the eyes and ears of a Minister and make it come alive for them.

Q6 John McDonnell: Is there an ongoing process? Is there a way for civil servants to flag that there is an issue to the Cabinet Office, the Cabinet Secretary or wherever?

Alex Thomas: I would make a distinction between ethical questions and conduct and relationship questions. So ethical questions, absolutely—the private office to the permanent secretary to the Cabinet Office and Cabinet Secretary, if necessary.

I think conduct tends to be handled within the Department a bit more. When I used to be a principal private secretary, if there was an issue with any of the Ministers in the Department, we would pick up on that through the private secretary, either by having a conversation with the Minister or by raising it with the permanent secretary and trying to deal with it within the Department. It would be only in the most extreme circumstances, where there was a relationship breakdown, say, at the top of the Department, that the matter would get to the Cabinet Office.

Dr White: It is worth adding that we think that all Ministers would benefit from more ongoing professional development. In every other walk of life, in every other senior position, it would be expected that people would have mentors, peer groups and professional development. Ministers' jobs are incredibly tough and we ought to give Ministers more support.

Q7 John McDonnell: I am always surprised by how unprepared people are. That is a criticism not of the people, but of the process. Is there any attempt to extend at least some of it to the shadow Cabinet members?

Dr White: Since the Institute for Government was set up in 2009, it has always, prior to a planned general election, run preparation for government sessions with the official Opposition, explaining what it is like to come into government and the questions that they would need to approach. There are access talks, which the civil service would do, but those tend to be more focused on policy.

John McDonnell: More on policy than behaviour, yes—thanks.

Q8 Ronnie Cowan: Briefly on that last point, how open are Ministers or Secretaries of State to the idea of continual, ongoing development?



Dr White: It is very personal. Different Ministers take different approaches. I would say that there is a gentle trend towards more openness. It depends a lot on where people come from before they come into politics. We tend to find that those who come from a corporate environment, where professional development is normal these days, expect it and ask for it, whereas those who have come from environments where professional development is less normal would not ask for it. It depends on the prior experience of the people who are appointed.

Q9 **Ronnie Cowan:** Would you care to mention some of those less likely—not by name, but by background?

Dr White: People who have come through an exclusively political route, say from local government, would have less—

Ronnie Cowan: That is fine.

Alex Thomas: The other very brief point, I think—Hannah might have a slightly different view—is that more junior Ministers are more open to development. Coming in in a reshuffle as a Parliamentary Under-Secretary, there is a bit more time and a bit more openness. If you are a Cabinet Minister, first, you are probably more experienced anyway, and there is a bit more machismo around it and needing to show that you are leading from the front.

Q10 **Ronnie Cowan:** You argue that responsibility for ensuring an environment where robust discussions on policy can be had lies primarily with the civil service. The civil service people survey suggests that 48% of officials do not feel comfortable challenging the way things are done. What can happen there? If a Minister is not open to discussion and the civil servant is not comfortable about having a discussion, what happens, or what can we do to improve the situation?

Dr White: I would go back to my previous answer—that there is responsibility for this on both sides. It is important for Ministers and civil servants to reflect on the benefits of open discussion and challenge to policy ideas happening in private before policies are advanced and, for example, Bills brought into Parliament where challenges will inevitably arise. It is better to enable those questions to be explored in private first.

We see that the extent to which civil servants feel able to challenge is quite particular to the Ministers they are working to and the Departments they are working in. There is a responsibility both for Ministers to be clear that they want and would welcome challenge and for senior civil servants to show that they would support their staff in putting forward the evidence and questioning decisions, which then are absolutely for Ministers to make. The adage—civil servants advise, Ministers decide—of course applies.

Alex Thomas: I do not think we would argue that, for policy decisions, the primary responsibility for creating that environment is on civil



servants. I think we would argue that for policy decisions, it is on Ministers. For internal civil service matters—disciplinary or cultural—it is absolutely on civil servants. However, for the reasons Hannah says, this is why, in certain spheres, we have been arguing for clearer responsibilities for the civil service. If we think about—this is topical, again, with the covid inquiry—contingency planning, and a situation where you are a permanent secretary and your Secretary of State or another Minister is closing down a discussion about contingency planning, we want to give more clarity for a permanent secretary to be able to say, “Hang on, Secretary of State, this is my responsibility. If you do not want me to do this, you will have to direct me, for example, not to spend that money on it”. That is fine. If the Secretary of State wants to direct them, that is okay, but that is then a clear point of accountability. We do think there are certain areas in which the civil service’s arm could be usefully strengthened on this, within a democratic setting.

Q11 Ronnie Cowan: Are you surprised to know that the figure for people who are comfortable challenging is conspicuously low in the Cabinet Office?

Alex Thomas: I think that reflects the environment that we were talking about. Some Departments have always been a bit lower on that—the Home Office and the MOD have been, for cultural reasons, lower on that.

Ronnie Cowan: For cultural reasons?

Alex Thomas: More deference, perhaps; less openness to challenge internally.

Q12 Ronnie Cowan: Does being more deferent mean you are more likely to be put into a position in the Cabinet Office?

Alex Thomas: No, sorry—I was talking about the MOD or the Home Office. For the Cabinet Office, I do not have the trend figures there, but I do think that low number is almost bound to reflect a pretty torrid environment in the centre of Government.

Q13 Ronnie Cowan: Does being more deferent mean you are likely to be put into the Home Office?

Alex Thomas: Perhaps deference was the wrong word, but what were those dismissals in 2020 designed to do? Possibly to get more competent permanent secretaries and others in; possibly also to perhaps say to the civil service, “If you step out of line, here is what happens,” and I think that message was unfortunately heard.

Q14 Chair: I think that perhaps traditionally they have been the most hierarchical Departments. I seem to recall something about the Home Office being the last where the civil servants would enter a meeting, in terms of their seniority. Those anecdotes are merely anecdotes, but they may speak to something wider.



Alex Thomas: The make-up of these Departments is very different. The big, operational Departments have a very different set of civil servants—the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Work and Pensions—and different environments in the nature of the work they do.

Q15 **Ronnie Cowan:** Do you think the Ministers' responsibilities for maintaining the environment are well enough understood—that the responsibility lies with the Minister?

Alex Thomas: I think they have not been well enough understood among some Ministers recently but, as we said earlier, there are positive signs that more Ministers are starting to understand those things. I did take heart from the Home Secretary's words.

Q16 **Ronnie Cowan:** The evidence we are seeing from the covid inquiry is that Ministers were advised; some were just not up to taking on that advice and some decided not to take on that advice. Are we over that now?

Alex Thomas: We will see, I suppose. Clearly, the covid inquiry has exposed inconsistencies in decision making between Ministers and the Prime Minister and that seems to be less of a factor at the moment. Take, for example, how the Government set out their five pledges and have broadly stuck to them, whatever you think about how they are doing on them.

Q17 **Mr David Jones:** You have suggested that there should be a more comprehensive statutory basis for the civil service than the CRaG Act. Previous civil service reforms have frequently been done to encourage greater responsiveness to Ministers. Do you think that that has gone too far and that the civil service has become too responsive?

Dr White: While I think it is a good thing for the civil service to be responsive to Ministers—that is what the civil service is for, and if the civil service is not capable of being responsive to Ministers, we have a problem. That is why that has been the direction of reform efforts and why that continues to be so. I think, though, that we need to unpack a bit what "responsive" means. It does not mean, as we have just been discussing, not testing and challenging. This is a thought experiment and people will have completely different views on it, but Liz Truss's view of the Treasury was that it was not sufficiently responsive to what she was trying to do when she came in as Prime Minister. But an alternative perspective would be that the Treasury let the mini-Budget go ahead, which had a negative response from the markets and maybe it was not sufficiently challenging in fulfilling that side of its role, to say to her, "These could be some of the possible consequences", which meant that that was the way it played out.

There is a question over "responsive". Responsive is almost too broadbrush a term. The question is whether the civil service is equipped to deliver what Ministers need, and partly what Ministers need is delivery of the policies that they have been democratically elected by the public to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

deliver. Sometimes, however, the best way of delivering those policies might not be their first idea, and it is up to the civil service to advise Ministers and provide them with evidence that might challenge that. That does not necessarily mean the civil service is not being responsive, if that makes sense.

Mr David Jones: Do you want to add to that, Alex?

Alex Thomas: I agree entirely.

Q18 **Mr David Jones:** Would legislating for the civil service in the way that you suggest risk making the relationship between Ministers and officials more contractual, if you like? You have already said, Alex, that you think the relationship between the official and the Minister should be collaborative. Do you think legislating would risk undermining that?

Alex Thomas: If it was done in the wrong way, it would risk undermining collaboration, but one of the things we have been grappling with is what is the best and right way to do it.

To reflect on the recent report from Lord Maude, I think Hannah said that it entirely shares our diagnosis of the problem of a lack of stewardship and sometimes a lack of clarity about roles in the civil service. Lord Maude very generously, in his report, recognises that he disagrees with us on this particular statutory position. I think that is partly because he worries that putting too much in statute would create a wedge between the responsibilities of Ministers and those of the civil servants.

Our argument in reply would be that Lord Maude does not quite reflect in his report that ultimately this would still be on Ministers. I think that the way you avoid thinking of it as a contractual relationship, but as a relationship around clarity of responsibilities, is by setting out more clearly what the responsibilities of Ministers and civil servants are, but you also recognise that they are operating in an environment where it is incredibly important that Ministers take the ultimate decisions because they are democratically accountable for them.

To take that worked example on contingency planning, even if the permanent secretary said, "I have a responsibility to invest x amount of money in contingency planning for a particular scenario" and the Minister said, "I don't want you to invest that money in this; I want you to invest it in that", that would be fine, but the permanent secretary would say, "Direct me to do it, because in my judgment, to discharge my responsibility, I need to do this". In that way, you get over the sense that the civil servant will be at loggerheads with a Minister. It just clarifies where the responsibility for spending the money sits.

Q19 **Mr David Jones:** That facility already exists. Do you not think that you are going to be introducing too much rigidity into the relationship?

Alex Thomas: No, I don't think so because I think there has not been enough rigidity so far. The facility for a ministerial direction exists but



not, for example, around something like contingency planning. A direction is quite narrowly drawn around feasibility, value for money and so on. One of the things we are saying is that the ministerial direction is quite a good mechanism for clarifying what the views of the civil service are and then for proper accountability to sit where it should properly lie. We are arguing in that sense for an expansion of the sphere for ministerial directions in, I hope, quite a careful way. One of the reasons for setting it out in statute would be so that those areas for which the civil service had a particular responsibility were clear and well defined and that Parliament ultimately could take a view on it and change it if necessary.

Q20 John McDonnell: I think I have got you—even though, for the time being anyway, the relationships between Ministers and civil servants are less turbulent now, you are still committed to a form of legislation to define their roles. However, here is the problem: the civil service is serving Ministers but it is also policing them on their behaviour. Is that realistic?

Dr White: The civil service does not police Ministers in any formal way. Ultimately, in terms of ethics-type issues, we have the ministerial code and it is for the Prime Minister to determine how to apply their ministerial code. I guess any confusion, potentially, from an external perspective arises when, for example, there is an allegation against a Minister and sometimes the civil service is asked to investigate. If the Prime Minister's adviser on ministerial interests is brought into the picture, the propriety and ethics terms will work to find out the facts.

The point where this came to a head was in relation to partygate, where we first had the Cabinet Secretary, who then had to recuse himself, and then we had Sue Gray asked to do an investigation, which ultimately was an investigation of the Prime Minister himself and that was a very difficult position. That was the point at which it became untenable and put a senior civil servant in a very tricky position. However, it is very unusual for any policing or any ethics investigation to involve a Prime Minister.

Q21 John McDonnell: I think that is relatively clearcut, but it was still an internal investigation initially, before the police were brought in. However, where a decision is not criminal but reckless, the civil service is then policing a Minister, isn't it, in terms of explaining that it is reckless? At the moment, what you are suggesting is to at least get a ministerial decision on the record. That is a fig leaf of cover, is it not?

Alex Thomas: No, it is an important clarification of accountability, Mr McDonnell.

John McDonnell: For future inquiries.

Alex Thomas: One of the things that Lord Maude's report usefully brought out was that certain things are implicitly assumed about the civil service. One is that it will have some view beyond the lifetime of a Government. The other is that it has some check or grit put into the



decisions of Ministers in the way that you are suggesting. Lord Maude usefully sets out that both those things are true but are contested and a bit underground and subterranean. I think the value of what Lord Maude is suggesting and what we are suggesting in different ways is that you make these roles more explicit and, therefore, more accountable and ultimately more open to Parliament.

One minor point—only because this is a hobby horse, and the propriety and ethics discussion allowed me to make it—is that I do think, talking about the policing of Ministers, that there is an unfortunate double role for the propriety and ethics team in the Cabinet Office of both advising Ministers on their responsibilities under the code and investigating them. I think that could usefully be unpicked in the Cabinet Office.

Q22 John McDonnell: I do not want to delay us with this, but you are suggesting that the ministerial direction should be a written direction, and that there should be reference of it to Parliament?

Alex Thomas: Yes, through the normal procedures, but we also suggest that there should be an annual or bi-annual report to Parliament by the head of the civil service on the performance of the civil service. One of the themes of the IFG's work and this particular set of recommendations is more openness between Parliament and the civil service, which I think would be a good thing.

Q23 John McDonnell: You are not thinking of any other element of independent scrutiny?

Alex Thomas: No. There are some interesting ideas around. For instance, could you beef up the National Audit Office? I know the Labour party has talked about an office of public value. I think there are interesting questions about whether there could and should be more external scrutiny of Ministers and civil servants for the decisions they make. We have also argued, along with others, that more openness around the publication of policy advice, at an appropriate time and in an appropriate way, would be useful so that you could get under the bonnet of some of this.

Q24 John McDonnell: What about us?

Alex Thomas: In terms of scrutiny?

John McDonnell: Yes.

Alex Thomas: Completely. I would imagine the head of the civil service's report would be to a Committee—this Committee or another one.

John McDonnell: A report of a ministerial direction to us?

Alex Thomas: Yes, I think that would be a welcome development.

John McDonnell: I look forward to that.



Dr White: Fundamentally, just to reinforce the point, though I think you have it, if you have a simple statute that sets out the relative accountabilities, it makes your job as a Committee easier.

John McDonnell: Defines it clearly, yes.

Dr White: You have defined what it is that you are holding whom to account for.

John McDonnell: Understood, yes.

Q25 **Jo Gideon:** Lord Maude is recommending that the roles of the Cabinet Secretary and the head of the civil service be split. Do you agree that that is required, bearing in mind that this has been tried before and that it was not seen as a success? What measures would be necessary to ensure that it was more successful if adopted again?

Alex Thomas: We think about this a lot, which is a preface to giving you a probably slightly unsatisfactory reply.

The fixed point is that the jobs are overloaded, much like the Prime Minister's job. The Cabinet Secretary and the head is also an enormous role with umpteen responsibilities. It is certainly the case that the skillset to be Cabinet Secretary, ultimate policy adviser and broker in the room with the Prime Minister is quite different from being the major system leader as the head of the civil service. There are some very good reasons why different people might be best placed to do those roles. As you suggest, it has not worked particularly well when the roles have been separated in the past and that has been because the power and authority have drained away from the head of the civil service when that person has not also been the Cabinet Secretary and in the room with the Prime Minister, having authority over all the other permanent secretaries and the whole system of government.

So that exists, but it is also the case that the current set-up does not seem to me to be working particularly well, in that successive civil service reform plans are announced and then a bit of progress is made and then the momentum drains away a little bit. Does the Cabinet Secretary really have the time and the authority to make that happen?

We are a little bit torn on it. Where I finish up is that from my observation and experience as a civil servant, it did not work to have the jobs separately, but I increasingly wonder whether it is working now. Lord Maude has certain views; we are developing others as part of some work we are doing on the centre of Government. If you could create enough authority in a head of the civil service who really did assert that authority over permanent secretaries and, in an appropriate way, the capability of Government Departments, that might start to be the way forward. But it is a work in progress.

Dr White: Adding to that and as a follow-up to the previous conversation as well, part of this is if that you separated the roles, you could make the



accountability to Parliament of the head of the civil service crunchier because you would—in our world—have a statute that set out those responsibilities, and that is what that person would be being held to account for.

Q26 Jo Gideon: You have recommended giving the head of the civil service statutory responsibility for managing the civil service. To what extent—you have touched on this—do you think it would undermine the permanent secretaries' relationships with their Departments, particularly through their accounting officer role, and with their Secretaries of State? Is that a necessary step for the civil service to be better managed?

Dr White: It is important to distinguish between the policy responsibilities and the capability side. We are not proposing that the head of the civil service would take over policy responsibilities, which would still sit with the Departments and with permanent secretaries working to their Secretaries of State. But in terms of the capability role played by a permanent secretary, who has responsibility for making sure that their Department is equipped to deliver what the Minister and the Government want, we are saying that there would be a bit of a loss of autonomy, because you want someone at the centre who is really able to grip the cross-cutting functions that you want the whole of the civil service to be able to deliver and to say, "Yes, you will maintain these standards of procurement. You will use these IT systems." And you will not be able to say, as in the federal system we have now, "Actually, our Department is different—for the following reasons, we are going to do things differently".

In past years, we saw in the Government Digital Service's roll-out of gov.uk a rare example of the centre being able to exert sufficient power to get all Departments to do something equally and across the board, and that having real value. This is why we think beefing up the responsibility at the centre for somebody on that side is worth a slight loss of autonomy for individual permanent secretaries.

Alex Thomas: On permanent secretaries, I think you could make quite a strong case that their accountabilities are already unhelpfully unclear. If you put yourself in the position of a permanent secretary, you are accountable to your Secretary of State; you are accountable to the head of the civil service; you are accountable—in a way, because they sign off your appointment—to the Prime Minister; and you are accountable to Parliament as an accounting officer. There is already this miasma of accountabilities as a permanent secretary, so we feel a couple of notches of clarification would be a useful step.

Q27 John Stevenson: Lord Maude recommended that Ministers should be more involved in senior appointments. What are your views about that?

Alex Thomas: This is my specialist subject. I do not agree with Lord Maude on that. I think he does make some interesting recommendations. He talks—if I remember his report rightly—about a bit more flexibility for



the Prime Minister around choosing director general appointments. I think that is fine. I do not think that is a problem.

However, in large part thanks to Lord Maude's work when he was Cabinet Office Minister from 2010 to 2015, we have got to just about the right place, where Ministers and the Prime Minister can have quite a large amount of influence over the most senior appointments. They sign off the job adverts and the job descriptions. They can be involved in the process all the way through. Ultimately, there is a prime ministerial sign-off. Whether all Ministers take advantage of that or not is a different question. It is certainly the case that any Minister will have sign-off on their Private Secretary and the chemistry test for whether you can work with this person.

Where I think Lord Maude goes too far is that he suggests that Ministers should be able to designate special jobs or critical roles, where any senior civil servant in those roles could be dismissed and then the recruitment process would be overseen by a representative of the Minister, or with some quite close involvement from a representative of the Minister. That seems to me to be unhelpful. Lord Maude also suggests that you should put all senior civil servants on four-year fixed-term contracts, which would be renewable, but he argues fairly convincingly that—I do not think that would suddenly politicise the civil service, because I think most Ministers are interested in getting the best people in to do the best job, nor do I think, actually, that it would lead to huge churn, because one of the problems in the civil service at the moment is that people do not stay for four years, so it might encourage them. He suggests that fixed minimum terms would be a good thing.

We were talking about truth to power—honest advice. If you knew—we have seen a little bit of this in permanent secretaries since they moved to five-year fixed-term contracts—that a Secretary of State or a Minister is going to have a pretty fundamental influence over whether your four-year contract is extended or not, I think that would provide a chilling effect on the honesty of the advice that civil servants would provide. I also think it would make it harder to recruit people because very few companies I know would recruit most of their senior workforce on four-year fixed-term contracts.

Q28 John Stevenson: At the end of the day, though, a Prime Minister would have the absolute right to decide who is a permanent secretary or not.

Alex Thomas: Ultimately, they do. A Prime Minister can do an awful lot if they have a majority in the House of Commons. They could change anything. In practice, however, I think it is inconceivable that a Cabinet Secretary in a recruitment process would appoint to a permanent secretary job someone with whom the Prime Minister was deeply unhappy, because of the locus they already have on the system. Given the stewardship and other responsibilities we have been talking about, I think we have the balance about right. I do not think it is helpful to think of a Prime Minister having an absolute right to appoint the permanent



HOUSE OF COMMONS

bureaucracy because of impartiality, capability and the other reasons we have talked about.

Q29 **John Stevenson:** What about an individual Secretary of State having the right in their Department?

Alex Thomas: Part of the problem with that is certainly, as we have seen recently, Secretaries of State moving around quite a lot or being dismissed.

John Stevenson: That is a slightly different discussion.

Alex Thomas: It is a different discussion and I am not trying to avoid the question, but I mentioned it because it is remarkably common to go through quite a long and convoluted process where a permanent secretary is appointed and then the Secretary of State moves a few weeks or months later. I think, therefore, that there is a purity to this discussion sometimes that does not actually exist.

Q30 **John Stevenson:** We have talked quite a bit about the institutionalisation of things, but at the end of the day, personality matters more than anything. If there is a clash of personalities, there has to be a mechanism for change.

Alex Thomas: There is, which is that the Secretary of State would go to the Cabinet Secretary and say, "This isn't working. We need to do something". I think that's fine. What I don't think is fine is for the Prime Minister or the Prime Minister's most senior adviser by fiat to dismiss that person or to make it clear that that person has to go. If there is a personality clash or a question about capability, there has to be a process of performance management, which ultimately might lead to that permanent secretary not being in their job any more—not over a huge, extended period, but over a period of months rather than days or weeks. That facility exists now. Other parliamentary Committees have looked at this. There is space for that process to be better understood and formalised for scrutiny reasons and for lots of other reasons, in the same way that appointment processes are.

Dr White: If we were to get into a situation where every incoming Secretary of State expected to reappoint their permanent secretary—or, indeed, incoming Prime Minister expected to reappoint their Cabinet Secretary—that would undermine one of the main benefits that we advocate for in the civil service, in terms of continuity. We already worry a great deal at the IFG about the churn of civil servants—in particular, senior civil servants. You would run the risk of the institutional memory that a permanent secretary would have about what has been tried in their Department and the way it runs being lost, if immediately on appointment, you had a Secretary of State thinking, "Right the first thing to do is to change my permanent secretary."

Chair: Our final set of questions for our first panel is from Tom Randall.



Q31 **Tom Randall:** You have called for the policy advice to Ministers to be published. Were that to happen, do you think it might affect the candour of the advice contained within those policy papers?

Dr White: Possibly, but it would depend on how you did it. It is worth saying that this is not a completely novel idea. Those of you who come from local government will know that something equivalent happens in local government, and it is what happens in New Zealand. We are not talking about abolishing the private space that needs to exist for civil servants and Ministers to discuss policy ideas. I think you would want to put quite firm constraints around what it was that was published. It is already supposed to be the case, however, that impact assessments are made public, and they should contain the evidence on which a policy is based. They are not always very good quality, so that is why we are pushing to go further than that.

Interestingly, Patrick Vallance was talking to the covid inquiry yesterday about his view that it would be really useful for the evidence base on which policy decisions are made to be made more clearly public. We do think that it would be a really important discipline for civil servants to think that their policy advice was going to be made public and to ensure that the quality of the advice they are giving is high. To go back to our old refrain, it would also help with accountability. The policy decision remains for the Minister, but the accountability for the basis on which that decision was made and what information the civil service gave to the Minister to make that decision would be there in the public domain.

Q32 **Tom Randall:** Is that change in New Zealand recent, or has it been established for some time?

Alex Thomas: It has been quite some time. They have made more recent changes around public service duties and things like that, but the distinction between what they call chief executives or permanent secretary equivalents and Ministers has been clear for some time. For a long time, they have published their policy advice in the same way that, as Hannah said, happens all over the place. NHS England does the same.

We have learned a lot from New Zealand in the work we have done, but it is worth saying that that is done in a context where there is more distance between chief executives, as they call them, and Ministers. To go back to Mr Jones's questions earlier, there is a more contractual relationship, where a Minister might say, at the beginning of the year or the term, "Here is what I want you to achieve", and then a chief executive is more publicly accountable for how well it is going.

Q33 **Tom Randall:** Finally from me, going back to ministerial directions, which we have touched on, you have been arguing for greater use of ministerial directions, as I understand it. Do you think that there may be a danger, arguably, of a culture change, where it becomes a means where poorly designed policy can be adopted more often if there is more use of ministerial direction to overrule civil servants? If that is a danger,



how might you go about preventing it?

Alex Thomas: It is an interesting question. I was pulling up the evidence from Professor Ferry, Professor Murphy and Dr Midgley that covers this point. I do not agree that it would be worse than the current situation. I can see that if ministerial directions were spraying around all over the place, their impact would be undermined. I can also see the argument they make that if you do not have a precise basis on which to make the direction, you are putting it as a matter of the senior civil servant's judgment—possibly policy, possibly personal judgment—rather than a bright-line decision.

I can see that if you did not have that clarity, that could become difficult. For me, that is one of the reasons why—and there is still plenty of work to do to identify exactly what should go into a statute—clarity in law on what those areas are, with clear tests, is the right way to go, in part to avoid undermining the directions process.

Q34 **Tom Randall:** Do you think that this could fundamentally change the relationship between Ministers and civil servants, if these were to become more prolific?

Alex Thomas: Define "fundamental". At the risk of sounding like the civil servant I used to be—sorry—I think it could fairly importantly change the relationship in a positive way, because there would be more clarity about who was responsible for what.

I do think it would be a major change. What I hope it would not do—but I am very interested in all thoughts on this—is undermine the relationship of trust and that fundamental alignment between a Minister who is trying to achieve something and a civil servant who is there to help them achieve it. I do not think we at the IFG would ever argue for the independence of the civil service or for some oppositional role for the civil service. One of the things that we have tried to do, quite carefully, is create the beginnings of a system that is aligned between Ministers and civil servants and not in tension.

Dr White: If you look at how ministerial directions are used now, permanent secretaries will go to great lengths to avoid asking for a direction. They are a last resort, almost to the extent that we think that they could do it more often. Permanent secretaries are acutely aware of the need to preserve an effective working relationship with their Ministers. The risk that they would suddenly start doing this left, right and centre to excuse poor policy advice is extremely remote.

Chair: John Stevenson has a very quick supplementary question.

Q35 **John Stevenson:** You mentioned private space, which I agree is very important. Do you think that has been destroyed by the covid inquiry?



Dr White: That is a very interesting question. I think the covid inquiry is probably the only public inquiry we will ever see where there is a great weight put on WhatsApp.

Chair: Yes, I think that is fair. That is a sufficient answer and an interesting way to conclude our first panel. Hannah and Alex, thank you both very much for sharing your wise words with us this morning. We are very grateful, as ever.

Examination of witness

Witness: Charlotte Pickles.

Q36 **Chair:** Seamlessly—as I, from the Chair, it could be said, witter on—we are going to move to our second panel, which has a single member. We are joined by Charlotte Pickles, who is director of the Reform think-tank, for our second set of questions this morning. Charlotte, good morning—you are very welcome. Thank you for coming to see us today. I have the opening question, and we have a few more from other Committee members.

As I began with the first panel, I would like to give you the opportunity to briefly characterise the current Government and civil service relationship.

Charlotte Pickles: I think it is improving, which I hope is a slightly positive answer. The last few years—clearly, you will have heard this; you will all be very familiar with it—have been incredibly turbulent, and we have had incidences where some of the behaviour on the part of the political side has led to a deterioration in the relationship between the politicians and officials.

I also think the last few years have exposed some of the flaws and the shortcomings in the civil service model, and therefore, some of those concerns on the political side are legitimate. However, there are ways of articulating that and approaching it. I do not think that those frustrations, many of which are shared by civil servants, have always been well expressed or appropriately expressed.

As regards the work that we have done, we have published several papers, most recently one called “Civil unrest”, which I think is appropriately titled, and which was authored by a former civil servant. It was based on interviews with both current and former civil servants of a mid-level.

There was a lot in that where, again, both former and current mid-level civil servants talked about how difficult it was working in an environment where there was lots of briefing, anonymously or otherwise. It is never a good idea to say rude things about the people that you are relying on to deliver something for you. They were also very clear that they felt there had been a sea change with the arrival of Rishi Sunak as PM and the new set of Ministers. There was a sense that things were improving, which I think is a positive note.



Chair: That is helpful and concise.

Q37 **Damien Moore:** You have criticised the civil service's lack of cognitive diversity and tendency of group-think. What do you mean by "cognitive diversity"?

Charlotte Pickles: By cognitive diversity, we mean a set of people who have different experiences and different backgrounds, and therefore are likely to think in different ways. There is plenty of evidence, not relating to Government and the public sector but, equally applicably, about high-performing organisations, and typically, high-performing organisations have a cognitively diverse group of people.

What we have consistently heard and, again, just as strongly from both senior officials—we did a paper called "Breaking down the barriers: why Whitehall is so hard to reform". You can see we are very good at our titles, being very literal in what we call them. We interviewed a whole host of former Cabinet Secretaries and former permanent secretaries and former Cabinet Ministers. Those on the official side were far more critical of the lack of diversity than a lot of those on the political side.

Former permanent secretaries talked about how many of that cohort were very similar to each other, had come up through very similar routes, had come literally from the same geographic areas, gone to the same schools, had the same socioeconomic background. We equally heard that in "Civil unrest" from those more mid-level officials, civil servants. For example, one talked about how, during the pandemic in particular, there were a lot of 30-year-olds with no mortgage and no children trying to make decisions that clearly were not representative of the broad swathe of the country.

Again, we heard the term "Oxbridge men" coming up a lot in both of those papers we did. You can take—and I am sure you will take—Dom Cummings in whatever way you want to, but he was right to say that we needed greater cognitive diversity. The civil service has done a very good job at what I would say is diversifying outwardly, so there are more women and more ethnic minorities. But getting people who think differently, who are going to be disruptors, who are going to approach a problem from a different perspective or angle, which allows you to interrogate it much better and hopefully come up with better policy, is not an area that we have been nearly as effective on in Government.

Q38 **Chair:** Briefly, do you think cognitive diversity has bad press because of one of its previous exponents? I could be very simplistic; what we are saying is fewer folks who have arts degrees and more of those with science degrees.

Charlotte Pickles: I couldn't possibly comment because I have an arts degree, so I would not want to suggest—

Chair: So do I.



Charlotte Pickles: I think it is more than that. Yes, absolutely, we very much need people with the more technical science subjects. We have been hearing that recently in the inquiry. Equally, we needed, and I think the inquiry has shown this just as much—so, Helen MacNamara talked about the fact that women’s voices were not central. Lee Cain talked about the fact that people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—so more disadvantaged groups—had not been involved in the conversations.

These lead to poor policy making. They lead, therefore, to poor outcomes for the country. So yes, I think it is about the skillset, but it is more than that. It is about whether you can approach a problem from a different angle because you are coming with a different experience to it.

Q39 **Damien Moore:** How can the civil service recruit to improve cognitive diversity then?

Charlotte Pickles: It is a great question. I am not sure there is one simple answer, certainly on the point around skills, but also to a degree around socioeconomic background and experience. We have had at least a couple of decades of the civil service trying to tackle some of these problems. If I may reflect back on the Baxendale review, which you are probably all familiar with, it was a report done almost a decade ago—in 2014—which was looking at the experience of trying to recruit and then retain and make the best use of external hires. This comes up a lot. The way to do this is to get people from outside to come into the system. That is absolutely spot on—of course we need different experiences, and that is one of the key ways of doing it.

However, what she found, in talking to people about their experience as an external hire, was that there were process issues—things like how long it takes to get people into the civil service, and people just give up along the way because it is such a long-winded and protracted process, so you are putting off people. When you get in there, there is the level of hierarchy, the level of bureaucracy, and the fact that there is so much focus on process over outcome. A lot of these things mean that people who might bring a different perspective get pushed out.

What was quite interesting is that one of the phrases used was the expectation that you will assimilate when you get into the civil service, which, in my view, is the exact opposite of what we are saying we want people to do. We are hiring people for their different perspective and then they get in the door and we say, “Oh no, that was all very well for us to hire you for that, but now we would like you to be like everyone else”. That is partly how you lose it.

It is not unique to the civil service and to Government, but I think it is particularly problematic. There are some other things that we are seeing through apprenticeships, and the push on apprenticeships is a positive thing in getting people who have not perhaps had quite such a fortunate background and have taken a different route. That can be valuable.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

There is potential in moving more civil servants—I am going to rephrase that. I do not think there is potential in moving civil servants to another part of the country. I think there is potential in recruiting civil servants from a different part of the country, and you may get a different set of experiences there. I think there are a series of things you can do.

Ultimately, the problem is the current HR model in the civil service, which is based on hiring people who look like each other or think like each other. We heard this consistently, again, from civil servants themselves—the deep frustration with the fact that you are not asking the question: are we filling a gap or are we hiring someone who is going to bring something different? We are asking the question: is this person going to fit in and are they going to be able to stick with the mould and the culture that the civil service has? Therefore, you are only ever going to reinforce the idea of group-think within that.

Q40 Damien Moore: Should Ministers be allowed to play a greater role in senior appointments to encourage cognitive diversity?

Charlotte Pickles: I am going to give you a slightly different answer to the answer that you got in the previous evidence session, as thoughtful as it was. I do think Ministers should have a greater say, partly because I reflect on the fact that in any other walk of life, if you said to the person running an organisation and ultimately accountable for the performance of that organisation, “We want you to set the priorities. We want you to set the vision. We want you to be accountable very publicly, very visibly, for the performance of this organisation, but we are not going to let you choose who your senior team is. We are not going to let you have a say in your private office, the people who are directly around you and supporting you”, I am not sure many of those people would take up the job. They would slightly laugh us out of town. That is not the same thing as saying, “I think there should be greater politicisation”. I think this is where Lord Maude is very good in his review.

As a slight sidebar on that, there is a big difference between being apolitical and non-political. The civil service is not non-political, and I think we get confused about this. The civil service is there to serve the Government of the day. They have to be neutral, but not non-political. I think that is quite important in couching the risk of politicisation.

I know Alex, in the previous session—and I would agree—said that most Ministers want to get the best people in because, again, ultimately they are accountable. They want to be able to stand in front of you guys and the other Select Committees and media and say things are going well, so why would they want to hire people who are unqualified or incompetent?

Clearly, you can have checks and balances, which we do at the moment, with the limited scope that politicians or Ministers have—so particularly the PM, as we heard, and Secretaries of State on the whole will get presented with a couple of options for permanent secretary and told to choose. That is not the same thing as having a significant say.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

There is very much a standard you have to get over—you have to be qualified to get to the point. So I am supportive of it; I also think there is potential to improve those relationships. I cannot remember—forgive me—who said it, but the personalities are very important. Everybody knows that in their working lives. You do not hire people you do not get on with. That may sound like a slightly stupid thing to say, but if you have people where there is tension or friction, or someone you do not think is on board with what you are trying to achieve, I do think there should be the ability, transparently and following a process, for a Minister who is there to deliver on the Government's agenda to say, "I want to hire someone else" or, "This person is not working".

Chair: Ronnie has a quick supplementary question.

Q41 **Ronnie Cowan:** I think you probably touched on it at the end of your answer. Do you think this broadening of the civil service to bring greater experience, and those from different backgrounds, will take the civil service to a position where people are genuinely prepared to stand up to the power, speak truth to power, and take it to that next step where we say, "The decisions you are making here are untenable"?

Charlotte Pickles: That is a great question, and I am not sure there is a straight answer to that. I think it would help, absolutely. Clearly, a Minister has to be willing to listen to what is being said. This is obviously not part of the discussion today, but I think there is a conversation to be had about support and training for Ministers—getting the right people in at the ministerial level.

Yes, I do think if you have greater cognitive diversity—to put it again quite crudely—and you have people who are a bit more disruptors in the system, they will be more likely to be challenging in what they say. I also think there is an issue—we heard this very strongly, particularly from those mid-level civil servants with senior leadership in the civil service—where there is a strong feeling that to succeed at the senior level you need to be good at the small "p" politics. You need to be good at serving Ministers. We heard the phrase "yes men" a lot in the interviews that were done for "Civil unrest".

There is also something about how we are monitoring and holding to account senior civil servants in the system, so that they are supporting that more cognitively diverse set of civil servants—supporting them in having that voice heard. I think at times it is actually the senior civil service that acts as almost a blocker to Ministers hearing the "truth" about a policy, how deliverable it is, what it is really going to cost, and so on.

Q42 **Mr David Jones:** In your submission, and again today, you have pointed out that the civil service suffers from group-think, and it is hostile or at least resistant to challenge of long-standing approaches. Can you give the Committee any examples of where this has detrimentally affected policy?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Charlotte Pickles: I think we have heard quite a few already during the pandemic and then in the covid inquiry. I mentioned the stuff that Helen MacNamara and Lee Cain have talked about. We have heard about Patrick Vallance and the understanding of science and application of that.

Again, we had one example, and as you will understand, the reports we have done have anonymised quotes, because clearly if you are a current civil servant, you cannot very well be quoted as saying how flawed the current model is. We heard from, for example, someone in the Department for Education talking about how there was no external engagement done—again during the pandemic, because that was the focus of that period—to try to compensate for the lack of cognitive diversity internally, so there was a real reluctance to go and talk to stakeholders.

We heard of an example where, in health and social care, someone had been brought in who had been working “on the frontline”, and when they had challenged thinking internally and said, “I do not think this is the best way of doing something” they have basically been sidelined and moved away from that discussion because the quote we got was they “did not fit with the club”.

I think you would find plenty of examples. As I say, because we anonymise them it is difficult to give you the granular detail, but there are lots of examples of where it will be having a daily impact.

Q43 **Mr David Jones:** To what extent do you think that open by default recruitment will remedy this?

Charlotte Pickles: Open by default recruitment?

Mr David Jones: Yes.

Charlotte Pickles: It is one of the things you need to do, but if you are openly recruiting for the same people, you are going to get the same people. It is a bit like saying “We are going to send a load of civil servants up to the north and then we will represent the north”, but if they are all southern Oxbridge types, you are not representing the north, are you?

I think it is the same as saying yes, of course, we can open up recruitment. I think that is a genuinely good principle, but you also have to change how you are doing that recruitment. If you are going to continue with what most people are quite critical of, so the competency-based approach to recruitment—again, in the Baxendale report, they were very critical that when you do this recruitment, lots of people were reported as saying, “Did not really feel like I got to talk about my experience, the way I thought about things. It was not an interview about me, it was about this slightly theoretical set of competencies”, which again are not used anywhere else. I think you would need to change that as a start.



I also think you need an HR system that is going to be willing to bring people in who are unconventional, and I do not think the system understands how to do that.

Mr David Jones: Weirdos and oddballs?

Charlotte Pickles: Exactly, or to not use Dom Cummings, so perhaps there is a more palatable—

Chair: That is what I meant by a bad press, you see.

Charlotte Pickles: Yes, exactly. Clare Moriarty, a very good former permanent secretary—I confess she sits on the Reform advisory board, so that is my health, or conflict, warning—has talked about the idea of red shoelaces. Effectively, what she says is that if you are the sort of person who might wear red shoelaces, you come in to the civil service and then someone takes you aside and they say, “You might want to change those for brown shoelaces or black shoelaces because it is a bit different and you are standing out”—

John McDonnell: It used to be suede shoes.

Charlotte Pickles: There we go—suede shoes. Whatever example you might want to use, it is this idea that you get in and then the culture, the whole system, is about saying, “No, you cannot be different internally”. Even if you do that open recruitment, if they are going to get people to come in and then say, “No, you need to take your red shoelaces out”, you have a problem.

Q44 **Mr David Jones:** You suggested that the civil service is excessively defensive in the face of external scrutiny. To what extent would you say this is the product of often highly personal attacks that the civil service has experienced rather than a product of an insular culture, which is what you are outlining to us?

Charlotte Pickles: I think it is both. We were given a great quote by a former permanent secretary in our “Breaking down the barriers” report—I am going to paraphrase, so forgive me. It is something like, and excuse my language, “If you are going to come in and tell everyone they’re shit, you are not going to get a good response”. It is blunt and it is crude but that is true. If you are going to constantly attack people, of course, those people are going to have a bunker mentality. That is natural. That is human nature. You are being attacked. You retreat. You want to close the doors.

What it does is it alienates a whole set of reform-minded civil servants. Again, one of the things that we heard, particularly in “Civil unrest”, which again was the slightly more junior civil servants, was quite a strong agreement that there needed to be radical change. Even to the point where one person said, “Look, I did not like how Dom Cummings approached it, but I totally agree with his diagnosis and the need for a fundamental shake-up”.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

If you are going to approach it in a way where you personalise it, where you are doing negative briefings, where you are telling people you are going to slash the numbers—even if that might be a good thing to do—then of course you are not going to get people who are going to be responsive. Any leader knows that the way to drive change is bringing people with you. It is basic change management or leadership 101.

That said, I do not think this internality or defensiveness started in the last few years, where we have seen the more problematic tensions and interactions. The civil service has historically been poor at engaging externally. I remember this from when I was in the Department for Work and Pensions. There is a set list of stakeholders that you were allowed to engage with, and they are the people that you go and talk to.

Ministers are very handled in terms of the external engagement they do. If you take things like even basic transparency, we were very critical. We wrote a paper called, “A State of preparedness”, which was looking at why things had gone so wrong in some areas during the pandemic. We talked about the fact that because there is such a reluctance to publish data, plans and information, you cannot get to that external scrutiny.

I think we have, for some time, had an insular and more defensive approach in Government but, of course, it has been exacerbated in quite a damaging way in the experience of the last few years.

Q45 **Ronnie Cowan:** Reform’s research has found its senior officials consider that as a permanent civil service, the onus is on it to consider and maintain long-term capability. While this is subject to some political permission and endorsement, are we not getting the cart before the horse here?

Charlotte Pickles: In what sense is that the cart before the horse?

Ronnie Cowan: We seem to be saying that the long-term development should be down to the civil service and the politicians who will come in and guide it.

Charlotte Pickles: There is a distinction, which I think was also being made in the previous session, between policy decisions, which is about what the Government are prioritising and what they want to achieve as a Government, which absolutely should sit with the politics—this is a democracy, not a technocracy—

Ronnie Cowan: Glad to hear it.

Charlotte Pickles: Absolutely vital. However, the functioning of the corporate entity, which is the Whitehall machine, is not the responsibility of MPs. It is not the responsibility of Ministers. Ministers should be able to expect that they get into their Department or they get into Government and there is a machine that is fit for purpose. There should be the right skills. There should be the right processes. There should be the right infrastructure in place to try to deliver cross-Government, genuinely



outcomes-focused priorities in that way. It is not for Ministers to come in and say, "Hold on a minute. I do not have the right skills in my Department. I feel like I am not being well supported. I feel like I do not have the right people in place".

Q46 **Ronnie Cowan:** What if they do feel that?

Charlotte Pickles: I think they probably do feel that. The point is that it should be the responsibility of the civil service to be rectifying that. Essentially, what we heard from former Cabinet Ministers and from former permanent secretaries and senior advisers was that the politicians should be setting the vision, the direction, the priorities, the policy. They should be supportive of a civil service that is ensuring that it can deliver against those priorities. That may mean reforming certain things, whether that is more technical stuff like procurement and digital—the stuff we saw Francis Maude do when he was Minister for the Cabinet Office. We make the point that he is the exception to the rule, that he has been a Minister who has grasped driving some of the more machinery of government-type changes.

Ultimately, it should be the head of the civil service who ultimately has responsibility for the functioning of the civil service with his or her—it has only been "his" so far—cadre of permanent secretaries, so the top team. They should be ensuring that the machine is evolving and developing and has the skills and capability it needs for whatever Government are coming in.

Q47 **Ronnie Cowan:** Do Government have any role in this?

Charlotte Pickles: Yes. There are two things Government need to do. One is to explicitly support any reform agenda. We made very clear in our report that while we do not think Ministers should be responsible for the nuts-and-bolts reform, they should be endorsing and supporting that reform happening. I do not know if we will come on to the tensions between Departments and the centre. One of the reasons why reform often does not happen is that Departments are strong fiefdoms—that permanent secretaries see their primary loyalty to the Department and not to a central Government-devised or designed reform programme.

You definitely need the support of the PM, Cabinet Office, Treasury, because the Treasury can block anything. You need a Secretary of State to be supportive of their permanent secretary taking some time out to be able to deliver reform, but you do not want them rolling up their sleeves and trying to change the engine.

Q48 **Ronnie Cowan:** That is all well and good, but ultimately, what if a Minister does not agree with that situation? If they are democratically elected, people will say, "This is how we should be doing things". At what point, or how, do you reconcile the difference if you have a belligerent Secretary of State and he says, "No, I am not doing this. I want this structure that advises me so I can do my job better"?



Charlotte Pickles: I have no problem with a Secretary of State wanting to do that. The problem is that, on the whole, and through the history of reform programmes, Secretaries of State neither see that as a priority for them nor do they have the time and space to be able to drive machinery of government changes. They are too busy trying to think about—I do not know—how to solve overcrowded prisons, or how to close the educational gap, or how to create an NHS that is fit for purpose.

Their focus tends to be on the policy side. It tends to be on their electorate and the things their electorate cares about. As we hear consistently, there are no votes in saying, “Oh, but I have tweaked the CDDO in Cabinet Office and now we can do data infrastructure better”.

If there is a Secretary of State—much like Francis Maude was that very unusual creature—who wants to come in and say, “I want to restructure how this is done”, I am all for it. The problem is that if we rely on that, it tends not to happen.

Chair: They talk of little else in Hazel Grove.

Charlotte Pickles: I am thrilled to hear that.

Chair: We will go to John McDonnell.

Q49 **John McDonnell:** I will ask you the least exciting question then, which is—

Chair: You could deliver it with excitement.

John McDonnell: Exactly. The current arrangements are that the Cabinet Secretary delegates much of the responsibility for civil service leadership and reform to the chief operating officer. What are your views on that? Also, do you support Francis Maude’s proposal that there should be a distinct and more powerful head of the civil service? I know we tried various routes, but should we?

Charlotte Pickles: We have. I do not think that is a dull question at all; I think that is probably the most important question.

John McDonnell: The least exciting.

Charlotte Pickles: Least exciting, okay—I do not think it is the least exciting. When we looked at the question of why reform does not happen—because there is quite a broad consensus on what needs to change, we slightly scratch our head as to why it has not—one of the most important things that came up in those discussions was the role of the most senior people in Government, which is the Cabinet Secretary, head of the civil service.

My short answer is that we are looking at this. We do not have a settled view on what we think the answer is. However, I can tell you what we have found from talking to those who have worked at the most senior



levels, including former Cabinet Secretaries. It is almost impossible for the same person to be both doing an excellent job of Cabinet Secretary—so the right-hand person to the Prime Minister, supporting Cabinet Government, doing the policy side of government, which is, let's face it, a very full-time job—and having a very full-time job as head of the civil service, which is to steward and steer the health of the corporate entity.

You start from the point that partly the reason that Whitehall reform gets lost is that the person who is tasked with responsibility for the health of the civil service and the Whitehall machine is doing a whole other job, which, as we were told in our interviews, is almost like daily firefighting. You are asking the person who is constantly having to put out fires to also think about the long-term health of this machine. Clearly, people are not going to be able to do it.

The wicked problem, if you like, is that it has not worked to split those two roles. There are two important points in there. I do not think we can think about the example of when the late Bob Kerslake took on the head of the civil service role as having tested it, because you will obviously all be very aware that he continued to be a permanent secretary of a big Government Department at the same time. You were just reinforcing the fact that this person has a whole other full-time job, so I do not think that is a fair example. It did not work, but I think it was not a true test.

The challenge, though, even if that job had been only as the head of the civil service—which, in a sense, we have with what was CEO with John Manzoni and COO now with Alex Chisholm—is that the power comes from proximity to the Prime Minister. Time and time again we heard the phrase, “The Cabinet Secretary is the anointed one”. They are the one who is in and out of the door of the Prime Minister, literally, in the meetings and so on.

The reason that is important is that it links back to the fact that we do not have a Government; we have a whole series of little fiefdoms, which are the Departments. If the most powerful person is not the person who is responsible for driving change, for making sure that the civil service system is as high-performing as it possibly can be, it becomes far too easy for those quite powerful permanent secretaries just to ignore. We literally had one say to us, “People ask themselves whether they want to pick up the phone to the COO”.

Q50 **John McDonnell:** What is the solution?

Charlotte Pickles: Again, we have not come to a settled view on it. I do not want to, on the hoof, decide for the team what the view is. My honest answer is that right at this point, I do not know, because it is very challenging. I do think Francis Maude's answer of giving that head of the civil service person a much bigger Department, much greater power and much greater control of the day-to-day budgeting side of stuff would give it much greater weight and would require the permanent secretaries to have to engage in a way that we do not currently have with the current



HOUSE OF COMMONS

COO model. Instead, I would just say that I would love to come back and talk to you when we have done the work and I have an answer.

John McDonnell: That would be helpful.

Chair: From recollection of a “Yes, Prime Minister” episode, I think one proposal was for it to go to the permanent secretary of the Treasury—Sir Frank, as it were.

Charlotte Pickles: Yes, and historically that was the case.

Chair: Well, maybe we have solved it this morning.

Charlotte Pickles: Exactly.

Chair: Charlotte, thank you very much for giving evidence this morning. It is most illuminating. If there is anything else you wish to acquaint us with, please do write, but for the moment, thank you very much.

Charlotte Pickles: Thank you so much.