HOUSE OF COMMONS

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Civil Service Leadership and Reform, HC 201

Tuesday 30 April 2024

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 30 April 2024.

Watch the meeting

Members present: Mr David Jones (Chair); Ronnie Cowan; Jo Gideon; Damien Moore; Tom Randall; Lloyd Russell-Moyle; John Stevenson.

Questions 102 - 149

Witness

I: Jonathan Slater, former Permanent Secretary, Department for Education.

Examination of witness

Witness: Jonathan Slater.

Q102 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to this meeting of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. Today the Committee is holding its third oral evidence session in our civil service leadership and reform inquiry. Recent high-profile tensions between Ministers and their officials have called into question whether the model of an independent, impartial civil service that serves the Government of the day remains fit for purpose in the 21st century or whether a fresh understanding of the relationship between the Government and the civil service is needed.

Today we will be hearing from Jonathan Slater, formerly permanent secretary at the Department for Education and head of the civil service policy profession. The session will examine whether Whitehall policymaking is fundamentally disconnected from both delivery and the people affected by it, and the solutions suggested to resolve this issue.

Good morning, Mr Slater. Could you please introduce yourself for the record?

Jonathan Slater: Hello. My name is Jonathan Slater. I am delighted to be here this morning.

Q103 **Chair:** Mr Slater, you are the author of a report entitled "Fixing Whitehall's broken policy machine". In that report you are critical of the dominance of the so-called courtier skills at the top of the civil service and in the policy profession. How far would you say that reflects the preferences of Ministers who expect to have little time to get to grips with their jobs or to make significant changes?

Jonathan Slater: It has not been my experience over the 20 years that I was a civil servant that the Ministers that I worked for—from John Reid to David Cameron to Gavin Williamson to Justine Greening and many others—that what they wanted from their senior civil servants were courtiers, no. In general, what they wanted were experts on their subject matter who could advise without fear or favour and who, once the Ministers had decided what they wanted to get done, would implement it with all due speed and skill. I conclude from that that the courtier culture, which has been widely reported on, not least by Fulton in the 1960s, is not because Ministers want it to be so. They are busy people; they come into Government and get on with running the country. They inherit a civil service with a predominant culture, and they do not have the time or inclination to change it.

Q104 **Chair:** How would you say that that culture developed?

Jonathan Slater: It has developed over a very long time—at least 100 years. I argued in my pamphlet that you referred to that it is, it seems to me, a consequence of a system that operates in private. If you have a system in which the civil servants are operating behind closed doors in meetings with Ministers, not really meeting members of the public—I am talking here about the policymakers and, again, this is a criticism that was made of the civil service in the 1960s—and nothing else really—this is the very first time I have been able to express my views to a group of MPs; while I was a civil servant I was forbidden from expressing my views—that inevitably encourages a culture in which civil servants are wondering what it is that their Ministers would like them to say, more than anything else.

Q105 **Chair:** It is strange that that should develop and that the civil servants themselves should not have sufficient self-awareness to see that this process is perhaps not necessarily serving the best interests of the Government of the day.

Jonathan Slater: When I was the permanent secretary at the Department for Education, I saw it as an important duty that I would attend the induction meetings of all new starters—all new civil servants joining the Department for Education—since I was head of the Department. I would ask them, having arrived in the civil service, fresh in their 20s typically—not always, but nevertheless normally—why they had become civil servants and they would almost always give me the same answer: it was to make a difference and to achieve results on behalf of the Government of the day. It is not the case that people join the civil service with anything other than ambition to do their best for the

Government, and plenty of civil servants go through their whole career doing so. Again, I am talking here about policymakers.

What they soon discover is that their ability to achieve real outcomes on behalf of the Ministers they are serving is not typically what gets them promoted—it is not what gets them promoted. That is not a controversial statement. How could it be otherwise, given how quickly civil servants move from one job to another? It takes a bit of time to get something done. If you got promoted within 12 months, you could be pretty confident that nothing much has been achieved on your watch. Junior people see senior people getting promoted because of their ability to manage upwards—to handle issues on behalf of Minister—rather than because of their subject matter expertise or their ability to achieve real change on the ground.

I am oversimplifying, but that is the predominant culture. So it is inevitable that ambitious civil servants wanting to get more senior start, despite the reasons why they joined, to see that what will make the biggest difference to their career is not necessarily their subject matter expertise. They can see that that is not being prioritised. People have got promoted within 12 months and couldn't possibly have developed the expertise. They are switching from Department to Department. And so the culture takes over.

Q106 **Chair:** How useful are the so-called courtiers?

Jonathan Slater: Ministers need a whole set of skills and people supporting them to achieve their jobs. Certainly, I was not surprised if Ministers I worked for asked me not only what the best way was to teach mathematics or to recruit French teachers—that sort of expertise—but also how I thought we could best get the support of a reluctant Chancellor, how something was going to play in the Education Select Committee or what the best way was of handling what was inevitably going to be a difficult set of questions when the Minister was in front of his or her team. If that is what you mean by courtier skills—helping the Minister handle the complexity of a political environment—of course Ministers need those people. I am not so sure, though, that they benefit from getting those skills from the senior civil service.

Francis Maude has argued in favour of an extended ministerial office, for example, inviting Ministers to bring in people they have chosen to help them to achieve their objective, not because of their expertise in the subject matter, but precisely because, as your question implies, it is a complicated world and you need some allies helping you to navigate your way through it.

If it were me, I would give Ministers the opportunity to recruit more people to help them with the courtier skills, the handling, and get the civil service focused on what we all say it is for—experts, impartial advice, getting it done. The word "courtier" does not exist in that sentence, but if you were to do a diary of your typical senior civil servant in Whitehall,

they would spend much more time on the "courtier" and much less time on the advice.

Q107 **Chair:** The development of cross-Government functions and professions was designed to improve civil service skills in key areas, and there has been a huge expansion in the number of commercial, digital and project management specialists, for example. How far has that addressed the concerns about generalism and the lack of expertise that you refer to?

Jonathan Slater: It certainly is the case, as you say, Chair, that over the last 20 years the civil service has recruited many specialists. When I joined in 2001, Government Departments were not required to have finance directors, let alone accountancy-qualified finance directors, and now they are. That is just one of many examples.

What I was struck by in my 20 years in the civil service, including, as you say, as head of the policy profession, was that these specialists were still one stage removed from the decision-making process—the room where the Minister, with his or her policy officials, makes the decisions. The policymaker is not a specialist in anything other than one thing, which I will come back to in a minute. They see their job more than anything else—again, I am oversimplifying, and it is complicated—as going to get the views of the experts, including commercial and digital people and project managers, synthesising it, reporting back and having a conversation with the Minister.

To bring this to life, I remember a meeting of Wednesday morning colleagues—the meetings that permanent secretaries hold on their own in private and have done on Wednesday mornings for 100 years—where the chief scientific adviser at the time was recommending that the fast stream, which is the recruitment process into the policymaking profession, should recruit more scientists. You might think that that is an uncontroversial proposal. Speaking as a mathematician, I was certainly in favour. I was not the head of the policy profession at the time. My predecessor was doing it, and he said, "No, we need scientists in the science fast stream, not in the generalist policymaking fast stream." I think that really brings it to life.

If you are not having scientists in the policy fast stream, what are they then? I suppose they are historians, classicists; they are people who are recruited on the basis of their ability to synthesise the views of lots of experts and put that in front of a Minister. Now, that is a thing, but I sometimes wondered whether you might just occasionally cut out the middle man or the middle woman. Why not put the experts in front of the Minister?

Q108 **Chair:** Has anyone before you ever thought of changing this structure or reviewing it?

Jonathan Slater: There is nothing unique about me and, as I say, this analysis of the way that Ministers and the country are not as well served

as they might be by this generalist group of people. I am certainly not the first person to argue that it needs to change. It is not typical for ex-permanent secretaries to be the ones arguing for it. I do not think that that is because there is anything special about me either, other than that I did not spend the whole of my career in the civil service; I spent the first half of it in local government, which is untypical—it is not unique but it is untypical. I sometimes reflect on what would have happened if I had had the standard career of Oxford, PPE, fast stream and joining the best civil service in the world, which is what you are told—Rolls-Royce. Would I, 20 years later, have been as ambitious for change as I am? Probably not.

You can see why the system takes over in the way that I have described. It is just that, because I did spend 10 years working for democratically elected politicians, as an impartial official with the responsibility to advise these politicians and then to get on with implementing their decisions, exactly the same as the civil service but in local government, it was inevitable that I was going to compare the two things, and doubly so since the politicians I worked for at Islington included Stephen Twigg, Meg Hillier, James Purnell and Margaret Hodge. So it was the same politicians in some cases. I did expect, when joining the civil service, to be arriving in a place that was essentially the same, but just more complicated and bigger.

But I could not have been more wrong. The idea that you do it in secret in the civil service, but you do it in public in local government, is so fundamental. But if I had joined the civil service at the age of 21 and had never done anything other than operate behind closed doors, I would have believed that it was not possible to do it any other way, which is indeed what most of my colleagues today think. I just know they are wrong, because I have done it a different way.

Q109 **Jo Gideon:** Complaints about excessive churn in the civil service are long standing. To what extent is churn a product of a civil service culture that accords too little importance to expertise, rather than the result of falling real wages and the lack of in-post advancement?

Jonathan Slater: I do think that the fundamental reason for the churn is that civil service leaders who are choosing who to promote—because that is when the churn happens—do prioritise expertise or delivery record. It cannot be that the primary cause is money, because this has been with us for at least 50 years. The words in the Fulton report are essentially the same. It has got worse in the last 10 years because there is an added financial incentive now on people to get promoted quickly because it is the best way of getting a pay rise, but it has been with us for at least 50 years.

As the permanent secretary of the Department for Education, I would be invited by my colleagues, on a fairly regular basis, to see person X or person Y who worked for them. I remember a conversation I had with somebody who wanted to join the Department for Education. I saw him

out of courtesy to my colleague. He was a bright young guy—I won't name the person, obviously. I said, "What do you do?" He said, "I'm involved in regulating this very complicated thing that is currently unregulated". I said, "How long have you been doing it for?" He said, "Twelve months." I said, "Why do you want to come to the Department for Education?" He said, "I'm really interested in schools." This guy was sent to me by one of my fellow permanent secretaries. It was completely absurd.

Q110 **Jo Gideon:** How far would allowing in-post progression help to change this culture, if people could advance without having to change Departments?

Jonathan Slater: Of course, absolutely. If you are asking people to stay in their roles for, say, three or four years, the Minister wants advice about how to get something done, you work on the advice, the Minister makes a decision, and you implement a change—let's say that that takes three or four years. An ambitious person who has the capability to go upwards needs to know that there is a good opportunity for financial reward if they succeed. You would need to design your HR systems to facilitate that, but that would be a very straightforward thing to do.

What happens at the moment is that, every few years, there is a new civil service reform plan announced, published, fanfare: "We are going to provide opportunities for people to get paid for what they achieve in practice." It never sees the light of day. Why doesn't it see the light of day? Because the underlying problem is that people know that, to get to the top, you don't stick around. If you stick in a job for three years, you are reducing your chances of getting to the top. After all, if my promotion was dependent upon me achieving successfully, that is quite hard. If my promotion is dependent instead on impressing a Minister before they move on to something else, that is a lot easier. So you can see why the civil service does not change the system.

Q111 **Chair:** Can I ask you a short question on that? How many moves did you have after joining the civil service before you became a permanent secretary?

Jonathan Slater: I went from the Cabinet Office in 2001 to the Home Office in 2006. I will excuse myself for the change to the Ministry of Justice, because that was a machinery of government change; I would have stayed in the Home Office—I was doing the same job. I moved from the Home Office/Ministry of Justice to the Ministry of Defence in 2011. So that is five and five.

This is a good example. I was recruited into the Ministry of Defence to implement a set of reforms for Liam Fox—the Levene review of the defence operating model. That was a three-year programme, and I implemented those changes. Those were implemented to the satisfaction of the Secretary of State at the time. Then, I think I demonstrated to the

satisfaction of the most senior people that I had the skills required to be a credible candidate for a permanent secretary role in the future.

There was just one rounding-off that I required. Possibly because the first part of my career had been in local government, I had to show that I could do the politics. It turns out the finishing job for potential permanent secretaries, if you are really lucky, is to be the head of the Economic and Domestic Affairs Secretariat. That is the ultimate DG role. If you have been given that job, the next one will be a permanent secretary. That is the job where you go along to Cabinet meetings and you write the minutes—by far the easiest director general job I did.

Q112 **Jo Gideon:** Many former Ministers have attacked the civil service's competence, but some have also attacked its integrity, suggesting that some officials have deliberately resisted or undermined Government policy. How do you respond to that?

Jonathan Slater: I never saw that myself. I worked in a number of different Departments for at least 15 different Secretaries of State and different political parties over 20 years. I am not saying it has never happened, but I never saw it.

You join the civil service certainly to make a difference, but recognising you are operating for elected politicians. It is really exciting working for elected politicians and building the trust and confidence of your next Minister, and increasingly that opportunity arises quite frequently. I have been a little bit critical already, but I never saw anything like that; I saw all of my colleagues really leaning in—"What does the Minister want, how can I get it for them?"

If anything, I agree with Francis Maude: there is not enough truth to power. This is not a new comment. I arrived in 2001, and I was excited, in my mid-30s. I remember thinking 23 years ago, "Where is it happening?" Of course, that is not to say there isn't any of what you describe—of course there is, and it tends to happen behind closed doors, for understandable reasons. But I don't think there is enough.

Q113 **Damien Moore:** Good morning. Can Cabinet Secretaries provide both the necessary support for Prime Ministers and Cabinets, and effective leadership of the civil service?

Jonathan Slater: It is a very big and complicated organisation, as you say, and the head of it has a whole series of tasks to accomplish. Just like any large, complicated organisation, you are unlikely to find one person with all the skills to do everything. Just like any other large, complicated organisation, what matters is the team of people at the top. That would be the same politically, wouldn't it? The Prime Minister can achieve a lot, but his or her team is a very important part of it, and the same would be try for any organisation—a bank, a football club.

What you definitely need in the head of the civil service is the ability to lead an organisation of 400,000 people, because they are the boss of it.

And you need someone who is sufficiently self-aware that they know what they are strong at and what they need help for and they can bring together a team.

Where I saw this operate best in my 20 years was when Gus O'Donnell was head of the civil service and he worked in extremely effective partnership with Jeremy Heywood, who was the permanent secretary at No. 10. Between the two of them they provided the combination of skills that you refer to, with Gus focusing more of his personal effort on the leadership, and Jeremy more on the Cabinet. It was a double act that worked really well, with Gus focusing on the leadership, because the top man or woman is, in the end, the leader.

Q114 **Damien Moore:** Do you think the Cabinet Secretary could lead reform?

Jonathan Slater: Reform of any organisation has to come from the top person, absolutely. It is possible that, behind your question, you are exploring a separation of the two roles. *[Interruption.]* Yes, you are—fine. If you did separate the two roles, the more senior one—because one has to be more senior than the other, and every organisation needs a leader—has to be the leader, not the secretary, not the person who writes the minutes. That person has to be driving the reform agenda.

If you do it the other way round, and the person who is advising the Cabinet but not leading the organisation delegates the leadership task to a No. 2, what will happen, and I have seen it happen before in a similar model, is that the permanent secretary—again, this would be true of any organisation—looks to the top person. They don't look to the second person; they look to the person at the top for direction. What is the person at the top doing? They are taking the minutes. So do it the other way round if you want to split it.

Gus was both Cabinet Secretary and head of the civil service. Whether you split the role or not does not really matter. What you need at the top is a strong leader who works with a team of people who can complement their strengths. Nobody could do the political handling better than Jeremy, so Gus left it to him.

Q115 **Damien Moore:** You did not focus on the role of the Government in reforming the civil service. How far can changes of the sort you recommend in your report be introduced by the civil service itself without active ministerial support?

Jonathan Slater: The civil service cannot do anything without ministerial approval; otherwise we would not be living in a democracy. As is evident from a previous question, the civil service has recruited lots of specialists in the last 20 years. It has made change, but that required political oversight because it is a democracy, but also because civil servants want to be following ministerial direction. Francis Maude was a very effective Minister for the Cabinet Office in driving the recruitment of those

specialists. He worked hand in glove with John Manzoni and others, and together they did it, and they did it well.

So it definitely requires ministerial oversight, because that is the system, which I think is why the sort of reform I am describing does not happen. It is fairly easy for people outside to see that the civil service has not had, say, the digital skills required. You can quite imagine some Ministers coming in 15 years ago and thinking they were going to have to fix that, and so they did.

In terms of the sort of issue I am describing—what goes on in those closed rooms, how much truth to power there is in practice, how people get promoted in reality—you only see when you are in; you don't see that when you are outside. Once you are in, you have bigger priorities. I wrote about this subject not because I think it is the biggest problem facing the country today, but because it was something I knew about and I thought it would be good to change it. But if I were the Prime Minister, I can see why I might prioritise something else.

Q116 **Damien Moore:** To what extent should the civil service be required to maintain and enhance its capability regardless of ministerial prioritisation?

Jonathan Slater: I would not accept the phrase "regardless of" because that implies, "I hear what you say, Minister, but I am going to prioritise training the next lot over meeting your needs no matter what." Then, we are not in a democracy any more. I certainly think, and so would my colleagues—this would be uncontroversial—that it is important for the civil service to be preparing for future generations. It is a recognised role of the civil service that it needs to be ready for an incoming Government. The whole point of a permanent civil service is that it is ready for the next lot.

But the incentive on civil servants would be to do rather less of that and instead prioritise impressing your Minister today—of course it would be. There are some parliamentary democracies that have put in law the requirement on the civil service to do the "planning for the future" thing. You could argue that that might not be a bad idea. I would not see it as an important issue either way particularly.

Damien Moore: Thank you.

Q117 **Tom Randall:** There is a lot of discussion about diversity in the civil service, using the common, Equality Act sort of characteristics. I understand that you have been critical of the lack of socioeconomic and geographical diversity in the policy profession and the senior civil service more generally. If policy is being based on proper evidence and developed that way, and it is an evidence-driven policy, why should policy be dependent upon the demographic characteristics of the civil servant creating?

Jonathan Slater: Because it isn't. My thesis is that Ministers are poorly served by a policymaking profession that inadequately puts in front of them the evidence because they don't know it well enough. Although that might seem critical and controversial, in a way it can't be if people move their jobs every year. How could they possibly know the evidence well enough to put it in front of a Minister? It isn't happening. I don't mean it is never happening, but it is not the predominant system.

If you were to then ask yourself what is the best way of making sure that the civil service does put better evidence in front of a Minister, I think it would not be controversial to argue that the task of putting a comprehensive set of options in front of Ministers and thinking through the practical implications on the ground of choices A, B and C is likely to be done better if all the people working on it are not all exactly the same as each other. That is the case for bringing people with different experience and expertise to bear on looking into a question. If they have all been to the same university, and all have the same background, they are unlikely to draw upon all of the different perspectives.

Government is a very complicated business, isn't it? In the Department for Education, I was having to work out what the practical implications were likely to be on the ground of a change in the maths curriculum, as I mentioned earlier. That requires you not just to be an expert in mathematics but an expert in children and very different children. The biggest problem confronting the school system is that, since time began, some children do a lot better at school than other children, and children whose parents have more resources do better than those with fewer resources. Understanding that issue—what it would take, and how you might support parents who failed at maths themselves and who do not have the resources to buy in tuition for their children—is not just an intellectual exercise; having somebody in the room who knows something about it would definitely improve the quality of the evidence.

Q118 **Tom Randall:** There are two things there. One is the current churn issue of people moving on constantly, and the other is the background issue, in terms of where you are from. Would you say that they are equally problematic, or is one more problematic than the other?

Jonathan Slater: You are asking me to rank churn versus diversity?

Tom Randall: Yes, if they can be ranked.

Jonathan Slater: I don't see why Ministers should choose. Ministers are in charge, and they can have whatever they want. I understand why they do not prioritise asking this question, because they have other ones, but they can have both. If I had to choose, I would choose having experts from a range of different perspectives in the room and changing more quickly, rather than a group of people, all of whom have the same experience, staying in the role for ever. But I do not see why you would want to choose.

I cannot put this any better than the Social Mobility Foundation did in their 2017 report, for which they interviewed hundreds of people. They noted that the socioeconomic diversity of the senior civil service had got a bit less in the last 40 years. They described the culture as studied neutrality, where what really mattered for your prospects of getting onwards and upwards were your literary allusions, not your evidence-based advice to Ministers.

Q119 **Tom Randall:** There is a current trend to move civil service jobs out of London to various regional hubs across the country. Do you think that will bring any greater diversity of background or thought to the civil service? Do you think that will be sufficient, or is more needed than that?

Jonathan Slater: I definitely think it helps to recruit people into any of these professions, but the focus of this conversation is the policy profession. Definitely it helps to improve the quality of the policy profession if you are recruiting from the widest possible range of backgrounds. It is bizarre in a way that, until fairly recently, you could only join the policy profession if you lived near London. Why would you want to reject anybody who happened to live in Manchester, Cornwall, Sheffield or Birmingham? It definitely helps, but it will only really help if you are addressing the cultural problem that I am describing too. If you get someone in from "the sticks" to advise on what it is like for people in Manchester, and then you go back to your way of doing things—a bit like, "We don't want scientists in our profession"—nothing really has changed.

Q120 **Tom Randall:** There are plenty of Oxford PPE-ists in Manchester as well as in London, I suppose.

Jonathan Slater: That is another equally good point. If you are going to be recruiting outside a particular narrow area, make sure you take advantage of that—not that I have got anything against PPE graduates, wherever they live. It is just that we don't just need them.

Tom Randall: Thank you.

Q121 **Ronnie Cowan:** Going beyond the geography of recruiting, the civil service's recent approach to diversity and inclusion—there have been many, but the most recent one—has focused on increasing its "cognitive diversity". How do you recruit for cognitive diversity?

Jonathan Slater: I cannot say that I was involved in any such recruitment campaigns myself. I see the idea of it, and I guess it complements some of the things we have been discussing. When you are in a room considering the best ways of dealing with issue x, y or z, you want people with different perspectives. That seems to be a good thing. Whenever there is an investigation into something that went seriously wrong, inside Government or outside, one of the factors is always group-think, isn't it? A major theme of the Chilcot inquiry was the notion of group-think—people who did not really argue with each other, because they had the same background and the same perspective, and in a culture where everything is polite.

Q122 **Ronnie Cowan:** There is always that danger in recruitment, if you get one person being interviewed, and five people interviewing them, that they try to match themselves up with that person—same school, same university, same background, same interests, same whatever. They are more comfortable with that; they think they understand that person because that person is like themselves. How do you break that?

Jonathan Slater: I absolutely agree with you, and that is why the civil service does not change, not so much because of the people it recruits but the people it promotes. If you are at the top of the civil service and you have got there because of the quality of your handling skills, it can't be too bad, can it? You are going to want to promote people in your image, like you, and so it stays as it is. That is why, in my view, you cannot rely upon the civil service to fix this problem for itself. That requires either Ministers or Parliament—and I suggest the latter, which is why I asked for the opportunity to talk to you, but it could be either—to say, "This isn't good enough."

Q123 **Ronnie Cowan:** Who would do the recruiting then?

Jonathan Slater: The Civil Service Commission, as you will know, is an independent body whose job is to ensure the application of the civil service values set out in statute when recruiting to the most senior positions. But its brief, as Francis Maude pointed out recently, is more to do with ensuring that, when people get into senior roles, they are impartial. That is a perfectly good thing, but the issue we are discussing this morning is a different issue: have they got the appropriate expertise? I am not sure you would need any new bodies. It would be for Ministers and Parliament to set out what the requirements are that people need to demonstrate to get to more senior positions.

Q124 **Ronnie Cowan:** Did the Ministers in Parliament not get to their positions for exactly the same reasons?

Jonathan Slater: Yes, absolutely. I think that is why civil servants need to recruit on a different basis. Why do we have a permanent civil service? Partly precisely because of the political system in which we operate. It is the nature of parliamentary democracy that the Minister in charge will not, in most cases, have any background in the subject. That is the nature of democracy, and I am not promoting changing it. I am saying that if that is the system, make sure the civil servants know what they are talking about. I think that the best way to ensure that the senior people do become experts in their subject is to expose their advice to public scrutiny. It is not so much the recruitment process; it is more, "Do you carry on doing it in secret or not?"

To give you an example of what I mean, when permanent secretaries are preparing advice for Ministers, there is one category of advice that they prepare that they spend much more time on than any other. They work extremely hard to make sure that it is accurate and cannot be pulled apart, and they employ teams of people who support them in that

activity. There is an expert team in the Treasury to make sure they do it well, and people go on a training course as soon as they become permanent secretary to make sure they do it well. I am guessing, because you have not been a permanent secretary, that you do not know what that category of advice is. That category of advice is value for money advice. They go on training courses—I went on training courses—on how to do this properly, so I was an expert in that one thing. I was an expert in other things too, but that was the one I was taught by the system to be an expert in.

Why was I taught to be an expert in value for money advice? Answer: because it was public. It really is that simple. I would go along to meetings like this, chaired by Margaret Hodge and Meg Hillier, and some experts in the National Audit Office would have read the advice. They would be able to judge whether I had done it well or badly, and they would tell the Committee. If I had done it badly, I would be roasted, but I didn't do it badly; I did it well.

I do not see why you should not apply exactly that principle to all policy advice. Imagine now that I have to advise you on the different options for achieving some objective that you have—for example, increasing the number of students succeeding in technical subjects at college. There are four or five different approaches I might take. It is my job as a civil servant to present those impartially, whoever the politician, with the pros and cons of each. Why not have an expert group of people who look at the quality of that advice—"Did Mr Slater consider each of the options? Did he set out the pros and consensus?"—and report to the Select Committee? They would report not on what the right answer is, because there is not a right answer—that is the point of politicians; the job of civil servants is to expose the choices. Why not have some experts looking at how well they do that, overseen by Parliament? It works for value for money. Why not do it for the rest?

The civil service is not going to invent that system for itself. Which is the meeting that permanent secretaries hate more than any other meeting? The Public Accounts Committee. Inevitably, who wants to be held to account in front of a group of anybody. This is the most relaxed Select Committee meeting I have ever sat in, because I am not being held to account.

Accountability is good. The civil service policymaking profession is a monopoly—there is one of it. You get to stay in your job for life. This is not the private sector, where if your advice is poor, you go. You stay. What do we do with teachers, doctors, local government officials and police officers, who work in monopolies in the public sector, who are not subject to a competitive principle where, if they do a poor job, their company goes down? We submit them to inspection. Why is the policymaking profession the only public sector institution that is not subject to inspection, other than in that one area? There is no good

answer to that question other than that you do not invent it for yourself, and Ministers are typically busy elsewhere.

Ronnie Cowan: That was a great answer and very interesting, but not actually the question I asked you.

Jonathan Slater: I am so sorry. I do apologise.

Q125 **Ronnie Cowan:** No, it was a great answer, lovely. How do I get cognitive diversity? How do I get these people around the table who can say to folk, "My thinking process is different from yours, and we have hammer things out here before we go and advise the Minister about what they should be doing"?

Jonathan Slater: You can do that by building it into the specification. There is a person specification set out for deputy directors, directors, directors general and permanent secretaries. You could build in cognitive diversity formally. You could require the recruitment of teams to bring in people with different skillsets and build that into your process. You could have the Civil Service Commission overseeing it. But the reason I did not really answer your question was that I think that a process answer will not really change it. What would change it is exposing it to external scrutiny.

Q126 **Ronnie Cowan:** Does the same go for ensuring that people with a greater focus on delivery are in the leadership positions and positions where they make policy and advise Ministers? Would it be the same process?

Jonathan Slater: Yes. Again, it is not that the civil service has not made any forward steps in the last 20 years. I felt very unusual in 2001 in having a local authority background, but I was not the first, and there have been more since. People have been brought in from outside—I mentioned John Manzoni. So there are recruits from outside, people with more experience.

It is not that it does not change at all; there are some very good senior civil servants. Cat Little has just been appointed as the permanent secretary to the Cabinet Office. I was very impressed by Cat. I didn't work with her a lot. But if the predominant culture is still as I describe it, it does not really change. What was the background of the current head of the civil service? I do not blame him for it, but he is literally a courtier.

Q127 **Ronnie Cowan:** Should we be recruiting more permanent secretaries from outside the civil service?

Jonathan Slater: The job of permanent secretary is a very hard one and, as in any organisation, it is quite risky to bring in somebody from outside at that level; I would bring them in at a more junior level. I would say that nobody should be a policymaker in the senior service unless they have worked for a significant amount of time outside it. I thought I was a much better permanent secretary than I would have been otherwise—no

doubt I could have been significantly better still—because of the 10 years I had spent in local government on the receiving end of Whitehall. But, again, the civil service reform plan, from time to time, will commit to a secondment programme—"We will give them nine months out." Michael Gove announced one about three years ago—another tumbleweed moment. Nothing happened. I spoke to a director general in my Department who went to see a permanent secretary: "I want to go on a secondment. I have read this plan." "Don't do that," he was told. "Oh, my goodness. Out of sight, out of mind. You've lost your chance to get to the top." Culture eats strategy for breakfast.

Q128 **John Stevenson:** You made a couple of interesting comments earlier about civil servants operating in private, and you made the comparison with local government being more open than the more private civil service. One of your key recommendations is that the civil service should publish its advice to Ministers. Do you not think that that would change the relationship quite dramatically between senior civil servants and Ministers and that it would become a lot more transactional?

Jonathan Slater: If one were accepting that there was a case for putting advice into the public eye, it would definitely be worth a proper discussion about how to do it, and there are different approaches that one could take. I have already mentioned one that applies to a subset of civil service advice, and the world has not fallen in. There is the level of trust that there is between Ministers and civil servants, in circumstances where the National Audit Office looks at all of the advice and advises Parliament. So it definitely is possible to design a system that extends that brief more widely.

In answer to a previous question, I suggested that civil servants are spending perhaps rather more time than they should on the issues that Ministers would not want to be in the public domain: how to handle the Chancellor-type questions—handling-type questions. In fact, I am not suggesting that that be put into the public domain. What I am suggesting should be put into the public domain is, "Here are the different options for achieving the outcome you want, and here is the evidence in support of those." That is supposed to be factual information. That is not supposed to be controversial. You are supposed to offer that advice whoever the politician is you are working for.

When politicians are nervous about what civil servants might say to Select Committees if they were entitled to say what they think, it is not so much that they are fearful that I might say to your Committee Chair, "The evidence about mathematics is this"—I don't think they are concerned about that. They would be concerned, and I think reasonably so, by, "What does Gavin Williamson really think about—". That is the trust issue. Am I going to say something disobliging about some Minister or other? No. That is not what needs to get into the public domain. What needs to get into the public domain are the facts and the evidence. That

is not something, in my experience, that leads to a breakdown of trust—quite the opposite.

One could build it up bit by bit. At the very least, ask an expanded National Audit Office or equivalent body to look at the advice and to advise you.

Q129 **John Stevenson:** Is there not a danger, though, that civil servants would be become less candid in their advice?

Jonathan Slater: In my view, it is the opposite. We have the opportunity to compare; that is the beauty of the fact that the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee do look at policy advice in a restrictive area. You see more candid advice on value for money than more generally. More generally, the instinct is, "What does the Minister want?" But not for value for money—"We have to tell it as it is. We have to do that. It might be uncomfortable, conceivably, to tell a politician this is going to be more expensive than that, but if we don't what are we going to say to Meg?" Completely straightforwardly, that is how the system works, as it would—put yourself in our shoes. If the public gets to see, and if you have to defend your own advice to a Committee, you are going to make sure it is right. It is that simple.

At these induction meetings, people joining the Department for Education would listen to me talk about the importance of truth to power, and at most of those meetings somebody would say to me, "But is that what Ministers really want?" They had only just started—they have just joined the Department for Education—and they ask, "Does Nick Gibb really want advice on x or y?" He was a Minister for 10 years. I would say yes, and that was true. I have been in lots of meetings with Nick Gibb in which he and I would do the truth to power thing, and he absolutely relished it—he welcomed it—but that it is really not how the system works. In terms of wanting to avoid changing the system because you are fearful that civil servants would become less candid, they couldn't become less candid.

Q130 **John Stevenson:** Do you not think that there is a danger, though, that once civil service advice becomes public and they are interviewed by Select Committees and so on, they enter the political sphere, in a way that we do not necessarily want them to?

Jonathan Slater: I am trying to distinguish here between two different roles that civil servants play in policymaking. One is the submission of impartial, honest evidence, which your colleague asked me about, and the other is the handling-type stuff, and you know what I mean by that. I am talking about putting the former into the public domain. I not completely convinced that politicians are particularly well served by senior civil servants doing the latter.

To take an example of a different country, New Zealand, which is a parliamentary democracy, with impartial officials permanently appointed, the civil servants do much more of the former and they do much less of

the latter. You could call that transactional if you want, but I would say it is the civil service doing its core job. A director general who worked for me in the Department for Education went to be the head of the policy function for the children's department in New Zealand for 18 months for various reasons—it doesn't matter what they were. He then came back. I said to him, "What was it like?" He said, "It was amazing. I had a meeting with my Minister on my policy once a week, rather than three times a day." That is the system. You could describe that as more transactional. At first, he thought, "I don't really understand it," but if you think about it, how much does the policy change? Why would you be having quite so many meetings with the Minister? Answer: because you are involved in this sort of handling activity.

I would give more of that activity to special advisers and ministerial offices, and I would invest properly in civil servants who are doing the thing that only civil servants can do properly—well, obviously you could have a different system, but the point of a permanent civil service is not to be handlers on call, but to be experts in education.

Q131 **John Stevenson:** Assuming they are experts, and assuming that a policy that is taken forward goes a little haywire, should the civil servant resign?

Jonathan Slater: Under the model I am describing, the civil servants are accountable for the quality of their advice.

Q132 **John Stevenson:** And for the quality of the implementation of the policy.

Jonathan Slater: Sorry, of course. Apologies. And also for the quality of their implementation. One of the reasons why I think these discussions sometimes go wrong is that the word "accountability" very quickly turns into the words "who to sack". Who is going to get sacked? That is the nature of the political system we operate in, and it is not easy being a Minister or an MP.

In any walk of life—this would be true of politicians, civil servants, people in the private sector—you would need a pretty egregious failure of advice or implementation to sack somebody. It will happen, clearly, if something incredibly obvious had not been spotted, which it certainly should have been by an expert, or if they made an obvious fail.

Q133 **John Stevenson:** Implementation is not always just about policy going wrong. It is about actually delivering the policy properly.

Jonathan Slater: Yes, and if the delivery fail is so egregious that you have no excuse and it is clearly the fault of one person, then goodbye, but in my experience that is rarely the case. In my experience, the advice and the implementation involve teams of people. One of the reasons why politicians and civil servants meet each other as frequently as they do is not, "We have decided what we want. Now just get on with it." It iterates over time, going to and fro. It involves civil servants, local government officials, the private sector. It is complicated.

Accountability, in my view, is much more about openness, transparency and learning from what has not worked. But, certainly, if a civil servant's advice or implementation has been so poor and it should have been easy to have got it right—they have been given the resources and the ability to do it properly, and they still messed it up—obviously they should take the consequences for it, of course.

Q134 **John Stevenson:** Ministerial directions are used on occasion in our system. What is your view on them? Are they of value? Do they work well, or could they be used more often?

Jonathan Slater: When the Treasury decided, 150 years ago, to give the civil service this responsibility—and the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee—in terms of ministerial directions, that was a good thing to do, and I guess that is why it still remains in place today. In a democracy, it is completely reasonable for a Minister to choose an option that is poorer value for money, seen in narrow terms, than another option; that is completely legitimate. That is why politicians should make these decisions, because they are often not straightforward. But if the Minister is choosing to do something that is poor value for money, it makes sense, from the Treasury's point of view, to know that that was despite the advice of the civil service. That is what the Treasury wanted; they wanted to make sure that permanent secretaries were at least telling the Minister what the value for money option was. That is why the ministerial direction system arises. I am arguing that if you did the same for everything else, it is completely fine for Ministers to choose one piece of evidence over another piece of evidence, but did the civil service give them it all? At the moment, that question is not asked. You have to wait for 20 years to find out.

Q135 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Ministers are largely absent in your analysis of policy functioning. Is that because you think the problem lies exclusively with the civil service, or are there issues around ministerial longevity and suchlike that also need to be addressed in this conundrum?

Jonathan Slater: Yes. As you say, I was not writing about Ministers, which is not because I think there is nothing wrong with politics. It is just I was focusing on my thing in my pamphlet, which is the civil service. The key point I was trying to make about the politics was that it is not the Ministers' fault that the civil service operates as it does. Obviously, I could have written a different pamphlet about politics, but I do not write about politics—I have not been a politician.

Q136 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** On the young civil servant who said, "Would Nick Gibb want to hear that?" it takes two to tango, doesn't it? It takes the other side, the Minister, to make it clear that they want to receive impartial advice. If they are not doing that, the civil service will react, in a democracy, likewise?

Jonathan Slater: You are absolutely right. All I am saying is that not a single Minister—not one of the dozens of Ministers I worked for for 20

years—ever gave me any reason to think that they were part of this problem. I worked for Justine Greening. She had just become Education Secretary. She asked for a piece of advice. She was told, "You could do x, y or z". Her private office came back on her behalf to the official, "Yes, but which do you think is the best option?" In those circumstances, the response she received was, "Well, it depends on what you want."

I never saw any examples of Ministers saying, "I do not want the advice." I often saw examples of Ministers who were a bit frustrated that the civil servants working for them did not know. I worked for Damian Hinds. At most of his meetings with the policy officials, he would say, "What is going to happen during this meeting is that I am going to engage in discussion with you, I am going to listen to you and I am going to throw some ideas out, but I really do not want you, just because I have said something, to assume that we are going to do it. I am just having a discussion with you to see what you think." You could see that as soon as he said something, they thought, "Oh, I am going to write it down." He felt he needed to say that every time. This was Damian Hinds. Who is nicer than Damian Hinds? This is not a party political point I am making. Every time, he felt he needed to say to the civil servants, "Say what you think. Do not just listen to me and write it down." Even then, they wrote it down.

Q137 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** If we go back to Mr Stevenson's point, if you publish that conversation, can that conversation happen at all?

Jonathan Slater: Yes, I know. I am not suggesting publishing every conversation.

Q138 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** There needs to be a clear delineation between what is advice and what is a conversation. How do you do that?

Jonathan Slater: In exactly the same way as it is done by the National Audit Office for value for money advice: when it is committed to paper and it is a formal recommendation that has been signed off by the permanent secretary.

Q139 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Apart from the publishing of advice, how do you change that culture, or is the publishing of advice the golden ticket that will see civil servants speak truth to power? Particularly if we look at the treatment of Sir Tom, the Treasury permanent secretary, who was dismissed for apparently speaking truth to power in private, does that not set a tone that is going in the opposite direction of what you suggest?

Jonathan Slater: Tom did not have a chance to speak truth to power. He was sacked on day one, so that is not an example of someone being sacked for truth to power.

If I were forced to choose which thing would make the biggest difference, I would say the independent inspection, the independent analysis, of that advice. I think it would be much better to put it in the public domain, but it stands to reason that if you have an independent group of experts who

are looking at the quality of something and advising on it, that will improve the quality of it. I guess you do not have to publish it to get the same benefit, but I do not see why you would not.

When I was director of education at a local authority, and there were too many primary schools for the number of primary school children, I had to make a recommendation as to which one should close. It was not an uncontroversial decision. I made that advice in public because that is what you do, and it did not change the nature of my relationship with the chair of education.

Q140 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** On your NAO example, with the Public Accounts Committee following it up, if you do that in policy, do you have a generalist policy unit that advises the respective departmental Select Committees or do you need a specialist unit that advises? Is a generalist policy unit—a national policy audit office or whatever you wanted to call it—able to do that, or do you need an education policy unit to be able to understand education and so on?

Jonathan Slater: Yes, I see what you mean. I am not convinced, as you can tell by my answers this morning, that there is much benefit to be achieved by generalists in the policy profession. What does the word "generalist" mean? It must mean someone who does not know very much about the subject. What is the difference between a generalist and a specialist? Clearly, the person who is advising Ministers needs to understand about politics, politicians and Government. Obviously, they need to be able to do that, but I am arguing that they should be able to do two things: they should be able to understand the role of a Secretary of State for Education and they should know something about education. They should be able to do two things, rather than only the first thing, which was Fulton's complaint in 1968 and still the position today.

If you had such a system, then, yes, of course. In the National Audit Office's audit, you would bring together a broader group of people with a broader set of skills, but just as the National Audit Office has an education team that is staffed by people who are different from the national security team in the National Audit Office and so on, you would have to do the same for this organisation.

Q141 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** It would be one organisation that would feed to all Select Committees rather than each Select Committee having an organisation that did its work for it. In development, for example, we have that with ICAI, which is the independent auditor for development effectiveness and reports to the Select Committee on the effectiveness of the work of the Department—it is now, of course, part of the Foreign Office Department. How is this significantly different from those specialist audit teams that we already have in some areas?

Jonathan Slater: I agree with you that there are some examples in Government. I have focused on the most high-profile one, which involves a bespoke Select Committee, but there is more than one example, as you

say, of scrutiny of the policymaking process. That is my answer to those who suggest that this would break the system if we made it more common. But it is very much the exception and it is very much constrained.

I think that the people I am talking about would be asking some fairly basic questions: "Have you identified all the options available to the Minister to help them make their decision? Have you brought to them the evidence that exists? Have you identified the risks and opportunities in an impartial way?" That is a fairly generic task. I am not looking for people who are going to have an argument about what the best way is to teach maths. It is more, "What are the options? Did you put them in front? Can you demonstrate that you have sought international expertise?" It is those sorts of questions.

Q142 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** They are generalists with an understanding of the area, rather than specialists themselves.

Finally, how far is it appropriate for a Minister to become involved in the hiring, firing and performance management of the civil servants serving them?

Jonathan Slater: There are countries—democracies—in which the politicians choose the officials working for them. America is one such country. The top four grades underneath the President are appointed by the President. There are pros and cons of such a system. I am not saying you must have one system. Clearly, there are countries making different choices.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Hybrids?

Jonathan Slater: Yes, but you need to be careful if you are a hybrid. If you give Ministers the power to recruit the people working for them, you have tipped the balance. The President is significantly less powerful in America than the Prime Minister is in our country, because the President must get Congress behind him—I am not saying that is bad—whereas the Prime Minister in our country has a lot more power, and you need to keep the checks and balances in place. If you were going to give Ministers more power, you would need to rebalance that somewhere else, not just do it on its own.

Q143 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** That is not the area of focus that we should be meddling with at the moment?

Jonathan Slater: I think it is a red herring. It would not address the issue I have described. How could a new Secretary for Education who does not really have any background in the subject and does not know whether they are going to be in post in a year's time be the right person to recruit the specialists they need working for them? By all means appoint some people to help them with the politics and have more of those people than they have at the moment.

Q144 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Maude talks about a chef de cabinet, or something like that, who would be directly appointed by the Minister to do some of that politics. You are talking about a whole team that potentially would do that?

Jonathan Slater: There are people who do that at the moment—special advisers who work in that space—but they work alongside civil servants. I think there is rather less separation of duties than there might be. Again, if you go back to the New Zealand system, the policymakers focus on the expert task, and the Ministers are all in one building together doing quite a lot of the politics themselves, rather than through a separate group of people.

Q145 **Jo Gideon:** You make the point about the merits of specialists as opposed to generalists. Yet, at the same time, we know that career progression within the civil service means moving from Department to Department. How would you square the two? If you are an education specialist, should you not have to remain within Education, rather than moving to Defence, or can you become an expert on the job, in which case you are a generalist?

Jonathan Slater: Absolutely. Under a model in which people were promoted because of their subject matter expertise and what they have achieved in practice, you would find people not stuck in one area for ever but within groups. The civil service does think in these terms already. National security Departments—Foreign Office, Defence, some parts of the Cabinet Office and so on—are public services. The challenges facing children at school today are as much to do with the services provided by health and local government as by headteachers, so there is a natural cluster, as we tend to call them. I can imagine people clustering. In the criminal justice cluster, you might find yourself in the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice, the Attorney General's Department.

This is assuming that you are working on policy questions. I made the switches that I did because I was not. I was working on business transformation, which is a cross-cutting theme. In the case of the Ministry of Defence, they wanted someone not from Defence to help them do transformational change, because they thought that the problem with having people inside Defence doing it was that they would do what they were told by the hierarchy. In the policymaking space, you could see clusters of the sort I have described.

Q146 **John Stevenson:** The whole thrust of your argument is that there needs to be fundamental cultural change within the civil service. As far as I can work out, there are only three places that that can come from: the civil service itself, which you have said is incapable of doing it; Ministers who are too busy; and, finally, Parliament. Do you detect any appetite or interest in doing that from Parliament?

Jonathan Slater: I look forward to your report with interest. In all seriousness, changes like these do not happen very often. I am guessing

that, at some point, people will say, "Those frustrations that Ministers have about the civil service, which they have had for the last 100 years." At some point; there will be a moment in time—I have no particular reason to think it is today.

But where does the change come from in the accountability of civil servants? It comes from this Committee, and it happens when there is an election and a change of Government. It does not happen very often. It happened in 1979 when this Committee's predecessor came up with the idea for departmental Select Committees and the new Thatcher Government implemented them. It happened in 1997, when the predecessor of this Committee came up with a plan that the Chairs of Select Committees should be elected by the House. These are both things that Ministers might not choose to do day in, day out. But a team of Members of Parliament, cross party, thinking about the system and how it might change—not thinking about how it might change for the current Government, but thinking about how it might change afterwards—are the two times it has happened in the last 40 years. I do not have any particular reason to think that it is going to happen this time, but you never know. I would encourage you to consider what you might recommend.

Q147 **Tom Randall:** During your evidence this morning there have been passing references to the Fulton report commissioned under Harold Wilson, and the tone of our discussion today has been quite negative. In your view, have there been any aspects in this area that have improved since the 1960s, or is it the case that, culturally, we are still today where we were back under Harold Wilson's premiership?

Jonathan Slater: By the way, in the Haldane report in 1918, which set up the current Cabinet Government, Haldane himself argued that there needed to be a change in the way that Departments worked in the light of the issues we are describing today.

The civil service has changed a lot in the last 50 years and has improved in a lot of ways. Your Chair mentioned some new skills, undeniably, but the policymaking profession, which only represents about 10% of the civil service—the 10% that we are discussing, which I wrote about—has not really changed.

It is only a couple of pages in Fulton, but he describes an administrative class churning too fast, who never talk to the public, who know nothing other than about the political process. Those are his words. What do policymakers do? They write things down on a piece of paper and those go in red boxes with a little note handwritten on the top. That bit of the system has not changed.

Nobody gains. Everybody loses. Ministers lose. They get poorer advice than they might. Those bright young civil servants who joined my Department are losing, because of their enthusiasm. Parliament loses. Nothing changes.

Q148 **Chair:** One final question from me. With the exception of special advisers, should there be any role at all for the generalist in policymaking in the civil service?

Jonathan Slater: By "generalist" do you mean—

Chair: Generalist as opposed to specialist.

Jonathan Slater: But does a generalist mean, essentially, someone who does not know anything about the subject?

Q149 **Chair:** You have said that twice, and I take your point, but should there be any place for such a person within the policymaking of the civil service?

Jonathan Slater: It is absolutely essential that Ministers are served by people who understand about politics and understand the role of Ministers and Parliament, and that is a specialist activity. I would not call that generalist; that is a specialist activity in its own right. I think the problem with our current system is that it assumes that that is enough. I do not see why we should not grow a policy profession that can do two things: have the expertise on how to advise Ministers in a political environment and know about the subject matter.

I inherited, as I wrote about, two teams of people working on apprenticeships from the Department for Business, one headed by someone who knew nothing about apprenticeships but was good at talking to politicians, and another headed by someone who knew a lot about apprenticeships but had never been in a room with politicians. Category A keep category B out of the room, quite literally. So I taught the guy who knew a lot about apprenticeships how to talk to Ministers so that he could do two things, and he did them very well. I think that should be how we do the thing more generally.

Chair: Thank you very much, Mr Slater, for coming here today. I think we have all enjoyed your evidence.

Jonathan Slater: I enjoyed the opportunity to give it. Thank you very much.

Chair: You will be pleased to hear that this is the end of the session.