

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [The work of the Cabinet Office, HC 463](#)

Tuesday 25 February 2025

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Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Richard Baker; Markus Campbell-Savours; Sam Carling; Mr Richard Quigley.

Questions 196 - 242

Witness

I: Sir Chris Wormald KCB, Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service, Cabinet Office.

Examination of witness

Witness: Sir Chris Wormald.

Q196 **Chair:** Good afternoon, colleagues, and a particularly warm welcome to Sir Chris Wormald, the relatively new Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service.

Sir Chris, you are two months into post, so belated congratulations on behalf of the Committee. It is a great honour and such an important job to hold within the civil service. We wish you all the best in that and look forward to working with you and scrutinising your work over the coming years. We wish you well.

Sir Chris Wormald: Thank you.

Chair: Harold Wilson told us that a week was a long time in politics and he was right. These last several days have been dramatic in the pace of change in the defence and security sphere, and we have had an important statement this afternoon from the Prime Minister on the Floor of the House.

Let me open the questioning. What is your assessment in the light of the Prime Minister talking about major changes in industrial production—almost putting the whole nation on a war footing—and procurement, extra expenditure and changes to overseas aid? That will have knock-on effects across the operation of government and how Cabinet Ministers



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discharge their duties. What, if anything, may the effect on both the operation of Cabinet government and your role as Cabinet Secretary?

Sir Chris Wormald: The first thing to say is that it is a pleasure to be here at this Committee, my first appearance as Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Home Civil Service. So that I have it on record, this is my 100th Select Committee appearance, so it is both the first and the hundredth.

Chair: If you are expecting a clock or a box of chocolates or whatever, I am afraid disappointment will be immediate.

Sir Chris Wormald: No, I am not expecting a clock. No—I would have had to have warned the Committee in advance.

Much more seriously, we take appearances at Committees such as this extremely seriously. The scrutiny is important and I look forward to discussing the work that we do with this Committee on a whole range of subjects over the months to come.

On your specific question, yes, that was an important statement by the Prime Minister, with a lot of implications for both domestic and international policy. You listed a number of the areas that it will impact, which I will not repeat, but I will put the statement in the context of what I have found on my return to the Cabinet Office. As you probably know, I was here between 2009 and 2012 in Gordon Brown's Administration and then the coalition. Many things are the same, but one of the big changes that I have reflected on is how interrelated international and domestic issues now are. In 2009 to 2012, it was quite easy to tell the difference. There were lots of difficult and important issues, but it was quite easy to say, "This is a domestic question" or "This is an international question". One of the things I have observed since being back is that almost every domestic or economic meeting has an international context and every international meeting has a domestic consequence.

The Prime Minister's statement has implications in its own right, as you said, but I think in a way it emphasises that question. In terms of how we work—both Cabinet and the wider civil service—the biggest change and challenge is that ability to think across the boundaries. There is no structural way of reworking the world for that question. You have to have domestic committees, international committees, a Foreign Office, domestic Departments and all those things. There is not a structure that you can create that solves the problem. Therefore, it puts a huge capacity on civil servants to be able to work across that boundary.

I see it as one of my roles as Cabinet Secretary to see what I can do to help people do that. As you say, what has been announced has lots of straight policy implications, but in terms of ways of working, that is the biggest challenge, because we need people—and I am sure we will come back to this question throughout this hearing—to be thinking differently



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about how they do their jobs and thinking across the various silos that we create in policy.

Q197 **Chair:** It is a big step change. We have had a distinct siloisation, with departmental cabinet secretaries effectively chief executives or chairmen of their own boards and so on. I think we heard when we took evidence from Cat Little recently a sense of an understanding of the challenge that presents for delivering mission-led government and that collaborative approach. It will not be the silver bullet, but do you see some urgent merit in bringing people back into the office so that those new cross-silo relationships can be forged, rather than trying to do it with a lot of civil servants continuing to work from home?

Sir Chris Wormald: We have a policy on this, as I am sure you know, which is that people should be in three days a week. It needs to be applied with a level of common sense depending upon the work that is being done; if you are a prison officer or a border guard, you work under rather different rules. I think—and I thought this when I was permanent secretary at DHSC—that for an office-based mode of working, that is about right. It gives people time face to face with their colleagues, which is important. It is particularly important for new entrants and it is important for people who do not have spaces where they can work from home, but it also gives people some flexibility. We have no plans to change that policy. I think we have hit roughly the right balance. There is a big technology element, however, and the Foreign Office is a great example of somewhere that manages to run an effective network spread all over the world using technology to do so. The face-to-face bit is important, but it is not the only thing.

Q198 **Chair:** Almost using the terms that the Prime Minister deployed today, it may have worked satisfactorily in “peacetime”—I use that term in inverted commas—but he was quite keen to stress that he thinks that there has been a gear shift. Will you keep that under review to ensure that the capacity of the workforce is present and working collaboratively to meet these now speedy and pressing challenges?

Sir Chris Wormald: Specifically in terms of hybrid working?

Chair: Yes.

Sir Chris Wormald: Each Department should be thinking about these things all the time. As I say, we have a cross-Government benchmark, which we have no plans to review, but each Department—

Q199 **Chair:** No plans to review.

Sir Chris Wormald: Not currently, no. We have set a policy and we intend to stick to it.

Chair: But—



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Sir Chris Wormald: Sorry, there is a second part to my answer, which is very important—

Q200 **Chair:** But if Cabinet Ministers—Secretaries of State—in those front-facing Departments believe that it is not firing on all cylinders—

Sir Chris Wormald: Yes, sorry, this was going to be the second part of my answer. We have set a benchmark across the civil service. As I say, we have no plans to change that and we are focused on implementing the policy. However, as I said before, there is very much a horses for courses part of this, so we are not saying to every single Department in every single building, “You are flat rate doing that thing”. Individual permanent secretaries and Secretaries of State should be in a constant state of thinking about what next is appropriate for that Department in its circumstances. This is quite a good example of how we need to work. We do need cross-civil service policies, for the reasons you would all understand, and then we need huge levels of common sense at departmental level to say, “What is the next challenge and how do we meet it?”

Q201 **Chair:** The service of which you are head has been described by the Prime Minister as sitting in a “tepid bath”. Others have referred dismissively to the civil service as “the blob”, whose intention it is to frustrate the delivery of the Government’s programme irrespective of party, while others see the civil service still as the Rolls-Royce benchmark of civil administration, the envy of the world. What is your assessment of today’s civil service and what are your priorities as head of the service in the foreseeable timeframe?

Sir Chris Wormald: That is quite a big question, so I will take it in chunks.

Chair: I will not ask you how hot your bath is.

Sir Chris Wormald: Thank you.

It is, as has been said before, very important to look at the Prime Minister’s entire comments. He was making a wider point about fatalism in the public services and a belief that we need to solve the problems that are in front of us and be confident in doing so.

On your more specific question about my assessment of the civil service, it will not surprise you that it is none of those things. In some ways, I do not find the general catchphrases, including the Rolls-Royce one, at all helpful. I am tremendously proud of the civil service and the work that it does and I am even prouder of individual civil servants, who almost universally, when I meet them, are dedicated professional people trying to do good in the world, often in difficult circumstances.

However—and I think this is true of any historic institution—you are in a constant state of wishing to preserve what made that institution great in the first place while reforming it for a constantly changing world. In any



area of the public services where you are effectively a monopoly, it is perfectly right and indeed good that people challenge the status quo.

Lots of things are great about the civil service: its values, its way of working, its public service commitments, the great recruits that we get, its levels of dedication. Then there are lots of areas where we need to be continuously improving, some of them very challenging—the Prime Minister, I am sure, will come back to a number of these things—including a series of technological challenges and opportunities; a series of fundamental changes to the challenges that the country faces fiscally, economically, in international affairs and in public services, which you pointed to in your first question; changing expectations; and pressures on public services from things like demographic change. That is before you get some of those other global challenges such as net zero.

The civil service, in my view, needs to be in a constant state of being proud of what it is and what it does and in a constant state of being restless about how it needs to change to meet those external changes. For me personally, I think that would be a fairer assessment of where the civil service is than any of these particular catchphrases, none of which get you into the slightly more nuanced approach I have described.

Q202 Chair: Before I bring in Richard Quigley, my final thought, or probe, on that is that it is quite hard to get the balance between engaged generalists and expert people in certain spheres of duty and responsibility. There has been a growing reliance on bringing in often expensive external expert advice and expertise in a whole range of areas of operation of governance in this country. Do you have any thoughts, at what I appreciate is an early stage in your tenure as head of the service, about where the balance best sits between the eager generalist who can be moved around the service, picking up experience as they go, and the specific recruitment of in-house specialism to drive things forward?

Sir Chris Wormald: The civil service has benefited hugely from the move towards professions and functions. When I look at the quality of what we do in commerce, in law, in HR—in a whole range of areas—we have hugely benefited both from the internal professional drive and from getting people in from outside. We want to see that continue. In general, that move has been in the right direction. If I look across my whole career, that has been one of the biggest changes and has been hugely beneficial.

I used to run the policy profession. I do not like the word “generalist”. Policymakers should see themselves as a set of people with professional skills. They are just different professional skills, frequently in analysis, but also in the understanding of how democracy works and in how to make good policy for delivery. Your ideal generalist, policymaker or whatever you want to call them sits at the nexus of those three things and should have the ability to be the person who can bring those things together into a successful public policy, piece of advice or whatever it is, as a professional skill. As soon as you think of it like that, it is much



easier to see how the experts you describe and what used to be called generalists work together. They bring different professional skills to the table.

I have always thought, as well as the bit about bringing people in, that the policymaker needs to be the person who sits at the nexus of world opinion on the subject and needs to be good at reaching out and drawing on expertise from throughout the public sector, from academia and from the private sector. I have always had this line, which I have quoted before, that great policymakers are both self-confident and humble. They are self-confident enough to pick up the phone to the world expert and seek their opinion and then humble enough to listen to the answer.

Chair: To take the advice.

Sir Chris Wormald: Yes, exactly. I like to think of the policymaker in that mode. They are frequently the person who galvanises opinion so that the advice that goes to Ministers is genuinely the best in the world. If we think of policymaking like that and then think of the professional skills you need to do that—the skill of synthesis, in particular, and balancing up different types of evidence and all those things—it becomes much easier to see how the classic professions you are talking about and the civil service's classic skills fit together.

Q203 **Mr Quigley:** Congratulations, Sir Chris, and thank you for joining us. Your job specification was a vast document—certainly one of the fullest statements of the role of Cabinet Secretary. Have you found it to be an accurate description of what the job has turned out to be?

Sir Chris Wormald: I think, like every job description, yes and no. Setting it out fully and in public as part of an open competition was a good thing and has exposed what the role involves, which is good. Inevitably, it is slightly difficult to say after eight weeks, but on the experience of eight weeks, of course what you actually do all day is very heavily driven by the needs of the day. I would not say I refer to the job description every Monday morning to decide what I will be doing that week. That is driven by the needs of the Government and the issues of the day. However, in framing publicly what the job is all about, it did a good job.

Q204 **Mr Quigley:** Do you think there would be any advantage to formalising a document of what the job entails?

Sir Chris Wormald: Well, I think effectively we have. It sits there in public. I do not think there is a need to publish anything else on the subject. As long as everyone takes it that the job evolves over time depending upon the needs of the day, it is useful to have it in the public domain.

Q205 **Mr Quigley:** You could argue that being both Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service is two full-time jobs. How do you plan to balance those responsibilities? I am not trying to catch you out; it is just that they



are two big jobs.

Sir Chris Wormald: Yes, it is an important question. I had in my head when I came into the job that it was basically two thirds/one third. That was how I was thinking about how I would spend my time: two thirds on the Cabinet Secretary bit and one third on the Head of the Civil Service bit.

So far, I have largely stuck to that but with one large caveat, which is that quite frequently I am in meetings and other discussions when I cannot tell which of the two hats I am wearing. To take an example, which we will probably discuss later in the hearing, if I am in a meeting about how the Government and the civil service can be more mission focused, that is both a policy of the Government and core Cabinet Secretary work and, clearly, a core leadership theme. I do not spend time worrying when I am having that discussion which hat I am wearing. It is one of the arguments—which, again, I am sure we will come to—as to why linking the two jobs is important: frequently, you cannot tell.

Anyway, that is how I was thinking about it going in. So far, at eight weeks, I have largely stuck to that but, as I say, with quite a large proportion when I am effectively doing both jobs simultaneously.

Q206 **Mr Quigley:** With Cat Little being chief operating officer, how does the division of responsibilities work? Both of you have mentioned the importance of cross-cutting through Departments. From my perspective, the division of responsibilities and how you are driving it is quite new in terms of the cross-cutting of Departments, certainly in how you have outlined it so far. How will you make sure it happens?

Sir Chris Wormald: The most important thing is that we talk a lot. That is by miles the most important thing. She has the office next door to mine and we talk those issues through. With that, we have been doing quite a lot of work to ensure absolute clarity on the accountability side.

We are working to restructure the Cabinet Office by thinking of it, basically, in two halves and five blocks. There is the work that the Cabinet Office does that directly faces the Prime Minister and the Cabinet: No. 10, obviously, but also the economic and domestic functions and the economic and domestic secretariat, which is a block; the new block we have around Europe and global issues; the national security block; and the propriety and ethics block. Those are all the bits that directly face the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, and those report directly to me. Then the functions that report directly to Cat are about functional leadership, the management of the civil service, the crucial issues around how the state operates, in terms of property, people and technology, and all the things that are about the running of the wider machine.

The way we want it to work is having absolute clarity on those things and who is looking towards whom, and then huge amounts of discussion across the blocks I have described. We are trying to hit the balance—it is



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difficult in any Department and it is true in the Cabinet Office as well—so that we have clarity on accountability and it is clear whose job it is to answer which question, and then huge flexibility about how we actually work, which is the answer to your question earlier about how we work with silos and cross-cutting. It is those two things. It is not to mess up the accountability. You want that to be very, very clear. It is then about the ways of working between the blocks you create. We are moving to that structure, which I think clarifies the roles as well quite clearly.

Q207 Mr Quigley: Are you finding that an easier process than where you have been elsewhere, or is it a more difficult process in this role?

Sir Chris Wormald: As you know, I have just come from running the Department of Health and Social Care, including during the pandemic. That was quite hard. I will not say what I do now is more difficult, either during a pandemic or before or after, to be honest. That brought its own difficulties and complications. The Cabinet Office brings a different form of complication because it covers the entire breadth of Government business and because it covers the work of all 500,000 civil servants. There are more balls to keep in the air at once if you are in the Cabinet Office than I have found as a head of Department. It is more difficult on that dimension. There are ways in which managing a Department, particularly one like Health and Social Care, is more difficult on other dimensions.

Q208 Chair: You were talking about the Cabinet Office, No. 10 and your blocks, as you usefully described them. Is there any merit in the Office of the Prime Minister being more distinct and separate from the Cabinet Office—which increasingly becomes the receptacle for everything, in a way—and properly resourced and focused on cross-cutting governmental delivery?

Sir Chris Wormald: People argue for that and a number of the countries that are quite like us choose to organise themselves differently and do have bigger offices of the Prime Minister or President, so it is clearly perfectly possible to do it that way. The way we are reorganising is along those lines, but also recognises the different way the UK system works, including having Cabinet as the absolute centrepiece of it. So, yes, you can make that argument, and there are pros and cons of doing that. As I say, other successful countries do it that way, so you couldn't say that you couldn't.

I think what we have now suits our system of government. I will say this about many issues that get raised, but I am much more interested in the ways of working that make a system work than rearranging the blocks into other things. My focus is to get clarity within the Cabinet Office on exactly who is there and then a laser focus on who does what and how that works.

Q209 Sam Carling: Thank you for your time this afternoon, Sir Chris. I noticed that when you introduced yourself you described yourself as Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Home Civil Service, and you have clearly done



a lot of thinking about those two roles and how they differ. Is it fair to say that the skillsets that those roles require might be slightly different?

Sir Chris Wormald: At one extreme, yes, but because of the phenomenon I was describing earlier, where it is frequently difficult to tell the difference between the two, at that point it is the same skillset.

There are all sorts of models for how you can run these things. The model that we have at the moment of having a chief operating officer and a chunk of the Cabinet Office that is focused on operational things makes quite a good split. When we have split the Head of the Civil Service from the Cabinet Secretary, it has brought some advantages in terms of skillset but it has also brought problems of integration around those questions that are clearly for both the Cabinet Secretary role and the Head of the Civil Service role. Personally, I like the version we have at the moment. Again, it is not to say that other versions cannot work, because they clearly can.

Sam Carling: Thank you. I had some supplementary questions, but you have answered them all there.

Mr Quigley: After 100 appearances, that's what you get.

Chair: Yes. You have possibly damned Sir Chris from the start, because if we all take Sir Humphrey's advice, Cabinet Secretaries were never there to answer questions, were they? You have breached the code already, Sir Chris.

Sir Chris Wormald: Sorry.

Chair: Let us turn to Markus Campbell-Savours.

Q210 **Markus Campbell-Savours:** Sir Chris, I would like to ask you—you touched on it before—about the mission focus that, as you have come into your role, the incoming Government have set out as the approach they want to see. What impact is that having on your role and approach, and what impact is it having on the wider civil service?

Sir Chris Wormald: To state the obvious, it is work in progress so far. It is quite a new approach and it is quite different, which is not to say that there have not been examples of it before.

I will divide the question in two. There are the formal missions that the Government have set out, and the metrics set out in the plan for change, that they are seeking to achieve, which they have established as their top priorities. Therefore, I and my senior colleagues seek to spend as much time as we can on those specific missions as the key priorities of the Government—missions and foundations, I should say, which are equally important. In how I do my role and in how people allocate their time, we allocate considerable time and resource to those specific missions and targets, both within the Cabinet Office—we have a new mission delivery unit that focuses specifically on those missions—and in the wider civil



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service. They are beginning to work in really quite different ways, particularly looking—we have touched on this already—at how you work across Departments and institutions.

The whole concept of missions, as I see it, is problem solving on behalf of the Government and on behalf of citizens. That is what we want people to have in their head when they walk into a room. It is not, “I am from Department X here to defend policy Y,” but, “What is the problem and how do we solve it?” We are beginning to see that thinking spread across the Government. It is early days and we want to see a lot more, but we are beginning to see this in some of the examples of how the Government have gone about their growth mission, some of the things my previous Department was doing to look at the wider determinants of health, many of which go beyond the NHS or the care system, and what is being done to bring services together around safer streets. You can begin to see the different thinking that is developing.

That is the second half. We want to do the specific missions that the Government have set out, and that remains our biggest priority, but we want that style of thinking—“How do I solve the problem on behalf of the Government, on behalf of the public?”—to imbue everything the civil service and the Government do. When we talk about rewiring, that is what we mean. It is that laser focus on how we solve the problem and how we have to think differently across organisations to solve that problem. That is at the heart of what we are trying to drive.

Q211 Markus Campbell-Savours: To introduce the “silo” word, does this mission approach break down those silos, or are you having to do work separately to break down the silos in order to make this approach work?

Sir Chris Wormald: Yes, you do, but you do not break down the silos by pretending they do not exist. The Chair’s questioning pointed sometimes in this direction. Sometimes in public services you want to meet someone from a silo. In my old world of health, if you have a medical condition, you wish to meet doctors and nurses who are dedicated specialists in that particular condition. That is who you want to meet. If you are talking about how to drive the wider determinants of health, you are talking to people, if they do it well, who have broken down all the silos. We see this in some of our best early years centres, where you cannot tell when you visit them who works for the local authority, who works for the NHS, who works for DWP or whatever, because they are focused on solving the problem of the person who walks in.

The point of this is not to have no silos, because they play a very important function, both in specialisms and in expertise. It is to have that, and it starts with the problem-solving mentality: “Does the problem that is in front of me require a multidisciplinary approach and people to work across boundaries to solve the problem or does it need an expert in that very specific thing?” We want people to think about it that way around. Start with the problem, start with the individuals whose problems



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you are trying to solve, and build your answer around that, not from where you come from.

People say a lot of this thinking copies what was done in vaccines, and that is absolutely right. When you look at why the vaccine programme was so successful, it was all parts of the public services, civil society, academia and the private sector doing what they did best, and that fitting together into a huge number of jabs getting into arms. It required excellent researchers at our brilliant universities. It required private sector companies that could scale and produce at speed. It required quite exceptional procurement by the vaccine taskforce under Kate Bingham, which has been well described. It then required serious logistics, assisted by our colleagues in the military. It then required the NHS to run the actual vaccine deployment programme, at which they were already world class, and then it required local authorities and civic society groups to help us get to difficult-to-reach groups that did not work with the traditional state.

Interestingly, there was no one guiding mind of that. It was a genuine mission in which all those people effectively got together to solve the next problem. That was done in a national crisis environment, but we want to apply that thinking to the much wider problems of society, with everyone bringing their best to the table and then being completely undefensive about which institution they come from and focusing on how to solve the next problem.

I have described quite a long journey, as I am sure you can imagine. Now we are seeing that thinking beginning to be put in place, particularly in the formal missions that I have described, but it has a long way to go. It is partly about structures and we do have mission boards and stocktakes and the things that drive these things, but it is as much about how people think about their job and how to solve problems as it is about those structural solutions.

Q212 Markus Campbell-Savours: Have we looked internationally at where this approach has been developed elsewhere? Are we bringing in examples? You said it is quite a new approach. Who are we looking to for lessons learned?

Sir Chris Wormald: There are all sorts of interesting examples around the world. I particularly went to look at a whole range of issues in health and care in the far east. One of the interesting things about the countries I visited was the starting question. I was struck in Japan that they have a series of demographic challenges and their starting question was not, "How do I provide X service" but, "How are we going to reshape society for a new demographic?" As soon as that is your starting question, it drives you to some different solutions than if you ask, "How will we improve service X?" I am very interested in that. I also went to Singapore, where you see that intense problem-solving approach and particularly the question, "What technology is it that is going to help me solve this problem right here?"



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We are looking quite widely at different examples around the world and there are a lot of interesting ones out there, but, as I say, we do know how to do this. Our vaccines example did not happen by accident. It happened because we have some huge strengths in some specific areas. How do we use our world-class research base? How do we use all that other expertise I described? Yes, we want to look around the world, but we also want to remember that we are world class at a number of these things and we have the examples of how this works when we do it as I have described.

Q213 Mr Quigley: Do you want or need help from politicians outside of Cabinet to help deliver the missions?

Sir Chris Wormald: That is an exciting question. The mentality I described—"How do we solve the problem? Forget about the institution that you come from; how do we solve the problem?"—pretty much anyone can contribute to. I think there is a particular role for Parliament and parliamentary Committees, which tend to follow departmental boundaries. I would not presume to tell you the answer, but there is quite an interesting question about how parliamentary Committees would properly hold to account that sort of mission, and what sort of structures Parliament needs. That is an interesting question. As I say, it is for those on your side of the table to work out the answer. The more we can get all parts of the system, whether it is the legislature or whatever, focused on that question of how we solve the problem, as opposed to which institution does what—personally, I think that would be a very good thing to do.

Q214 Chair: On that, Sir Chris, it is two sides of the same coin. Committees spend an inordinate amount of time hearing from experts in a particular area of policy, delivery, reform and so on, and compose an agreed cross-party report. Often, the instinct of His Majesty's Government, irrespective of who is in charge and which Department it is, no matter what the Committee suggests or calls for or urges, is to answer, "No. Now go and find a reason why we're not going to do it." To maximise effectiveness and get all hands to the pump, could it fall within your ambit to encourage a more collaborative approach between Departments, Ministers, senior officials and those Committees? There will not always be agreement.

Sir Chris Wormald: It is not a question I have really thought about and it is an interesting one. I will go away and think about that. There are definitely things that we can do on both sides of the table. I do not think a knee-jerk reaction on either side helps—the sort of, "You're always wrong and we're here to tell you why. We reject everything." That is not healthy at all. I have done things in previous roles as a head of Department when we have had Committees in for much more informal discussions, which is an interesting way forward. There were also areas where the kind of Committee inquiry that you describe, where you are trying to help crack an issue as opposed to hold an individual Department or an individual Minister to account—I think there is a different mode of



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operating there. As you say, Committees can be very good at the reaching out and being humble bit, and collecting views of experts.

The next part of my answer may surprise you, but the bit we should not lose is the hard-edged accountability bit. That is a very important role for parliamentary Committees, and obviously the Public Accounts Committee does a lot of it. They should be, at times, in that inquisitorial “answer for yourself on behalf of taxpayers” mode, but maybe we could signal when Committees are in that mode and when Committees are in “we’re trying to help solve the problem” mode. I will go away and think some more and it might be worth some further discussions.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Q215 **Sam Carling:** The Prime Minister has said that he wants to rewire Government. What do you understand him to mean by that?

Sir Chris Wormald: I have said quite a lot about that already. The mission thinking, in terms of both the prioritisation and the ways of working I described, is central to what we are talking about in terms of rewiring. As I say, at the heart of it is people thinking differently about how they do their jobs and that problem solving, as opposed to saying, “I represent my institution”.

There are some specifics below that, which I would divide into five, and the Prime Minister has talked about all these things. There is a very big tech element, and you will have heard the Prime Minister talk about the opportunities of new technology and particularly AI. Getting to the point where the civil service and the public services seize the opportunities of that is central to what we mean. We already see some amazing examples of how it can transform services in health, particularly in diagnostics, but we want to see that a lot more generally. It is completely clear that elements of the private sector are quite a long way ahead of public services on that. So there is a big technology part.

There is a big people part, some of which we have touched on already, about the skills and capabilities that the civil service and other public services need to work in this way. That is the second chunk.

The third chunk is around structures, not in the traditional sense of moving things around, but being very clear on the question, “What should we should centralise, do once and get economies of scale, and what we should push out so that decisions are taken much closer to the individuals they affect, either by formal devolution to mayors and local government or by decentralising decision making?” We want to do both those things simultaneously on structures.

There is then a very big strand around early intervention that we want to see, moving from what we get used to in terms of crisis response, and getting upstream and dealing with the long-term drivers. You see that in all the missions. You see the focus on delivering right now, on 18 weeks



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or whatever it is as your health target, and looking at some of the fundamental drivers of public health. That is the early intervention angle.

Then there is a straight process angle, where, bluntly, we want to reduce the number of processes and particularly the number—the Prime Minister has talked quite a lot about this—of regulatory processes that get in people's way, and then do the ones that remain much better. It is not classic deregulation of the type that has been done before. It is, "Let's shrink what we do and up the quality of the things that remain."

Underneath the general move to mission and problem-solving thinking that I have described, those are the five specific areas we are looking at.

Q216 Sam Carling: That is helpful and sounds really positive, but a lot of this is quite abstract, so what metrics are you using to monitor and review performance on that?

Sir Chris Wormald: The key ones, which we are relentlessly focused on, are the metrics published in the plan for change, which were very clear indeed and set out some very specific priorities. Obviously, the Government do a lot of things and there are lots of KPIs and other things beyond that, but the philosophy of it is that you measure it in terms of the actual changes that real people will see as opposed to internal metrics. It is that sort of approach. If your objective, as it is in this case, is to change the actual performance that real people get in return for their taxes, the outcomes you eventually want to monitor are the things that people actually care about. Did they get seen by the NHS on time? Did they see that neighbourhood police officer? Did they get the new childcare? It is all those things, but the key ones are the ones published in the plan for change.

Q217 Sam Carling: Thank you. That is helpful. I guess this is a slightly a curveball question. You talked about people and, although you did not quite say culture, that sort of area: structures and processes. Is the hierarchical nature of the civil service working effectively?

Sir Chris Wormald: It is difficult to say yes. It is a very hierarchical organisation and there have been various attempts over time to basically have fewer grades. It is very difficult to do. The change is extremely difficult. We want to make progress on that issue but, as I said before, how people do their jobs and whether they are focused on solving the problem is, for me, much more important than those structural questions. Yes, we would want to make progress on that. I cannot say the current hierarchy helps. But I think the way through is that relentless focus on helping to solve the problem regardless of where you are in the hierarchy.

Q218 Chair: With the variation in salaries between grades, when people want to chase a pay increase they often find that they have to change Department. Does that merit looking at to try to get more departmental stability?



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Sir Chris Wormald: Yes, it is one of the things that we look at. It is in the same category of these things that are very difficult to change.

Q219 **Chair:** With respect, Sir Chris, they are not, are they? Where there is a will, there is a way. If you and the Prime Minister said, "Right, every grade 6 is going to be paid X and every grade 5 is going to be paid Y," it should just happen. New employment contracts might have to be issued, but it is not that tricky.

Sir Chris Wormald: The traditional challenge in organisations that do that is the up-front cost, because you normally level up. It is, as you know, very difficult to do the opposite. There is a straight up-front cost to those sorts of changes.

There are advantages—we were touching on some of them in your earlier questions—of each Department being its own organisation and its own employer and able to ask itself the question not, "What is the civil service-wide rule?" but "What do I need to do next?" It is not that there are not advantages to the multiple employer model that we have.

The question you always get in these areas is, bluntly, "Is the game worth the candle? There would be an up-front cost to what you are doing, and would the benefit that you get, particularly in a very fiscally constrained position, be worth the price?" As I say, I have seen it work best when you park a number of those structural questions and you focus on what people actually do in their day jobs and whether that is focused on solving the problem.

Q220 **Mr Quigley:** Going back briefly to missions and the good point you made about accountability via committee, would it make sense to change the committees so that they are mission committees rather than the current structure?

Sir Chris Wormald: Sorry, within the missions, we do have mission boards, which are doing exactly that. We then have "traditional" Cabinet committees, which are focused on decisions and collective agreement, which very frequently are best organised by the legal entity. Bluntly, I think you need a bit of both and not to confuse one with the other. The kind of committee structure you need to drive a project looks and feels very different from something whose job it is to say yes or no to particular pieces of policy.

Q221 **Mr Quigley:** Changing subjects, your predecessor had quite a fractious period of relations between Ministers and the civil service. In your opinion, has that caused lasting damage? If so, what can you do to get over that?

Sir Chris Wormald: The situation was as you say and I think he testified here about it. Obviously, you do not want to be in that situation.

I do not think it has done lasting damage, no. In my career, I have had the pleasure and honour of working very closely with Ministers from all



three recent parties of national government. In the vast majority of cases, there is a completely respectful relationship where Ministers of all parties are, from their different viewpoints, focused on achieving the public good, work very closely and well with civil servants, and are able, when they feel they need to, to raise issues about performance and standards and expectations in a positive way. Throughout my career that is largely what I have seen. That shared sense of public spiritedness, regardless of background, is one of the great strengths of our system.

There clearly were a series of high-profile events that Simon Case described to you. As I say, that is not a good thing, and it certainly damaged some public perceptions, but I do not think it has damaged the underlying relationship between the vast majority of Ministers of all parties and civil servants.

Q222 Mr Quigley: Simon Case was quite clear that he thought such attacks undermined good government. Do you agree with him?

Sir Chris Wormald: Yes. I agreed with what he said. There is an important distinction. When people criticise or attack the civil service, we have to treat that as fair game. Just like any other institution, it needs to be held to account, people need to be able to say what they think, and the media has to be able to freely report it. The whole point of being a public institution is that you enter into that world. In places where you have a natural monopoly, it is very important that all that transparency, scrutiny, challenge and criticism happens.

It is very different when it tips over into criticising civil servants, who frequently cannot answer back, by convention, in the way that other public servants or politicians or other people can. Simon was completely right in what he said about those attacks. My view is that, yes, we need to defend individual civil servants—they have signed up to do a job in which they do not answer back in public, and those at the top of the civil service and politicians and others need to defend that—while accepting absolute scrutiny of the civil service and what it does.

Q223 Mr Quigley: I am sure you have seen reports that if senior civil servants do not find 5% budget savings, they will face the sack. Is that true? If it is not, why do you think journalists have been briefed that?

Sir Chris Wormald: It is true in one sense. There is not a new rule. We expect civil servants, and indeed all public servants, to deliver on the objectives of their job in return for the money from the taxpayer that they get. When people are not delivering on the objectives of their job, including, in a large number of cases and particularly in current circumstances, achieving value for money and efficiency savings, you expect something to be done about it.

As with all organisations, in the vast majority of cases what is done about it is interventions to improve performance through performance management, retraining and other things. In a very small number of



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cases where people continue to not deliver on that or any other key objective of a job, eventually you cannot go on paying taxpayers' money for a service you are not delivering and the action has to be taken. Obviously, it needs to be done in line with the law on employment rights and with respect for individuals. That sort of objective is no different from any other sort of objective, but if it is a key part of the job, the taxpayer has a right to expect that the money they invest in civil servants and public services gets the return.

Q224 Mr Quigley: That is a fair point. I guess the next question is: does reports like that making it into the mainstream media incentivise officials or does it damage morale? Are you confident that the process is robust enough to get the answer you want?

Sir Chris Wormald: On the media bit, you may not like reading it, but it is the media's job to report. I do not need to say this to parliamentarians: if you are going to be in public service, that is what you sign up to. The media will rightly report what it finds and, if you think that an incorrect view has been taken, you argue your case. As I say, I do not need to say this to parliamentarians, but if you are in public service, you sign up for accountability, scrutiny, transparency and all those things.

Can it damage morale? I am sure it can, and then it is management and leadership's job to do something about that, as you do day to day as a leader and manager of a public service, but I do not think the answer is to pretend that the world could be something different. As I say, all those bits of scrutiny, transparency, accountability, going into criticism, are essential to the system working. That is what holds public services to account.

Q225 Chair: Sir Chris, you mentioned the mission boards a moment or so ago. I echo entirely that part of the job description in public service is that you sign up to accountability and transparency. They are essential parts of the ingredients. What is the plan for transparency and accountability on the mission boards—when and how often they meet, who attends, what the outcomes are? At the moment they are relatively new things, they are referenced slightly in the abstract, and they do not appear to have slotted into a particularly comfortable place on your dictum of accountability and transparency. What is your plan for that?

Sir Chris Wormald: As I say, they are clearly very new, so this is work in progress. The key bit to the accountability is the metrics set out in the plan for change and whether we deliver them.

Chair: Agreed, but we need to know—

Sir Chris Wormald: That is the ultimate bit. In terms of wider accountability, I do not think we are imagining anything beyond what we do for any other aspect of Government. I would expect Select Committees to take an interest in missions work and hold people to account on it in the same way. The point we were discussing earlier about



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whether we need some slightly different committee structures to do that properly given the cross-cutting nature of missions is interesting. Beyond that, I think you would expect the classic rules of transparency, accountability and parliamentary accountability via Ministers. Then, obviously, for anything involving money, the process is run by the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee. I think we would want to do it in exactly the same way.

Q226 Chair: How do individual Committees hold to account mission boards if they do not know who is on them, how often they meet—

Sir Chris Wormald: We have been very public about what the missions are and which Secretary of State is leading them. Therefore, I think you would expect the accountability to work as it would for any other piece of Government policy.

Q227 Chair: I am always anxious when an answer is that one would expect something. Unless there is a clear, instructive plan as to how best to share with parliamentarians and others who is on, how often, outcomes and so on, relying merely on the hope of expectation can lead to disappointment.

Sir Chris Wormald: I was choosing my words carefully because it is very definitely not my role to advise Parliament on how it should organise itself to hold us to account, but I do get the point of your question.

Chair: Maybe you could write to us on that.

Sir Chris Wormald: Let me take the question away and I will see if I can do something that is not “I would expect” and does not suggest what Parliament should and should not do, which, as I say, is obviously not my role.

Chair: Which would fall under your overarching ambit of accountability and transparency. Sir Chris, if you can write to us on that, it would be helpful. Thank you.

Q228 Richard Baker: Good afternoon, Sir Chris. Lord Sedwill described the Cabinet Secretary as “the principal adviser on constitutional matters...to the Prime Minister and the Cabinet”. Do you agree with that assessment of your role? Can you explain how you see your role in this respect?

Sir Chris Wormald: Basically, yes, I would describe it the same as Mark, and I think most Cabinet Secretaries would, but it is worth dwelling—I apologise for sounding very mandarin-ish at this point—on exactly what we mean by “principal” and exactly what we mean by “advice”. The way our constitution works, there is no one guardian of it, quite clearly, and it is ultimately the Prime Minister’s decision how to interpret constitutional matters if it is the quite large part of our constitution that is not set out in law. On all that bit that is precedent and practice, it is ultimately a decision for the Prime Minister whether to follow whatever the precedent is. The Prime Minister would take advice from a whole range of sources—



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not just the Cabinet Secretary, but leading parliamentarians, leading constitutionalists, leading judges and so on.

Chair: And, one would presume, the King's private secretary.

Sir Chris Wormald: Yes. As I say, no one has a monopoly on the interpretation of the constitution.

I see the Cabinet Secretary's role, a bit like we were discussing about the role of policy advisers, as the person who can bring all that thinking into one place and give the Prime Minister a rounded view of what is thought. I do not think—and I do not think Mark meant this—that the Cabinet Secretary has some special right to interpret the constitution beyond all those other figures. The Cabinet Secretary's job is to bring together all those sources of constitutional thought and give the Prime Minister some advice on which they can then properly and well-informedly make their decision, if that makes sense.

Q229 **Richard Baker:** It does, but the former Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove, said that the Cabinet Secretary's ability to constrain Government actions they deem unconstitutional was "pretty significant". That might be a product of the times but, clearly, at that point Ministers felt that the Cabinet Secretary had a significant role in this. If you had those recommendations from a series of people with the appropriate expertise and role in providing that advice, and you gave that advice to the Prime Minister and you deemed, essentially, that the Prime Minister was still determined to act in an unconstitutional way, would you see it as your responsibility to prevent the Government from doing so?

Sir Chris Wormald: Let us distinguish between two things, because there are of course two sources to the constitution. One is the law. Our role in relation to the law is clearcut. Like any other citizen, we cannot knowingly break the law, even if instructed to by someone else. That is a specific—

Q230 **Chair:** Even in a limited and specific way?

Sir Chris Wormald: Well, we can only act—as I say, it is no different from any other citizen of the country—in ways we believe to be lawful.

Q231 **Chair:** In the last Government, we had a Secretary of State at the Dispatch Box saying that a piece of legislation broke international law but in a limited and specific way.

Sir Chris Wormald: You would have to ask a lawyer this question, but my understanding of that situation is where you have a contradictory position between two pieces of law, domestic and international—I think that is what you are referring to, but anyway, I will not get into the individual case. My point is that the duty on civil servants to follow the law is exactly the same as on anyone else.



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Then there is the large part of the constitution that is about precedent and is not backed by law. This may be what Mr Gove was getting at. In my view, in those circumstances, it is people who have won elections who get to decide whether a particular piece of precedent they see as binding or not. Of course, by definition, precedents evolve. In that space, I would see the civil service and the Cabinet Secretary having the classic role: it is their job to advise and then it is people who have won elections who get to decide.

I will draw a very clear distinction between where you are talking about whether something is a lawful act or not under one of the key pieces of constitutional legislation, and where you are talking about a precedent that can evolve. It is the choice of people who win elections whether the precedent will evolve or not.

Q232 Richard Baker: What would you do if your advice to the Government on constitutional propriety was ignored? Would it depend on which of those two categories it fell into?

Sir Chris Wormald: Exactly as I have just described, the civil servant's job is to advise. You have no right that your advice is followed, except in those very limited circumstances where you are talking about a lawful or unlawful act. Your job is to advise to the best of your ability and honestly and fairly and self-confidently, and then it is to recognise that, as a civil servant, your duty is to carry out the lawful instructions of the Government of the day. If an instruction is lawful, your job as a civil servant is to implement that decision.

Q233 Richard Baker: Simon Case told our predecessor Committee that he spent around 30% of his time on constitutional propriety issues. That seems quite a lot. Are you spending as much of your time on these matters?

Sir Chris Wormald: Not in my first eight weeks, no.

Q234 Richard Baker: Good. So you would expect that to continue, or you would hope it follows in that vein.

Sir Chris Wormald: It is clearly dependent upon the circumstances of the day. If the politics of the day are all about constitutional issues, you would expect the Cabinet Secretary to be spending their time on those questions. When they are not, you would not.

Q235 Richard Baker: The Cabinet Secretary's role in relation to constitutional stewardship was not included in the job specification when you were appointed, and certainly the Lords Constitution Committee thought that it should be. What is your view? Should that aspect of the role have been in the job specification?

Sir Chris Wormald: It is entirely dependent upon the wishes of the Prime Minister of the day. We do carry out stewardship functions that go beyond the term of one Government, at the request of the elected



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Government of the day. There is nothing in statute or elsewhere that gives the civil service any role that beyond that. If the Government of the day want those roles, they are perfectly entitled to ask the civil service or the Cabinet Secretary to do that. I do not think there is any constitutional or other precedent that gives anyone in the civil service any right of independent action beyond what the Government of the day have asked.

Q236 Richard Baker: Sure, but clearly it is an important aspect of the job, as you said today and as Lord Sedwill remarked. In that context, would it be sensible for that responsibility to be set out formally, in terms of your duties and remit, at least somewhere within the civil service?

Sir Chris Wormald: That is debatable. It has to be a democratic decision that that is what you want. Roles such as the ones you describe exist in other countries and are part of constitutional practice. We have not had that here. You could argue it either way, but the most important thing is, if you are going to set up roles like this, it has to be the decision of the elected Government of the day.

Q237 Richard Baker: Thank you, Sir Chris. Finally from me, the Prime Minister, early on in his premiership, has set out reforms to the ministerial code. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has talked about the need to restore trust in politics. He has written for the Social Market Foundation on this issue. What role and responsibility do you see yourself having for maintaining and, if necessary, restoring trust in government?

Sir Chris Wormald: There are various ways of answering that question. Clearly, everyone who works in government should have a clear interest in trust in government. The specific one that falls to me relates to the conduct of the civil service. We talk about the civil service code nothing like enough. It flows directly from laws passed by Parliament and is an extremely important part of being a civil servant. As I say, within the civil service, we do not talk about and use the civil service code anything like enough. That is the big one that falls: the promotion of the civil service code, the modes of behaviour and the importance of trust, which is hardwired into the code. That is my specific role.

Q238 Chair: The final question of this session, Sir Chris, is about something that for some has the totemic qualities of the holy grail and for others seems to be the sort of thing that you might use to prop open a window when the sash cord has snapped. That is our old friend the Cabinet Manual. Several of your predecessors have described your role—there are a lot of your predecessors very helpfully describing what your role should be. I am sure you are grateful to them for doing your job description, but they have described the role of the Cabinet Secretary as being the custodian and guardian of the Cabinet Manual. I think it is collectively recognised that the Cabinet Manual is out of date. Are civil servants using out-of-date guidance or is there alternative guidance that is being used but not in the public domain? Do we still need a Cabinet Manual?



Sir Chris Wormald: At this point, I should admit that I helped write the original version when I was last in the Cabinet Office. I may even have contributed to the paragraphs that you are describing.

It is important to be clear about what it is and is not. When we wrote it, we were thinking about it as a precedent book—no more, no less. We were seeking to write down and clarify what we thought were the precedents in place at the point that we wrote it. It then went to Cabinet for collective agreement, just like any other Government policy, so I do not actually agree that it is owned by the Cabinet Secretary. It was a piece of Cabinet agreement, just like anything else.

In those terms—as a description of what we thought the relevant precedents were in 2011—is still as useful as it always was, but you have to treat it as a historical document. You would take it as a base and you would ask yourself, “What has happened since that might change those various precedents?” Some specific things have, of course, changed in the law and that makes large chunks of it out of date, but of course it is the law itself that defines what the situation is. Used in that way, it is still useful as a starting point for what we felt and thought then—as I said before, what the relevant precedents are is, in the end, a matter for elected politicians—but you then have to ask yourself what has changed since. It is no more and no less useful than any other historical document in that sense.

Q239 **Chair:** I do not think this Committee has ever viewed it as a 2011 equivalent of Magna Carta—

Sir Chris Wormald: No, and it never aspired to be that.

Chair: —or something to gaze at through a highly protective glass case. It is more of an organic document. There are things that have changed that have potentially materially affected precedent and Government powers. The pandemic is the prime example, and changes to and a deepening of the devolution settlement between the four nations, a very substantial rewriting of the local government landscape with metro mayors and others, and departure from the European Union. All those things, even taken in isolation, suggest a certain magnitude that might point to the usefulness of an up-to-date Cabinet Manual and doing it in a timely fashion.

Sir Chris Wormald: There are a couple of things to say there. On all the examples where the law has changed—the devolution settlement, the exit from the European Union and so on—people’s first port of call should be the actual law, not a set of interpretations of that law set out in a Cabinet Manual or elsewhere. It is always the case, however up to date something is, that on those things where Parliament has chosen to change the law, your reference should be the relevant law and nothing else.



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You can, of course, make a case for its updating and if people found the original Cabinet Manual useful, having worked on it, that is obviously a good thing. You discussed this with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, who I think made it clear that this was not one of the Government's priorities in this field and they would be focusing on the things that they set out in their manifesto.

Q240 **Chair:** Yes, I think that is an accurate summary of what Pat McFadden told the Committee, which, when married to your answer, takes me almost inevitably to the thought that the Cabinet Manual was written at a time when somebody thought a Cabinet Manual might be of use, interest and so on, and it is not any more, so those of us who are slightly nerdy on these matters should say, "Hang the Cabinet Manual. It is out of date. Take it off the library shelves, because precedent changes and the law changes and so on, and that will be the guiding star." Is it time to shoot the Cabinet Manual?

Sir Chris Wormald: No, as long as you take it as exactly what it is—

Q241 **Chair:** What is the point of it if it is out of date and historical?

Sir Chris Wormald: It gives you somewhere to start. If you look at the section that was published first, which was the Government formation section published before the 2010 election and discussed with both political leaders and constitutional experts about what would happen if there were a Parliament without a majority in a coalition discussion, it gives you a good description of what we thought were the precedents in 2010 and what the constitutional experts said. You would then ask yourself what has happened since that point that might lead you to conclude that you would do it differently in future, and there have obviously been several elections and other precedents. Used in that way, I do not see any reason for you not to keep it on your library shelf.

Q242 **Chair:** It is like volume 3 of "Encyclopaedia Britannica", which nobody opens because we all just google it.

Sir Chris Wormald: Well, you might, but—

Chair: Other search engines are available.

Sir Chris Wormald: As a historical reference document that you might use alongside other historical reference documents and ask yourself, "What has changed that might make us change our mind?", I still think it is useful, but it has to be seen in that way. It is a point in time.

Chair: Yes. I think I am a wee bit clearer, but I am not entirely sure. We might come back to it on a later occasion.

Sir Chris, thank you very much for your time. We are grateful to you for it. It is a busy day as far as government is concerned, but then again, all days in government are busy. We look forward to a fruitful and constructive relationship with you over the coming months and years.



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Thank you.

Sir Chris Wormald: Thank you very much.