

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The work of the Cabinet Office, HC 118

Monday 15 June 2026

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Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Richard Baker; Markus Campbell-Savours; Sam Carling; Lauren Edwards; Peter Lamb; John Lamont; Richard Quigley; Luke Taylor.

Questions 600-727

Witness

[I](#): Dame Antonia Romeo DCB, Head of the Civil Service and Cabinet Secretary.

Examination of witness

Witness: Dame Antonia Romeo DCB.

Chair: Good afternoon, colleagues. Unusually, we are meeting on a Monday—I am so glad you could all make it—for, I believe, Cabinet Secretary, your first appearance before a Select Committee since your appointment.

Dame Antonia Romeo: That is correct, Chair.

Chair: So our first duty is to congratulate you on your appointment. You are the first woman to hold the role, and we wish you the very best of luck and good fortune.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Thank you.

Q600 **Chair:** That is the nice bit dealt with. We will kick it straight into questions if we may. You will have read Al Carns's resignation letter of last week, and I will quote it directly: "The machinery of government itself has been left to decay. Decisions that should take days, take months. Departments fight each other instead of the problem. Officials and ministers who know the truth are not always rewarded for telling it." Is that a picture of government that, both as Cabinet Secretary and as a former departmental permanent secretary, you recognise or have any sympathy with?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dame Antonia Romeo: First, may I say thanks to the Committee for inviting me today?

I am not going to comment on the specific comments in a letter from an outgoing Minister to the Prime Minister. I will say probably two things. One is that a lot of extremely complex business happens in Government. The Prime Minister has explained that, in this particular situation, it is requiring what he has called “hard-edged decisions”, difficult trade-offs. These are things that involve all Government Departments. My job is to support the Prime Minister in running the effective machinery and the collective agreement process. So it is to be expected that sometimes these things take time.

However, I am on record, in my letter to the Committee sent in advance of this session, as saying that I do think there are things that need to be improved in terms of the machinery of government. In particular in terms of delivery, it is one of my top priorities to ensure that we are focused on delivery, that we are getting better at delivery and that that delivery is sped up. As you may also have seen in my published objectives, I do think we need to have a look at the Cabinet Office to ensure that it is reformed to be streamlined and more agile in that role it has of overseeing the collective agreement process, which includes, of course, making speedy decisions that involve all Government Departments, which are often quite difficult because often there are disagreements. My job is to ensure that the Prime Minister, when making those decisions, has all the correct information, evidence and analysis he needs to make them.

On the point about how Departments interact with each other, it is of course to be expected that functionally organised Government Departments have particular areas of focus. Their objectives are sometimes in tension; that is understood. It is the role of the Cabinet Secretariats to broker between those disagreeing where there are disagreements and, again, that can often take time.

Q601 **Chair:** I think we all get that, and it is good to have creative tension and discussion rather than somebody just rolling over and having their tummy tickled at the first request. You expect Secretaries of State and Ministers to stand and defend their turf. Walk us through, if you will—not on a specific case but in the abstract—how this Government come to a decision that secures collective Cabinet responsibility when there are competing voices, demands and policy pressures.

Dame Antonia Romeo: The first thing to say is that the collective agreement process is set out in the Cabinet manual, but, as part of my looking at the Cabinet manual on behalf of the Prime Minister, I will be looking at some of the issues around what is needed to require a write-round to secure collective agreement, because collective agreement can be secured in a number of ways, including via a meeting or the write-round process.

As is currently set out, when a number of Departments are engaged, when a policy decision might attract a lot of public attention or commentary or



HOUSE OF COMMONS

where there are unresolved disagreements between Departments, that would normally engage a full write-round process. In advance of the write-round, you would expect to talk to Departments about their issues and fully understand the consequences of different options. As I say, my job, and that of the secretariat and the Cabinet Office, is to ensure that the implications of those choices are known, so that when the Prime Minister makes that decision with his Cabinet—if it is a full Cabinet decision—he understands the implications of the various trade-offs.

Q602 Chair: In answer to my opening question, you gave a hint of your appetite to, while maintaining probity, streamline and speed up decision-making processes in order to aid manifest and tangible delivery. Are you a sort of John the Baptist in that—a lone voice crying in the wilderness—or is the service behind you?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Definitely the latter. One thing that has most surprised me, having started in this job just under four months ago, is the absolute enthusiasm for change among a huge number of people in the civil service. I have been writing to all staff and have set out my future civil service programme, which I have noted to the Committee in my letter, and I have had hundreds of emails from staff who are keen to engage and get involved, with strong views. They want us to be more agile and better at delivery, they want us to innovate and they want to have really strong pride in the service.

If I may, I should say that I have also seen—it did not surprise me—the sheer professionalism, expertise and commitment of the talented staff in the civil service. The entire country relies on their work every day and I am very grateful to them for it, and it is nice to take the opportunity in front of the Committee to say that. That work is often unseen, and I think that they do the hardest jobs in the country.

Q603 Chair: You have slightly pre-empted a question I was going to ask. Often, the first 100 days or so are the most energetic and focused, and people wish the new office holder well. What stands out to you as the most surprisingly pleasing thing you have noticed in those months? The corollary of that is this: what has come as the most devastatingly disappointing surprise to you that you did not think might require attention and does?

Dame Antonia Romeo: The first thing to say is that I hope my second 100 days, and indeed my first 1,000 days, will be as energetic as the first 100 days. As I said, the most pleasing thing is definitely the appetite for change and enthusiasm, and also the desire to engage. That has been fantastic.

I don't know if I would describe it as a negative surprise, but the thing I am most concerned about is our readiness as a service for the huge amount of technological change that is currently under way. I do not think that it is unique to the civil service, by the way, but I think that I, as the head of the civil service, and the whole of the top of the service need to take it very seriously. We essentially do two things in the civil service: we

support the elected Government in developing and implementing their policies and in delivering public services, and both of those two domains will be radically rewritten by AI and technology.

Chair: We will come on to AI and its role.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Okay.

Q604 **Chair:** I ask this question in full cognisance of the fact that you are head of the home civil service. However, everyone talks to civil servants at a variety of levels. They will often say, "Give us the clear direction, give us the milestones to monitor delivery, and we will crack on and do the job." If we look at Parliament and at who gets appointed to be Ministers—this is not a party political point; it applies to all political parties—it is a balancing act between left, right and centre wings of any political party in Government. Sometimes, round pegs get driven into square holes, or the other way around. Quite a lot of people who are called to ministerial office have very limited experience of running anything or delivering change in any sector, be it public or private.

Is enough being done, in your analysis, to speed up decision making and improve outcomes? What initiatives could be launched or sponsored to better prepare Ministers and improve the discharge of their duties, in order to better hold civil servants to account and drive forward change?

Dame Antonia Romeo: One of the things that we are setting up as part of a plan to build capability in the civil service is a national school of government. It is not beyond possibility that, if the Prime Minister should want the national school of government also to take on a role in offering training to Ministers, that could be done.

Q605 **Chair:** Would you think that helpful?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Well, if the Prime Minister asked me to do it, I'd do it. I think that the—

Chair: That wasn't the question.

Dame Antonia Romeo: What I would advise the Prime Minister on that, I probably would not think it right to share with the Committee.

It is obviously true to say that training and capability building is good in every sector and in every profession. The more that people can have training, both to build their skills—AI is something that we will all need to be skilled in—and in their role, for example through training in the ministerial code and how it applies, the more useful these things could be.

Q606 **Chair:** I wanted to ask you a question about the ministerial code. You will be aware that this Committee, at the request of the Speaker some months ago, undertook a short but pointed inquiry into the ministerial code, notwithstanding the Prime Minister's refresh of it, with particular reference to important policy announcements being made to Parliament first.

You will also know that Mr Speaker's blood pressure has risen quite considerably on this issue over the last six, seven, eight months or so. A

major announcement was made today on social media. We are not going to comment on that—the whys and wherefores, or the benefit of it, and so on—but it is clearly a breach of the ministerial code. It is an important policy announcement, which was made while Parliament was sitting but not to Parliament. What advice is ever sought from the Prime Minister to you about meeting the requirements of the ministerial code with respect to important policy announcements?

Dame Antonia Romeo: As you will know, the Prime Minister and the Government's position is that we are going to update the code and the particular section to which you have referred, Chair. It is obviously true to say that there is not—

Q607 **Chair:** You are going to upgrade the Cabinet manual. I thought that the ministerial code had already been done, hasn't it?

Dame Antonia Romeo: No. We responded to you a couple of weeks ago to say that we are updating that bit of the code, because I think the view would be that there is no point having something in a code that routinely, for other reasons that have post-dated the code, have come to pass. I think that the particular line in the code that you are referring to is in chapter 9, and we have committed specifically to update it. I am also updating the Cabinet manual on behalf of the Prime Minister and indeed the civil service code.

Chair: You are a busy Cabinet Secretary.

Q608 **John Lamont:** On that point, do you accept that the code has been breached with these announcements up until this point?

Dame Antonia Romeo: We are in the process of updating it. The exact language of the code, which I do not have to hand but somebody else might have, is that at the first possible opportunity it is brought to Parliament; and as I understand it, there is going to be an oral statement today on that particular question.

John Lamont: As of today, the ministerial code—

Dame Antonia Romeo: First of all, I should say that, as the Committee knows, it is for the Prime Minister to judge whether or not the code has been breached. It would not be for me to comment to the Committee on whether the ministerial code has been breached, but if someone has the language of chapter nine, then I am sure we could parse it.

Q609 **John Lamont:** But the point is that, as written today, the code requires Ministers to come to Parliament first before making announcements.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Does it say, "Before making an announcement"?

Q610 **John Lamont:** Unless Parliament is not sitting, or there is some other extreme circumstance. I think that the Committee is intrigued to know what advice you would give to the Prime Minister on that point.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Advice between the Cabinet Secretary and the Prime Minister is, as you know, very closely guarded. I think I would say—

Q611 **John Lamont:** But the ministerial code is very clear.

Dame Antonia Romeo: The Prime Minister took the decision to make the announcement that he made. He is responsible for the ministerial code—

Q612 **John Lamont:** But you have no opinion on that?

Dame Antonia Romeo: We have committed to updating. I have a lot of opinions, but they are ones that I would share publicly as opposed to opinions that I might discuss in private with the Prime Minister on different things. I am not seeking to be difficult, but you must see the position—

Q613 **Peter Lamb:** You asked about the wording in the ministerial code. It is: “When Parliament is in session, the most important announcements of government policy should be made in the first instance in Parliament”. That feels like a clear reading.

Dame Antonia Romeo: The Government’s intention is to update the code.

Q614 **John Lamont:** Sorry, I do not mean to be pursuing this point, but is that a recognition that the code is not working just now, or is it that the Government are not conducting themselves in a way that matches the intention and the black and white letter of the law in terms of the code?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I think, as this Committee recognised, the code needs to be updated. The Government said it will update the code.

Q615 **Chair:** Yes, but while that updating is in process, does the ministerial code as it stands apply?

Dame Antonia Romeo: On the ministerial code, the key word, as I said, is “should”. That is a matter of English, but the overseer and the upholder of the code is the Prime Minister, and it is for him to decide whether the code has been breached or not.

Q616 **Chair:** But a pretty fair assessment would be that No. 10 appears to be taking the stance that it is never made to Parliament first, not that it should, but that it never is. Routinely, as a matter of course, the most important announcements are made outwith this place.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Look, I note the very important views of the Committee, and I will be discussing with the Committee when we update the code.

Q617 **Chair:** I look forward to it. Is there a timetable on that?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I think we said we would do it in the autumn, but I might have made that up. Someone will tell me if we have not said the autumn.

Chair: Some head was nodding, but that might just have been nodding off rather than nodding in agreement.

Dame Antonia Romeo: It is a bit early in the Committee to be nodding off.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: It is a warm room.

Q618 **Richard Quigley:** Thank you, Dame Antonia, for coming along. You mentioned your performance objectives earlier, which you have published. That is quite an unusual step for a Cabinet Secretary. Why have you taken the step to publish them?

Dame Antonia Romeo: It is not that unusual; it has just been unusual for the past 10 years. In the history of Cabinet Secretaries, it is maybe not that unusual—the last one to publish it was, I think, Jeremy Heywood about a decade ago. I just think it is really important for transparency and accountability. I discussed it with the Prime Minister—he obviously sets my objectives because I am accountable to him—and we agreed that it would be sensible to publish them. One of the things that I have identified that we need to improve in the civil service is accountability: direct line accountability for delivery of objectives, but also for everything that the Government is doing. The first step on that is that accountability starts at the top. If I publish my objectives, everything that I do should in a way be reflected within what the permanent secretaries do and then down through the system, so that we are all aligned and accountability is clear.

Q619 **Richard Quigley:** Will the PM be the one that measures you against those objectives?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Well, I am accountable to him, so he holds me to account.

Q620 **Richard Quigley:** So you will have an annual review, and he will say, “Dame Antonia, three out four, you’ve done well on this one,” or not so well on another.

Dame Antonia Romeo: I hope it will not be only every year that the Prime Minister is giving me feedback—

Richard Quigley: Or every week—whatever you choose.

Chair: Be careful what you wish for!

Dame Antonia Romeo: The process is that the Government lead non-executive plays a role because they seek feedback from a range of stakeholders. They will then give me a kind of annual review. I would also then expect to have a conversation with the Prime Minister, and he will undoubtedly give me feedback against my objectives.

Q621 **Richard Quigley:** You said it is not that unusual, but it has been a decade since performance objectives have been published. You will be aware of the accusations that this is a bit of a land grab, usurping power from Ministers. Do you agree with that? Do you think that actually taking some of the power from Ministers is the only answer to make the changes you wish for?

Dame Antonia Romeo: My job is to serve the Prime Minister and the Government—I am completely clear about that. I think that is also very clear in my objectives, and everything I do is in support of the Prime



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Minister and the Government. I do not have any power to change the constitution; I advise the Prime Minister. In a way, setting out these things and providing clarity on what I think I should be spending my time on—and what I am spending my time on, as agreed with the Prime Minister in support of his agenda—seems to me to be a good thing.

Q622 Richard Quigley: As head of the civil service, you recognise that there are reported tensions—I think that is fair to say—between Ministers and officials. Do you think that publishing your performance objectives is a way to head off that tension, or do you not agree that there is tension and disagreement?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I do not think I do agree that there is a tension, particularly. The civil service serves the Government and delivers direct public services. I cannot imagine that publishing them and providing transparency on what one is trying to do could, in any way, have any impact on that.

I have to say that now and in every role I have worked—I was a permanent secretary for nine years before this job—there have always been excellent relations between the civil service and Secretaries of State. I should also say that there is often noise around, but if you actually ask the people doing the jobs, they say that the relationships are great.

Q623 Richard Quigley: So why do you think that is reported so often? If you read any report—maybe we should blame journalists—the default is always that there are tensions between Minister and Department or officials. Why do you think that is? You are probably quite right that if I were to walk out and ask civil servants, “How’s it going?” they would say, “Difficult, but it’s okay.” Why do you think that is such an easy go-to?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I suppose there is perhaps sometimes a lack of clarity on who is doing what, and what the roles are. I am entirely clear on the role of the civil service, and civil servants need to follow the code, which is entirely clear as well.

There is signal and noise, isn’t there? What is the signal? The signal is, “We have to get better at delivery and innovation. I want to build up pride and trust.” Those are the things I am focusing my time on, and that is all in the service of the Prime Minister and the Government.

Q624 Richard Quigley: Let’s say you had a magic wand—forget the next 100 days—and you could change something now, when you walk out of this meeting, what would you change to improve that delivery?

Dame Antonia Romeo: There is a raft of things. On delivery, I suppose I am sorting out accountability, and I would probably focus on capability as the thing where there is the biggest gap between achieving something as soon as possible and how long I think it is actually going to take.

There is also a raft of other things. We have the No. 10 delivery unit, and we now have clarity over the PM’s top priorities. It is busy focusing on those and ensuring that we are making those trade-offs, as was referred to, in getting blocks out of the way for delivery. That would probably be it.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I actually put this in the “pride” bucket in my head, but in my future civil service programme, which is led by the permanent secretaries, performance management and talent management are also top priorities, and I am happy to go into all of that.

Q625 Richard Quigley: Does it come as a surprise and a little bit of a concern that, regardless of which Government are in power, having a delivery unit is a surprise?

Dame Antonia Romeo: There has often been a delivery unit, and there have been delivery units in various different guises. The question is: what is it doing, and what is it focusing on? The thing I am really keen that the delivery unit does—I think it is doing this really well—is use a data-informed approach. It has a really fantastic dashboard that I am hoping, in principle, could be public one day. You can actually see where the Government are on delivering things that they said they would do.

Q626 Richard Quigley: You outlined your ideal priorities for reforming the civil service in the letter you sent to us—thank you for that. Those include incorporating the Prime Minister’s priorities into performance frameworks for permanent secretaries, as you just mentioned. What was in them beforehand?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Obviously, perm secs always have objectives. In the past, I have been setting my objectives for years with my Secretary of State. You might talk to your Secretary of State or your lead non-exec about it. Now I am trying to ensure, as agreed with the Prime Minister, that there is a direct relationship between the Prime Minister’s priorities, and therefore the top of Government’s priorities, and what the machine is doing. The Prime Minister—I think in front of the Liaison Committee—talked about pulling levers and those levers not being connected closely enough to things. I feel it is my job to ensure that those levers are connected closely to what is happening in the machine, and that has to flow through the system.

Everybody has objectives. Writing the objectives is not the hard thing; it is about making those objectives highly relevant and connected with the priorities, and also picking out some things that I think all Departments need to do. For example, I think that every Department needs to have a plan for fully ramping up AI, and that needs to sit alongside the strategic workforce plan. As you will know, we were developing the strategic workforce plan, but it was not really sitting closely enough to what our thinking is on how AI and technology will change the shape of the service, and I think that will be significant—I know we will be coming on to AI later, but it is very relevant to almost every question. Ensuring that Departments have those plans needs be specifically put into objectives, and the perm secs are all very enthusiastic about that.

Q627 Richard Quigley: Great. Anybody who has worked in private industry will be aghast that this is not already the case. Do you think that permanent secretaries who do not deliver on those objectives should be removed from their roles, or will that cause a bigger problem? The normal world will



HOUSE OF COMMONS

say, "Great, objectives. Fantastic! But at the end of year two, where are we? What's happening?"

Dame Antonia Romeo: I am an economist, so incentives are at the forefront of everything. The direct result of that would be an incentive to go for the easy objectives rather than the harder objectives. I am interested in being ambitious; I want to drive change, and I want to make things happen, so I want people to have stretch objectives and stretch targets.

Some of the objectives in the list of the PM's top priorities are pretty stretching, and some targets are being hit well by the Government. NHS elective lists have come down ahead of the trajectory, and on recruitment of neighbourhood officers, for example, the first year by the Home Office and the police was ahead of plan, but there will also be areas where things are slightly behind plan.

I do not think you want to be in a situation where you are saying, "Sorry, you missed the number because we set you a really ambitious target." It is a conversation. I am interested in having a proper professional conversation about how we together will significantly change how the civil service works and significantly improve delivery, innovation and drive up pride. That means that I want everyone to be leaning in and to make it happen, and to be ambitious. It also means signing up to ambitious objectives—which, by the way, they all have, because they all want change as much as I do.

Q628 **Richard Quigley:** This is two questions in one. The modern world we live in means that everyone outside this postcode is very impatient for change, and you can argue until you are blue in the face with the average person to explain why things are so slow. What are your views on the setting up of an office for the Prime Minister, which would be allowed to be political and help with the delivery of those objectives?

Dame Antonia Romeo: In the aforementioned published objectives, I have said that I think we need to look at strengthening the delivery architecture around the Prime Minister and reforming the Cabinet Office to be more streamlined. There are a number of options. I have read as many papers as I've had hot dinners on different ways that one could organise the centre. This will be a decision for the Prime Minister; it is something that I would discuss with him.

Q629 **Chair:** But there must be some philosophical merit in it. We now have performance frameworks and the Prime Minister's delivery unit, and we had the much spoken of and now never-referenced mission Government, which was going to be cross-siloed and a new model for the Treasury to operate to. Darren Jones was made Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister to effectively act as the Prime Minister's voice across Government, and he may have made some progress. Surely, if we are trying to run a mature democracy, with all of the international and national challenges that we have, it is pretty bonkers in this day and age that we do not have an office of the Prime Minister; the Cabinet Office is the sort of de facto, but not de



HOUSE OF COMMONS

jure, office of the Prime Minister, so there should be one, shouldn't there?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Well, there's Downing Street. There are different ways of structuring it. My personal view, by the way, is that the single most important thing is the quality of the people. I have worked in the civil service for 25 years, and I have worked in lots of different structures. I am not saying structural change is not important or cannot help; I just think the key thing is the exceptional quality of the people.

Q630 Chair: The Prime Minister famously said, not that long into his tenure, that he thought the civil service was sitting in a "tepid bath". I do not know whether the water has got warmer or colder in the intervening period, but you could act as a thermometer on that and tell us what you think the temperature of the bath is. You have told us that permanent secretaries are hungry for change, but a common theme in this Committee's hearings has been the silo-isation of Government, with a permanent secretary effectively acting as their Department's chief executive, the Secretary of State as the chairman of the board, and so on. If they are so hungry for change, and if that model of, effectively, an independent, siloed Department operating in isolation persists, why have they not been sating their hunger? Why have they not just got on with it and delivered the change that they are hungry for?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I think there are two things. First, a lot of change is already happening. A lot of permanent secretaries are changing things in their Departments, improving things and delivering for their Secretaries of State and indeed for the PM. What I am talking about is a big, coherent programme of change. This unprecedented moment of technological change, and indeed of a lot of global uncertainty and volatility, means that, right now, we have to go much further and much faster, and I think there is a huge appetite to do that. As I say, the permanent secretaries are leading this programme of work. They will be leading cross-Government things on delivery, innovation or pride, or they will be overseeing capability reviews, for example.

So you are quite right, Chair, that we have to operate more collectively. We could debate the kind of Haldane model of functional organisations of Departments and of accounting officer responsibility directly to Parliament, but you are always going to have the structural issues somewhere. I used to work in the criminal justice system; that is a classic example of a system across a range of Departments and organisations. What is really important is the ways in which you can work across silos, not getting bogged down in them, and quite a lot of that is about an attitude.

Q631 Chair: Can I make a helpful suggestion? Well, all of this Committee's suggestions are helpful, of course, but this is a particularly helpful one. Sometimes people are fearful of change because they do not quite know where it is going to end up—you have AI, which we will come on to. You have referenced, in response to questions from Mr Quigley and from me, that permanent secretaries are getting on and delivering change, and so on. What is your strategy for cherry-picking the best ones and really case-studying them, for the public, for Parliament and for civil servants?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

One can talk in the abstract—"hungry for change", "committed to change", "fit for the 21st century", and so on—but they are abstract concepts. We all think we know what they mean, but we might have different interpretations. This is a good example of change that everybody can learn from because it can be applied across the piece. It did not result in the sky falling on anybody's head; it worked. What is your strategy for identifying and highlighting those things, to give confidence?

Dame Antonia Romeo: It is a great question. At the moment, we are doing a lot of best-practice identification and sharing at the permanent secretary level. We spend a lot of time together talking—sorry to keep coming back to AI, but that is a particular example, or there is innovation more broadly—and asking, "What lessons can we learn? How can we benefit from each other's experience?"

We do put that information out to the civil service. There is a civil service newsletter, and things like that, where we talk about best practice that teams have developed, because we are also trying to spotlight those things. A lot of it is about building pride in the service, so we are trying to spotlight great work where it happens. As well as learning lessons and benefiting from best practice, that is about making people feel absolutely terrific about the contribution that they have made to the country.

I have not really thought about how we could get better at doing that, perhaps, to Parliament and to the public. Those are interesting questions. Of course, whenever Ministers talk about exceptional work or great things that have been delivered, behind that sits a huge number of civil servants who have been diligently working on it and delivering. Perhaps we just need a way of encouraging people to see that that is part of the civil service's contribution.

Q632 **Richard Quigley:** This is a leading question, so I will not make you agree with the first part of my statement, for fear of that affecting your role. We all know that the Treasury and the OBR are the handbrake on most things. What can you do to make them enablers rather than a very stiff handbrake?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I have to say, I would not describe the Treasury as a handbrake.

Chair: A sledgehammer?

Dame Antonia Romeo: The Treasury has a very particular role to play—this was more the case in my previous roles where I was trying to do things that cost more money—and rightly so. In a way, it is what I described earlier: different Departments have different roles. The Cabinet Office is the centre of Government. The core of the Cabinet Office, especially the secretariats, and the Treasury have to work incredibly closely together on everything. In my experience, that is just what happens.

Q633 **Chair:** But we do have an over-mighty Treasury, do we not? It can kill things with a look.

Dame Antonia Romeo: The thing is, it is responsible for the money. I suppose in principle it can kill anything that costs new money.

Richard Quigley: I think it is the point where neither the Treasury nor the OBR will take into account savings or future savings. The Committee spoke to Darren Jones and he put very eloquently how difficult that makes future planning. You are almost baking austerity into every decision because due to the Treasury thinking—or rules—you cannot take into account savings.

Dame Antonia Romeo: I think there are probably two different things. How the OBR scores things in its forecasts is one set of things, such as the extent to which it thinks that something will contribute to growth in the future. Those things are governed by quite strict rules. Then there is talking to the Treasury about things such as “invest to save”: the classic approach where a Department says, “If you give me a bit more money now for technology, I will make loads of savings later.” If representatives of the Treasury were sitting here they would say, “Yes, but we never get the cash out.” In a way, that is part of the reason. How do you tackle that? Actually, you need an autonomy system where Departments that have proven that they can do it—that they can invest upstream—get the benefits next time.

It also depends on whether you are trying to do something within a spending review period or not. At the start of a spending review period, it is always easier to argue for more money and investment if it will pay off during the SR. Again, I am slightly channelling the Treasury, but the problem is when Departments say, “If you give me additional money now, I guarantee I will ask for less in the next SR.” Anyway, I am sure that the Treasury would be happy to talk to you about that at length.

Q634 **Chair:** I will just speak to Mr Quigley’s point about the creation of the office of the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister’s other title is of course First Lord of the Treasury. Is there any chance that an office of the Prime Minister could, if sculpted properly, lead to a proper recalibration of the role of the Treasury? It is always going to be central but one can be central to something without being dominant. The Treasury has both centrality and dominance. It really needs only centrality; No. 10 needs dominance.

Dame Antonia Romeo: The Prime Minister is the Prime Minister, so I do not think anybody doubts that he has dominance. I mean, he is the Prime Minister of the country.

Q635 **Chair:** And yet—I am not asking you to comment on the specifics of the defence investment plan embroglio last week, but one of its chilling phrases was, “the Treasury has been unwilling” and the Prime Minister “unable”. The word “unwilling” suggests central dominance and “unable” suggests that not even No. 10—not even the Prime Minister—can convince the Treasury to do something if the Treasury does not wish to do it.

Dame Antonia Romeo: In my short experience in this job, they work incredibly closely together—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q636 **Chair:** They might, but what about when push comes to shove? They can work closely together, even for three or four months, but when push comes to shove, and the Prime Minister says, "We are going to do it this way," but the Treasury says, "Sorry, mate, no, we're not going to do it that way; we are doing it this way," because the affordability envelope can be stretched only so far, or whatever, the Prime Minister cannot overrule that, it appears. I do not mean this Prime Minister; Prime Ministers—the Prime Minister whoever it is—do not appear to have the levers, buttons, muscle power or whatever to overrule HMT.

Dame Antonia Romeo: This is a question for Prime Ministers past and present. The Prime Minister, as you say, is the First Lord of the Treasury; he is the Prime Minister of the country, he chairs the Cabinet, he oversees collective agreement—

Q637 **Chair:** If we identify what this Committee has set out as its perception, it is that, yes, the Treasury can be the critical friend to ask all the right questions before it writes the cheque, of course, but if it is also the dam that holds everything up apart from its pet projects, that means that the broader delivery picture is not painted. Without commenting on any specific plans that you might have, in order to meet your aspirations for a leaner, faster-moving and speedier-in-delivery civil service and Government machine, surely how Treasury operates cannot be outwith that process.

Dame Antonia Romeo: The Treasury of course sets the spending review, and that is the thing that is meant to determine the spending plans for Government Departments, and that would be overseen by the Prime Minister. That is the thing that essentially sets the envelopes. Some is ringfenced and some not, and so on, and then Departments are off organising things within that.

Q638 **Chair:** As a matter of principle, do you think ringfencing helps?

Dame Antonia Romeo: It depends what it is, and it depends what side of the ringfence you are on.

Chair: If you are ringfenced and in the fence, great. If you are not ringfenced, then—

Dame Antonia Romeo: Look, as somebody who has been a principal accounting officer for nine years, we are not mad about ringfences, because they stop us being able to do some things that we want to do. That, by the way, is exactly why the things are ringfenced.

Chair: Lord, make me good, but not yet—it sounds a little like St Augustine, doesn't it?

Q639 **Peter Lamb:** Continuing on that point, Lord Maude was before this Committee, and he spent a rather long time in the Cabinet Office. His conclusion was that we had to split the Treasury in half, separating out the payroll functions to a new body while retaining the economic functions within the Treasury, and that that would be the only way to develop some measure of Government independent of complete Treasury oversight.

Would you rule out the possibility of trying to separate the Treasury?

Dame Antonia Romeo: That is massively above my pay grade—

Q640 **Peter Lamb:** Can you see downsides to the proposal?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Look, I have talked a lot to Lord Maude about it. Indeed, last time around when I was in the Cabinet Office, I worked with Lord Maude. There are a lot of pros and cons, and the question is what you are trying to achieve and whether you think it makes sense to separate out the financial management and Budget stuff from the macro stuff. There are arguments both ways. Obviously, Lord Maude has a strong and highly respected view, but other views are equally strong and highly respected.

Q641 **Peter Lamb:** I can give you the impression of a two-year Back Bencher of the situation: you go to talk to a Minister or a civil servant in the Department, or you go to your friends in the civil service, and the impression is that no matter how good the policy idea is that you sell to the Department, unless Treasury has decided it is what it wants to do, it will not happen. That seems to enfeeble a lot of Government and removes an awful lot of the democratic process from the process of Government.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Again, I suppose it depends if something requires new money or not. If you had a proposal for a Government Department, what would happen normally is that that Department would have to make the decision whether it wanted to pursue it, so it would have to stop doing something else. By the way, I think prioritisation is something that we also need to get better at generally. Stopping something in order to do something else is a sensible thing, because the state cannot just keep growing and keep costing more.

I guess, to answer your question, it should not be the case that something can be stopped by another Department if it could be afforded within that Department, within the particular policy Department's financial envelope, and if it could stop something else in order to afford that.

Peter Lamb: I ran a local authority for eight years, and unlike central Government we always had to balance our books, so I appreciate the relevant costs, but even when you go with a costed proposal the viewpoint is that the Treasury would want money back, or would want to have some final say over what happened. It may well be that that is Ministers' way of excusing themselves from the decision-making process, in much the same way as the EU used to be a very convenient thing to blame for why you could not do something, but it creates a situation in which it is very hard to see how most people in this country can use the democratic processes available to them to in any way influence policy.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Sorry, Mr Lamb—what is the question you are putting to me?

Q642 **Peter Lamb:** Do you not feel that the Treasury has excessive oversight of public policy in the UK compared with other countries?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dame Antonia Romeo: I don't think it is excessive. I think that everyone is working together. I think they have an incredibly difficult job. What they are trying to achieve in the fiscal context is quite clear. I have a strong view that Departments have to live within their means. I do not know about these additional rules. Obviously, I have been on the wrong end of, "If you want to make this change, we want to see your business case," etc.

Actually, there has been a recent joint Treasury-Cabinet Office project called Project Reset, which looked at increasing Departments' delegations on a number of spend—essentially, reducing controls, because one of the things that we definitely have is quite a lot of additional bureaucracy caused by the centre asking a lot of questions about spend. It is conceivable that, post Project Reset, some of the things that you have described might not happen.

Q643 **Peter Lamb:** We spoke with the IFG about that recently, and it sounds like a very positive development.

Turning to the quality of the people, which you highlighted as being the key driver of civil service success, I think there are some fantastic people in the civil service; I know some of them myself. I would say that structures get in the way of good people doing good work—otherwise, there is a question as to why it is they are not currently performing—but one of the key things that keeps coming up is experience within Departments. A third of the civil service change Department every two years. I know these figures do not exactly transpose, but theoretically you might, within a six-year period, have no one in that Department with any real grasp of the policy in that area.

The civil service pride themselves on being very effective generalists, but do you not feel that there is a concern that in our system we have created a situation where, because of public sector pay restraint around civil service pay, we now have an issue where there are very few people in Departments who are genuinely experts who can advise Ministers as to the direction of policy in the area that the Department is responsible for?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I agree with you that we need to look at pay and reward, because the pay structures and mechanisms mean that the easiest way to get a pay rise is not to stay where you are and be an expert at the same grade, but just more expert and therefore slightly more senior; the quickest way to get a pay rise is to move. I mentioned incentives. That is obviously the wrong incentive. It is a big part of what I want to do.

Q644 **Peter Lamb:** I think that most members of the Committee probably agree with that. When we looked into this recently, it looks like 75% of the civil service is now technically at managerial level, in order to try to get around public sector pay restraint on civil service pay.

On the question of expertise, is there anything else that we could do to enable the civil service to be more sticky in terms of Departments, to ensure that the people advising Ministers are genuinely policy experts in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

that field? If people move Departments too often, there is a question around how much expertise the people advising Ministers have. Ministers themselves are clearly put in for political reasons very often. I can tell you that a lot of the SPADs are put in Departments for political reasons as opposed to expertise reasons. There is a big question as to what level of expertise there actually is now at the heart of Government, when taking decisions around public policy.

Dame Antonia Romeo: I have talked a lot about how I think the civil service needs to be impartial, curious, expert and engaged. Expertise is crucial, and I think we have to balance both things. On the one hand, we have to incentivise people staying and offering expertise. On the other hand, one of the great advantages of the civil service as a recruiter, apart from the fact that we all do incredibly purpose-led work, is that we offer the opportunity to work across a whole range of things. I have worked in an economic department and a big operational department. I have done international work. I have done domestic work. That is all possible within the civil service. I think that is one of our great sells as a recruiter, and I want to be recruiting the best talent in the country, so I am keen that we still allow people to move around while recognising that we need to not have people constantly moving, and especially not constantly moving because they feel they have to do so in order to get a pay rise.

I think we just have to do both things, but I do not think that it is impossible to do both things. We need to be able to manage talent properly—expertise, professionalism—as well as allow people these fantastic jobs where they can work across huge ranges of work in all sorts of areas.

Q645 **Chair:** Does that speak to salary bands irrespective of which Department?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I think that we need to look at how it works. We have been looking at it for quite a long time.

Chair: It is time to do something.

Dame Antonia Romeo: As you might have seen, I have two broad lists. My three things are essentially, delivery and accountability, innovation and productivity, and pride and trust. Within each of those there is two buckets. First, there are the things that I just want to get on and do: performance and talent management; look at pay; refresh the civil service code and update the Cabinet manual—the things we should just do. Then there are the things that are going to require longer-term thinking. On pay, the whole compensation structure—pay, pensions and all of that—is not going to be the work of a few weeks; it is going to be something that needs a proper fundamental look at.

Q646 **Richard Baker:** Dame Antonia, you have already touched on the expectation that you will broker disputes between Departments. Can you tell us a little more about what levers you have at your disposal to push for compromise?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dame Antonia Romeo: I suppose there are two things. Ultimately, I do so on behalf of the Prime Minister and he is the Prime Minister. He is the person who decides what gets collective agreement and how collective responsibility is engaged. At one level, that is the ultimate lever, but again there is the system. That is why we need to have much clearer accountability: the permanent secretaries report to me as the head of the civil service, so there is a sense of working together to try to make things happen. This is also a repeated game. Departments do not just enter one particular area of disagreement on a policy; there will be multiple policy discussions with those Departments. In my experience, one of the levers is that people want to collaborate because they know that next time that will help them in achieving their objectives.

Q647 **Richard Baker:** Why did that process not work in the case of the defence investment plan?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I don't think that it did not work. My point was that things take a long time. To be clear, the PM said that we are in the process of finalising the defence investment plan. I think he said last week that the funding decision is made. It is now being finalised with a new Secretary of State for Defence. It is not a swift thing. Again, as the PM said last week, this is a process outside of the spending review and to find a significant amount of money. That is pretty unusual and it is going to affect all Departments—as the PM said, everybody is contributing. That is a significant thing, and you must understand the trade-offs and the choices. I do not think that it is not working; I think that sometimes these things take time.

Q648 **Richard Baker:** The strategic defence review was published over a year ago. The parameters of what was required in the defence investment plan and what the MOD would have wanted would have been pretty clear for about a year. When you have the Treasury indicating to the Defence Secretary on Monday of last week—when we were told that the defence plan is imminent—what the actual envelope for spending will be, that looks like the process not working.

Dame Antonia Romeo: There are a couple of different things here. There is the strategic defence review, which concluded over a year ago. The defence investment plan is different; it is the operationalisation of that with additional funding required. They are not the same. The additional funding needed was not known at the time of the SDR. In fact, the strategic defence review was designed to fit within the spending review envelope. What happened was that the defence investment plan requires more money. That is why we have been in this process and that process takes time.

I want to come back to what I said at the start. I am not saying that systems do not need to be improved. I am absolutely not here saying that the system for brokering decision making is perfect. In fact, as I referred to earlier, I think that we need to do quite a lot of work at the centre to streamline the write-round process to look at how we can broker things more quickly.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q649 **Richard Baker:** Would there be any specific lessons from this instance regarding the defence investment plan? At this point do you have any thoughts about things that could have been done better?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I think I will wait for the process to conclude before learning lessons. There are always lessons to be learned; I have not yet worked on anything where there was not a lesson to be learned that could improve things.

We need to have a look at the basis on which we go to write-round for collective agreement. I do not think that would have been engaged in this case, as this was so significant and affected so many Departments, and it would have had such a significant impact, including on Departments' budgets outside the spending review. I do not think the main things I am looking to streamline would have applied in this case, but I will be happy in a year's time, or whenever, to come back to the Committee and tell you whether I was right.

Q650 **Chair:** Can you just clarify something for us? Former Secretary of State John Healey has effectively told the country that he was presented with a figure that he thought was below what was needed. The fact that he was presented with a figure, and the narrative that sat around it, suggested to the country at large that the process had concluded, and that it was merely a matter of when the announcement was going to be made. If rumour is to be believed, there was some talk that it was going to be put into the public domain on Friday, and that was then pulled because it was obviously not a sitting Friday.

Secretary of State Kyle, the day following former Secretary of State Healey's resignation, seemed to suggest a far more open, fluid, still organic, movable feast. The briefing over the weekend was that—I hope we are all keeping up with the names—new Secretary of State Dan Jarvis has been told to implement the plan as agreed, but within the financial envelope that was presented to former Secretary of State Healey, which then dismisses Secretary of State Kyle's proposition that it was a movable feast. Which is the correct version?

Dame Antonia Romeo: The PM said last week on Friday that the decision on funding had been made. There is obviously a new Secretary of State for Defence, and he is going to want to satisfy himself on the capabilities and mechanisms that the funding buys, which is the process that is happening at the moment. In a way, all things can be true. It is in the process of being finalised—

Chair: With the greatest respect, I do not think all things can be true. Either there was still negotiation going on with the Treasury, or the Treasury was convinced or had taken the view that the conversations had concluded. Let's just park that for one moment.

You have said, perfectly properly, that these things take time, but time fills the vacuum—we know that. I am not setting Al Carns up as the font of all wisdom; he has not been a Member of Parliament for very long, but he was a very distinguished soldier in a previous life. He made the point that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

decisions that should take days take months, although I am not suggesting the defence investment plan should take days.

We know that this has overrun and overrun, and it was promised to Parliament four or five months ago. It has to be done properly, but there is no sense of the urgent here. We now have a Secretary of State for Defence who is reviewing it, but that is entirely out of the timeline that the Prime Minister presented at the security conference in Munich—that is, the Russians were effectively at the gate. On Friday, we had an announcement of £3.4 billion for safer crossings and potholes, so the Russians tanks and soldiers will know that they can cross the roads perfectly safely. New money could be found for DFT to deal with that, but not for the MOD. Surely the first duty of Government is defence of the realm.

Dame Antonia Romeo: So the question—

Q651 **Chair:** Well, you have put the fear of God into me, frankly, by saying that the new Secretary of State, Dan Jarvis, now has the time to look at the defence investment plan with fresh eyes. My read across that—shoot me down if I am incorrect—is that there is then an opportunity to reopen conversations with the Treasury. If you juxtapose that with what the Prime Minister was saying, as well as the lack of reliability in NATO and European defence, for which we have inadvertently relied upon the United States for too long, surely time is not on our side.

Dame Antonia Romeo: The Prime Minister has said that we will publish the plan before the NATO summit, which is in a matter of weeks. That is one fact on the ground. The second fact—

Q652 **Chair:** We can publish the plan, but will there be a volume 2 that says, “And this is the money that delivers the plan”? I could publish a plan tomorrow.

Dame Antonia Romeo: I expect that, when the plan is published, the funding for the plan will be published with it. I do not think it is likely that an unfunded plan will be published.

Q653 **Chair:** An unfunded plan would just not look serious, would it?

Dame Antonia Romeo: These are decisions for the Prime Minister and his Secretary of State for Defence.

Q654 **Chair:** I appreciate that these are decisions for the Prime Minister, but in the court of public opinion, knowing the wrangle that has gone on over the past four or five days, a published plan—well thought out, detailed and so on—without costings running alongside it would not be taken as seriously as the defence investment plan should be. There are two key words there, aren’t there? Defence and investment.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Falling back on what an accounting officer would want to do, if you are going to plan something—

Chair: What would the Cabinet Secretary want to do?



Dame Antonia Romeo: If you are going to publish something that will cost a lot of money, you would want to know where the money is going to come from in order to satisfy yourself that it is affordable before you allow the publication to happen. It seems highly unlikely that a plan is going to be published that is not affordable and has not had how it will be made affordable set out alongside it.

Chair: Right. I will read the transcript. I think I have followed it. Forgive me.

Q655 **Lauren Edwards:** We talked a bit about AI earlier. What is your vision for what the civil service will look like in five years' time following the impact of AI?

Dame Antonia Romeo: As I said before, we are not the only organisation looking at this, but if you think about the civil service footprint, we have 520,000 people. The idea that AI will not quite significantly transform both what we do and how we do it in the next three to five years is obviously absurd. We have to have a plan to consider that. Right now, I do not know exactly what that will look like. What I have is a programme, which is essentially four parts: tools, talent, transformation and transition.

On tools, we know that task automation will not be sufficient to get the full productivity benefits of AI. That is well understood now. What you have to do is look at your workflows—as the civil service, we would look at workflows and systems—starting from the outcomes you want to achieve, and then how technology can potentially help you to improve those. Then you essentially go from task automation to job augmentation. For example, a probation officer will spend some of their time interacting personally with people, helping them try to reduce reoffending, but they also have to transcribe all those notes and do various things in that space. If technology can help you do the latter, you have much more time for the former—that would be job augmentation.

More importantly, it is hard even to understand now the way we deliver the outcomes we are trying to achieve. For example, on reducing reoffending, what interventions we make and what data we need to ensure that we are making those interventions are things that technology can help us with. There is quite a lot of work to think about that. I am really clear that the people who will know most about how these tools can help them do their jobs better and help them rethink how they can best achieve the outcomes they are after are the people who do the work. The tools part is really about thinking about how we put the best possible models and technology in the hands of the people doing the work so that, essentially, the enthusiasm and vibrancy of their work and their use of technology helps to significantly improve what we do. That is the first thing.

The second thing is talent. We obviously have to significantly upskill across the civil service in the use of AI and tech. The National School of Government will be very focused on this. Alongside that, we also need to



be bringing in world-class experts. We already have the innovation fellows, and we will look at whether we can expand that programme.

On transformation, again, that is about the end-to-end process and how we are actually going to be transforming our work. Finally, on transition—this comes back to something a Committee member, or it might have been the Chair, said earlier about supporting people in the transition and the fear factor of change—that is about how we ensure that we are managing the friction through the transition and that we understand what it will mean for people's jobs. We will be working closely with the unions on that.

We want to ensure that people are being skilled to do the new jobs that will be created, or to focus more on those jobs. I do not know what the vision is like right now, but part of the review of the organisation, performance and transformation of the civil service is going to set out a vision for the future of the civil service in the next 10 years and beyond, which will include that.

Q656 Lauren Edwards: That is a really helpful overview. Where you have AI rolled out now—we know it is being used for all sorts of things, such as transcription, which frees people from having to write notes; there have also been press reports about moving to parliamentary questions being answered by AI, perhaps controversially, although with a human sense-check—what are you doing to understand whether the benefits of AI, particularly in driving efficiency, are actually being realised in practice? For instance, when I read reviews of AI implementation, it seems like senior leaders see it as a bit of a panacea for all of an organisation's problems, particularly around efficiency, but when you look at the detail, you see that workers are spending quite a bit of time toggling between multiple apps to try to get the best answer, which eats into the efficiency saving. How are you monitoring those efficiency gains at the moment to give you the confidence that AI will have the impact that you are seeking as it is adopted more broadly across the civil service?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I think there are a couple of things. Obviously, as I said at the start, you do not get the benefits of AI from just automating each individual task—although you can get some benefits, which are probably some of the efficiency benefits. You will get the real benefits, in terms of outcomes being delivered, when you rethink the workflow. That is what I am more interested in doing, although it will obviously be quite complicated, because we run a massive operation across many workflows.

What you have to do is rely on the people who are doing it. I was at a jobcentre a couple of weeks ago, and they have an innovation tool that they were showing to me. It makes it much easier for work coaches to lay their hands immediately on the main things they need when talking to people to help them get into work. To me, that seemed like a good thing—a very good thing. They were in the foothills of using it, but they seemed to think it was going to really help them. They will be the people who know. I have spent a lot of my life in courts—

Chair: Professionally?

Dame Antonia Romeo: No comment. Yes, very much professionally. You could see, several years ago, that people had a screen and they would say, "This is on this system and that is on that system, so I have to take it off this system and put it on to that system." This is the stuff that the data linking and other things the MOJ is doing is stopping, but it is the people doing the work who will tell us whether it is helping them or not.

Q657 **Lauren Edwards:** At the Cabinet Office, do you have a programme to quantify the gains that AI is delivering so that you can make sure it is delivering what it needs to?

Dame Antonia Romeo: That is part of what I have just set out—the four levels. That programme will essentially determine what we are going to do about AI.

Q658 **Lauren Edwards:** You will have quantitative metrics and some kind of reporting to be able to say, "At the MOJ, based on the caseload data we are seeing, we think there is a 20% improvement from introducing this AI tool." Is that the kind of thing you will be able to say through your monitoring?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Yes, in some areas. For caseload and other areas where you can easily measure—areas that are conducive to the metrics, if you like—it is easy to say, "It saved a probation officer x hours," or, "It saved a work coach x hours." These are things you can measure quite easily. There will be other areas where you cannot measure it as easily, because it is really about the outcome. That is not an AI-shaped problem, by the way; it is a fundamental problem in how we measure productivity.

There are lots of measures of productivity for the state in areas where things can easily be priced and measured, but it is actually quite hard, in a lot of civil service areas, to measure productivity. That is something I also want to look at, but to the Chair's earlier point, not everything will be done in the first or second 100 days. But I do think we should look at that.

Q659 **Lauren Edwards:** One of the consistent themes across a lot of our inquiries with various people across Whitehall is a reluctance or failure of various Departments to share data with each other, which will be quite crucial to AI success. How will you fix that siloed culture, particularly around access to data, which seems, according to some of the evidence we have heard, to hold Departments back, particularly on missions or objectives that involve cross-departmental working? There is a little bit of a "GDPR" or "computer says no" response when Departments need to work much more closely in sharing data in pursuit of Government policy objectives.

Dame Antonia Romeo: We have been doing quite a big push on this for some time. When I was at the MOJ and then at the Home Office, we were doing a big programme of joining up better outcomes through linked data—the BOLD programme—that was all about making sure you had identifiers so that you could track flows through the system. Generally



HOUSE OF COMMONS

speaking, Departments are quite keen to link up, because we know it drives better outcomes. The problem is where everyone has a different system and everyone is using different identifiers. Some of those things can be quite simply solved. We are in the process of solving them at the moment.

Q660 Lauren Edwards: Are there any Departments that you think are doing data sharing well and are a model for how it should work across Whitehall?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Again, I am probably biased, but I think that what we did in the MOJ and the Home Office, which also involved the Attorney General's office, was pretty forward-leaning. There will be lots of other areas where people have been doing good things on data, but mainly it is where you have a system that flows across. I imagine that the DWP, for example, is doing quite a lot of work on this as part of its transformation.

Q661 Chair: Could you say a word or two about your relationship and, more generally, your agenda's relationship with the trade unions across the civil service? AI is clearly going to present operational opportunities, but talk to any headhunter and they will tell you that it is reducing job opportunities for entry-grade work, and so on and so forth. You have identified the need to scale up and speed up the delivery of change and how the civil service manifests itself. Sitting on the sidelines is the problem with the civil service pension, which the Cabinet Office and Nick Thomas-Symonds are wrestling with. Are the unions onside?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I think that my objectives and the unions' objectives are pretty closely aligned. If you lead the civil service, you want what is best for your people. That is what the unions want as well.

Q662 Chair: You might, but the Government might define their people as the country—voters and citizens. The unions might define their people as their members.

Dame Antonia Romeo: I suppose the point I was broadly making is that we all want the best for the civil service. We have talked about things like changing pay. On anything where we are changing systems—AI is bound to be such an area—we will be working incredibly closely with the unions. We want to work very closely with them. We want to collaborate with them. Thus far, in my less than four months' experience, that is what has happened.

Q663 Chair: We are not picking up any die-in-a-ditch resistance to any of the laudable ambitions you have set out in mission statements and other communications.

Dame Antonia Romeo: No. I have talked to the unions about them, and everybody wants the civil service to be even better. I want it to be a world-class organisation that is famous for excellence in delivery. I do not think they would disagree. There will doubtless be areas of tension, and I can imagine there being areas later where we might disagree on things, but I will always want a very open and close relationship. Obviously, I

have run really big workforces in previous jobs, so I am used to working well and closely with the unions.

Q664 Chair: You appear to be fully seized, and because you are sharing that with us, one can only presume that the Prime Minister and the Government are as well, or otherwise you would not be saying what you are saying to us. Is the resolve there? Were there, in theory, to be a logjam with union members, is the resolve there? In the interests of getting that better civil service to deliver better outcomes for the taxpayers of this country, is there the will, the appetite and the determination in Government not to blink first?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I suppose it depends—blinking at what? In practice, what do we want to do? The things I am talking about, in support of the PM and with which he agrees, are excellence in delivery, better use of tech and AI, and higher pride—“impartial, curious and engaged.” All those things will involve better talent management, better performance management and the pride that comes from high performance. Maybe not everyone will want everything, but I want to work with the unions.

Q665 Chair: Of course. The reason why I ask is that you will recall the Prime Minister made a speech in which he referred to the civil service luxuriating in a “tepid bath”. One or two of the senior voices in the civil service trade union movement criticised him for that, and the following day, he put on sackcloth, rolled in ashes and did his mea culpa. Then everything in the garden was rosy, and the civil service was almost, if not entirely perfect. That would suggest it does not take much to make the Prime Minister blink, when it comes to a difference in tack between the centre of Government and the trade union leaders of the civil service.

Dame Antonia Romeo: The Prime Minister wrote to all civil servants last month and underlined his confidence, support and respect for the civil service. He talked about civil servants’ integrity and dedication, and how he wants to work closely with the civil service. There is no doubt. I, like the Prime Minister, want to work closely and together with the civil service, and to lead it in a way that will allow it to get better at delivery. I do think that we need to change, and I do not think that the unions would say that we did not need to change. It is all about how we do it.

Chair: Okay. We may come back to that in a different session.

Q666 Luke Taylor: Dame Antonia, you agreed with the Prime Minister to conduct a review into the organisation, performance and transformation of the civil service. Your performance objectives include refreshing its governance. How are you approaching that, what is the timeframe and what will it cover?

Dame Antonia Romeo: There are a few things in that bucket. The review is intended to be the thing that sets out the vision for the civil service as a world-class organisation, serving the Government of the day and building on its great strengths for the second quarter of the 21st century. This is really about looking ahead. Significant reviews of the civil service happen maybe once every 60 years—I mean, there are lots of reviews, so it felt



HOUSE OF COMMONS

like it was time. There will be an expert panel, and the Prime Minister has asked me to lead it, which I will of course do. The expert panel will do a lot of engagement with experts, bodies, academics and, I hope, this Committee, which I am sure will have views. That is the review.

There is also the review of other particular things that are part of the Cabinet Office, the Cabinet system or Cabinet machinery. One is the update on the Cabinet manual, on which I have written to the Committee, and one is going to be a refresh of the civil service code, which I can say a bit about, if that is helpful. All those things, I hope, will come to land in about the spring, shall we say, next year.

Q667 Luke Taylor: To start with some follow-up questions, how would you like to see civil service governance changed?

Dame Antonia Romeo: May I ask, Mr Taylor, what you mean by civil service governance?

Luke Taylor: In terms of reporting and structures, what critical changes coming out of this review will you try to drive? You talk about the panel and others, but what do you see as the most critical?

Dame Antonia Romeo: A lot of the things that I think are critical are things that I want to do already. For example, when I started in this post, not all the permanent secretaries reported to the Cabinet Secretary, and I have changed that. I have already talked about accountability and the flows down through the objectives—things like that are about governance structures. The question then is, “When do the heads of Department meet? What are the topics?” Those are governance issues I have tackled already.

As was said in the King’s Speech, the review will consider the statutory basis for the civil service and look—this is also in the code, of course—at our impartiality. Those are not really governance questions. Obviously, we are governed by CRaG—the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010—and that is the statutory basis for the civil service. Does that need amending? Those are the sort of things that the review will look at, and the Committee will have expert views on that.

Q668 Luke Taylor: You mentioned the civil service code, which you are tasked with refreshing to ensure it is up to date, understood and adhered to. What needs to change in that, and why?

Dame Antonia Romeo: That is a really interesting question. There are three types of things. There are our current values, which I really strongly believe in and probably would not want to change. Some people can argue about whether they are duplicative, and various think-tanks have written proposals about what a different set of values would look like. There is looking at reinvesting in or renewing those and whether it is the right language and so on.

Then there is, are there any values that are not currently expressed in the code? As you say, the code is a values-based document. As a small spoiler



HOUSE OF COMMONS

alert, one that I am quite interested in considering, and on which I would welcome the views of the Committee and others on, is something like curiosity. Integrity, impartiality, honesty and objectivity run through the stick of rock of the civil service, and rightly so, but would we not also want to have something about being curious and about curiosity? I think you can invest a lot in that—I am just flying a kite there for the moment.

The other thing is adherence. The question is, how well understood is the code? Especially if we want to bring in people, potentially more from other sectors, and make it easier to ventilate a bit more with other sectors, we cannot rely on the thing that we sometimes have a tendency to rely on: that everybody has grown up with the code and knows the code. I am very focused on how everybody in the civil service really lives the values of the code, so there is a question about how we would do that.

Q669 Luke Taylor: We will come on to talk about how the civil service attracts the right people, so living the values might be relevant to people coming in from the outside. Going back to the code, what difference do you anticipate that changing it will have on how civil servants do their job? You mentioned curiosity. Do you think that that will fundamentally change the approach and mentality in terms of how the civil service operates?

Dame Antonia Romeo: One of the things I have been talking about is the mindset that I want the civil service to have. That is essentially—I mentioned this in my letter—along the structure of the delivery, innovation and pride thing, which is, “Make it happen”, “Make it better” and “Make it count”. “Make it better” is all about questioning how we can be better and what we can do differently, and that really embodies curiosity.

I am hoping that we will not have to wait for the civil service code to be refreshed before people can see that the message from the top is, “We want you to challenge things. We want you to think about how you can do things better.” However, the civil service code is a very totemic document, and the values are in statute in CRaG, as I mentioned, so if you do something like change it, it would send the strongest possible signal that curiosity really matters, and that we should be thinking about how we can do things better. I and the Government want civil servants to challenge, to find new and better ways to do things, and to learn from history, other sectors, other countries and so on. If we did put it in the code, it would send the strongest possible signal that we really cared about it and meant it. But, as I say, I do not want to prejudge the refresh; I am just quite enthusiastic about that particular word.

Q670 Chair: When Pat McFadden was CDL, he came before us quite early on in the Government. I think we were all cheering him to the rafters when he said he wanted to inculcate a culture whereby the fear of failing did not reduce the appetite to try—I slightly paraphrase, but that was the spirit of what he was saying. Do you think that is important?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I do think it is important; the question is how to do it. We spend taxpayers’ money, so it is very important that we do not run the risk of sending signals of things that we want to happen, while not



HOUSE OF COMMONS

really meaning it. So, yes to more risk, and, obviously, yes to not being held back by fear of failure and, obviously, yes to more innovation. The question is, to what extent? What are the limits of risks, and what sort of risks should individuals take? I just want to ensure that we are totally clear about that. I agree that we do not want people to be held back by fear of failure. I really want people to innovate. I want them to be curious. I want to do things simpler, better, faster. I think that will happen in a bottom-up way through people thinking of how to do things simpler, better, faster. I also know that we have to be very careful about risks with taxpayers' money; I have appeared in front of many, many, many PACs, and when things go wrong, questions are rightly asked. Those things need to be kept in balance.

Q671 Chair: You mentioned curiosity, and that is quite an important and interesting word to use. I think we would all agree that the impartiality of the civil service is crucial—Ministers of whatever hue need to know that the service is going to be there at their disposal, without fear or favour—but, too often, impartiality translates into indifference. In your exploration of the creation of a curious mind and curiosity within the service, how do you square that circle of maintaining party political neutrality but beefing it up so that it is not indifference—"Well, I don't really mind. I'm impartial, so if it works, it works, and if it doesn't, it doesn't. It's not me; it's my political masters"? Through your review, and through other levers and buttons, how do we get the civil service to be motivated and focused on delivery, and to understand the political importance of delivering, without rendering its members party political apparatchiks?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Being impartial does not mean you do not understand politics. You can actually be deeply interested in politics; it just means that you yourself are not politically motivated or, if you are, you leave it at the door. Impartiality really has two parts: one is that things are done just on the merits of the case—you put your arguments on the merits of the case, and you are not driven by any ideology. The second part is specifically political impartiality, which means that, while you serve the Government of the day and have the confidence of Ministers, you do so in a way that allows you to retain the confidence of any future Government you may be required to serve.

I think all of that is possible, as you said, Chair, without being indifferent. It comes back to the question about how we can ensure it is adhered to. People need to understand what we mean by impartiality. Impartiality does not mean that you are blithely proposing things that are obviously not going to wash or that are never going to pass through Parliament. You can obviously offer up a range of options. You have to understand the context in which you are operating, but you must be completely impartial when presenting those options.

Q672 Chair: Do you see your review and refresh of the code as an opportunity to—I am loath to use this word—"modernise" that concept?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Yes, actually. Impartiality is really important as a word. It is completely clear, and it is very meaningful, but I do agree,

having said that it is completely clear, that some people do not understand it.

Q673 **Chair:** I think it is almost more important to say what it does not mean.

Dame Antonia Romeo: That is the sort of thing, actually, that could be easily done in the code. We need to be really clear what we mean and really clear how we expect them to uphold it.

Q674 **Luke Taylor:** Regarding business appointment rules, does the civil service currently attract the right people, and in sufficient numbers, from the private sector? If not, what do you think the barriers are to attracting people who could make a positive impact on the way the country is governed?

Dame Antonia Romeo: You started by mentioning business appointment rules, which was a spoiler alert for what my answer might involve. We have a lot of excellent people who started from the private sector—on an unrelated point, and I was not at all referring to myself, I started my career in the private sector. We probably do not recruit as many as we might, if we want to get the best talent from everywhere. The question is why. What are the barriers?

There are a number of barriers, one of which, quite often for people coming from the private sector, is pay. This comes back to the pay/pension trade-off. There are issues about people's choices and revealed preferences in terms of the choices they make. Everyone who works in the civil service knows that the purposeful nature of the job is the great privilege that comes with that service, but people from the outside might not know that before they join.

There are two reviews ongoing on business appointment rules. One is being done by the Ethics and Integrity Commission as part of its lobbying and transparency review, and the other is being done by the Civil Service Commission, but they are aimed at slightly different things. If we want to be serious about getting more people from the private sector into the civil service, we need to accept that they might then want to leave. We therefore need to be clear at the point of entry about the requirements on departure. There is then a conversation to be had about the extent to which that is the right level of requirements or not.

Q675 **Luke Taylor:** You have described three sides of the equation there: the restrictions on what you can do after, the attractiveness of the package when you are there, and then your future pension earnings. What do you think would be the right way to balance those? Do you think it can be done? Do you think there is a way to find that pipeline of good people who can give good service to the public sector for a shorter period? We do not want to lose all these skills to the private sector and find ourselves in a mess when we look around Government.

Dame Antonia Romeo: It is probably easier to solve the BARs issue. We will almost certainly not, in my lifetime, be offering pay rates that would mean that somebody would decide to leave a very high-paying private



HOUSE OF COMMONS

sector job for the pay. What we offer is massively purposeful, important work for the country. I would just like to manage it so that people felt as though it were something that they could do at a point in their life where they no longer needed to make the same amount of money—I am talking at this point about very senior people.

There would be lots of ways of attracting lots of other excellent people to the civil service. My point is that, in order to do that, you have to allow people to come in for a bit and then leave. We cannot be entering into a private sector competition on pay. On the BARs system, the thing we are moving towards is risk-based rather than grade-based, so it is about asking, "What is the actual risk here?" when somebody leaves, rather than just saying, "You can't move into that" for almost any job. I think the CSC is going to do that.

Because I started by talking about the senior civil service, for delegated grades I think we need to be better at attracting people to these excellent jobs that we have. I recently met somebody on a prison wing who said that they had gone off to become an accountant for a bit, and then had found that that did not give them the same sense of purpose, so they came back.

Q676 Chair: Which side of the bars were they on when you saw them? Were they an inmate?

Dame Antonia Romeo: They were a prison officer.

Luke Taylor: It was very unclear.

Dame Antonia Romeo: All right, fair enough. They were one of our exceptional prison officers working on the wing. That is a good example of how people do come back; they leave, and then they come back for the service. Again, I want to make sure that we have a way of allowing people to ventilate more, because that is how we will get skills; that is how we will change and benefit.

Q677 Luke Taylor: We spoke about this previously, but it is about how you manage the talent—the people—how you provide that support and growth when they are in the public sector, and whether the public sector can be as competitive, rewarding and nurturing as you might find in the private sector. Do you think that that is something the civil service could emulate?

Dame Antonia Romeo: The idea that we are less nurturing than the private sector is an interesting one. You are quite right to ask whether we offer the support to people who come into a quite complex system and who do not necessarily understand it. As I have, you will have doubtless talked to many people who joined the civil service and left because they could not make it work. That is not right, and we should fix that. The National School of Government will look at things like that.

Actually, we just need to be better about how we relate to people. It is all joined up, because all this stuff about performance management, talent management and how we operate are things that people would



understand. For example, on induction, how do we induct people? It varies between Departments. One thing we are doing on training is bringing it in-house. With the National School of Government, we are essentially insourcing it. That is important, because it means that you can decide which bits of training you want to standardise. On mid-level entrants, for example, people have talked about whether we should look at a mid-level fast stream. There are all sorts of things we could do; I want to look at all types of recruitment. But, as you rightly say, Mr Taylor, what we do with people, how we support them and how we develop them while they are in the service is also essential.

Q678 Chair: Should we be more flexible? We have a pressing problem, and in the short term there is an expert who can help Government sort it out. They are prepared to do it, they leave their corporate world—it could be their privately owned business or whatever—and they step up to help the country. Then we tie them with, “Oh, you might have learned something. You may have picked up a nugget of information. You cannot possibly go back to your own boardroom until you are 97 and both of your parents are driving you there.” It does not necessarily encourage women and men of goodwill to step up pro tem, does it?

Dame Antonia Romeo: In principle, I completely agree. It obviously must be sensible to be able to get in the best people from wherever they come from. That is why I look forward to seeing the outcome of the two BARs reviews, because we need to look seriously at exactly what the basis is on which we have people come in and then go out again. The innovation fellows are a good example of people who come in for one or two years to do some really good work, putting innovation and AI at the heart of what we are doing in Government. They will then go back out. I do not know how it was cracked in that zone.

Q679 Chair: Let me turn briefly to arm’s length bodies, just to see if something is on your radar. If it is, great; if not, I want to put it on your radar. We have spoken about the impartiality of the civil service. Independence of a lot of the arm’s length bodies is, of course, key—one thinks specifically, but not exclusively, about statistics. Surely, independence cannot mean lacking any form of oversight, in governance terms, by some aspect of HMG. Some have come perilously close to implosion, and others undoubtedly will. In terms of the functionality of ALBs, and who and how board recruitment is made, are we making sure those board members understand fully what their powers and remit is? As a Committee, we were very surprised and shocked by the lack of board muscle when it came to UKSA, for example.

Dame Antonia Romeo: As you will be aware, there are two things. There is the sponsorship of the public body, and then there are the public appointments on to the board of the public body. On both of those, the Cabinet Office has a role, but it is essentially for Departments to make the decisions. In terms of sponsorship, the framework agreement sets out responsibilities. That should then be monitored by the Departments. There should be annual effectiveness reviews and so on, but essentially, there are things that can be done if the body is not working as it should, and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

then there are appointments, which, as you know, are governed by the governance code on public appointments.

I understand that we are going to benefit greatly from your and the Committee's involvement in the new ONS chair via the pre-appointment hearing. Obviously, mechanisms like that help to get it right, but again, some of these decisions are signed off by the Prime Minister and some not. Our role is to provide a code of conduct and then address particular issues—we have discussed another particular issue, of which I am well aware and I look forward to the Committee's report on that as well.

Q680 Chair: It strikes us that there is—I am trying to think of a word other than patchy—a lot of variation in how Government Departments view their relationships with the ALBs that they sponsor and define their right or role to question and inquire, which leads to a very confusing accountability mosaic across the landscape. Would you see some merit in providing a uniform template for what the centre, whether that is No.10 or the Cabinet Office, expects departmental perm secs and Secretaries of State to do and how they conduct themselves?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Yes, there is the sponsorship code of good practice, so I wonder if it is an adherence problem, given the situation you described. I am very happy to take that away from the Committee and have a look at that.

Chair: Sam, I know you have been in the Chamber for the statement, but we have just moved on to arm's length bodies, and I have you on my list of Committee colleagues who wanted to ask a question on that.

Sam Carling: Apologies for that; I had to be in the Chamber. We have just covered the first part of that section, I assume.

Chair: We have.

Q681 Sam Carling: We as a Committee have interacted with a number of arm's length bodies, and had questions around how we balance accountability with independence. The main thing I want to understand, Dame Antonia, is: are we getting that balance right or is some rebalancing needed?

Dame Antonia Romeo: The question is about standards, and independence in decision making and on particular decisions, but accountability is about a standard and a quality. Based on the two examples—well, 1.5 examples—we were discussing before, your question is really: in those areas, was there enough accountability for high performance? It should be right to say, "We expect high quality of boards." There is a code of conduct; the code of conduct must be followed, and if it is not being followed, then we should intervene.

Q682 Sam Carling: Who is "we" in that circumstance? Is it Departments? Is it the Cabinet Office?

Dame Antonia Romeo: It would be the Department. The Cabinet Office is essentially responsible for the Government code, but the individuals are appointed to public bodies by the Department. It is not really "we"



HOUSE OF COMMONS

because it is Cat's Department, but that does not mean that the Cabinet Office would not support them in doing it.

Q683 Sam Carling: On the broader point of arm's length bodies, are we getting the balance right around how much of Government delivery is being done by the civil service versus being sent off to arm's length bodies?

Dame Antonia Romeo: That is the whole point of the arm's length bodies review. I referred earlier to the pulling of the lever. One of the things that the Prime Minister was referring to was whether the lever was essentially attached to some arm's length body over which he did not have direct control. The Government in the arm's length bodies review have been looking specifically at where accountability should sit—what accountability should sit with Departments versus what should sit with an independent arm's length body. That has led to a review across Departments of which bodies might be merged with each other, repatriated into the Department or closed altogether. That process will come to fruition in the coming months. The Government's view is that the balance has not been set in the right way. The other thing that is happening now is that there should be a presumption in favour of not creating a new arm's length body.

Chair: Hooray! Sorry, I am allowing my impartiality to become curious.

Sam Carling: I second the Chair's "hooray".

Q684 Chair: Do you think it is justified, justifiable or desirable when an arm's length body created by Government to deliver some element of what was hitherto Government activity then advertises for public affairs people to lobby Government for changes of policy?

Dame Antonia Romeo: It would appear rather odd, would it not?

Chair: They do it.

Dame Antonia Romeo: I suppose it would depend on the specifics. That is exactly the point of the independence. I think there is a question about whether you should pay people to do the lobbying if that is taxpayers' money, but I think it is right that the arm's length body can have an independent position, because if it has been decided by the Government that you are an independent arm's length body, you can get on and be independent. The situation you described does seem a bit odd. Perhaps we should have a conversation separately.

Chair: Perfect. I look forward to that.

Q685 Markus Campbell-Savours: I wonder if we could link the conversation about arm's length bodies to the earlier discussion about civil service pay. The Committee has found during its inquiries that it has become a well-accepted feature of the arm's length bodies that one argument for their creation—which I believe was a significant factor in why many were created—is that they allow individuals to be brought in and the civil service pay grades to be ignored. There are arguments about how you can bring



HOUSE OF COMMONS

in certain technical expertise that would be difficult on civil service pay grades. As part of the discussion around how pay could be changed, is there a view that to stop the creation of new arm's length bodies we need to fix pay, or that we might be able to re-move people into the civil service from arm's length bodies if we were to do so? Is that part of the discussion and the review in the Department?

Dame Antonia Romeo: That is an excellent point. I have not directly thought of it in that way. There are a lot of things broken about the pay system; that would be one. That could be part of the overall review because it is all about asking what system attracts the best people into the most important jobs. It seems clear that we have got a bit out of whack on that; that is one reason I want to review pay. I agree with you, Mr Campbell-Savours, that that seems an obvious thing to consider.

Markus Campbell-Savours: Chair, on that compliment I will hand back to you.

Chair: I would bank that if I were you. Great things beckon when you have that endorsement from the Cabinet Secretary. I am still waiting for mine.

Q686 **Peter Lamb:** In one of your performance objectives you describe yourself as the "guardian of the constitution". What do you understand the constitution to be? How do you understand yourself guarding it? What are you defending it against?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Obviously there are several guardians of the constitution and the Prime Minister holds ultimate responsibility, within the Executive, for guarding the constitution. I have a very particular role as Cabinet Secretary and head of the civil service because I am responsible for the effective running of the Government and therefore of the collective agreement process. I am also the Prime Minister's principal adviser on things such as propriety, constitutional issues and so on. That could be on a question about, for example, conventions in the constitution and how they apply. The IFG has a quite neat way of categorising core and auxiliary guardians, in which the core are the legislature, the Executive and the judiciary.

Q687 **Peter Lamb:** Your role is to support the Prime Minister and the Government, and your role is apparently also to support the constitution. Do you see any conflict in those two roles?

Dame Antonia Romeo: No.

Q688 **Peter Lamb:** What is your view of a situation where a Cabinet Secretary is approached by a Prime Minister who says, "There's a very significant debate that Parliament wants to have; it's incredibly constitutionally significant. I don't want the debate happening. I'm going to go to the palace and tell the Queen that I'm going to prorogue Parliament for the next few weeks so that the debate doesn't happen and I can move on with my treaty negotiations separate from Parliament's oversight." We had a scenario like that, in which the Cabinet Secretary did not intervene, and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the Supreme Court was very clear that that was in breach of the constitution.

Dame Antonia Romeo: The absolutely imperative thing is that the decision, and the ultimate responsibility in the Executive for upholding the constitution, is for the Prime Minister. The Cabinet Secretary can advise, and might give strong advice behind closed doors, but it is only advice. The Prime Minister is who makes the decision in that situation.

Q689 **Peter Lamb:** In that context, you are not so much a guardian of the constitution as a constitutional adviser to the Prime Minister.

Dame Antonia Romeo: There are guardians of the constitution, but not everyone can be a decision maker. The logical conclusion of that point is that there is only one guardian of the constitution in the Executive—the Prime Minister—and, with respect, I do not agree with that. I think that a number of people are guardians of the constitution, and that those are very particular roles, but I also think that the Prime Minister—the head of the elected Government of the day, which the Cabinet Secretary and the whole of the civil service serve—has the ultimate responsibility in the Executive for upholding the constitution.

Q690 **Peter Lamb:** How does the system defend itself against a Prime Minister who chooses not to follow the constitution?

Dame Antonia Romeo: What one can do is advise. The civil service serves, and that is an important part of what we do. We do advise and we do speak truth to power—it is really important that we do that. Obviously, as I have mentioned, we have some particular responsibilities around ensuring that we can retain the confidence of future Governments. It is important to understand the roles of the different people in the system.

Q691 **Peter Lamb:** So the civil service would knowingly violate the UK constitution if required to do so by the Prime Minister?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Not if it broke the law.

Q692 **Peter Lamb:** But the Prime Minister can modify or change the law—that is entirely at his discretion. We have a constitution to try to ensure that our government lingers on, beyond whoever the Prime Minister of the day happens to be. Unfortunately, in the various meetings this Committee has had with the various apparent guardians of the constitution over the last two years, it has been very clear that we are still reliant on a “good chaps” model of government. Quite apart from who may occupy No. 10 next, that model of choosing to follow constitutional principle purely because it is the right thing to do does not appear to be operating anymore. For the previous two Governments, it seemed to be something that they had to be required to do by outside bodies. Do you feel that our constitution currently has sufficient safeguards to protect it from any person who may occupy No. 10 in future?

Dame Antonia Romeo: The first thing to say is that the question of the constitution is a matter for others. Exactly how the constitution works is rather above my pay grade—in fact, it is above the pay grades of most



HOUSE OF COMMONS

people. It is not a written constitution; it evolved over years. There are some very important parts of it and particular institutions that play hugely important roles. You referred to the Supreme Court: the judiciary is also a crucial part of the constitution. Broadly, the Westminster system—the British system—works well. As I have said, we should update some things, such as the Cabinet manual.

You made a point about guardians of the constitution; you will be aware that when the Lords Constitution Committee looked at the role of the Cabinet Secretary in the constitution, it noted that the Cabinet Secretary had a particular role as guardian of the constitution and said that it would be worthwhile to set that out as part of their official responsibilities, which is one of the reasons why it is in my published objectives.

Q693 Peter Lamb: This was not under this system but under the American system, but in response to a ruling by a Supreme Court justice, Andrew Jackson allegedly—apparently it did not actually happen—said that he had “made his decision; now let him enforce it.” The ability of the state to enforce power is held by the Executive. If a Prime Minister was so minded to ignore the judiciary, or, potentially, Parliament—we have international examples of that at the moment, which gives rise for real concern—and the civil service’s only mandate is to do what the Prime Minister instructs them to do, what protection exists for the British public?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I am not sure I necessarily think that the civil service’s core role is to protect the British public from the elected Government of the day. We serve the elected Government of the day.

Q694 Peter Lamb: But if that Government is minded to do harm to the British public?

Dame Antonia Romeo: What I will come back to is that, obviously, we cannot be asked to do something unlawful; and actually, if we were, there are particular rules. The accounting officers make judgments all the time about things that have to be done; as well as being value for money, they have to be within propriety and regular. So there are systems in place where, if you thought you were being asked to do something that did not meet the accounting officer test on managing public money, you could seek a direction. I mean, this is a kind of incredibly interesting—

Q695 Peter Lamb: It is not just hypothetical. We are seeing, internationally, populists coming into office who are minded to use whatever levers are available to them within the state to enforce whatever it is they want to do, and are testing what kind of restrictions are in the system. The overriding conclusion, after two years of speaking to people in this Committee, is that we have essentially no protections in our system other than our politicians, so far, broadly speaking, being good people, even if we disagree about policies.

Chair: We have conventions and no statutory guardrails.

Peter Lamb: Correct. To be honest, in the current circumstances, that gives me enormous terror. If I were a parliamentarian in the Reichstag in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

1930, I would be wondering what my constitutional duty was, at that point in time, to try to put safeguards in place. When I asked the question about what would happen in the event that the Prime Minister came to you about proroguing Parliament, that is not on the level of choosing to round up a group of people, but it is something that the Supreme Court ultimately ruled was illegal, and the civil service went along with it. Is that not something that the British public should be concerned about?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I think there is going along with it and there is doing what it is that democracy requires you to do. I do not think that anybody would be enthusiastic for the unelected civil service to be putting itself in a position of authority above the elected Government. The Government are elected by the people. They represent the people. Our job is to serve the Government, and in a way that retains the confidence of potential future Governments we may serve. I think that is quite clear. Obviously, there can be a lot of check and balance in the advice given, but that is not something that would happen publicly. I do not know what advice my predecessor but one—or two—gave to the Prime Minister at the time. The views of the Committee on this are crucial, obviously.

Q696 **Peter Lamb:** We come back to this point about an elected Government being able to do whatever they want. We are now entering into a period where you have five viable political parties possibly winning elections on turnouts of maybe two thirds of the public, with maybe just over one fifth of those people who turn out voting for them, and potentially not even being the largest party in terms of the voting share. Our constitution essentially was never set up to be a democratic constitution; democracy was grafted on to it. We still have Governments being appointed by the monarch.

We can debate the process through which that conclusion comes to fruition—no doubt the Cabinet manual sets out an awful lot of interesting processes for how that comes about—but its primary goal was to provide stability, and that is why it has so much flexibility. Are we now entering into a period where we need better safeguards as a system, because it can no longer be taken for granted that the people in that system are going to follow the rules because that is the good thing to do?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I think it is a really interesting question, and one on which many much more authoritative and illustrious people than me have expressed views. I would say a couple of things. First, it is clear that this is one of the reasons we need to update the bits where things are written down. The Cabinet manual is just a record of conventions and laws and rules that is not intended to sort of set new ones; none the less, it is now 15 years out of date, which should obviously be rectified.

Secondly, I look forward to having this conversation as part of the review of the operation, performance and transformation of the civil service, because these are the sorts of questions that are reasonable to ask: what is the role of the civil service? Although, as I say, it is quite clearly set out that we serve the Government of the day.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q697 **Peter Lamb:** I am going to come on to the Cabinet manual in just a minute, but I have one more question before that. As part of your function of acting as a steward for the democratic system of Government, and your responsibility to prepare for the long term, how do you weigh expedience for democratically elected Governments today against what you and the civil service may view as the long-term interests of good Government?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Actually, I don't think they are in conflict. It is really all about maintaining the health and resilience, and propriety, of the institutional machinery. That is the best thing to do for now to serve the Government of the day. That is also right to do for the long term.

Peter Lamb: Turning to the Cabinet manual, I think this Committee were the only people in the building who were desperately interested to hear that it was being revised.

Chair: We had a small party.

Q698 **Peter Lamb:** Absolutely. Could you set out what you think the function of the Cabinet manual is, and what it should be?

Dame Antonia Romeo: It sets out the rules, laws and conventions that underpin the operation of the Government as seen from the Executive. It is an Executive document. It is the Prime Minister's document. It is not intended to be something setting new rules, but it is none the less a source of information on the current laws and conventions. To that end, it is extremely useful for people, but I think it is hard to say that it is as useful as it might be when it is 15 years out of date.

Q699 **Peter Lamb:** I do not want to reopen the conversation that we just had, or the earlier conversation about the ministerial code, but when the key documents that both Ministers and the civil service follow regarding constitutional principles are devised by the Government of the day, is there a risk that the rules are essentially being set by the people who are choosing whether or not they want to follow them?

Dame Antonia Romeo: It is an interesting question. The first thing to say is that my intention is to update it rather than to do a complete rewrite in support of the Prime Minister. I think that it is reasonable for the Executive to set out the rules that govern the operation of the Government, for which the Executive is responsible. I think that what you are asking is whether there should be a written constitution separate from the Cabinet manual—which, by the way, is not a codified constitution of any sort; it is literally just a description of the rules overseeing the operation of the Executive. To some extent, that is a different question. I do not think that the Cabinet manual is intended to be a written constitution because we do not have a written constitution. Does that make sense as an answer to your question?

Q700 **Peter Lamb:** For what it is worth, I am not seeking a written constitution. Documents like this, on which we expect the Government to act, feel like they should have wider engagement from the political system rather than just from the same people who are going to be choosing whether they

follow them. Documents that set out the limits of Executive power should not be purely within the control of the Executive; I would have thought that was a fairly reasonable belief system that most constitutions have apart from ours.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Obviously it is going to be consulted on with this Committee and the Lords Constitution Committee, and you will see it in draft. The first version was consulted on quite widely. This is really just an update to bring it into line with where we are now. It is really a timing issue as much as anything else. The first one was written in about two years, so an update should take about nine months, but there is no problem with all views being welcome. I was more making a statement of fact about how the foreword to the previous Cabinet manual was by the then prime Minister and the then Cabinet Secretary.

Q701 **Peter Lamb:** Finally, the current version is so out of date, and it has taken so long to get around to writing one. I briefly note that one of the recommendations for what it should include is a more detailed description of your own role than the current one offers. Do you think that there should be a mechanism for ensuring that there is a regular updating and revising of the Cabinet manual to keep it relevant?

Dame Antonia Romeo: There could be a mechanism. The question is that it is for the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Secretary—or the Prime Minister on the advice of the Cabinet Secretary of the day—to decide.

Q702 **Peter Lamb:** What advice would you give?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I meant in terms of the update. It was one of the things that I talked very early with the Prime Minister about. I do not know why it was not done five years ago and whether it nearly was and something threw it off, or whether nobody had any interest.

Q703 **Chair:** To summarise, as you have heard from Mr Lamb, this Committee is concerned that, although you say that it is not for you to say what your successors might advise, we know that one political party has a policy paper that recommends abolishing your position and would effectively allow the Prime Minister of the day to act in, if not splendid isolation, then without senior mature advice. Our system works because the people who work it want it to work, and naturally understand the limits of power and what is acceptable and unacceptable, but it is an entirely self-applied ordinance.

Can you give us any indication as to whether any thought at the centre—for instance, an update of CRaG or whatever—is being given to whether, in a different time from when most of our norms were established, they are still fit for purpose, just to sort of sense-check them, or whether they should be placed on a statutory footing, so that at least that in this place, should a Prime Minister seek to change the *modus operandi*, that would at least have to go through the transparency of a statutory revocation process.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Do you mean in so far as it relates to the civil service?



Chair: I am talking about the operation of Government.

Dame Antonia Romeo: In so far as it relates to the civil service, the place that will consider that will be the review.

Q704 **Chair:** It is the civil service. It is appointments to the House of Lords. It is whom one appoints to boards of arm's length bodies and others. It is the deployment of patronage, which hitherto has broadly been done responsibly, and where the discharge of even the highest elected office in the land, i.e. the Prime Minister, has been exercised with, for 99.9% of the time, self-imposed barriers of caution and an understanding of the acceptable and the unacceptable, what works and what does not work, and where the unwritten boundaries take you.

The question we possibly have as a Committee, which has evolved, as Mr Lamb has alluded to, over the last several months of hearing from different witnesses in different inquiries, is that it all works—I hate using the phrase “good chaps and chapesses”—because the good chaps and chapesses principle is understood.

Dame Antonia Romeo: I think it is an interesting question. There are no plans at the moment within Government to do that complete review. There are different bits of it being covered—for example, as I mentioned already, the statutory footing of the civil service, including looking at things like impartiality. Then there are other codes, as we have discussed, that govern appointments. The Government are not currently planning to review them all together—the patronage angle, if you like. There is no reason why it should not be done.

Q705 **Chair:** I would certainly urge, in the silo piece of work that is being done—it is applaudable that it is—that somebody pulls it all together as an identifiable package of what the centre, whether it is political or the civil service, has done to modernise, refresh, stress-test, prepare for the future, etc, rather than just the ministerial code over there, and the Cabinet manual over there.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Just to be clear, all these things come in the bucket of the pride and trust angle. There is a coherent plan. My point is that there are some things that we are not currently looking at about appointments. There is no plan to review how public appointments are done, for example. Were there to be, that would be a separate thing that could be brought in.

I should just say one other thing. I see my job as making the impartial permanent civil service as excellent as it can possibly be. I want it to be a world-class institution famous for excellence in delivery. The judgment about how useful or not it is to have an impartial civil service is a matter for others. I run the civil service and that is my role.

Q706 **Richard Baker:** I have a couple of questions on the Union and devolution. Where devolved Governments wish to develop policy in reserved areas, what would be the process for authorising civil servants to carry out such work?

Dame Antonia Romeo: In reserved areas?

Richard Baker: Yes. For example, the Scottish Government might be interested in areas of foreign policy, or business and trade in terms of foreign engagement.

Dame Antonia Romeo: We work very closely all the time with the devolved Governments. The CSPM is the Minister for Intergovernmental Relations and meets with them frequently. You mentioned trade; the Department for Business and Trade will be working all the time with its counterparts, because although this is a reserved area, the consequences of the implementation may happen locally. That would just happen through collaboration, but obviously if a devolved Government wanted to legislate on a reserved area, it would not normally be able to do so without the consent of the UK.

Q707 **Richard Baker:** In terms of developing policy in that area, that might be possible if there was the right collaboration with the Departments in Whitehall.

Dame Antonia Romeo: I suppose it would depend—policy on what?—how in line it was with the UK Government's policy position and also what sort of team you are talking about.

Q708 **Richard Baker:** Are there any civil servants in devolved Governments currently working on how an independent Scotland or Wales might function, or how and when to hold a referendum on the issue?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I thought that was where you might be going with your first question. As you know, the Supreme Court has said very clearly that the Scottish Parliament cannot legislate to hold an independence referendum without formal consent from the UK Government. Given the UK Government's position of believing in the integrity of the UK, I would not expect there to be significant teams working on independence. However, you could imagine—this would be a judgment for the accounting officer of the Scottish Government—a situation where there could be a team working on policy thinking in order to support a conversation between the First Minister and the Prime Minister, for example, because the responsibility of the accounting officer of the Scottish Government is also to support the Scottish Government. I would rely on him to navigate that issue. Obviously he and all civil servants in the Scottish Government are bound by the civil service code, so you could not work on anything that was considered to be party political.

Q709 **Richard Baker:** If there were a team of civil servants working on proposals for an independent Scotland and policy areas there, and that was their entire function for the whole of a Parliament, you would see that as going beyond what the responsibility should be in terms of the devolved civil service.

Dame Antonia Romeo: I would want to discuss it with the permanent secretary. It would depend on precisely what they were working on. Again,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I can see a position where it would be right for some people to be doing some work to prepare the First Minister for a meeting with the Prime Minister on this topic. It would not be right to be doing a huge amount of work on something that the UK Government had ruled out as Government policy, and it would be difficult to justify on a value-for-money basis a significant team spending significant time on something that was going to be nugatory work because it was never going to end up being policy. Does that make sense?

Q710 **Richard Baker:** Yes. That happened in the last Scottish Parliament.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Again, it is a bit of a spectrum. I am not judging that in particular, but I think it would depend on the size of team and resource, and that would be a judgment for the permanent secretary as accounting officer.

Q711 **Richard Baker:** What is your assessment of how well devolution is understood throughout the civil service?

Dame Antonia Romeo: It is probably not understood well enough, given recent changes. What we are seeing at the moment is devolution working. It's in the lingo and a feature of the system, not a bug, to have different parties in different devolved Governments. The question is: how does the system work? In the UK Government, a large number of people should understand how devolution works. I do not think that is high enough. Not everybody needs to understand it; you do not need mandatory training for everybody. If you are working on the wing in Wandsworth, you do not need to know the detail of what is going on with the Sewel convention, for example, but there are a lot of jobs where you do. We have a devolution training programme that the Cabinet Office leads. This is Cabinet Office policy, as you know. Quite a lot of work is happening on that. Also, the national school will probably take some of that work on.

Q712 **Richard Baker:** So you think there is a fair understanding at the moment among civil servants that they have a role in ensuring good governance across the UK and working with colleagues and devolved Governments to ensure that is the case.

Dame Antonia Romeo: Yes. Very specifically, support for devolution and support for the devolution settlement is Government policy. Civil servants should be making sure of that, and civil servants should think all the time about the consequences of Government policies across the Union in devolved nations.

Chair: You are being generous with your time. I hope we are not intruding on it too much, but I know Mr Taylor has a series of questions of relevance and pertinence, which I am minded—

Dame Antonia Romeo: I am only just getting started!

Chair: I have only just concluded my opening remarks, but there we go. Mr Taylor, the floor is yours. We will send out for sandwiches at this rate.

Q713 **Luke Taylor:** Except for a small number of documents withheld at the

request of the Metropolitan police, the Government say they have discharged their duties in relation to the Humble Address of 4 February relating to Peter Mandelson. What lessons have been learned by the civil service in terms of the process for complying with the Humble Address?

Dame Antonia Romeo: A quite considerable number of lessons have been learned, or rather a small number of lessons have been learned quite considerably. Probably the most significant one is record keeping: the need to have proper records of decisions made, the need to ensure that the box processes work properly and that decisions are read out on at the right level to the right person and then captured. There is a series of things around information security and whether you are using the right system—in the lingo, are you using high-side systems for high-side work? That is something that the ISC in particular has commented on.

There is something about the use of non-corporate communication channels. In particular, that relates to, again, how are you capturing the decision? If a decision is made and communicated via WhatsApp, for example, how has that been captured on the formal record? Then there are some issues about consistency of vetting application. I have written to all permanent secretaries reminding them of their responsibilities on a number of these things. Record keeping, by the way, is in the code. The civil service code makes it very clear that you have to maintain accurate records. As well as that, there are a number of reviews that are going to do deeper dives into the lessons. Adrian Fulford is doing one on vetting.

Q714 **Luke Taylor:** You made two references that we will have follow up questions on. The first is the non-corporate communication channels. What has the Humble Address process shown in terms of the extent to which guidelines from 2023 on the use of non-corporate communication channels were being adhered to? To what extent were those guidelines being ignored by people using WhatsApp and deleted messages?

Dame Antonia Romeo: The first thing to say is that we are now doing a review. As you know, we are about to launch a review into the use of non-corporate communication channels, partly to test whether the guidelines that were in place were the correct ones. One of the problems is that they were not as clear as they perhaps might have been, and maybe they were not being adhered to as they might have been either. This process has shown that we need to have a look again at how non-corporate communication channels are used.

Q715 **Chair:** Not adhered to wilfully or not adhered to ignorantly?

Dame Antonia Romeo: It is unclear, but I assume the latter. Probably a lot of people had not read the guidelines.

Q716 **Luke Taylor:** Digging into the practice of disappearing messages, for example, can that be seen as anything other than wilfully avoiding record keeping?

Dame Antonia Romeo: It depends on what you are doing on the channel. The first thing is that you should not really be doing Government official business on the channel. If you are not doing official business on



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the channel, then have all the disappearing messages you like because all you are saying is, "I'll see you later—please pick up the milk," or whatever it may be. I suppose it depends who you are messaging. Whereas if you are actually using the channel and making or expressing decisions, it obviously becomes important that you do not have disappearing messages turned on because they have to be captured—or, if you do, before they disappear, they need to be captured. The review will look into all this.

It is understood that disappearing messages can be useful as a way of controlling the size of the bandwidth taken up by your phone. The thing that I am very focused on is that if an official decision is made and it is something that should go on the official record, that must be captured. Who is capturing it? How are they capturing it?

Q717 Chair: In the review, are we being clear that it is not just the taking of the decision and the appropriate way that that is communicated—

Dame Antonia Romeo: And the advice as well.

Q718 Chair: Particularly if it is cross-departmental, but also if Ministers or others share thoughts as their thinking evolves towards taking a decision.

Dame Antonia Romeo: That should be captured.

Q719 Chair: It should be? So the whole route map should be, not just the destination?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Advice, process of taking a decision, decision—you would expect that to be captured. The test is: if this was a meeting, what would be in the meeting read-out?

Q720 Chair: Something could happen. Let's say Luke and I are two Secretaries of State—wouldn't life be perfect if we were?—and you said to me, "Simon, if I support you on this and you support me on that, we can both get our things through, but that means we've got to knife Bloggins over there." That is a tactical governmental thing between Departments working either together or against each other. Is there an expectation that the tactics of decision making should also be captured?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Not necessarily.

Chair: Because you would not capture a conversation if we were standing in the queue in the gents or something, would you?

Dame Antonia Romeo: The test would be the two Secretaries of State met, the advice was X, there was a discussion about such and such, and the decision was Y. One needs to keep it in the realms of what would happen before NCCCs—non-corporate communication channels—came along.

Q721 Luke Taylor: Relating to the independent review, when do you expect that to report?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Into the NCCCs in particular?

Luke Taylor: Yes.

Dame Antonia Romeo: We have not begun it yet. We are currently in the process of appointing a reviewer, so I don't know, but I imagine it will be in weeks or months.

Q722 **Luke Taylor:** What is the scope of that? Is that entirely into the use of NCCCs?

Dame Antonia Romeo: That review is particularly looking at non-corporate communicate channels. There is a separate review into vetting, as you will know, which Adrian Fulford is leading.

Q723 **Luke Taylor:** Moving on to vetting, are you concerned that the Humble Address process has had an impact on the wider vetting system, particularly people's willingness to engage with it?

Dame Antonia Romeo: It is incredibly important that it does not. I guess I am concerned—I would be very concerned if it did. Obviously, this has all been agreed with the ISC, and I thank the Chair for being involved in some aspects of that. It is incredibly important that we preserve the personal vetting inputs into decisions and summary documents, because those are the crown jewels of the system.

A huge number of people are vetted to a very high level, and you cannot work in some organisations without that vetting. If we made it that people felt that they couldn't share that confidential information—we rely on people being completely open in those discussions, so the preservation and sanctity of that information is important. The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister said that to the House and I think the ISC and everybody else agrees with that. It is important that, through the process, we do not end up making public, or allowing to be public, information that would undermine that.

Q724 **Luke Taylor:** I have a couple of specific questions. Should the Prime Minister be informed about the outcome of the vetting process for direct ministerial appointments, including any areas of concern? If not, why not?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Yes. We have already changed the guidance for direct ministerial appointments and diplomatic appointments made directly by a Minister to say that the Prime Minister or the relevant Minister should be informed of the vetting outcome.

Q725 **Luke Taylor:** On a related question, if the Prime Minister's appointee as US ambassador—a former Cabinet Member, peer and Privy Counsellor—is subject to security vetting, why aren't Ministers?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Elected politicians, as you will know, are exempt, which is to avoid conflict with the democratic process. I think the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister has made these points to Parliament, possibly on the Floor of the House. It is important to preserve the democratic process and not do something in conflict with that.

Q726 **Luke Taylor:** It may well be the case, but is there information that can be

understood and obtained, and risks mitigated, by a Prime Minister or the civil service?

Dame Antonia Romeo: I suppose the Prime Minister could decide to change that, but I do not think there are any plans to do so.

Chair: There is the presumption that PET and the signing of the ministerial code—

Dame Antonia Romeo: There is due diligence. There is the independent adviser on ministerial standards, and there are roles for people, but this is specifically about vetting and whether you vet Ministers. Obviously, there are due diligences done, conflicts checked and things like that.

Chair: If I may, this is an observation on behalf of the public. This is intended to give power to your elbow—if your elbow needs power; I don't think it does. In answer to Mr Taylor's question, you mentioned record keeping—keeping a note of decisions and so on—and ignorance and/or non-compliance of guidance and regulations with regards to non-corporate communications.

Most people out there would think that we live in a hugely mature democracy that has evolved over a period of time, and those two deficiencies you have identified would come as an enormous surprise, because they would be seen as table stakes. Maybe we have all had too much of a diet of "Yes, Minister", but the civil service did not think to keep all the papers and all the records of the fact that the Prime Minister would not necessarily have been told, on a direct ministerial appointment, that there might be a question mark over who that person was. Does it not point to the need for that—I am loath to use the term "root and branch"—big, energetic overview as to how the British state functions, the role that the civil service plays in that and how the civil service supports Ministers in delivering change? It must power you up, does it not?

Dame Antonia Romeo: Yes, I agree with that. For me, it comes back to the code and the point about adherence to the code. The code is quite clear. I know you are making a broader point, but I am also saying that the code is entirely clear that official records must be kept. There is a question as to whether people are deeply understanding the code and living and breathing it, but I take your wider point.

Q727 **Chair:** That is why this Committee is quite keen on this. I am not expecting an answer to this point—it is a sort of thought piece for you to take away—but how we operate as a democracy is littered with codes, strategies and guidance in different places, and they presuppose that you read them once, you commit them verbatim to memory and they are for ever at your fingertips. I am pretty certain that we would all say, "Oh yes, the Nolan principles are frightfully important," but give us all a sheet of paper and ask us to jot down the seven, and I would be very surprised if all of us came up with the seven—I am not suggesting that we do that as some sort of pub quiz. This needs pulling together, because these documents are inclined to just sit on bookcases, prop open windows or keep fire doors open and so on. They are absolutely germane to the good



HOUSE OF COMMONS

functioning of the state, and recent events seem a good opportunity to really hammer that home—not in a bashing-people-over-the-head way, but in a positive way as to their importance.

Dame Antonia Romeo: I agree. To your point about root and branch, the fundamental review can look at some of this as well, because these are important issues. I should also say that there is a not great word but a good concept—sludge busting—

Chair: That makes us all sound like Dyno-Rod or something.

Dame Antonia Romeo: That project is under way, which the Minister for the Cabinet Office and the Attorney General are leading. That is essentially about clearing out, because there is a lot of stuff around, and some of these things—

Chair: His Majesty's sludge buster—it could be the new Privy Council appointment, couldn't it? But yes, it is an important thing to do. Dame Antonia, thank you. As a Committee, we look forward to more of these sessions as your work progresses. We wish you well with it, and we look forward to hearing about things as they evolve.