



## Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

### Oral evidence: The Work of the Cabinet Office, HC 118

Thursday 10 September 2020

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 10 September 2020.

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Members present: Mr William Wragg (Chair); Ronnie Cowan; Jackie Doyle-Price; Rachel Hopkins; Mr David Jones; David Mundell; Tom Randall; Lloyd Russell-Moyle; Karin Smyth.

Questions 287 - 352

#### Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office.

#### Examination of witness

Witness: Michael Gove.

Q287 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to another hybrid public meeting of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee. I am here in the committee room with a number of Committee members, along with our witness, the Minister, Michael Gove, this afternoon, with some of my Committee colleagues in their homes and offices joining us virtually. Minister, we appreciate you have had an extremely busy day today, but we were hoping for longer than the hour session that we are going to get with you. We will be extremely grateful if you could commit to coming again to the Committee at your earliest possible convenience to discuss some of the things that otherwise we are not going to have a chance to explore with you this afternoon.

**Michael Gove:** Yes, absolutely.

Q288 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed. Could I therefore kick off, please, and thank you for finally releasing the list of ministerial responsibilities, after much prompting from this Committee and others? It is noticeable within the Cabinet Office that many of your junior Ministers "support you in various policy areas". Is ministerial accountability clear within the



Cabinet Office?

**Michael Gove:** Yes.

Q289 **Chair:** Could you describe the nature of their support?

**Michael Gove:** Yes. It obviously depends on the different areas that I discharge. In short order, the Minister for the Constitution and Devolution supports me in making sure not just that the intergovernmental relations that the Cabinet Office oversees—meetings of the Joint Committee on European negotiations and so on—run smoothly, but she is also heavily involved in policy work, whether that relates to specific constitutional issues, like the reform of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act or how we can make sure that the UK internal market works best.

One of the reason for a delay in finalising all the responsibilities is that Julia Lopez, another one of the very talented junior Ministers in the Department, was in Australia at the time the Covid pandemic broke. It was only when Julia came back that we were able to finalise all of them.

It is also the case that sometimes responsibilities shift within the Department. For example, we have a joint Minister with HM Treasury, Lord Agnew. He has recently acquired additional responsibility for some HMRC-related issues in connection with the implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol.

Q290 **Chair:** Moving on with that theme, is it clear where accountability lies between the Civil Service and Ministers?

**Michael Gove:** Yes. The buck stops with Ministers.

Q291 **Chair:** What are Permanent Secretaries accountable for, as opposed to Ministers?

**Michael Gove:** Permanent Secretaries, like all civil servants, work to ensure that the Government of the day's priorities are implemented. Ultimately, it is the case that we are accountable, as Ministers, to Parliament, and we bear direct accountability for the actions of our Departments.

Q292 **Chair:** Where does responsibility lie when policy goes wrong: with the Minister or with the civil servant?

**Michael Gove:** Sometimes the responsibility can lie with many Ministers. The judgment as to when policy goes wrong of course is rarely a definitive one that gets 100% consensus.

Q293 **Chair:** No, but, broadly speaking, it tends to be reasonably obvious though, does it not?

**Michael Gove:** Yes.

Q294 **Chair:** How can we tell whether it is the Civil Service or the Government that are responsible for that broad consensus of things not going quite to



plan?

**Michael Gove:** There is generally a wealth of evidence—Select Committees are often experts at both unearthing and analysing it—to draw conclusions about why things have gone wrong in particular areas. That judgment is one that is never a science but relies on the assessment of evidence and the exercise of judgment.

Q295 **Chair:** Do you appreciate the difference between responsibility and accountability?

**Michael Gove:** Yes. Again, Ministers are accountable to Parliament, they are responsible for what goes on in their Departments and they take responsibility for that. No Minister, given the way in which modern Government works, will be aware of every submission circulating within that Department, every decision that might be made and every administrative process that might go on.

For example, my colleague who is the Secretary of State at the Department for Work and Pensions is responsible for one of the largest Civil Service workforces, providing one of the most important services. If a single universal credit mistake is made, that is deeply regrettable for the individual involved, but I do not think anyone would say that ultimately the person who was accountable for it—and you would want to investigate why, if it was part of a broader, systemic failure, that systemic failure had been allowed to continue—would be the Secretary of State. I do not think anyone would say that individual bug in the system was her or his fault.

Q296 **Chair:** No, but that is a very specific example. What about broad policy? Take, purely at random, a Department such as the Department for Education, which presumably knew that examinations were not taking place and that therefore there might be some issue with an important aspect of its work. Then very senior officials within the Department, or indeed an agency, determined that they should fall on their swords. Is it not peculiar that a Minister might not do the same?

**Michael Gove:** I have been Secretary of State for Education in the past and I appreciate how complex many of these questions are. I know that the Education Select Committee is taking evidence, I think from Ofqual and others, about this question.

The challenges that were faced by Governments across the United Kingdom as a result of the Covid pandemic were unprecedented. There was a broad consensus that, in the circumstances where it would be difficult to press ahead with examinations, an alternative method of assessment had to be found. Because it was unprecedented, inevitably it was a challenging delivery environment.

Q297 **Chair:** You agree that responsibility can be shared but that accountability rests solely with the Minister concerned.



**Michael Gove:** Ultimate accountability rests with the Minister, yes.

Q298 **Chair:** Pretty much like Harry Truman, it would be helpful if Ministers had that motto on their desk of the buck stopping with them.

**Michael Gove:** Most Ministers are conscious of that. I remember Jack Straw saying that, when he was Home Secretary, he was very conscious of the fact that, at any given moment, there were things happening in his Department that could lead to unfortunate political consequences for him. It is part of political life.

My other view also is that, wherever possible—it is a point that I made in the context of the Civil Service—we should ensure that experience, authority and deep subject expertise is prized. We would want to keep people, particularly people who were passionate about delivering in a particular area, in post, or in that area, or in that region, for as long as possible.

Q299 **Chair:** In order to clarify where that heavy responsibility lies, should the Civil Service be more willing to ask for formal ministerial directions, or do you think it is more likely that they will, in light of recent events?

**Michael Gove:** I do not think it is more likely, but sometimes it is appropriate, and I have issued them myself in the past.

Q300 **Karin Smyth:** Mr Gove, we corresponded as a Committee with you over the summer about the UK Internal Market Bill. We now have what I think we can all agree is an extraordinarily quick parliamentary timetable to pursue the Bill. We are also expecting the Government's Constitution, Democracy and Rights Commission to report. Can you talk us through the Government's view about how the speed of this Bill, in light of other constitutional Bills we are expecting, respects the various parts of the United Kingdom and will enhance our democracy and rights for people across the United Kingdom?

**Michael Gove:** The important thing to stress about the UK Internal Market Bill is that is primarily an economic measure. That is why it is the Business Department that is leading on it. For the last 40 years many of the rules that have governed the circulation of goods within the UK have been EU single market rules. The UK Internal Market Bill is there to ensure that, as we leave the European Union, we have a robust legal framework to underpin that.

You mentioned the constitution commission. It is the case that, inevitably, there are constitutional matters that we will need to address in this Parliament, including the repeal of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act and so on. In the meantime, one of the reasons for making sure we can proceed with the UK Internal Market Bill is that businesses have told us that they would prefer to have certainty at the end of the transition period on how the UK internal market will operate.

Q301 **David Mundell:** Mr Gove, as you are with us, can I ask something



specific on the UK Internal Market Bill? One of the dangers of proceeding at pace is that misinformation abounds. One piece of misinformation I am concerned about is the suggestion that the UK Internal Market Bill could impact on the Barnett formula. I wonder if you are in a position to categorically rule that out.

**Michael Gove:** Yes, I can. There is nothing in the UK Internal Market Bill that will or is intended to in any way bear on or have an impact on the Barnett formula. The Barnett formula is a tried and trusted way of making sure that the unique needs of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland within our United Kingdom are protected when it comes to the allocation of expenditure. Of course, there is some expenditure outwith the Barnett formula. For example, we touched on DWP earlier. It is the case that DWP administer universal credit across the whole country. The Barnett formula is not imperilled in any way by this Bill.

Q302 **David Mundell:** Obviously in the Chamber next week there will be an opportunity to debate the impact of the Bill on the devolution settlements. Can you set out for us what the Government's overall vision for devolution within the United Kingdom is? Indeed, is there one within Government?

**Michael Gove:** Yes, there is. Our overall vision is that we believe that devolution provides the best of both worlds and that, in all those parts of the United Kingdom in which there are devolved Administrations, both Governments should work together for the good of our citizens. Your constituents have the Scottish Government responsible for the delivery of education. They are responsible for the administration of our UK National Health Service in Scotland. They are responsible for a plethora of other important matters, all of which were clearly devolved in the original devolution legislation. Indeed, more powers have been given to Holyrood since then, not least in the Scotland Act, which you had such an important role in bringing to the House of Commons and through the House of Commons.

At the same time, we also believe that every part of the United Kingdom benefits from the broad shoulders of the UK Treasury and the strength of the common ties that bind us. The important way to proceed is to make sure that both Governments work in the interest of all. That is the position of other unionist parties, like the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats. Each of us might have our own ideas about individual aspects of the constitution, but all of us recognise that strength. Of course, our colleagues from the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru would prefer just to have one Government working on its own for the individual parts of the United Kingdom. I do not believe that is right, but of course I respect the argument.

Q303 **David Mundell:** In terms of the relationship of the UK Government with the devolved Administrations and Parliaments, a report was commissioned from Lord Dunlop into how that relationship could be improved and the UK Government could act more effectively in relation to



its responsibilities and relationships. When the Minister for the Constitution and Devolution, for whom I have a lot of respect, was before this Committee, her answers to our simple questions of whether that report was going to be published were, frankly, unsatisfactory. I wonder, perhaps, if you could clarify whether the Dunlop report will be published.

**Michael Gove:** Yes, it will. It is an excellent report. It makes a series of practical recommendations. Many of those recommendations are in the process of being implemented. Any deficiency in answering the questions will have been as a result of what I was doing, rather than anything the Minister was doing.

**David Mundell:** The buck was stopping with you.

**Michael Gove:** The buck was stopping with me. My approach was that I wanted to make sure that, when we publish the Dunlop report, we can say not, "This is a plan of action that we are punting into the future", but, "These are a series of recommendations and you can see that we have responded to all of them". Some of the recommendations in the report we are implementing in a slightly different way from the way in which Lord Dunlop argued for, but overall it is an excellent report. I want to thank him for it and we will publish it.

Q304 **Chair:** When?

**Michael Gove:** Later this year

Q305 **Chair:** Later this year. There is no greater specificity than that.

**Michael Gove:** No. One of the things that I want to do is to make sure, without prejudice to the views of the devolved Administrations, that we can conclude a review of intergovernmental relations. I am very keen that we should do that. The Minister for the Constitution and Devolution is working on that. When that cake is baked, if it is, the report can be published. That depends on progress with the devolved Administrations. To be fair to all the devolved Administrations, they have been very keen to make progress on it, though there are still one or two bits of contention.

Q306 **David Mundell:** You will publish the report in full and say what you have done in respect of each part.

**Michael Gove:** Yes. We want to publish the report, to thank Lord Dunlop, to explain what we have done in order to implement it, and, where we disagree about aspects of implementation, to explain, not because we think his reasoning is wrong but just because some circumstances have moved on.

Q307 **Ronnie Cowan:** To tidy something you said earlier on, Mr Gove, you said the devolved powers were defined in the Scotland Act. The devolved powers are not defined in the Scotland Act. The reserved powers are defined, and if it is not reserved it is devolved by default. Coming to the UK Internal Market Bill, you also said it does not affect Barnett, but this



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Bill allows the UK Government to impose their projects on the people of Scotland. Therefore, that could affect funding set aside for schools and hospitals. The funding can be affected, determined by how you use this Bill. This Bill is so open in many things that it can do that it can undermine food standards, agriculture and building projects in Scotland. It also undermines the laws in Scotland. I cannot see how you can possibly justify this as being a good thing for a healthy devolved Parliament.

**Michael Gove:** You raise a number of very important points, Ronnie. The first thing is about the UK Government imposing things on Scotland. It depends on how you use that verb. You can argue that the UK Government has imposed the furlough scheme, Eat Out to Help Out and the Barnett formula on Scotland.

It is the case that the broad shoulders of the UK Government and Treasury have meant that public spending in Scotland, both through the Barnett formula and through these other measures, has been higher than in other parts of the United Kingdom. That is quite right too. I would always defend it, and I sometimes have to defend it to colleagues from other parts of the United Kingdom. It is not a matter of imposition. It is a matter of sharing, working together and respecting the devolution settlement. The whole point about the devolution settlement is that there is a role for both Governments working together. That is what that Bill brings even more firmly into focus.

You made a point about apparent dangers on food standards, agriculture and so on. Not at all; that is stuff and nonsense. When you think about agriculture in Scotland, which is a critically important part of Scotland's economy, the case is that the administration of agriculture in Scotland, the disbursement of support to farmers and environmental regulations are all devolved matters, and a good thing too. In fact, it is the case that, as a result of our departure from the European Union, the Scottish Government have additional powers to control what happens in agriculture, which they did not have before.

Q308 **Ronnie Cowan:** You are talking about mutual recognition of standards. If there is mutual recognition, that can be imposed from the UK Government.

**Michael Gove:** No, I think that is a misunderstanding on your part. Let me complete the point. It is the case that your colleague and my friend, Fergus Ewing, has brought forward legislation in the Scottish Parliament to simplify the common agricultural policy and to alter it in circumstances that are uniquely in Scotland's interests. He would not have been able to bring forward the legislation in the way that he has if Scotland was still in the EU.

My understanding of the Scottish Government's position is that they would like Scotland to leave the United Kingdom and to re-enter the EU. If it were the case that Scotland did that, the additional freedoms that



the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government will enjoy after 31 December would no longer exist.

**Ronnie Cowan:** That is a completely different argument.

**Michael Gove:** Let me finish, Ronnie, and then I am sure you can come back. It would be an odd thing, as the former Scottish Government Minister, Alex Neil, has pointed out, and indeed the former depute leader of the SNP, Jim Sillars, has pointed out, for a movement that wants greater independence to separate from the United Kingdom and then to make itself, within the EU, more dependent on a body over which it exercised less influence and, in the process, to relinquish powers.

Q309 **Ronnie Cowan:** You are in danger of talking about Scottish independence. That is not what we are talking about here today. You have moved to a completely different channel here. That is not what we are talking about here. You need to reread clause 46 if you honestly believe that you are not imposing upon the opportunities for the Scottish Government to impose their own powers, their own food standards and their own building projects. Reread clause 46. This is not just the Scottish National Party. The Labour Welsh Government have also made clear they vehemently oppose this process.

**Michael Gove:** I am sure that we will find there will be lots of Labour voices discussing how we can make the United Kingdom stronger. That is the shared commitment of everyone I know within the Labour Party, but we take a different position. Conservatives, this Government, want to make devolution work. The Scottish National Party does not believe in devolution. That is a perfectly legitimate position. It does not want devolution to work. It wants devolution to fail because it wants independence, separation then re-joining the European Union, and the surrender of additional powers and autonomy that Scotland and the whole of the United Kingdom would enjoy.

Q310 **Ronnie Cowan:** That would be a matter for the people of Scotland.

**Michael Gove:** Of course people will vote in the future on these questions. The key thing is the Scottish National Party position is to separate from the United Kingdom in order to be more dependent on another political entity. As I pointed out, very distinguished nationalist figures like Jim Sillars, Alex Neil and others have pointed out the logical inconsistency in it.

Q311 **Karin Smyth:** If I can come back, I think what we have heard is that the Government have this excellent report. We take your word for how excellent it is, because obviously none of the Committee have seen it. In fact, you are implementing the report but you are not publishing it, but you are progressing with the UK Internal Market Bill, which I think everyone would recognise and we are starting to hear is hugely controversial and at least unsettling for the devolved regions. How can you be doing those things simultaneously? Why do you not just publish Dunlop now in advance of the Bill?



**Michael Gove:** The report bears on a range of areas where we can make the union work better. The UK Internal Market Bill is primarily an economic measure that is required as a result of our departure from the European Union, which provides us with significant additional opportunities as well. It is fair to say that, unless something unprecedented happens, the Dunlop report will be published before the UK Internal Market Bill reaches the statute book.

The other point is that, with the UK Internal Market Bill, there is a broad consensus, certainly among unionist parties, that the UK internal market is worth preserving and enhancing. There are technical questions about how one does so, and I am looking forward to the debates about those, in which Alok Sharma and BEIS colleagues will engage. There is a difference between that approach and the approach of Ronnie's party. They do not believe in a UK internal market.

Q312 **Karin Smyth:** With respect, it is an economic Bill with huge constitutional issues, which is the subject of our correspondence over the summer, which is why you have Minister Smith also working on it.

**Michael Gove:** Yes, I think that is right. That is fair.

**Karin Smyth:** To pretend that it is simply an economic Bill—

**Michael Gove:** No, it is primarily an economic measure and it becomes even more important economically as we think about how we recover from Covid. Reducing costs for companies and workers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is part of the recovery programme overall. You are right, of course; there are always constitutional questions when you are dealing with these matters.

Q313 **Karin Smyth:** Finally, what concerns do you have about the unsettling of the very fragile situation in Northern Ireland with some of the parts of this Bill.

**Michael Gove:** I know there are many different views, but my view is that the Bill makes sure that Northern Ireland citizens and businesses have unfettered access to the rest of the United Kingdom. That was one of the things that was guaranteed in the protocol that is part of the withdrawal agreement and the Bill gives effect to that.

Q314 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Secretary Gove, thank you very much. You mentioned about making devolution work and I very much agree with that. As we all know, we constantly obsess about devolution in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, but its poorer sister in the question is what we do with England. Is how we deal with England more important in making devolution work? While we have a British Parliament that also is an English Parliament, the Scot nats and the Welsh nats will constantly have a legitimate grievance that it is being done to them because there is not a clear delineation of power. How are you involved in some of those discussions around English devolution? Where would you see the direction of that travel going, beyond just mayors?



**Michael Gove:** Lloyd, you raise a very important question on which there are a range of influential and important currents of opinion. First, the lead Department in thinking about devolution in England is MHCLG. A White Paper is going to be published a wee bit later by Robert Jenrick, and it will look at some of these questions. It will look at the extension of mayors, as you point out. It will also look at the way in which we can perhaps revisit some aspects of the local government settlement. It will also build on some of the successful devolution of powers that metro mayors and others have enjoyed.

My own view is that I would not want myself to dictate where this conversation should end, because it is important that we take account of the views of people in different parts of England. You are absolutely right that there is an issue when you have the constituent parts of the United Kingdom and England forming 85% of the population. The important thing for us to do is to have a mature debate about how we can resolve that. I am not myself a fan of what some people would call federalism, but the important thing to do is to have that respectful conversation, because constitutions evolve over time to take account of new challenges.

Q315 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** I take that you are not necessarily a supporter of federalism yourself. If we, as you quite rightly pointed out, have England that has the bulk of the economy and population and we constantly treat England as one homogenous block, even if we break down the power within England, versus another set of smaller blocks, that imbalance of power is constantly going to be where the grit in our union is. Is there not some sense in breaking down England, so we do not talk about England as one homogenous block, but instead talk about the different cultural and political current? Therefore, is that not a question that is not just local government but a question that should sit in your Department, which is about the broader issue of how England fits in the constitution?

**Michael Gove:** Yes, it is a perfectly legitimate conversation—not just legitimate but important and vital—in which there are different views. My own view is that a sense of understandable pride in England and its history is a good thing. I also recognise that, within England, there are local and regional identities. We should look at how local government and governance overall reflects that.

MHCLG is the lead Department. Rob Jenrick has been giving a lot of thought to this. The excellent Simon Clarke, who stood down as Minister two days ago, did an enormous amount of work on this and I want to pay tribute to him. Again, whether in a Select Committee or elsewhere, it is a good thing to talk about.

I should say that some of the most interesting thinking about this has been done by people within the Labour tradition. People like John Denham have been thinking about the position of England within the United Kingdom. While I do not agree with everything he says, he has opened up and led a very fruitful avenue of debate.



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Q316 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Just to clarify, from your Department, you do not necessarily think that relationship with England and Scotland, England and Wales and England and Northern Ireland should necessarily change. You are just talking here about the relationship with how power is split up within England.

**Michael Gove:** I am always willing to look at ways in which we can make the United Kingdom overall stronger. I have preferences and judgments based on experience, but it is always the case, as the experience that I alluded to that David Mundell had shows, that, if a case can be made for additional steps that can be taken that strengthen the United Kingdom and adjust the devolution settlement in the right way, great. The really important thing is that we recognise the success of devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, do not do anything to undermine that, but work with the Governments there in order to make it work. The broader questions you raise are legitimate questions for medium-to-long-term debate.

Q317 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Finally, I will just put this out there. Are there any discussions with your colleagues at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office about how our overseas territories fit into that constitutional arrangement going forward? Gibraltar is clearly now out of the European Union and will need to be part of a new constitutional settlement in terms of the market for them as well. Is your Department leading on that, or is that, again, something that is hived off to the Foreign Office and not part of that bigger constitutional settlement question?

**Michael Gove:** It is part of a broader question. I know you asked about the overseas territories. Narrowly, the Crown dependencies are the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice. I take a very close interest in the Crown dependencies, our relationship with them and our wider relationship with the world. If you include the whole British family, including the overseas territories, I take a close interest in that. The FCDO lead on that, but we have discussions—I have had discussions with Foreign Secretaries past and present—about the Falklands, Gibraltar and other OTs as well.

Q318 **Ronnie Cowan:** Very briefly, Mr Gove, you have said a number of times that devolution is a great success. I am just wondering, if it is such a good success for those people who live in Scotland, why do the latest polls show 56% of people voting for independence?

**Michael Gove:** Over the course of the last 10 to 12 years, we have a seen, notwithstanding the recent challenges the Covid pandemic has shown, a significant improvement in productivity in Scotland and in the economic performance of Scotland. What is striking—I am quoting, of course, from the response the Scottish Government gave to our *UK Internal Market White Paper*—is how, since 2008, 12 years ago, most years you have had either a Conservative or coalition Government, Scotland's economy has improved.



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When I visit Scotland to see my mum and dad, be with friends or discharge my responsibilities, I am struck by how rich Scotland's cultural life is, by how robust and attractive its institutions are, by how, notwithstanding everything we have seen over the last few months, there is a spirit of enterprise and optimism. I am also struck by the fact that most folk think that the really important thing for politicians to do at the moment is to concentrate on working together to get through the Covid crisis, to improve our economy and to improve schools and hospitals. Constitutional matters, while they matter to you and me, are never very high on their list of priorities.

Q319 **Mr Jones:** Just briefly, may I say, from a Welsh perspective, how very pleased I am that the Government are introducing the UK Internal Market Bill, which will be hugely appreciated by Welsh businesses?

**Michael Gove:** Thank you, David. It is certainly the case that there have been a number of Welsh businesses that have been in touch with us to say they are glad this legislation is putting everything on a firmer footing.

Q320 **Mr Jones:** The Cabinet Office webpage describes the role of the Office as supporting the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister of course has his own establishment in Number 10. Could you explain how the Cabinet Office works with the Number 10 establishment?

**Michael Gove:** Yes. It is like a sort of gearing mechanism within the machinery of Government. The Cabinet Office is an additional cog that makes sure that Government machinery overall does what the Prime Minister wants. In narrow accounting terms, Number 10, the Prime Minister's private office, his Policy Unit and so on, fall within the Cabinet Office overall, in terms of spending. I do not think anyone would suggest, even though it is the Cabinet Office spending settlement overall that pays for it, that we are anything other than servants of the Prime Minister. The Cabinet Office is there to make sure the Prime Minister's priorities and the Government's manifesto are implemented. It has particular responsibilities when it comes to the efficiency of the operation of Government, the resilience of our constitution and, at the moment, preparation for the end of the transition period.

Q321 **Mr Jones:** Therefore, I imagine there is a very close interface between the staff of Cabinet Office and the staff of Number 10

**Michael Gove:** Yes, absolutely. The new Cabinet Secretary was a Cabinet Office official who then went to work for the Prime Minister in Number 10 and who of course is now Cabinet Secretary. Famously, you move from the Cabinet Office to Number 10 by going through a single linked door. The two physical Departments are linked in that way. It is often the case that officials from the Prime Minister's private office or the Policy Unit will be meeting with officials in the Cabinet Office, and also the Treasury, to co-operate on the Government's priorities.

Q322 **Mr Jones:** We have heard a lot about the new collaboration hub within the Cabinet Office. Could you describe its work, please?



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**Michael Gove:** Yes. It has attracted a lot of outside attention. I would not want to exaggerate its significance, nor would I want to minimise it. In essence, it is a way of co-locating some of those who work in the Cabinet Office secretariat and who are responsible for preparing the papers for Cabinet committees and for Government decisions, with individuals from the Prime Minister's Policy Unit, in order to make sure that the policies that are at the heart of the Government and the material that is generated for Ministers to make decisions can be shared in the same room. It is another manifestation of something that has happened throughout the years, and I think across administrations, where the centre works together in order to make sure the Prime Minister's priorities are delivered.

Q323 **Mr Jones:** Is it a Cabinet Office body, or is it a Number 10 one?

**Michael Gove:** It is Cabinet Office and it will have Cabinet Office and Number 10 staff working in it.

Q324 **Mr Jones:** Is it staffed by political appointees, permanent Civil Service or a mixture of both?

**Michael Gove:** It is a mixture, because the Prime Minister's Policy Unit has traditionally had a mixture of secondees from elsewhere in the Civil Service and people from outside who are appointed, some of whom will have a political background, some of whom do not. Obviously they will have political views, but they will be hired because of their expertise and authority in particular disciplines.

Q325 **Mr Jones:** What is the chain of command, so to speak, within there? Is it headed by the Prime Minister's chief of staff?

**Michael Gove:** We are still in the process of resolving all of these questions. I imagine that people will be ultimately answerable in that office to the Cabinet Secretary, whether or not it is the case that the Permanent Secretary at Number 10, if a new one is appointed, which I imagine they will be, or the Cabinet Office Permanent Secretary would be the person who would be IC there.

Q326 **Mr Jones:** That remains to be determined.

**Michael Gove:** Yes.

Q327 **Chair:** Building on that metaphor, is that famous door ever locked at the moment?

**Michael Gove:** I have never seen it locked. You need a pass to get through and there are some people whose faces are sufficiently familiar over time not necessarily to need that pass.

Q328 **Chair:** It would suggest a very close relationship between the Cabinet Office and Number 10.

**Michael Gove:** Yes.



Q329 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** I would like to ask a couple of questions about communications and how the Government are going to be running that going forward. Why do you think that greater centralisation of Government communications in the Cabinet Office is necessary?

**Michael Gove:** One thing that Francis Maude, as Cabinet Office Minister, did when he was my predecessor was to bring together certain cross-Government functions. Whether it is the management of the Government's property estate, the management of the Government Digital Service or the provision of legal advice across Government, rather than each Department going its own way, there were economies of scale and a greater level of co-ordination if all of them came together. GCS, the Government Communication Service, preceded this Prime Minister or my own arrival in office.

Communications overall changes and evolves over time. You need to make sure that you keep pace with modern platforms and modern media. What is being contemplated is simply the next refinement of a process that had already been in place in the past.

Q330 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** How does that work in terms of messaging? Obviously the Government will have their overall narrative. If we take, for example, the coronavirus response, clearly that is a cross-Government issue and there are obviously good reasons to centralise communications, not least to get consistency of message when you have many Departments involved. Equally, there will be other areas of policy that are much more niche, where the audience is perhaps not the general public but individual professions, for example. How do we get the balance right? How do you see that playing out in the future, in terms of what will be managed centrally and what individual Departments would do, particularly in terms of setting that message?

**Michael Gove:** That is a very important point. We can describe potential situations, but we will not know every one in advance. As a general rule, I think you are right. If you have something like a pandemic, DHSC will be in the lead. Other Government Departments will have to co-ordinate their message, as appropriate, with it. Also, to take DHSC as an example, it will have a relationship with specialist titles, with its own staff and indeed with the employees in the NHS, which will require communications professionals whose job is very much to make sure that those specific specialist channels are properly communicated through. Again, it is not quite you know it when you see it, but, like in any organisation, it is a process of working out what we should do effectively centrally, what it is that we should leave devolved and how we ensure there is an appropriate process of reviewing when that balance may need to change.

Q331 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** A general area of concern that people have expressed is that there is a risk that messages could become overtly politicised through centralisation. From what you have just said, the centralisation appears to be more about operational nuts and bolts, rather than messaging. Is that correct?



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**Michael Gove:** Yes, absolutely. It is important that the Government of the day are clear about their priorities, clear about why they are choosing to deliver them and candid and take people into their confidence about some of the challenges but also some of the achievements. There is a distinction that is drawn between the Civil Service implementing the Government's policies of the day and explicitly political activity. That distinction absolutely needs to be maintained.

Q332 **Tom Randall:** You said in your recent Ditchley Lecture that you suggested that the Civil Service should be subject to significant reform. So far we have seen Permanent Secretaries replaced. Can we expect to see a programme setting out the full agenda for Civil Service reform at any point?

**Michael Gove:** Yes, I hope so. I know that it would seem unfair to pick you up on this one verb. When you talked about imposition, the one thing I would say, and different people will draw their own conclusions, is that Civil Service reform and change is something we will be doing with the Civil Service, not to the Civil Service. That is why I am working with colleagues in the Cabinet Office to draw up an outline paper that will put flesh on the thin bones of what I said at Ditchley and of course what the Permanent Secretary, Alex Chisholm, has said at Civil Service Live and elsewhere. The short answer is yes.

Q333 **Tom Randall:** The Prime Minister's chief adviser has suggested that the Civil Service should be subject to hard rain. If you are working with them, they are not going to be subject to hard rain.

**Michael Gove:** No. Those words were attributed to the Prime Minister's chief adviser at a particular meeting. I was not in the meeting. I have colleagues who were; there were three of them. They do not recall him having said that, so my understanding of the reporting is that this is one rare occasion where there was a mishearing. That is what I was told. I have never heard him use that phrase.

Q334 **Tom Randall:** In terms of the make-up of the Civil Service, in the lecture I think you said you wanted the Civil Service to be less southern, less middle class, less anywhere, more somewhere. How do we achieve that? Does that require greater political intervention in the recruitment and management of the Civil Service? How do we achieve that aim?

**Michael Gove:** I do not think political, but I think ministerial and Civil Service leadership. One of the things that the Permanent Secretary at the Cabinet Office, Alex Chisholm, and I are highly motivated to achieve is a greater dispersal of jobs across the United Kingdom through a programme called Places for Growth. One thing that the coronavirus pandemic has reinforced is that we do not need to have every civil servant based in Whitehall—not that they are, but you know what I mean. Greater dispersal of roles is a good thing in terms of broadening the talent pool and in terms of helping to supporting economic growth and recovery across the United Kingdom.



There is a broader question we always need to look at. Any organisation always has a tendency to recruit in its own image. One thing I wanted to do was to make sure we were as diverse as possible. When I was interviewed by Gloria De Piero, the former Labour MP, on Times Radio the other week, she pointed out to me the relative lack of people in the Senior Civil Service who had come from particularly challenging schools and socioeconomic backgrounds. We have to do better in that regard.

The final thing I would say at this stage is that everything I said in the Ditchley Lecture was my view, but I shared it beforehand with a variety of civil servants, including Permanent Secretaries. They made improvements to it. I am not saying that everyone agreed with everything I said, but the whole point of it was that it was designed to be a collaborative exercise. It was designed for that reason, because I have had the benefit of working with great civil servants throughout my career and I wanted to reflect that in what I was saying.

Q335 **Chair:** The forecast is for balmy sunshine, rather than hard rain.

**Michael Gove:** All of us in Government face some challenging times ahead, but the key thing is that we can only meet those challenges if we ensure that the Civil Service, as it in my view always has been, is true to the virtues of integrity, impartiality, objectivity and candour that have always marked it out. There will be challenges ahead but, as we navigate those challenges, I know the Civil Service will provide data-rich, well-evidenced judgments about what Ministers should or should not do, and then Ministers will decide.

Q336 **Chair:** Is there anything perhaps comparable for Ministers? In fairness to you, in your Ditchley Lecture you make clear that Ministers, as we know, are not infallible. Is there a data-rich matrix on which you can judge the quality and usefulness of Ministers as well as their civil servants?

**Michael Gove:** I am talking about the evidence that civil servants will provide. It is a very fair challenge. One question in my mind is, "Politics has an inherent volatility, but what can we do to better prepare people who might become Ministers for that responsibility and what can we better do to support Ministers in the exercise of that responsibility?" Ultimately, politics is about judgment and fulfilling a democratic mandate. No training or matrix can ever substitute for judgment and accountability, but we can all do our jobs better. Sharing experience, certainly from those who have done it before, can help. It probably would not surprise you to know, even though I disagree with them on lots of things, I have benefited from hearing directly from Michael Heseltine and Peter Mandelson about how to do the job. Whatever mistakes I have made, I have made fewer as a result of what they have told me.

**Chair:** The same question can be asked as Committee chairman as well; I assure you of that.

Q337 **David Mundell:** Mr Gove, one thing concerned me, including during my



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time in office, was the very small number of civil servants in the higher echelons of Whitehall who had had experience of working within the devolved Administrations and, likewise now, within the devolved Administrations—I am not as familiar with Wales and Northern Ireland but certainly the Scottish Government—of individuals there who have worked within Whitehall. Are there any mechanisms or ideas in play to try to improve that exchange of individuals? As this Committee has been told, we still operate a one Civil Service approach.

**Michael Gove:** You are right. It happens. It does not happen often enough. There are people whom I worked with at Defra who went on to work with the Welsh Government, who are very good civil servants. I would ideally like to see more of it happen. That is one thing that both I and Alex Chisholm are keen to promote.

Q338 **Mr Jones:** At Ditchley, you also said that the Civil Service should better reflect the 52% who voted to leave the European Union. Does that tend to confirm the suspicion that there has been among certain people who voted to leave the European Union that the Civil Service, or at least the senior echelons, is staffed by people who would rather we were remaining?

**Michael Gove:** No. It is a very good question and let me try to answer it as fully as possible as briefly as possible. The first thing is that many of us who live, work and operate in SW1—this has changed over time as a result of the general election but still— and many of the people within this village, have not exhibited a deep understanding, as you have, David, of the reasons why people voted to leave. It is deepening that understanding that is important. It is an understanding of what our ultimate masters, the British public, feel, think and want from Government. That is the first thing.

The second thing is I do not know how, with one or two very rare exceptions, any civil servant with whom I work has voted. I know that every civil servant with whom I have worked, particularly on Brexit, and I have been involved both at Defra and in the Cabinet Office on implementation of policies for the end of the transition period, has worked very energetically to advance the Government's agenda. It may well be that there were some civil servants who voted to remain and regretted the judgment, but I could not tell you who they were. I can tell you that everyone with whom I have worked has done everything they can to advance the agenda of the elected Government of the day, as put forward by Ministers.

Q339 **Mr Jones:** Could you describe precisely what you think is lacking there that needs to reflect that 52%?

**Michael Gove:** There is a broader question and it is less about any Department or any group of individuals. It is just a broader question as well. You sometimes find that people ascribe to those who voted to leave a set of motives that, in my view, does not do justice to the range of



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factors that lay behind that. The Prime Minister, in the levelling-up agenda he has outlined, gets to the heart of it. One thing that we need to recognise is that, over time, there are more people across the United Kingdom who felt that the political classes were not responsive, were not listening and did not understand their concerns. I do not think it is purely a leave/remain thing, but the referendum was probably the biggest moment that revealed or laid bare some of those concerns.

One thing I would stress, and it follows on partly from what Lloyd said earlier, is that north Wales is a part of the UK that perhaps insufficient people who live and work in London know, understand and have the chance both to visit and to work in. You will appreciate that there are political currents, economic feelings and so on that your constituents have that are sometimes poorly reflected in what the BBC might broadcast at certain moments. I am trying not to be critical of anyone. I am just trying to say that we need to promote that understanding. I am sure you know and could list some of the ways in which occasionally, even with the best will in the world, well intentioned and generous-hearted people sometimes subscribe to a caricature of some of our other citizens. It is trying to move beyond that that is important.

Q340 **Mr Jones:** This does not imply the end to the Northcote-Trevelyan principle of political impartiality.

**Michael Gove:** No, absolutely not. There is a key distinction to be drawn. Civil servants must be impartial and objective. That does not mean they are neutral, because civil servants, as I mentioned, are there to implement the policies of the Government of the day. Partly in response to Tom's question, we can always look at broadening the talent pool. The other thing is that it is no diminution of objectivity to seek to extend people's sympathy and understanding of all the citizens in this country.

The one other thing about Northcote-Trevelyan is you also need political appointees in Government and you draw an appropriate distinction. Special advisers play an absolutely critical role. The reason why you need special advisers is that they should be doing things and providing certain advice that you would not want a civil servant to.

Q341 **Mr Jones:** There have of course been efforts previously, for many years, to promote diversity in the Civil Service, in terms of ethnicity, gender, disability and so on. Should we read from your speech that in fact that has been a failure, it has not gone far enough, it has been wrongly targeted, or what?

**Michael Gove:** It is absolutely critical, but there is more to do. The Civil Service has improved, as most major employers have improved over the course of the last few years, in drawing people from diverse ethnic backgrounds and in ensuring there is better representation of women and people living with disabilities across the board and in senior positions, but there is more to do. That is absolutely vital. There is something else as well, which is that I would like to promote intellectual diversity, so people



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who see things from different points of view. Again, I am not talking about left/right. I am just talking about people who can look at problems in different ways. That is a really valuable part of any organisation.

Q342 **Mr Jones:** I wonder if we could talk about churn in the Civil Service, which has been identified as a problem for many years, in fact not least by predecessors of this Committee. How do you propose to tackle churn and why do you think that it has remained a problem, despite having been identified as one for so long?

**Michael Gove:** It is partly the way in which the career structure of the Civil Service is oriented. There are tools in the toolbox for Permanent Secretaries and others to encourage people to stay in particular posts. Something called the pivotal role allowance enables greater reward to be given and there are other appropriate bonuses. There is often an incentive, if you look at the past, for people to have to move Department and responsibility in order to secure promotion. It has become more acute recently. The Perm Sec at the Cabinet Office and I are looking at different ways in which we can change that in order to allow Government Departments to be more flexible, so that people can rise within their profession, get that reward, in terms of status, income and other areas, without them having to leave the Department and move into another area.

Q343 **Mr Jones:** It is clearly a significant problem. It seems to have defeated many predecessors of yours. How hopeful are you that you will be able to resolve the issue?

**Michael Gove:** I am hopeful, but there will always be some failures along the way—not failures but imperfections. I hope we can improve the situation, but I think there will still be some moments when Ministers or Permanent Secretaries will regret the fact that someone who they very much want to hold on to will be lost to them, but hopefully the situation will be better.

Q344 **Mr Jones:** How concerned are you about the current level of churn among the Secretaries in various Departments?

**Michael Gove:** I have enjoyed working with some of those who have left the Government over the course of the last 12 months. I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to those people with whom I worked particularly closely. I really enjoyed working with Richard Heaton, as Permanent Secretary at MoJ. I worked with Clare Moriarty at Defra. She departed, as it happens, because the Department for which she was responsible, DExEU, and which you served with distinction as a Minister, David, had reached the end of its natural existence. Historically, it is the case that in other years there has been a bigger churn at the top. For example, in 2005 12 Permanent Secretaries moved on and in 2007 11. That is more than have done so this year. It is important to look at it in a historical context.

Q345 **Chair:** Could I interrupt there? I think when David Jones talks of churn, it



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was about people moving between Departments. It is a bit of a confusion to pretend—

**Michael Gove:** Yes, my apologies

**Chair:** Not at all. Interrupting David as I am, can I bring Karin Smyth in with a supplementary question at this juncture?

Q346 **Karin Smyth:** Mr Gove, I would support what you have said about diversity and breadth, intellectually, with more women, black and ethnic minorities, et cetera, for the Civil Service. Do you think it is incumbent on politicians and the Government to ensure that is reflected in special advisers as well? What is the Government's view of diversity and recruitment and retention among special advisers?

**Michael Gove:** My view is that it should apply across the board. In an ideal world, parliamentary parties should be more diverse as well.

Q347 **Karin Smyth:** Some of us are doing better than others on that, but are the Government taking active steps with Ministers to encourage greater diversity with special advisers?

**Michael Gove:** Yes.

Q348 **Karin Smyth:** How is that going?

**Michael Gove:** If you look overall, you will see that we have a range of individuals from a variety of different backgrounds. There are some minority characteristics that are better represented than others. We continue to strive for diversity overall.

Q349 **Karin Smyth:** The majority of the population is women, 51%. How is that going?

**Michael Gove:** I would be able to tell you exactly what the proportion is. I do not have the full list of special advisers in front of me.

Q350 **Chair:** You could write to the Committee afterwards with that.

**Michael Gove:** I certainly will. There may be some special advisers who may be covered by the protected characteristics of the Equality Act, who may not wish to necessarily reveal aspects of it, but we will do our very best to provide you with that matrix.

Q351 **Chair:** Very quickly, as we draw to a close, how many of the Cabinet Office's civil servants have returned to work at least part-time from the office since the Government encouraged other businesses to adopt that approach?

**Michael Gove:** I will have those figures tomorrow and I will give them to the Committee as soon as we have them. It varies site by site, but I will give you those figures.

Q352 **Chair:** What have the Government learnt from the pandemic, home-working, and how that might affect an estates strategy going forward?



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**Michael Gove:** We have learnt a lot. One thing that my colleague, Lord Agnew, is seeking to do is to make sure that we reduce our footprint in London overall, that, where home working is appropriate, we facilitate that and that, where we can have responsibilities and potentially whole Departments operating outside London, we do that as well.

**Chair:** That is an hour's session. It was a canter through that and we are looking forward to seeing you again in a few weeks' time when we can explore those issues in greater depth. Thanks to the Committee members for their attendance this afternoon, and to you, Michael.