

Strategy vs Whitehall

Successful strategy development is typically cross-boundary, long-term, and outward-facing. Whitehall is typically departmental, short-term, and secretive. So the challenge of improving the effectiveness of Whitehall's strategic capabilities should not be underestimated.

The evidence shows that determined efforts from political and civil service leaders can make a difference from time to time. Looking back at the 20 years during which I was a civil servant, I would point to the early days of the Blair Government in addressing social exclusion, and the early days of the Cameron Government in pursuing national security.

Under Tony Blair, the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) was established in the Cabinet Office, and given the remit to work across and beyond the boundaries of central government, analysing the causes of neighbourhood deprivation, teenage pregnancy, and other so-called 'wicked issues', and developing transformational plans to achieve real-world outcomes. The objective of the teenage pregnancy work, remitted to the SEU in July 1998, was:

"to develop an integrated strategy to cut rates of teenage parenthood, particularly under-age parenthood, towards the European average, and propose better solutions to combat the risk of social exclusion for vulnerable teenage parents and their children".

A target was set to halve under-18 conception over the decade to 2010. This was achieved in London in 2011, and across England three years later.

There were of course many ingredients in the success of this work. But what struck me in particular were:

- political leadership from the Prime Minister, straight after his first election success
- dedicated focus from a unit at the centre of Government with no other responsibilities
- the unit's mix of civil servants and frontline professionals
- the outward-looking, visible approach taken by the unit
- detailed analysis of problems before proposing solutions

The National Security Council was established by David Cameron straight after the 2010 election, supported by the new post of National Security Adviser at the head of the national security secretariat (NSS) in the Cabinet Office.

At weekly meetings of the Council, chaired by the Prime Minister, senior ministers, the heads of the armed forces and security services, the Met Police and others grappled with a huge range of security issues, and sought to build a cross-government approach to engagement with China, Russia, Africa and much more. The Institute for Government reported on the work of the Council after its first few years, and quoted a former official describing its creation as like:

"the lights coming on, because it was very difficult under the previous arrangements to necessarily detect what decisions, if any decisions, were being taken on a number of issues and the thinking that led to the decisions was even more opaque."

Over time these arrangements developed further, leading to the very unusual sight of departmental director generals leading across Whitehall on cross-cutting strategies,

drawing together the perspectives and resources of the military, diplomatic corps, international development and others to help the Government increase its influence and reach.

As in the case of the SEU, the Prime Minister's personal leadership was critical, as was dedicated Cabinet Office-based support, the mix of people involved, the outward-looking approach, and detailed problem analysis.

However, in my experience, these are the exceptions which prove the rule. As evidenced, for example, by the way that Whitehall rejected the attempt to spread the learning from the work of the National Security Council to economic and domestic affairs. The fact is that departmental boundaries are very powerful, with civil servants learning when they are young that an important part of their job is to arm their Cabinet Minister with ammunition to resist collaborating with others. The pressure on politicians to offer instant solutions to complex problems is increasingly intense, even as the public's scepticism as to their ability to do what they say grows. And Whitehall sees it as a first order principle that its work should remain secret for (at least) 20 years.

But is it? Is it really the case that policy development should be done behind closed doors? Without the benefit of external challenge? Or the expertise of those at the receiving end? Or any process for exploring the potential for cross-party support, which is so often the key ingredient to long-term change?

It is self-evident that developing strategy in secret is unlikely to generate a good product. And that developing it in the open is much more likely to replicate the successes of initiatives like the SEU and NSC (linking civil servants with outside experts, looking outwards, analysing problems thoroughly rather than jumping to what they imagine - often wrongly - their Ministers want to hear).

Indeed Ministers sometimes have the confidence to do something about it. Publishing a Green Paper which sets out possible options, inviting comments, then publishing a White Paper which sets out the Government's preferred way forward, inviting comments again, before legislation or other action, is much better than not. But this too seems increasingly to be the exception rather than the rule.

So why not change the rule?

The argument goes that civil servants are accountable to Ministers, and Ministers are accountable to Parliament. So civil servants are not accountable to Parliament themselves, and their only public pronouncements on matters of policy must be to explain why the Government has chosen the course of action it has. If a Parliamentary Select Committee wants to know whether civil servants have carried out a comprehensive analysis of the options available to Government in pursuing a particular outcome, there is no point them asking the civil servants, as they are in practice forbidden from answering.

Thus strategy development is a black box, other than to the extent to which individual Ministers choose to open it up. Which is why the SEU and the NSC are exceptions - they only happen when Ministers make a deliberate choice, not as a matter of course.

But this is so simply because Parliament chooses not to open the box. In a Parliamentary democracy, Parliament is sovereign. And if Parliament wants a change, it can make one. As it chose when it decided that it would hold civil servants (through their Permanent

Secretaries) to account for matters of value for money - hence the work of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC). Which makes a big difference to civil servants' advice in practice. A Permanent Secretary might be reluctant to point out to an impatient Minister that the latter's preferred policy is poor value for money, fearing for how the message will be received. But they know that, if they don't, and it all goes wrong, the PAC, with the benefit of an investigation by the National Audit Office (NAO), will ask them - in public - to explain why they bottled it. And so they tend not to. Which of course serves the Minister, the Government, and the public at large much better in the end.

At the moment, the NAO's and PAC's reach doesn't extend into matters of policy development more generally. As a Permanent Secretary sitting in front of the PAC, it was my job to bat away any question from an MP wanting to know whether I had considered fully (or even at all) the implications of a policy recommendation.

But only because Parliament doesn't demand more.

The reason generally given for the status quo is that the trust required for Ministers and civil servants to work well together would be put at risk if Ministers knew that their civil servants would have to explain honestly the advice they had offered. And that the media and opposition would make hay with apparently disagreements between the two, making Government even more difficult than it already is.

But the fact of the matter is that civil servants are required - by law - to offer honest and impartial advice to their Ministers no matter what. They are required to consider objectively the costs, benefits, risks and evidence in support of all the various options available to Ministers in achieving the Government's objectives, and it is then for Ministers to choose. It's not a matter of Ministers making the 'right' or 'wrong' choice. In my view, it is generally not advisable for civil servants to advise their Minister which option to choose anyway - this is the very stuff of politics. To govern is to choose. Why shouldn't the choices be put into the public domain? Isn't the real answer that it can be inconvenient for the Minister if the facts are known? And if so, surely this is no way to run a country?

If Parliament wants civil servants to produce long-term, evidence-informed, cross-departmental strategic work, the thing that would make the biggest difference is to subject this work to the cold light of day. For Parliament to subject it to scrutiny as they already do for matters of value for money. Supported by experts in such work - a strategy equivalent of the NAO. With one crucial difference. Not audit after the event, when the inevitable focus is on who to blame because something has gone wrong. But scrutiny up front, in time to help Government reduce the risk of things going wrong in the first place.

Surely the public deserves no less than this from the people it elects to make decisions on their behalf?

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