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CIVIL SERVICE WORLD
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FORWARD THINKING
Alex Chisholm KICKSTARTS CIVIL SERVICE REFORM

DOM AND GLOOM
DAVE PENMAN AND ANDY COWPER ON CUMMINGS

BOLT AT THE DOOR
INSPECTOR'S HOME OFFICE REFLECTIONS

OFFICIAL PROTEST
A CIVIL SERVANT'S ETHICAL DILEMMA

ROUNDTABLE

Planes, Tanks, Ships, and Smartphones

How defence integration can improve military capability

Tuesday 15 June 2021
from 12:00 - 13:30.

Richard Johnstone, acting editor, CSW, is hosting a virtual roundtable with senior spokespeople from across the defence sector and our partners at Appian, to explore:

- How transformation can happen
- Can intelligent automation deliver critical support faster and more efficiently

Spaces are limited, to register your interest in attending please RSVP to:

Bella Frimpong at **roundtables@dodsgroup.com**

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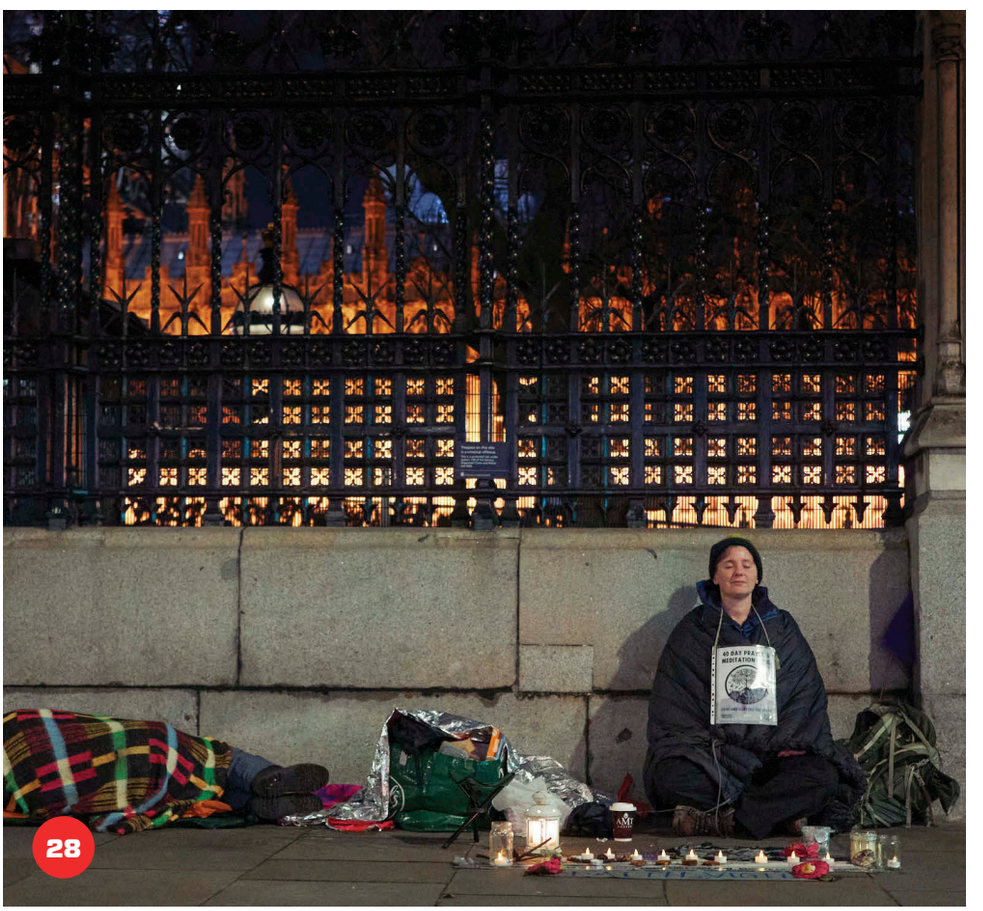
ON THE COVER
A photo of Alex Chisholm taken by Photoshot



FROM THE EDITOR

Dominic Cummings's marathon seven-hour evidence session before the health and social care and science and technology select committees last month was compelling Whitehall theatre. Here was the man who until late last year had been the prime minister's top adviser giving us a behind-the-scenes look at the government's pandemic response as ministers and officials grappled with unrelenting waves of Covid-19.

The unprecedented event is being met by an unprecedented response in the pages of *CSW* this month. Not one, not two, but three of our regular columnists look at the session and try to weigh up Cummings's assertions: Dave Penman takes on the cross-government claims, Andy Cowper the alleged failings at the Department of Health and Social Care, and Colin Talbot the pandemic preparedness – or lack thereof. All are worth reading and cover the initial skirmishes of what will likely be the ground that is contested at the looming public inquiry.

What struck this observer watching the session, though, was that much of Cummings's critique of how the government failed was familiar to those who have studied his writings on the civil service before.

He said at one point that the failings that were revealed by the government's coronavirus response were "programmed by the wiring of the system".

He added: "If you have something this bad and you have got tens and tens of thousands of people who have died who did not need to die and massive economic destruction... that did not need to happen if we had sorted things out earlier, everyone in this country needs to face the reality of this."

These comments chime with his 2014 comments that the "huge system in Whitehall, in my opinion, is programmed to go wrong, it can't work".

Perhaps Cummings had been right all along and Covid simply exposed problems in the system that he had long spotted – and to some extent, that is probably the case. But it is also telling that after well over a year in government, Cummings was still more able to describe the problem than to have solved it.

This is perhaps no surprise – the civil service is a large and fairly decentralised organisation, and it takes time to change anything. But we will soon begin to see the fruits of the reform drive that Cummings will always be associated with. In this issue, civil service chief operating officer and Cabinet Office permanent secretary Alex Chisholm sets out the next steps for reform, saying that after a period of "biding our time", a plan will be published "shortly".

There has been consultation on with civil servants for ideas on what should change.

"We've also been quite reflective about what we can take from the pandemic and, indeed, from the EU exit process, the Integrated Review and other experiences about what needs to be done differently and better," Chisholm tells us.

We await details of what these changes will be, but the tale of Dominic Cummings has another lesson – events can, and will, get in the way. Life is what happens when you are making Whitehall plans, but for civil service reform to work, it needs to be clear what the problem is that is being solved, what plan is to change it, and what clear steps are to get there. The best civil service organisations share this clarity of vision and leadership, and as the country emerges fom the pandemic, we will need it for the recovery. ■

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CLASS ACTION

Readers weighed in on a Social Mobility Commission report that found people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are still underrepresented in the civil service, and can struggle to get on if they have not picked up the unwritten codes of practice and 'studied neutrality' that benefit those from more privileged upbringings.

"This resonates," **Mohammed Aziz** said.

"This is true in my experience, if you're not in the 'club' there's no chance of progression regardless of background. The studied neutrality approach results in poor performance, lack of results and no accountability from management," agreed **Mike Besant**.

John Hatton shared a different perspective. "I can't say I observed much, if any, of what is being claimed here during my time in the civil service. If anything, I'd say the selection processes were about as robust, fair and open as I've seen anywhere. There was also a real effort to bring greater diversity both to the interview panels and the candidate shortlists. In terms of promotion and selection it did feel more like a meritocracy than an old boys' club.

"Easy for me to say from a position much nearer the top than the bottom... and as a white, middle-aged bloke – but I'm saying it as someone emanating from a working class background and a state education. And with a Brummie accent. No gripes here."

But **Rocio Ferro-Adams** replied: "This may be true, but privilege comes in many forms. If you're trusted with information, if you are invited to meetings – there are many people who are not and do not experience the privilege of being included and being 'one of us'. This can create an unhappy workforce... Privilege is relative and not tied to class but to socio-economic status."

Sunny Thompson wrote: "What I would not like to see is for this to become about equipping people from lower socio-economic backgrounds to mimic the methods by which their more privileged colleagues rise to the top through 'studied neutrality'. Instead, let us welcome those who are less understated, who dare to show human emotion, and who have all kinds of accents. Perhaps I would say that, as a flamboyant and emotional person... But some of my favourite leaders have also been flamboyant, emotional, regional et cetera."

Claire Lever added: "That's exactly what they do. I was welcomed into HMT because of my diversity: regional background/perspective and protected characteristic. Yet was constantly trying to be moulded to fit them. I had to say on more than one occasion: 'just because someone has a northern accent doesn't mean they are stupid,' and even worse had to replace stupid with 'poor' on one occasion."

And **Eamonn M.** shared his experience: "For years I was both praised for performing above what was required yet, at the same time, told that if I wanted to get on I needed to work on "smoothing off some of my rough edges" – this exact phrase from different senior leaders. I now view this as being code for not having the right background, supposedly not cut from the right cloth, not from the right university. I later gained a degree but never did enough to quite fit in... I hope this report is a catalyst for real change and the 18-year-old version of me joining today as an AA can fulfil their full potential, not just for their sake but for the sake of the civil service overall.

He added: "Moving jobs and opportunities outside London will help bring more [people from a lower socio-economic background] in, but a radical change in culture is required to enable a true meritocracy to take hold and allow everyone to progress fairly."

YACHT FOR ME

Readers were less than impressed to hear No.10 is forging ahead with plans for a new national flagship, the Royal Yacht Britannia, that the prime minister has said will give British businesses a "new global platform".

"What vanity and misuse of £200m," **Geoff Eales** said.

"Another white elephant," **Colin Taylor** wrote.

"More nostalgic empire days fantasy running riot with the taxpayers' purse," **Andrew Hansler** said.

Owen S. was equally unenthralled with the idea. "So the government's masterplan to demonstrate the 'greatness' of the UK will be to resurrect a tradition of Royal Yachts started in 1660, and to justify this on the basis of the UK being a major maritime trading nation (it is currently the 10th largest merchant flag carrier, at <3% of world capacity, behind those other powerhouses of global shipping like Panama, Liberia, Malta, Hong Kong, the Bahamas and Marshal Islands). For a frame of reference, EU country flags are 39% of global merchant carriers," he wrote.

"Hard to show and convince the world you're truly forward looking and thinking when all you ever do is point to perceived successes of your ever distant past..."

But not everyone thought the project was a bad idea. "I like the clear statement that it will be built in the UK and giving it a dual role (perhaps) might further increase the value for money equation: eg Britannia has a secondary role as a hospital ship and was actually used in this function in the Falklands," **Simon Hall** wrote. "My inclination is to slow down on the cries of 'vanity project' and let's hear the details first. It might even be a good idea!"

COMMERCIAL SENSE

And new guidance for on government procurement, which instructed departments to not automatically give contracts to the lowest bidder before considering wider benefits, sparked some reflections.

"With colossal purchasing power comes great responsibility... will be interesting to see how departments demonstrate their social value considerations in future tender evaluations alongside the other non-cost elements already in play," **Stephen W.** wrote.

R.B.O. added: "Looking at it from a different angle, some organisations/SMEs are still struggling to demonstrate social value initiatives. I personally believe SMEs/companies need to be equipped on how to deliver social value initiatives in their tender returns... I strongly believe contracting authorities still need to create more awareness on how organisations should deliver social value initiatives and added values." ■

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

We continue our overseaqs tour to consider the benefits of Germany's system of political civil servants, and we look at the lessons for the government's in-house consultancy

Ministers 'need more training', think tank says

Policy Exchange report says courses would give ministers a "better understanding of the implications of policy options". By **Beckie Smith**

Ministers should be made to undergo training as part of a number of wide-ranging reforms to how Whitehall and the civil service works, a leading think tank has recommended. Government must do more to attract and retain talented staff, Policy Exchange's Reform of Government Commission said – but the civil service is not the only place where roadblocks to progress lie.

The commission's recent report, which was endorsed by Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove, argued civil service reform must be accompanied by measures addressing ministerial skills and churn if departments are to achieve their long-term policy priorities.

In particular, ministers should undergo policy and delivery-orientated training covering areas including procurement, digital delivery, stats and data, and practical skills like better decision making and chairing meetings, according to the think tank, while prospective ministers should be better prepared for jobs.

"Greater ministerial training in such areas will help to ensure that, when policies are designed, ministers have a better understanding of the consequences and implications of different policy options," the report said.

The government's recent push for ministerial training – under which every minister with major infrastructure spending responsibilities must sit a specific course – should be "encouraged, expanded and continued".

"Ministers must use ODPs to hold their own department to account and there must be serious consequences for failure to deliver them"

Training should be modelled on the infrastructure-focused course set up with the Infrastructure and Projects Authority and the Said Business School at Oxford University, the report said.

Similar courses would help politicians "understand the trade-offs and difficulties of other areas", according to the think tank.

It stressed that training programmes should be available to junior ministers – who are "often the engine room of government" – and not just secretaries of state.

And they must also be available to prospective ministers, given that those in post will have little time to complete multiple training courses. That should be just one way the government and political parties should work to establish a "pipeline of political talent", Policy Exchange said – noting that this additional support should be provided for both backbench MPs and opposition spokespeople.

Such training would help to equip new ministers to handle the crises they are often faced with upon arriving in office, the report said. However, it argued that turnover among ministers must also be reduced.

"At present, ministerial reshuffles are too frequent and ministers are overstretched by competing and contradictory expectations," it said.

Better preparation and support for ministers would ensure they have "both the incentive and the capacity to tackle long-term policy problems", it said.

The report also called on the government to restore Extended Ministerial Offices – and make them simpler to set up – to improve access to expert advice.

Better-equipped ministers should set out their priorities to departments in a clearer way through "comprehensive and accountable frameworks" – and permanent secretaries must be held to account for delivering them, the report said.

Ministers should set clear targets for departments and issue "letters of strategic priorities" to perm secs, the think tank said.

Renewal of perm secs' contracts should then be conditional on meeting these targets and on their "track record for reform", according to the report. Since 2014, perm secs have been appointed for five-year, fixed-term contracts.

The report also called for ministers to have "active involvement" in departments' Outcome Delivery Plans, which will be introduced later this year.

"Ministers must use ODPs to hold their own department to account and there must be serious consequences for failure to deliver them. ODPs should be published in their entirety (with the usual exemptions for commercially or security sensitive information)," the report said.

"There should also be a clear and transparent way for observers to monitor the progress of departments against these plans," it added. ■

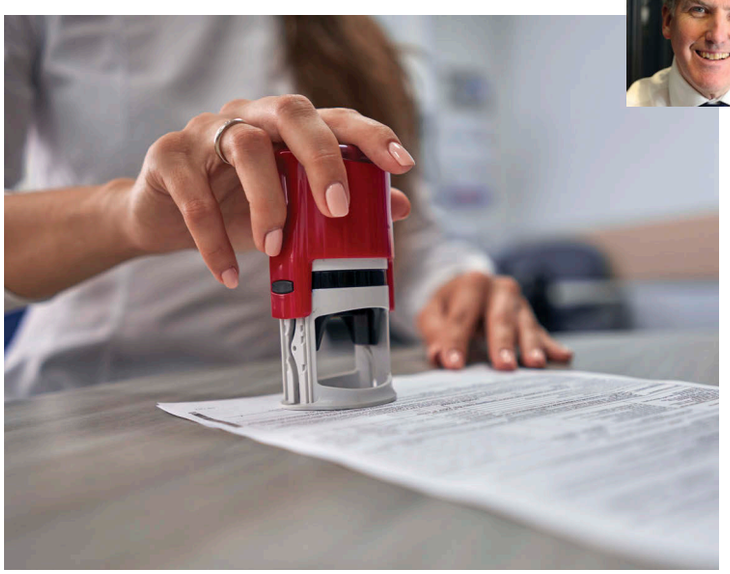
New procurement rules 'to boost social value'

The government's chief commercial officer tells **Richard Johnstone** about the impetus behind the creation of a national procurement policy

New procurement guidance for departments is intended to help focus efforts around social value to maximise the benefits of public spending, the government's chief commercial officer has told *CSW*.

Gareth Rhys Williams said the new national procurement policy statement aims to increase the benefits of public spending by streamlining how procurement teams use government contracts to meet key policy aims.

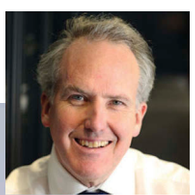
"The idea is this will be a statement [published] once a parliament from the government saying 'we want you to major on these two, three, or four things'," he said. "We're trying to just focus everyone's efforts on national strategic priorities rather than just having everyone going off hither and yon."



The new policy, published on 3 June, sets out three priorities to be considered in procurement: creating new businesses, new jobs and new skills in the UK; improving supplier diversity, innovation and resilience, and tackling climate change and reducing waste.

This is intended to improve the ability of government departments and other public sector organisations to differentiate between suppliers. Procurement teams have been told they must not simply award contracts to the lowest bidder when wider economic benefits can be proved, and Rhys Williams said the aim of the new system is to enable officials to properly analyse external impacts.

"The problem before was that we score people on a number of quality metrics, and on price. But if we don't set a quality metric that is sufficiently differentiated, then price is the deciding factor, because price is obvious.



"So what the social value criteria is doing is asking us to differentiate between vendors, such that we don't give everyone eight out of ten. It is forcing ourselves, in a way, to differentiate on quality, and what the national procurement policy statement is doing is giving a bit of central guidance to what issues we want to concentrate on as a country."

The national plan forms part of a number of post-Brexit procurement reforms, with legislation planned to replace the inherited EU rules.

Further changes will be coming, Rhys Williams said. "Although we've left the European Union, we have still got European rules in our law, and one of the things you want to change is [to move] from what's called the most economically advantageous tender to the most advantageous tender... 'detuning' the emphasis on cost and trying to underline the point that we really are expecting people to include these other quality measures, particularly the social value measures, that are in the NPPS."

"The social value criteria is forcing us to differentiate on quality, and giving central guidance to what issues we want to concentrate on as a country"

He also highlighted that the policy statement sets out plans to publish more information on procurement pipelines, and to set standards for procurement professionals across the public sector.

The guidance says organisations should ensure they have the right capacity, skills and capability to manage efficient procurements, and must prioritise transparency.

The document calls on all public authorities to consider benchmarking themselves every year "against relevant commercial and procurement operating standards and other comparable organisations".

Benchmarking should consider seven factors:

- whether commercial objectives are aligned to relevant policies and organisational objectives
- whether governance, management frameworks and controls are integrated, proportionate and appropriate to the commercial work and level of prevailing risk
- whether work is undertaken and assigned to people who have the required capability and capacity to undertake it
- whether business needs are adequately informed by the commercial strategy to determine when, and how to procure services and works
- whether market conditions are sufficiently understood and procurement routes align with supply capacity and capability
- whether contract management capability is sufficient and resources are proportional to complexity and risk
- whether appropriate procurement systems and data reporting enables process efficiency, robust controls and effective decision making

Rhys Williams said the new benchmarking is about "setting standards across the country on procurement confidence".

He said the new tests will "widen the group of public procurers who we are confident are sufficiently trained and sufficient numbers of them sufficiently competent to spend what in a normal year would be £290bn throughout the whole of the public sector". ■

THOMAS POPE WILL POST-BREXIT SUBSIDIES WORK?

THE GOVERNMENT HAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO DESIGN A BETTER SYSTEM THAN THE EU STATE AID REGIME IT WILL REPLACE, BUT ITS CURRENT APPROACH RISKS MISSING THE OPPORTUNITY

The subsidy control bill – announced in the Queen's Speech and expected shortly – will be one of the first opportunities for the government to show a "Brexit dividend" by designing a better system than EU state aid rules. It was an opportunity that UK negotiators fought hard for in Brexit talks last year, and the final deal allows the UK to design its own domestic system to regulate around £8bn of subsidies offered to businesses by governments and public bodies each year.

If the government designs the system well then it can play an important role directing funds towards effective subsidies that deliver on objectives like levelling up and net zero and prevent subsidies that could damage competition and growth. But getting this wrong would mean an ineffective system that does not protect against wasteful subsidies, imposes red tape and legal uncertainty on public bodies and businesses and might set up further clashes between Westminster and the devolved governments. The government can design a successful system, but since the end of last year interim arrangements have been in place. These are deeply flawed, and risk creating a worse system than the EU regime that the UK has left behind.

Under the EU system, the European Commission plays a gatekeeper role: all subsidies are illegal unless and until the commission approves them. This allows the commission to retain control of subsidies in 27 countries, each with different approaches to public spending. But the result is a system that is slow and inflexible. The UK system will not face these same constraints. And that means the government can design a more flexible system that imposes less bureaucracy on public bodies and businesses.

Importantly, however, flexibility and freedom cannot be the sole aim. The government's own objectives for the system acknowledge that subsidies can be damaging. There is a particular risk of "subsidy races" as different parts of the UK compete for activity. The system must be effective at preventing these measures that would be harmful for the UK as a whole, as well as encouraging subsidies that support government priorities.

Since the UK left the EU, an "interim regime" has required governments and public bodies to self-assess whether their subsidies comply with broad, hard-to-define principles. There is no regulator, so the only way to confirm that a subsidy is legal is via a court challenge (which may or may not emerge). The government has indicated that it intends to continue with this principles-based approach – with only a minor role for any regulator – in the new legislation.

"There is no guarantee that harmful subsidies will be prevented if the granting body is responsible for self-assessing them"

A regime like this risks being the worst of both worlds. There is no guarantee that harmful subsidies will be prevented if the granting body is responsible for self-assessing whether a measure addresses a "public policy objective" or whether the benefits outweigh the costs (two of the six broad principles). But a system that does not provide legal certainty will also deter some public bodies from offering worthwhile subsidies because it is hard to know how to demonstrate the principles are met and there is a risk of court challenge.

A new Institute for Government report, *Taking Back Control of Subsidies*, argues that the system needs clear rules and a strong regulator if it is to be a success. Guidance and regulation are needed to clarify what it means to comply with the broad principles and provide "safe harbours" that guarantee legal certainty for smaller measures.

A further risk with any new system is the potential for high profile and messy legal disputes between the devolved administrations and the UK government. A UK-wide system is in the interest of all the administrations, but it should be a joint venture, with the Competition and Markets Authority reformed to make it a genuine four-nation body that can impartially regulate governments across the UK.

A more effective subsidy control system is within the government's grasp, but unless it alters its approach then public bodies, businesses and taxpayers may be forced to work within an ineffective system. They could well end up wondering why leaving the orbit of EU state aid rules was such a priority in the first place. ■

Thomas Pope is the Institute for Government's deputy chief economist

DAVE PENMAN TIME FOR DOM TO PUT UP OR SHUT UP

THE PRIME MINISTER'S FORMER TOP ADVISER FIRED BROADSIDES ACROSS ALL OF WHITEHALL IN HIS EVIDENCE ON THE GOVERNMENT'S CORONAVIRUS RESPONSE. BUT WE GOT MORE ACCUSATIONS THAN FACTS

It was a soul-baring, tell-all TV spectacular. Too long, but then they always are, and it really dragged in parts. In the end though, we came away with a better picture of the man himself. And of course, Keir Starmer's *Life Stories* was OK as well.

Dominic Cummings, the artist formerly known as "career psychopath", gave a marathon seven-hour evidence session to the combined health and science and technology select committees. Just like baking your first sourdough loaf in lockdown, you wonder whether all that effort was really worth the few bite-size pieces you come away with. Sure, they were tasty, but seven hours!

"Whilst the point of a select committee hearing is to get the facts, I never got the feeling that was Hard Rain Man's agenda"

He started his evidence with a heartfelt apology. I don't know whether the Hard Rain Man is really the communication and campaign genius some think he is, but the abject apology for whatever heinous crime you're alleged to have committed is the go-to strategy. Get it out there straight away as well, then spend the next six hours and 58 minutes qualifying it by pointing the finger at everyone else, making clear your real crime was not doing more to stop them.

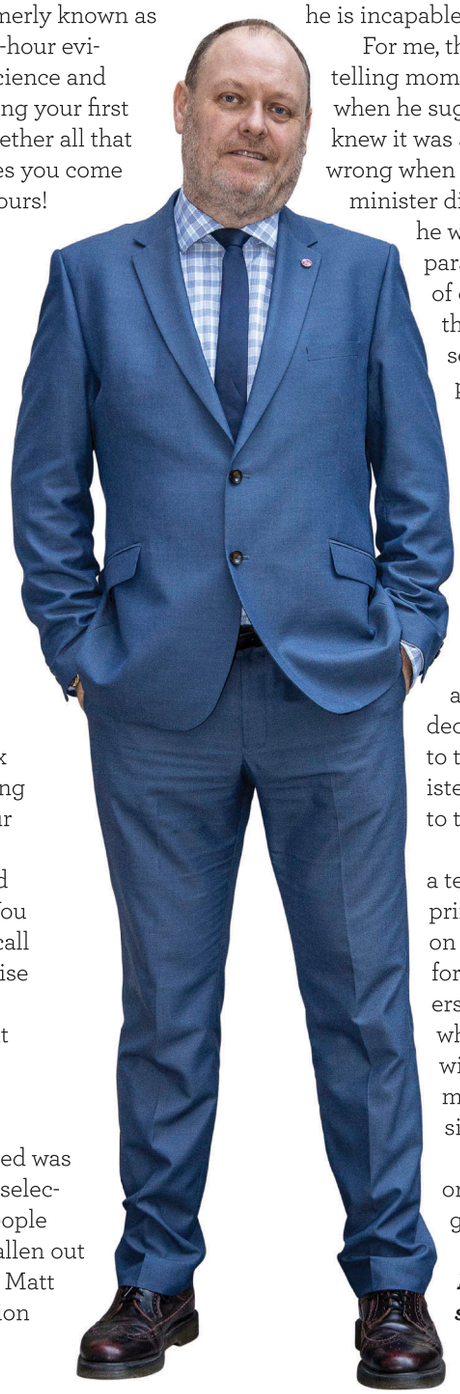
We also had the revelation that "Yes, I did talk to people unauthorised." Really, Dom? You spoke to the press? Well tickle my toes and call me Charlie, who knew? I think the real surprise was that he had time to do anything else.

There were some moments of insight, but whilst the point of a select committee hearing is to get the facts, I never got the feeling that was Hard Rain Man's agenda.

I came away feeling that what I'd witnessed was not so much the rewriting of history, more a selection of the bits that suit his narrative. The people he's decided are culpable – or that he's just fallen out with – got it both barrels, Boris Johnson and Matt Hancock in particular. There was little mention of Rishi Sunak or Michael Gove, who it would appear never put a foot wrong on Covid. We were treated to the usual sweeping criticisms of "the machine" that didn't understand, wasn't prepared, was structurally incapable – as he battled bravely, always driven by the science. Except, of course, when he found time to wage the culture war against the civil service, undermining it and its leadership and briefing the press on an almost daily basis.

He is apparently a fan of speaking truth unto power – coming as close to a compliment as you'll get – when retelling the moment when apparently Helen McNamara, the deputy cabinet secretary burst into the room with an expletive-laced outburst that would have made Malcolm Tucker blush.

What there wasn't was a lot of evidence. I would say it's time to put up or shut up but I fear he is incapable of the latter.



For me, the most telling moment was when he suggested he knew it was all going wrong when the prime minister didn't do as he was told. I'm paraphrasing of course, but that was essentially his point and here lies the problem. Not so much that he thought he could tell the PM what to do, as that ship had sailed a long time ago. He had been allowed to operate like this with the PM's authority. Every decision, every leaned-on official, every briefing to the press: all of it was done in the prime minister's name. This of course suited the PM down to the ground, providing plausible deniability.

Cummings was, after all, only a special adviser, a temporary civil servant. We know how much the prime minister respects the ministerial code, and on this it is absolutely clear: "The responsibility for the management and conduct of special advisers, including discipline, rests with the minister who made the appointment. Individual ministers will be accountable to the prime minister, parliament and the public for their actions and decisions in respect of their special advisers."

Whatever Cummings ultimately is, hero or monster, he is a product of the power granted to him by the prime minister. ■

Dave Penman is the general secretary of the FDA union

COLIN TALBOT WHY WE WEREN'T READY FOR COVID-19

DOMINIC CUMMINGS HAS CLAIMED THERE WAS NO PLAN FOR A PANDEMIC WHEN THE CORONAVIRUS STRUCK WAS HE RIGHT?

When Dominic Cummings sensationally claimed that there was no plan to deal with a pandemic, was he right? And was his blaming of Whitehall right? There were plans – but they were neglected, underfunded and didn't suit the government of Boris Johnson.

In the mid-2000s the then-Labour government spent quite a lot of energy establishing a civil contingencies system – and passed a Civil Contingencies Act – precisely to prepare for a national emergency like a pandemic. Indeed, a pandemic was the top of the risk register – though it was expected to be a flu pandemic, not coronavirus.

So why can Cummings plausibly claim 15 years later that "there was no plan"?

Let's go right back to the year 1999 and the millennium bug. In the run-up to 2000 there was widespread fear that computer systems that only used two digits to denote the year would crash when the year became "00".

Fueling change The September 2000 fuel protests lead to civil contingency reform

Huge amounts of effort were expended ensuring that the millennium bug didn't bring on the collapse of civilisation. And it didn't. But it did highlight the need to be alert for big, improbable but high-impact events – what later became known as "black swans".

The fear of such events was heightened when Britain was hit by several examples. In the year 2000 it was fuel and floods. In September protests by lorry drivers who blockaded fuel storage and distribution almost brought the country to a standstill. Then in October the UK experienced extensive flooding – the Met Office reported it was the worst since 1947.

These three crises prompted the New Labour government of Tony Blair to start reforms to the UK's antiquated civil defence system, as it had previously been called. Their first step was to move responsibility from the Home Office to the Cabinet Office and create the Civil Contingencies Secretariat in July 2001.

Even as the new system was being formed two more events emphasised the need for it. In February 2001 an outbreak of foot and mouth disease started in the UK and lasted all year. And then passenger planes were flown into the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC – 9/11 shook the world.

Over the next few years the government put a lot of effort in creating a modern civil contingencies system. The most visible evidence of this was the passing of the Civil Contingencies Act in 2004, which imposed duties on a range of public and some private bodies to prepare for dealing with a national emergency. This in turn led to the government producing an annual National Risk Register, first published in 2008.

At the top of the risk matrix was "pandemic influenza" – a place it continued to occupy in every National Risk Register until now. The threat of a pandemic – not just influenza – should have become ever clearer as first SARS (2003) and then MERS (2012) highlighted the danger.

Over the next eight years contingency planning carried on – numerous guidance and planning documents were published, and indeed some explicitly focused on a possible pandemic.

In 2016 the Westminster government even carried out a massive exercise – called Cygnus – simulating a pandemic flu outbreak and response. Over three days in October, 950 participants from devolved administrations, the Department of Health and 12 other central government departments, NHS Wales, NHS England, Public Health England, eight Local Resilience Forums and six prisons took part. It included four simulated Cobra meetings.

But it seems clear that the political interest in planning for disasters and emergencies that was strong in the period from 2000 until about 2008 had waned considerably since then.

In 2008 the global financial crisis gripped almost all the government's attention. It was followed by the growing political crisis of the Brown government, the 2010 general election and then the coalition government – and austerity – occupied centre stage.

"The 2016 Cygnus exercise illustrated many problems, but few of them were addressed"

Although a lot of contingency planning carried on behind the scenes, interest and funding dwindled. The Cygnus exercise illustrated many problems, but few of them were addressed. And it focused on a flu pandemic – despite the SARS and MERS episodes – which has significant differences with Covid-19 pandemic that has arrived.

Some of the issues could not have been foreseen – but many could, and indeed were. It's fair enough to suggest some of the mistakes were systemic – but in the end it was people who decided not to prepare properly and allow the civil contingencies system to atrophy. ■

Colin Talbot is emeritus professor of government at the University of Manchester and a research associate at the University of Cambridge

PETER SCHOFIELD 20 YEARS OF DWP

THE DEPARTMENT FOR WORK AND PENSIONS HAS MARKED ITS TWO DECADES IN EXISTENCE BY COORDINATING ONE OF THE KEY ELEMENTS OF THE GOVERNMENT'S PANDEMIC RESPONSE, SAYS ITS PERMANENT SECRETARY

On 8 June 2001, the then-prime minister Tony Blair announced the creation of the Department for Work and Pensions, responsible for employment, equality, benefits, pensions and child support. It was formed from the Department for Social Security and most of its agencies, including the Benefits Agency, Child Support Agency and Appeals Service, and the employment part of the Department for Education and Employment, including the Employment Service in its entirety.

Back then, the Department for Work and Pensions was created with the purpose "to promote opportunity and independence for all". That's still very much at the heart of what we do – supporting people to improve the quality of their lives – and even more so over the course of the pandemic.

Our success over the past year has only been possible because of the advances we've made as a department over the last 20 years.

When we came together as a department in 2001, this was only the beginning of our story. In 2002, we created Jobcentre Plus, which brought together the Employment Service and Benefits Agency – this was a huge physical and cultural shift for our colleagues and customers.

Then in 2008, the recession hit. Back then we were referred to as the "fourth emergency service" as we were such a lifeline for people in need, very similar to this past 15 months.

In 2011, we brought our agencies inside to become One DWP and the year after we made reforms to key services like pensions and child maintenance to help our customers even further.

Then in 2013, the rollout of the digitised, single-payment benefit system that is Universal Credit began, by 2016 it was live in every jobcentre and by 2017 we had 100,000 claims. Back then, we couldn't predict that we would have the capacity to process what we've experienced with the pandemic, but the system has proven itself over the last 15 months beyond doubt. But this is just one part of the wider digital shift we've experienced over the last 20 years.

Back to the modern day, from processing an unprecedented 2.7 million new Universal Credit claims and answering an astonishing 2.2 million calls in a single day, to standing up vital new programmes such as Kickstart and Job Entry: Targeted Support, DWP has continued to support people when they need us most. We are boosting opportunities for jobseekers and giving vital new hope to those who have found themselves without it due to the pandemic.

Our pandemic response would have been unthinkable 20 years ago, from the rapid roll out of home working to the flexibility to redeploy 10,000 colleagues at such pace. The adaptations to our services, the abilities and diversity of colleagues, and stronger organisational structure have ensured we are able to work across team boundaries, across the civil service to get the job done.

I am hugely grateful to DWP colleagues, who have worked tirelessly and passionately to help the millions of citizens who have needed us. In fact, approximately 45% of our colleagues have been with us on this long journey, as they've worked in DWP for the last 20 years or more. I often ask long service colleagues: "What was it like to work in DWP in the past and what should we hold onto?" Usually the answer is about how we work together to help society. And to me, a DWP that works seamlessly together across government and across society to help improve people's lives is at the heart of our success. We're now, more than ever, One DWP.

"DWP has continued to support people when they need us most, giving vital new hope to those who have found themselves without it due to the pandemic"

Looking to the future, I know the department will continue to fight for and deliver for those who need us. Immediate priorities include our Plan for Jobs, getting people into work – such as through Kickstart – and implementing the government's Disability Strategy. There is also more to do to build back better: for example, my department will be leading the push for greener pension investments as we look to COP26 and beyond.

Twenty years ago, no one could have predicted the changes we have seen, and I am proud that my colleagues came together to help society when it was needed most. ■

Peter Schofield is permanent secretary at the Department for Work and Pensions

ANDY COWPER THE TREASURY'S BACK – AND SO IS DOM

THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE – AND ITS SECRETARY OF STATE – HAS HAD ANOTHER MONTH IN THE HEADLINES. BUT DID IT JUST SEE ITS FUTURE IN THE SCHOOL FUNDING ROW?

The most important event in government policy and politics as regards health and care over the past month was in education. Sounds odd, but it's true.

Sir Kevan Collins's resignation as the government's education catch-up tsar might not instantly have got you thinking about the health and care sector. But it should. Because as many shrewd observers swiftly noted, it marked the re-assertion of the traditional Treasury mindset over public spending.

The pandemic enforced huge increases in the state's role as the lender and spender of last resort. Collins's bid for £15bn over three financial years for educational catch-up did not seem (and probably wasn't) outlandish, in the context of the £37bn made available for NHS Test and Trace, or the £340bn approximate overall cost of the Covid-19 crisis response.

Guess who's back? The Treasury

The government's proposed decimation of the sum requested – they offered just £1.4bn – sends an unambiguous message: the magic money tree has been fenced off. The Treasury – the bank that likes to say "no" – is back in the driving seat, so fasten your fiscal seat belts nice and tight.

Of course, this matters for every part of the government and the civil service. Yet maybe it matters most of all for the health and care sector. Here are a few reasons why.

The NHS waiting list was huge before Covid-19 hit. It now stands at almost 5 million people: the longest since accurate records began. NHS workforce shortages remain significant, and the capital and maintenance backlog hit £8bn last year.

Social care still lacks any sign of the government's long-promised plan.

On top of all this, dealing with Covid-19 has left much, if not most, of the workforce stressed and tired, and possibly traumatised. Their reward? Staff in the NHS in England have been offered a 1% pay rise.

Cometh the hour, cometh the Dom

The past month has not, however, been without some fairly high-profile news. And civil servants in all areas of government would be forgiven for having ordered in popcorn and some suitable liquid refreshment for the man who infamously promised (borrowing from octogenarian song-and-dance-man Bob Dylan) a hard rain on the civil service.

Cummings was on incendiary form over the seven-hour session. He apologised several times for his own part in the failures of the government.

According to Cummings, a senior DHSC official told then-deputy cabinet secretary Helen MacNamara that the long-vaunted pandemic plans did not in fact exist.

MacNamara went straight to see Cummings in Downing Street, reportedly saying: "I think we are absolutely fucked. I think this country's heading for disaster. I think we're going to kill thousands and thousands of people".

The alleged Hancock-ups

Cummings also shipped copious amounts of blame straight onto secretary of state for health and social care Matt Hancock.

When Rosie Cooper MP asked Cummings to Ofsted-rate the performance of DHSC and Hancock (outstanding, good, requires improvement, inadequate), he replied: "I think the secretary of state should have been fired for at least 15 to 20 things, including lying to everybody on multiple occasions in meeting after meeting in the cabinet room and publicly... I said the secretary of state should be fired; so did the cabinet secretary; so did many, many other people".

"The row over education catch up cash marked the re-assertion of the traditional Treasury mindset over public spending"

Cummings said: "There were lots of great people [working in DHSC] but the procurement system which they were operating was just completely hopeless. On the day the PM tested positive, I was told by officials that DHSC were turning down ventilators because their price had been marked up. It completely beggars belief that sort of thing was happening. I was having PPE meetings that said delivery will take months because shipping stuff. Why shipping? Because that's what we always do. I had to leave meetings, tell people to commandeer planes, go get the PPE."

Cummings also criticised Hancock's pledge to hit 100,000 tests a day by the end of April 2020 (which was only met by gaming the numbers). He claimed that Hancock contradicted his directives to get test and trace properly established for the long term, diverting staff and holding back tests to help in hitting his 100,000 pledge.

"He should have been fired for that alone. That itself meant that the whole of April was hugely disrupted by different parts of Whitehall fundamentally trying to operate in different ways, completely because Hancock wanted to be able to go on TV and say 'look at me and my target I've hit'." Cummings concluded. "The cabinet secretary told the PM that the British political system cannot cope with a secretary of state who lies repeatedly in meetings. We couldn't get to grips with test and trace until we got it out of DHSC and into a separate agency."

Nor did the prime minister escape the firing line:

Cummings told the Covid-19 lessons learned committee that "after April 2020, there was no proper border policy because the PM did not want one. His argument was that lockdown had been a terrible mistake".

He claimed that "the prime minister already is about 1,000 times far too obsessed with the media, in a way that undermined him doing his own job. It doesn't matter if you've got great people doing communications, if the PM changes his mind 10 times a day, and then calls up the media and contradicts his own policy, day after day after day, you're going to have a communications disaster... We cannot change our mind every time the *Telegraph* writes an editorial on the subject".

Cummings confirmed that the BBC's account of the prime minister saying he'd rather see "bodies pile high" than introduce another lockdown in the autumn was accurate: "I heard that: it was after the 31 October decision to lock down."

Cummings added that "my relationship with the PM declined after the second lockdown in October, which he thought I blamed him for – and I did. The heart of the problem was, fundamentally, I regarded him as unfit for the job and I was trying to create a structure around him to try and stop what I thought were extremely bad decisions and push other things through against his wishes".

We should of course bear in mind that so far Cummings has produced no corroborating witness statements nor documentary evidence. These are, as such, allegations rather than facts.

Hancock's own testimony to the committee is likely to be quite gripping viewing, too. His friend and horse-racing chum, Conservative peer Baroness Dido Harding (ex-test and trace boss, newly returned to her NHS Improvement chair role) hit the news as a potential candidate to replace Sir Simon Stevens as the boss of NHS England.

Baroness Harding gave a combative interview to BBC *Woman's Hour* defending the performance of NHS Test and Trace, claiming not to have read the negative media coverage and that expectations were set too high. "This year, we've learned that test and trace is part of the response, but not a silver bullet for return to normal. It's not possible to do it with test and trace alone."

The noble baroness also claimed in conclusion that she is "not a politician" and is "not here to campaign for something". She is, of course, a Conservative peer, who within 24 hours appeared prominently in both the *Sunday Times* and on *Woman's Hour* in relation to the chief executive vacancy at NHS England. Eyebrows might well raise. ■

Andy Cowper is the editor of Health Policy Insight

Alex Chisholm has had a busy first year as civil service chief operating officer. Now the UK is looking towards its recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, he tells **Beckie Smith** about his priorities for the months ahead, and how the plans for civil service reform are shaping up

FORWARD OPERATIONS

Over the last year that Alex Chisholm has been chief operating officer of the civil service and Cabinet Office permanent secretary, very much has been said about Whitehall reform. It was a high-profile priority of the prime minister's former top adviser Dominic Cummings, whose pre-No.10 writings on the subject – and indeed some when he was in the building – meant the inner workings of the government machine suddenly had an unusually high prominence in the national discussion.

Concrete details on what changes might be in the offing have been slow to emerge, though – understandably, since the civil service has had one or two more pressing priorities to focus on.

But as the UK starts to emerge from the worst throes of the coronavirus pandemic – and now the country has finally left the EU – the gears are turning again.

As well as the not-inconsiderable tasks of helping guide the civil service through a pandemic and the Brexit transition period, Chisholm has been working behind the scenes on turning those gears. A civil service reform plan is in the works to be published "shortly" – he won't be more specific than that.

"It's been a tremendous year from the perspective of the challenges that we've had to face and we've risen to. I'm filled with admiration, genuinely, for what the civil service has been able to do. We've all had a really powerful sense of mission – that's never been stronger," he says, listing some of the many huge pieces of work civil servants have pulled together since the pandemic struck – among them the furlough scheme, the vaccine rollout and the Universal Credit support for people who lost jobs.

While all of that has been happening, "we've been biding our time [on reform]... but we haven't wasted that time, because there's been a terrific element of consultation across the civil service," Chisholm says. "We've also been quite reflective about what we can take from the pandemic and, indeed, from the EU exit process, the Integrated Review and other experiences about what needs to be done differently and better."

Data has been a big focus of the government's work this year, with analysis of stats from across government informing the Covid response and datasets being opened to the public, and Chisholm says he wants to build on civil servants' skills in that area to improve the way services are delivered.

He also wants to encourage what he calls, in classic mandarin style, "integrated solutions to interconnected challenges" like the government's levelling-up agenda; the net-zero-goal; economic recovery from the pandemic; increasing trade under the "Global Britain banner". All of these cut across departments and UK administrations, "so it is enormously important that we are really joined up in an effective way," Chisholm says.

"If the profile of the organisation is that you need to be in an old-fashioned building in Whitehall, that is much less inviting than something which is in a town or city near you"

As part of that, he has been working with No.10, the Treasury and the cabinet secretary, Simon Case, on a "one centre approach" to coordinating work towards these ambitious goals. That thinking has shaped government's approach to planning this and last year's spending reviews, the management of government's more than 200 major projects, and the introduction of new Outcome Delivery Plans *(see box)*.

He is also working to embed a new approach to risk management, he says, referring to external reviews such as the one being conducted by Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy non-executive director Nigel Boardman in the wake of the Greensill scandal *(see box)*, and a review of the Cabinet Office by one of its erstwhile ministers, Lord Francis Maude.

Chisholm acknowledges that all of this – along with addressing the Conservative Party's 2019 manifesto commitments – "hasn't had the same level of attention" it normally would, given the dual crises civil servants have been working on in the last couple of years. "So I'm keen to make sure... that we really redouble our efforts to make a success of those things and tackle inequalities that have become even further exposed during the experience of the pandemic."

As well as the very real inequalities affecting the UK population the government must address in the wake of the pandemic, the civil service still has inequalities of its own.

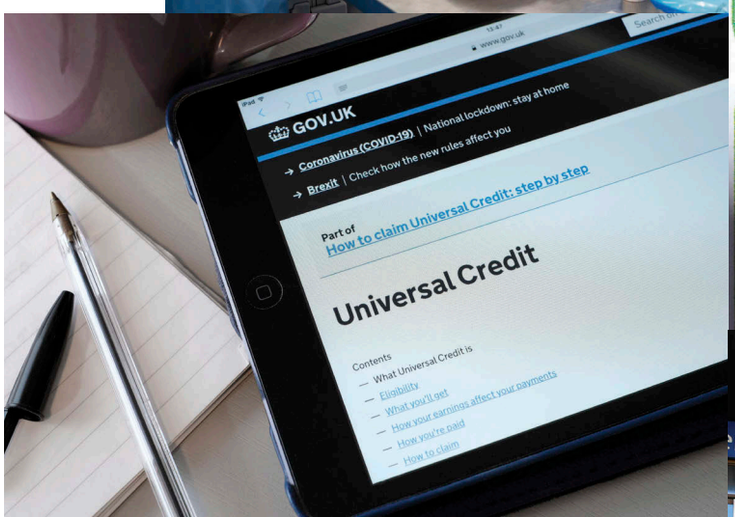
A report from the Social Mobility Commission last month found people from disadvantaged backgrounds are still "significantly underrepresented"

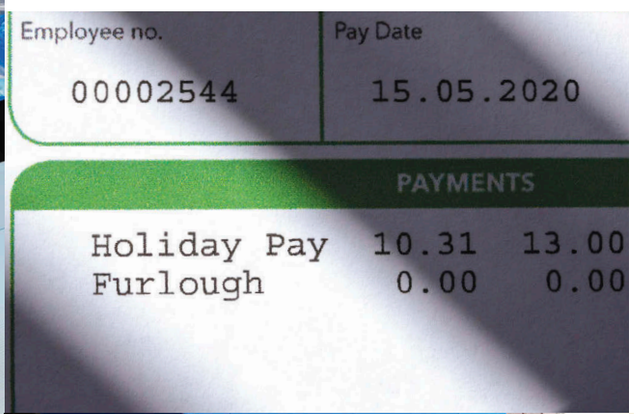
CHISHOLM ON... WHETHER THE GREENSILL SCANDAL HAS DENTED PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN THE CIVIL SERVICE

"I'm going to go out on a limb and say I actually think that it won't have damaged confidence in the civil service. The view the public has of the civil service is based on millions of interactions every day: in benefits offices, in dealing with the tax authorities, and the experience of people working in education, health, and throughout the public service. From those interactions, the public actually have a lot of trust and confidence in civil servants... I think that with this sense that fellow citizens have had to rely on civil servants to act with amazing courage and commitment through the pandemic, we'll probably have added to that rather than taking anything away.

"Although Greensill has provided some alarming headlines, I think the focus will tend to move onto corporate governance standards and regulation rather than what it tells you about the civil service – which isn't very much, because the reality is that 99% of civil servants wouldn't recognise this picture of lobbying, second jobbing and the other things that are alleged because that's just no part of their world. So I think it's a distraction.

"It also shows that there are some lessons that can be learned, I think, about public appointments and about management of conflicts of interest. I'm sure we will learn them when we get the report from Nigel Boardman. And it also probably tells us some things about the value of supply chain finance, but I don't think it will make a big difference to the civil service and our reputation."





within the civil service. Those that make it sometimes struggle to climb the ladder because of what it called "alienating and intimidating" unspoken behavioural codes that their better-off colleagues have learned through their upbringing and privileged education. In fact, the number of senior civil servants from working-class or "low social economic backgrounds" has actually fallen slightly from 19% in 1967 to 18% now.

Asked about the report, Chisholm says the civil service now compared to when he joined more than 30 years ago is like "chalk and cheese". "It's unbelievable, the progress that's been made," he says, noting that 62% of civil servants went to a non-selective state school and 31% identify as coming from a lower socio-economic background. The senior civil service – including the top echelon of permanent secretaries – is now "as open to women as men", he adds. "So that's really helped, I think. When you look at the top of the organisation, if you feel that people like you are not represented amongst that group, it's discouraging."

He says talent schemes focused on underrepresented groups, internships and apprenticeships are all good ways to address the remaining disparities.

Attracting a more diverse civil service is "about the profile of the organisation", he adds, nodding to the ongoing drive to move more civil servants out of London. "I think if the profile of the organisation is that you need to be in an old-fashioned looking building in Whitehall or Westminster, that is much less inviting than something which is in a town or city near you – and also where it feels very modern, it's very visible, it doesn't feel locked in the past."

"Ministers will always attract people around them. If ministers want to work outside of London, that sends a really positive message"

He points out that many of the new government hubs that departments are moving officials into as part of the Places for Growth programme are "glass and steel constructions". And seeing the officials that appear in front of those buildings at press conferences and turn up at local meetings, working with businesses and local authorities "will help change people's perception about what the civil service is like", he adds.

"But I think that it's already seen as being very open to people from any background. And we just need to nudge a couple more points on the dial to really, truly make sure that every aspect of it is representative and inclusive."

The government has always had outposts outside London, and it will take more than a few office moves

to make the civil service representative of the many UK regions it serves. Chisholm says unlike previous attempts, this programme isn't focused as heavily on moving delivery-focused roles.

"So that is different this time around: we've got a lot of policy roles as well. Also that many senior civil servants are transferring roles as well as the more operational and junior roles," he says.

"That won't be a surprise to HMRC or the Department for Work and Pensions, for example, which have always had a strong representation across the whole of the UK. But it is a change for a number of very policy-heavy departments," he says.

He says another thing that will make a "big difference" to the programme's success is a strong ministerial presence. "Ministers will always attract people around them for meetings and for visits and all of that. And so if ministers themselves want to work outside of London offices, that sends a really positive message."

Recent press releases about office openings have signalled ministers will spend time in their "second homes", and housing secretary Robert Jenrick has promised to spend "as much time as I can" in his ministry's new Wolverhampton HQ. Exactly what that looks like remains to be seen, though, and *CSW* wonders if some politicians might take some persuading to get out of the big smoke.

"A lot of it will vary between individuals. And of course, the location of their constituency can make quite a difference," Chisholm says. And, he points out, parliament's rules around voting and other matters often dictate when MPs need to be in Westminster. Asked if that could prove a serious barrier to ministers working out of regional offices, Chisholm answers carefully: "I think that some evolution of parliamentary practice will definitely help with multi-site working across the UK... I need to be careful not to exceed my brief because these are parliamentary rules, but it's probably something to consider as well around equal opportunities for participation between the sexes as well – and people at different stages in their careers and in their parenting, for example, or with caring responsibilities.

"So there are probably a number of ways in which I suspect parliament will want to evolve to become a fully modern organisation, making use of that technology and responding to social change around it."

What about permanent secretaries? The Social Mobility Commission's recent report suggested one way to ensure departments' new regional offices are more than just outposts would be to have two to three perm secs outside London. Can Chisholm see that happening?

"I think it's increasingly likely, not least because a number of departments now have two permanent secretaries, often with more of an operational support or delivery role. So that at least doubles your chances – probably more than doubles of chances, because very often the workforces that are involved in those more operational roles are themselves very largely outside of London," he says.

"So from the perspective of being closer to the people that you are leading, there's a lot to be said for new locations."

He points out that Angela McDonald, who became second permanent secretary at HM Revenue and Customs last summer, is based in Leeds. Having leaders outside the capital means civil servants are "more visible" and seen as more accessible to the public – and for both the reform plans and the levelling-up agenda, he says, that can only be a good thing. ■

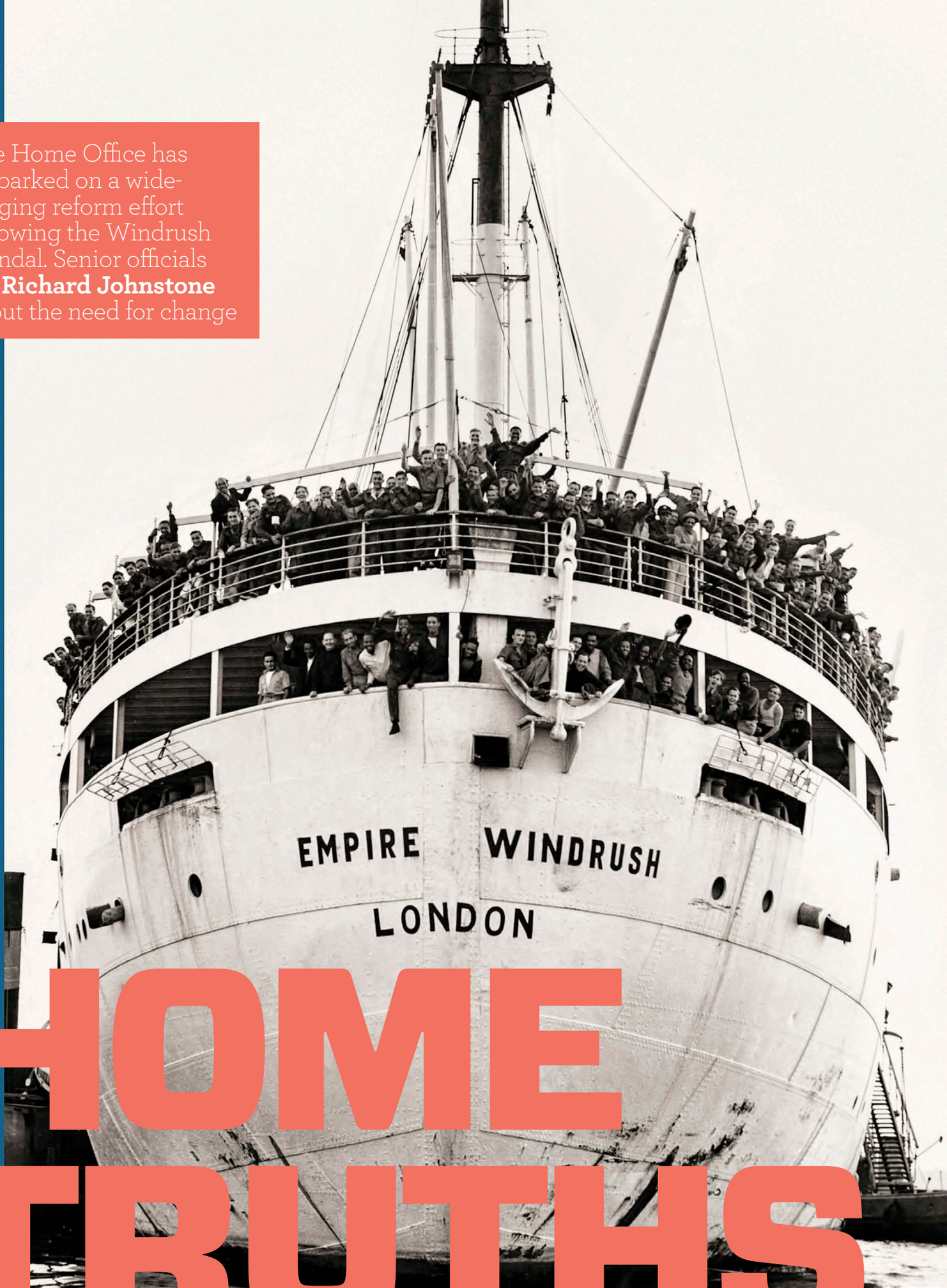
"I think Greensill won't have damaged confidence in the civil service. The public actually have a lot of trust and confidence in civil servants"

CHISHOLM ON... OUTCOME DELIVERY PLANS

"I'm really optimistic about those. The original basis for the Single Departmental Plans [which ODPs are replacing] was solid, but they were done very differently between different departments and that made it difficult to make comparisons and limited external transparency and accountability. And they also tried to do too many things – they became long lists or compendiums of activity. ODPs are more selective, they're more consistent, there's been a real effort to join up the allocation of resources against those declared priorities and plans. There are much clearer metrics than we've had before, which are related much more to outcomes achieved rather than just outputs.

"This is year one; I bet we can do better in year two. We also need to make sure that people walk the walk as well as talk the talk, but I think it's a far better framework for trying to prioritise government activity. All of us who work in the civil service know that one of our tendencies is to throw ourselves into situations and we do tend to overcommit. That also can be a tendency in the political process as well. So using these plans to try and be very disciplined about what we deliver against those promises – seeing things through on time, on budget and making sure that all the essential work gets done – that will make a huge difference, especially when it's measured by the gains to the end user in society, our fellow citizens, and not just by conformance with an output plan."

The Home Office has embarked on a wide-ranging reform effort following the Windrush scandal. Senior officials tell **Richard Johnstone** about the need for change



HOME TRUTHS

Scrutiny comes with the territory in the Home Office. The department, described by its own top minister two decades ago as "not fit for purpose", has long been subject to a high level of oversight from parliament, media and civil society groups.

And, many would say, for good reason. The Windrush scandal revealed a department that had been wrongly deporting British citizens who arrived in the UK between 1948 and 1973. A subsequent inquiry found many people from Commonwealth countries had been denied their rights due to the department's "hostile environment" policy.

The department will be in the spotlight in the weeks and months ahead for how it responds to the review into the scandal, which set out a series of recommendations to ensure those mistakes are never repeated.

The scandal shook the department, claiming its cabinet minister and a group of senior civil servants. Current permanent secretary Matthew Rycroft acknowledges the official inquiry, undertaken by Wendy Williams, got "pretty close to saying that the department is institutionally racist".

"She didn't get that far," says Rycroft, who took up the post the week after the report and its 30 recommendation were published. "But she did say the department had shown 'institutional ignorance and thoughtlessness towards the issue of race and the history of the Windrush generation'. That's what she found the Home Office grievously guilty of."

The Williams review made four recommendations specifically addressing race issues in the Home Office, including the creation of an overarching strategic race advisory board, chaired by the permanent secretary and with external experts as members.

It also called for a revised diversity and inclusion strategy, including targets for improving the number of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic officials in the senior civil service, and a detailed plan for achieving them.

These recommendations were intended by Williams to form part of "a programme of major cultural change for the whole department and all staff, aimed at encouraging the workforce and networks to contribute to the values and purpose of the organisation and how it will turn them into reality".

Rycroft tells *CSW*: "My instinct was to use Wendy Williams's really compelling and really hard-hitting report as the burning platform to drive the cultural shift in the department. And how we deal with race in the department is absolutely central to that."

This led to the development of the Race Action Programme to take on the process of culture change in the department.

"If you look at the numbers, there's definitely something going wrong – BAME staff were underachieving in terms of performance and pay, and were overly represented in the bottom tranches" *Matthew Rycroft*

Programme team head Hamid Motraghi says the review put increased emphasis on issues of race in the department. "When the review was published, and when Matthew came in, we used that opportunity to really look at where we can align the thinking of the department," he says.

The Race Action Plan launched in July 2020, following what Motraghi calls "a period of reflection". It was compiled after consultation with the department's 10 directorate race champions, as well as with Rycroft (who is also the overall civil service race champion) and Tyson Hepple, the Home Office's race champion and director general for immigration enforcement.

The plan sets out a number of measures to increase the number of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people in senior roles, with the aim of matching representation in the Home Office SCS to the proportion in society by 2025.

Rycroft notes that the Home Office has more Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff than any other department, making up 23% of its workforce, but accepts that at "every single step up the hierarchy, the proportion falls".

"By the time you get to the senior civil service, that proportion is down to 7-8%, a really shocking fall off," he says. "So we are doing something right in attracting people into the Home Office, but the bad news is most of them are in the most junior grades. So we've got a massive job to really focus on promotion and progression, and that is one of the big things that we've been focusing on."

Rycroft says one key action has been improving the performance management system, which represented "probably the biggest single thing" that came out of his conversation with colleagues on how to improve representation in the department.

Rycroft joined the Home Office from the Department for International Development, where he was perm sec from January 2018 to March 2020. He said one thing he did not expect to find at the Home Office was "a very serious concern" from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic colleagues about performance management and the way they felt the system was "biased against them".

"If you just look at the numbers, there's definitely something going wrong – the Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic staff were underachieving in terms of performance and pay, and were overly represented in the bottom tranches [of the department's performance management system]," Rycroft says.

The system was based on a broader civil service system that unions and others have argued is discriminatory. Data from across departments and agencies has consistently shown that employees from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds are less likely to receive the top performance rating and more likely to receive the lowest rating compared to their white colleagues.

Motraghi says the performance management regime was a "real thorn in the side for a lot of staff for several years", so the new system represented "a huge change for the department". The new system, which has been put in place for the current assessment year, has removed mid-year and end-of-year performance assessment ratings, and reduced the

administrative burden of performance reviews in favour of light-touch regular check-ins, with a focus on development and wellbeing. The process has also been simplified, with the goal of providing a continuous cycle of performance and development conversations, and greater consistency and fairness for all staff through increased monitoring and accountability – with director generals having additional responsibility around diverse outcomes.

"To Matthew and Tyson's credit, they took the bull by the horns on this one and got it delivered," Motraghi says.

The Race Action Programme has also changed the makeup of recruitment boards. To increase diversity, 800 volunteers, all of whom are from a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic background or have a disability, have been recruited to sit on the panels. Motraghi says work is focused "mainly at senior executive officer and above, because that's where our under representation is the most acute". The department is doing "significant work" around feedback and reserve lists, and ensuring jobs have more diverse shortlists to begin with.

Staff sponsorship is another area of change, with every executive committee member – and soon every member of the senior civil service – sponsoring a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff member.

However, changing the culture of the Home Office is something that Rycroft acknowledges will not be a quick fix. In a letter to Public Accounts Committee chair Meg Hillier in March, he said "transformational change is needed if the Home Office is to deliver better for the public", adding that it should become "more open and customer-focused, more efficient and automated, more forward looking and innovative".

He acknowledged that "this transformation journey will take time to implement fully and to embed", a concern shared by other observers of the department.

Former independent chief inspector of borders and immigration David Bolt (interviewed elsewhere in this month's *CSW*) highlights some of the barriers to change.

"There isn't one culture in the Home Office," he says. "It's lots of micro cultures, because it's spread out over so many locations.

"I know Matthew Rycroft and ministers are talking about how they're intending to change the culture, but it's a real challenge to achieve that across such a big department. I don't doubt there's a will to do it, I doubt whether there is the ability to do it."

Chai Patel, legal policy director at the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, tells *CSW* that while he agrees many civil servants are "sincerely trying to improve things in line with some of the recommendations that were made", the department has not improved.

"The key problems weren't internal diversity within the Home Office or necessarily whether the staff had had enough sensitivity training. The problems were in policy and in the political culture and in the directions given by ministers," he says.

"You have the home secretary and ministers calling for harsher measures and saying extremely hostile things to the charities and employers who raised the Windrush problems in the first place."

The policy landscape coming from ministers around their new plan for immigration is increasingly hostile and advocating regressive policies, Patel says. "So it is difficult to talk about reform when all the reforms are to stuff that wasn't the root cause of the problem, while there's regression in all the poli-

cies and politics that were," he adds.

Rycroft acknowledges that no element of the Home Office's current package of changes will be a "single bullet" and says it will "take time" to improve outcomes for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff.

"I want to be honest with people that this is this is not an overnight issue, this is going to take a long period of sustained work – very unheroic and behind the scenes – but we are determined to do that," he says.

Motraghi agrees progress is "going to be the aggregation of marginal gains". "It's not going to be one big bang. It will take us time," he says.

But he hopes to reach that 2025 target for SCS representation. "I'm sure we can get there, because we are seeing improvements in terms of representation already.

"It is at the top end of the scale that we do need to do some more work and I think the focus on it will make a real difference."

The department has accepted all of Wendy Williams's recommendations, which means it has now formed the strategic race board chaired by Rycroft. In Rycroft's words, the board will "hold people to account and ensure we crack on with delivering our plans", as well as revising the department's overall diversity and inclusion strategy.

These efforts all come at a time when government action to tackle racial disparities more broadly is in the spotlight. The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report produced for the government was viewed by many equality advocates as a backwards step because it concluded that geography, family influence, socio-economic background, culture and religion have a more significant impact on life chances than the existence of racism.

Asked if the report – and the pre-briefing of the most contentious elements, which led to high-profile media coverage – harmed the kind of work that the Home Office is seeking to address, Rycroft stresses that the government has not yet responded to the report.

"We should reflect on it and see it as a contribution to the debate rather than as the last word," he says.

"It's definitely not going to detract us from our implementation of all of the Windrush recommendations. I think there probably have been some staff in the Home Office who have been worried about that. And I have sought to reassure them that they shouldn't be worrying. In terms of what it means more broadly, I think we are waiting for the prime minister and Cabinet Office on that."

Motraghi adds that the report has "got people to stop and think more about race", but says implementing the Windrush recommendations is "what we're focused on delivering and making a difference for our staff". And some of the recommendations, such as disaggregating statistics about Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups to better understand the challenges faced by each, have already happened in the department.

"It's not going to be one big bang. It will take us time" *Hamid Motraghi*

Alongside his work in the department, Rycroft is also the civil service race's champion, having been confirmed in the role after an initial six-month appointment.

He says his priorities are looking at recruitment, promotion and progression, and lived experiences of people from minority backgrounds in the civil service – and that he has begun to find initiatives that can be applied to the Home Office's own efforts.

Other areas of collaboration Motraghi highlights include work the Home Office has done with the departments that share its Marsham Street HQ – the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs – to put in place a shared career development pipeline for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic women.

The Home Office's high profile means it will no doubt remain in the spotlight for its actions. But Rycroft stresses that he wants his to be the department that others learn from. "Some of our Windrush response, for instance, includes trying to get a message across the whole of the civil service about how to do policymaking in a more open and more inclusive way that is more in touch with the communities that we serve," he says. "We are trying to break down the barriers between the Home Office and the rest of the civil service and actually go out there with constructive suggestions on some issues which we've got experience of."

This has included conversations between Rycroft and his fellow permanent secretaries in what he calls "Wednesday morning colleagues format", referring to the weekly meeting between departmental chiefs.

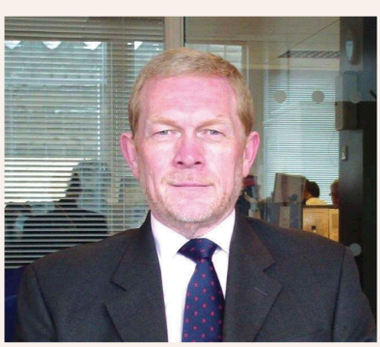
These have been "updating them on our Windrush response, and then specifically asking them to engage on some of these particular issues," Rycroft says. "And there's a whole strand of work, to follow up one of Wendy's recommendations, that is about spreading good practice around the policymaking community."

Like many parts of this agenda, it is now about tracking progress. But, says Rycroft, "when you put them all together, you know, this is a really strong and sustained attempt to shift the dial".

Both he and Motraghi know the country will be watching to judge their progress. ■

BOLT OF INSIGHT

As independent chief inspector of borders and immigration, **David Bolt** spent six years shedding light on the Home Office's work. He tells **Beckie Smith** about inspecting Napier Barracks, post-Windrush reforms, and the challenge of changing the department's culture



It is eight months since home secretary Priti Patel promised to deliver a "cultural shift" at the Home Office that would see the department become more compassionate and people-focused, with a "culture of learning".

In the months since that "unprecedented programme of change" – brought about by the revelations of the damning Windrush lessons learned review – launched, many have questioned the extent to which the department has learned from its mistakes.

Sceptics have questioned whether the ministry's promise to "see the face behind the case" is meaningful, as stories of people being harmed by Home Office decisions continue to unfold. Earlier this year, for example, it emerged that asylum seekers had been forced to sleep in dormitories of more than 20 people while being held in repurposed army accommodation during the Covid-19 lockdown.

It is partly because of David Bolt that the public is aware of the conditions in Napier Barracks and Penally Barracks during the pandemic – conditions he described following an inspection as "impoverished, run down and unsuitable for long-term accommodation". Those conditions made a coronavirus outbreak "almost inevitable", Bolt said – contradicting the home secretary's insistence that "mingling" was to blame for the eruption of 178 cases in a single month at Napier.

"It was always going to be questionable whether that type of barracks accommodation was suitable in any event for asylum seekers – particularly if there are those who have suffered trauma, or possibly been involved in being interned or in camps in their home country. So it was always a questionable exercise," says Bolt, who stepped down as independent chief inspector of borders and immigration in March. But the pandemic made it even more so, he adds, because it meant keeping large numbers of people in cramped conditions.

Having spent six years inspecting the Home Office's work, Bolt well understands how asylum seekers came to be held in such inappropriate quarters. Even outside a pandemic the whole of the immigration system is under constant strain, and "the capacity of the system to do everything well, to an appropriate standard, all of the time and across all of the business just isn't there," he says.

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Bolt's inspection of the two barracks – one of his last pieces of work as ICIBI – led Home Affairs Select Committee chair Yvette Cooper to conclude that "at a time when the home secretary and permanent secretary have told us they are making major changes to improve the culture and the humanity of the department in response to the Wendy Williams Windrush review... they haven't yet learnt the lessons".

Campaigners and human-rights charities meanwhile described the decision to use the former army accommmodation to house asylum seekers as "inhumane" and "heartless".

But Bolt says he doesn't believe Home Office civil servants lack compassion. "I've met lots of staff at all levels across the department and I don't think that is fair to say about the majority, or even many of them. I'm sure there are some people who are 'case hardened' to the point where they are maybe less caring and thoughtful than they ought to be about dealing with individual cases – but in general, I don't think that is an issue," he says.

But he says those leading the department sometimes fail to recognise the "transactional" nature of its work. Many staff deal primarily with application forms, and opportunities to speak to people face to face are "limited".

"And some of those opportunities are confrontational – like in immigration enforcement," Bolt adds. "Border Force [is one example]: although they don't set out to become confrontational, nonetheless they're in an unequal power relationship with the people who are arriving at the frontier.

"So the Home Office's interactions with people are not the same as they would be in, say, the Department of Health and Social Care. They're not in a welfare role, they're in a transactional mindset. They've got a set of rules, a set of guidance, an application or a claim in front of them and they're applying the rules and the guidance to that claim.

"I would question whether sometimes they do that as carefully as they should... and I do think that when those judgments require compassion, or when they require an understanding and empathy with the applicant, that is sometimes lacking, because that's not part of the norm in which these things are done."

"I think the Home Office's sense of time is different from many of the people that are engaging with it"

To illustrate his point, Bolt recalls examining family reunification for refugees in 2016. Back then, applications for asylum were handled in overseas posts by people "who were applying the sorts of considerations that they would to a normal visa". He explains: "So when the wife or the children [of a refugee who had settled in the UK] were unable to provide passports or other documents in support of their application, they were being routinely turned down on the basis that, 'Well, they can always reapply, it's free'. I'm not sure that you call that callous or heartless, but you would call it unimaginative and not recognising the true circumstances of those people's situations."

As well as inspecting the Home Office's work, the immigration inspector makes recommendations on how to improve – and this is one occasion when the department took Bolt's advice, which was to put the asylum operations directorate in charge of handling family reunification casework. "That was a step forward. But there were lots of other [recommendations I made] to do with refugee camps that they rejected."

Asked about his proudest moments as ICIBI, Bolt says he "did take some satisfaction" in changing the family reunification process. But he says every win was tinged with disappointment. "With family reunion, department ministers decided that they didn't want to go down the route of extending the notion of the family to include siblings who are over the age of 18," he says, adding: "I tend to be a glass-half-empty person, as you can probably tell."

Despite those frustrations, Bolt says he didn't see the job as a battle. "It wasn't about me winning and the department losing. It was more about trying to make sure that the department actually understood certain things that it [wouldn't otherwise]." He wanted to create a "'water on stone' sense of continuous inspection and continuous pressure on the department to do the best it could", he says. "We managed that, I think," he adds, noting that he introduced a reinspection process to review progress on his recommendations.

Another factor that has dampened confidence in the Home Office's pledge to "right the wrongs of Windrush" is that the process seems to be taking an awfully long time. A compensation scheme for victims took a year to launch after then-home secretary Amber Rudd acknowledged the scandal and set up the Windrush task force. This March, nearly two years after the scheme launched, just £14.3m had been paid out and some people had been waiting more than 18 months for their applications to be processed. Twenty-one people had died waiting.

Bolt hasn't inspected the compensation scheme directly, as it has its own assurance mechanisms. But he observes that when it was being set up, the Home Office seemed very concerned about ensuring the system would work properly. "I don't think it managed to achieve the right balance there – the need to move at pace and the need to do it with care," he says.

"It seemed to me that with this, it was moving very, very slowly, which it might argue was necessary to get it all right, but obviously wasn't matching public expectations – nor, indeed, the needs of the individuals who'd been affected."

"I think one of my major frustrations is the very slow pace at which things move [in the Home Office]," he says, noting that the department was consistently slow to publish his reports and act on his recommendations – "particularly those that require policy input, where that seemed to take forever".

The Home Office officially aims to publish ICIBI inspection reports eight weeks after it receives them – but only did so for a tiny fraction of those Bolt wrote. It took months to publish some of them.

"I think the Home Office's sense of time – the passage of time, the speed at which time moves – is different from many of the people that are engaging with it," he adds.

Take, for example, the panels deciding if adults at risk in detention should be released. If the panel needs more information about a case after its first meeting, it might take a couple of weeks to reconvene. "A couple of weeks might seem like pretty quick in civil service terms or administrative terms. But for the person sitting in an immigration removal centre, it feels like a long time. So I think there's a lack of recognition of the need to move at pace, which I think is a concern."

For those following the Home Office's work closely, it can feel that change is often influenced by public opinion. It was only after a national outcry over reports about the treatment of elderly and vulnerable Windrush victims that the department acknowledged its failings and launched the lessons-learned review – and there are many examples of visas being granted or deportations being stopped following media attention.

Does Bolt think the commitment to change post-Windrush is meaningful – or is it more about protecting the department's image? "Well certainly, there's an image and reputation issue that is clearly part of all of that," he acknowledges.

But he says the desire for change runs deeper than that. "I think that a lot of staff were quite bruised by Windrush... from what I saw and heard, a lot of staff were very upset that the Home Office had acted in the way that it had, and felt person-

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ally hurt by it and had a determination to do something about it. So I think at all levels, there is a desire to change," he says.

There is "some scepticism" about whether things will actually change, though. "The Home Office has got more transformation plans and programmes than you can shake a stick at. It's always talking about transforming and changing."

"And there's a question in my mind about follow through," which Bolt attributes partly to the "tremendous" rate of churn among senior civil servants and ministers. In his six years inspecting the Home Office it had four home secretaries, seven immigration ministers, three permanent secretaries, three second permanent secretaries, and the director generals changed "at least twice".

"Any programme that's going to require a commitment over time is at risk because whatever energies you have at the beginning, and whatever personal commitment... as people change and as time goes on and new things hit you, it's hard to keep that momentum going. I just think that's one of the real challenges that the department's got," he says.

"How does it manage to do that, and keep the momentum for something like that when it's got so many other challenges to deal with? And this issue I mentioned before, about capacity, and it's always running to stand still?"

Then there is the sheer scale of the Home Office, he adds. "There's so many moving parts. Even when you talk about culture – I've often said, well, there isn't one culture in the Home Office." Border Force, immigration enforcement and UK Visas and Immigration all have their own "micro cultures", with distinct identities and responsibilities.

"I know Matthew [Rycroft, permanent secretary] and ministers are talking about how they're intending to change the culture, the 'face behind the case' training is being rolled out so that people will develop more sympathy, more empathy for the applicants. That's a hell of a challenge, I think, to achieve that across such a big department with so many diverse functions, such a devolved workforce. A real challenge. I don't doubt there's a will to do it, I doubt whether there is the ability to do it."

CSW wonders where Bolt would start, were he in charge. "I think that you'd have to be careful not to try and eat the elephant all in one go. I think you need to find things where it's possible to make change," he says. Not that that's a simple task – as he points out, every change has a knock-on effect, and a change to one area of casework could have an unforeseen impact on processes elsewhere.

But he would invest in career management, training and personal development, he says. And he would encourage – as he tried to do as ICIBI – more top-level ownership of officials' work. "One of the things you hear is that the people in asylum feel like a forgotten army; they're not necessarily a particularly high priority to top management," he says, but he concedes that may have changed since the appointment of a new director general for asylum and protection in February.

Does Bolt think a requirement for Home Office staff to spend time meeting people in detention centres, or visiting asylum accommodation, would be helpful? Yes, he says – he would encourage the department to give staff "as much exposure as possible" to the groups of people they are dealing with. He says his own experience doing just that was "illuminating and quite humbling".

The post-Windrush "face behind the case" training will mean more officials meet Home Office "customers" – but Bolt notes that in the past, the department resisted his calls to increase face-to-face contact. It turned down a recommendation to require caseworkers making decisions about foreign national offenders who had served their sentences to visit immigration removal centres and prisons – instead putting other staff in place as go-betweens.

"The Home Office has more transformation plans and programmes than you can shake a stick at. There's a question in my mind about follow through"

Another theme running through many of Bolt's reports – and which appears to be reflected in the Home Office's attitude towards the publication of the reports themselves – is a lack of transparency. It was only through his reporting that seemingly key information needed to allow scrutiny of its work, such as the makeup of the panel consulting on its right to rent scheme, became public.

"Transparency is a real issue," Bolt says. "I realised after a while that part of the function of my reports was to expose things, to get things into the public domain, in a way that I hoped would mean that people had a better understanding of what was really going on – because the Home Office itself was so poor at explaining itself," he says.

That was part of the thinking behind the advice Bolt passed on to his successor, David Neal, about how to succeed as chief inspector. "It's in the title, 'independent', so I tried to be very careful not to try and steer him towards a particular thing. The independence comes in deciding what to look at, how to look at it, what's important. So I encouraged him to do that.

"But I passed on a few tricks of the trade – things to do with pushing back at the Home Office at the factual accuracy stage of the report [after submission and before publication], where the Home Office tends to go well beyond factual accuracy when it's seeking to add things and redraft it. You need to be robust there – otherwise, it will try spinning the report."

His final piece of advice is, he acknowledges, "an enormous cliché". "It's a great privilege to be able to poke around under the bonnet of the Home Office in the way that I did... to have your own train set and to be able to do exactly what you wanted, when and how you wanted, was fantastic. And so essentially, I encouraged him to make the most of that." ■

ALL CHANGE FOR DIGITAL GOVERNMENT?

This year has seen the biggest changes to Whitehall's technology leadership in a decade. **Sam Trendall** runs through what's new

This year has seen perhaps the biggest shake-up in the Whitehall digital scene since the creation of the Government Digital Service 10 years ago.

GDS has itself appointed a new chief executive, with former Ministry of Justice digital chief Tom Read taking the reins in February. Government's digital leadership has been further augmented by the respective appointments of Joanna Davinson and Paul Wilmott as executive director and chair of the newly created Central Digital and Data Office.

The CDDO sits alongside GDS in the Cabinet Office, with the former assuming leadership of the digital, data and technology function across the civil service. Its broad remit is to set and implement overall strategy across departments, while GDS focuses on developing digital platforms that can be used throughout government.

In recent weeks, details have gradually emerged about how the two agencies will work together – and in parallel – and how the revamp will affect those working in digital government.

Staffing and responsibilities

In the past two months, scores of staff from GDS have moved over to CDDO, as the

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newly created entity has taken on a range of standards and controls functions that were previously the remit of the digital agency.

CDDO now holds responsibility for managing and implementing all digital, data and technology strategy and standards throughout government. This includes the Service Standard – a set of 14 rules against which services are assessed at every stage of their development. The body also oversees open standards and government's Technology Code of Practice.

All of which were previously the responsibility of GDS – as was the imposition of spending controls for departmental investment in digital services and technology. This too, along with all other "cross-government DDaT performance and assurance", has been moved to CDDO. Responsibility for accessibility work is also understood to have moved to the new entity, as has the management of the .gov.uk public sector domain.

The decision to move all these functions has seen a large number of staff move from GDS to CDDO. Those that have made the switch include holders of a wide range of job titles such as technology adviser, policy and engagement lead, and user researchers and designers in the areas of standards, assurance, and accessibility. It is understood the number of employees moved between the two organisations is likely to be in the region of at least 100.

The two entities do, at least, share an office, with CDDO's listed HQ being the Whitechapel Building in east London, which has housed GDS since 2016.

GOV.UK and services

GDS's biggest project is the ongoing work to develop GOV.UK accounts, which will provide a government-wide login system to replace an existing patchwork of about 100 separate means of logging in to access various services across departments.

One of the tools being phased out is GOV.UK Verify, public funding for which was scheduled to cease in March 2020. From that point onwards, responsibility for supporting its ongoing operation and development had been due to be handed over to the platform's commercial identity-provider partners.

However, as the majority of those partners began to sever their ties with the platform – and with huge demands being placed on Verify by the surge in Universal Credit applications prompted by the coronavirus crisis – the government stepped in to continue funding the product until at least September 2021.

This funding – equating to £11m a year – will now continue even further, until April 2023, while work on the new accounts system takes place.

That project, meanwhile, received £21m in the November spending round.

According to civil service chief operating officer Alex Chisholm: "[This will] enable GDS to build a pilot system as the first stage of an ambitious single sign-on and digital identity assurance system for the whole of government, alongside £11m to continue to run Verify during 2021-22 to minimise the risk of disruption to users and connected services as we transition on to the future system."

> **"Data is too often stuck in silos within departments and agencies"**
> ***Julia Lopez***

Since launching five years ago, Verify has had tepid uptake across government, with only about 20 services making use of the platform. The GOV.UK accounts system "is being built with the lessons of Verify front and centre", Chisholm said.

"It is being co-designed and built in close collaboration with key departments, and with robust oversight from the IPA [Infrastructure and Projects Authority] and a dedicated ministerial group, jointly chaired by the chief secretary to the Treasury [Steve Barclay] and minister Julia Lopez, Cabinet Office parliamentary under-secretary," he added.

Tech and data infrastructure

Addressing the significant challenges created for government by outdated IT is "a core reason the Central Digital and Data Office has been established" and will be one of the organisation's major early objectives, according to Cabinet Office minister Julia Lopez.

In a speech given to the Digital Government Conference last month, Lopez described legacy IT as "the elephant in the room" of the transformation agenda.

Before the pandemic, GDS led work to conduct a government-wide audit of legacy technology across departments. The commonly used government definition of legacy is any hardware, software or business process which meets one or more of the following criteria: being considered an end-of-life product; being no longer supported by the supplier; being impossible to update; being considered to be above what is considered an acceptable risk threshold; and being no longer cost effective.

The impact of such ageing systems has been starkly demonstrated by the coronavirus crisis, with the need to maintain legacy IT systems having added more than £50m to HM Revenue and Customs' costs last year – representing 80% of the additional expense the department incurred as a result of Covid. The tax agency was the chief beneficiary of four departments that will receive a cumulative £600m in funding to tackle legacy tech set out in the November spending round. In addition to £268m for HMRC, the Home Office received £232m, the Department for Education £64m, and the Ministry of Justice £40m.

Lopez said that this cash will allow departments to address "critical risks", but added that "this is only one step" on a much longer journey towards solving the problems posed by legacy tech.

"Addressing legacy remains a key focus," she added. "Our next phase of work will build on what we have done so far, further identifying legacy assets and agreeing prioritisation and funding while working with departments to develop roadmaps for addressing risks. Removing legacy IT also achieves value for money by removing excessive costs to support out-of-date technology."

This phase will be led by the CDDO.

Improving government's use of data will be another of the new organisation's major initial objectives.

"We need to tackle the issues that are stopping us from using data on tap," Lopez said. "Data is too often stuck in silos within departments and agencies – there are also other legislative, technical and security blockers which stop us from sharing data."

She added: "Through the CDDO, we intend to tackle this long-standing issue head on. We will do this by establishing a common data model for government with core data standards, reference data and policies. This will enable easier and ethical sharing of data. We are also committed to transforming the way data is collected, managed and used across government. We intend to create a joined-up and interoperable data infrastructure." ■

FROM CIVIL SERVICE TO CIVIL DISOBEDI

Cee MacDonald was working as an economist in the civil service when she was arrested at an Extinction Rebellion protest. She reflects on how she balanced her activism with the civil service code

On the early hours of the morning on Monday 16 March 2020, I was sitting on the pavement outside parliament. I had been there since the early evening, taking part in an Extinction Rebellion (XR) Interfaith vigil in the run up to Easter. I knew Westminster and Parliament Square well, as they were part of my commute into Whitehall where I worked as a government economist. It was a cold night and at one point I went for a walk to stretch my legs and warm up. I found myself outside my office at 2 Marsham Street. For ten minutes, I sat on the concrete.

I joined the civil service straight out of university in 2007 and it suited me. I liked the processes, the agendas, the flow charts, the gantt charts, the charts in general. I respected the value of making good rules, saw the work that went into consulting on them, fed analysis into the legislative process and evaluated the impacts of regulatory changes. However, during my after-hours Open University study in environmental science I'd become increasingly concerned about scientists' warnings on the climate crisis, the "long tail" risks, what could be mitigated and what was locked in, and the risk of wide scale human suffering. During the past 18 months, I have wrestled with how to balance my professional obligations (which I took seriously) with my faith as a Buddhist and the increasingly clear and urgent science of climate change and biodiversity loss.

The odd thing about activism is that what people see are the outward impacts: the lawns dug up, the roads blocked, and occasionally the headlines and interest piqued. But activism also works at an inner level. Doing things changes you. And as I sat outside my department that night, unseen by anyone, I felt something change in me. I had done a lot of work in Marsham Street, a lot of long hours on business cases, regulatory triage assessments and some beautiful powerpoint presentations. But sitting in the quiet, under the streetlights, it felt powerful just to be able to be there and meditate on what was happening to the earth. No need for lines to take, no need for killer stats, just understanding things as they are.

Some months later, at another XR demonstration, I was arrested for sitting and meditating in the road at Parliament Square. I had taken a week of leave, and I had told my line management I would be taking part in the environmental protests, anonymously and peacefully, as a part of my Buddhist practice. I had mentioned a "non-zero risk of arrest", but I think they were surprised when I came back from leave to discover I had been escorted to the Lewisham custody suite for a breach of the Public Order Act.

I'm not an expert in civil service ethics, but I spent a lot of time considering the tension between the different values I held and how I could

steer a course which honoured them.

The civil service code is partly about honesty, impartiality and objectivity. As a government analyst, quite a bit of my job involved checking that numbers we were using were accurate, or at least defensible. But giving a clear picture involves more than ensuring that the individual sentences are true. It means telling the whole truth. For climate change that means being honest ourselves about what the current trajectories are, what that means for our communities, our industries, and what solutions are open to us. However, being a good civil servant also means understanding what your ministers want to know in the scarce time they have to read briefings and submissions. And so there is a tension between sharing the "inconvenient facts" and sending up briefings which deal with specific issues, and can sometimes miss the bigger picture.

I was confident that my work was impartial. I did a lot of things which I disagreed with as a civil servant, including working on dismantling the disability benefit my mother had received while I was growing up. I understood that was the job. I was careful not to mention my environmental affiliations at work, and was carefully bland about my activities when talking to my own team. But I also understood it was important I was seen as impartial. So I made some choices in how I undertook my activism. I separated my work and activist identities.

I got rid of all my social media. I didn't want anyone to be able to analyse the tweets I was liking or the comments I left on Facebook and feel they were undermining my work. I used a different name and email address for my activism. This reduced the risk that someone would be able to connect the dots between my activism and my profession. It did mean that in the months leading up to the September Rebellion, when I was thinking a lot about the risks I may incur professionally if I was arrested, I felt like I was splitting between two people. In the late nights working on urgent business cases, I was paranoid I would inadvertently sign off an email with the wrong name. Sometimes I'd stumble when introducing myself in a Teams meeting.

When I was out with other activists, I tried to look boring. I avoided the slogans, the patches, the flags. Tried to avoid holding signs, so if there were photos of me I had some plausible deniability. I never made speeches. None of the current ministers knew my face. I would occasionally wear a placard with a picture of the planet that said "love and grief for the earth". Are grief and love political? Some days it's hard to tell.

I knew if I was putting myself in a position where arrest was more likely, I didn't want it to be for anything overtly "anti government". I was not going to be one of the people hosing down the Treasury in fake blood, or at least not yet. But I was increasingly open to being arrested for meditating as part of my Buddhist practice. I knew that this may be difficult for work, and I thought carefully about the worst case scenarios, including potentially being fired. I was also worried about my colleagues feeling a sense of betrayal about what I'd done. Sometimes civil disobedience is about breaking the social rules as well as the legal ones.

"As I sat outside my department that night, unseen by anyone, I felt something change in me"

On the GOV.UK webpage for the civil service code, it says "'Integrity' is putting the obligations of public service above

your own personal interests". Is my concern for the planet a personal interest or is it public service? Is getting a civil service salary a personal interest or is it public service? I found it wasn't straight forward. "The personal is political" is an old feminist slogan, and I think about it a lot. We have a democracy and the principle of freedom of speech. The code implicitly makes a distinction between our own lives, and our work lives. But there isn't such a thing as a non-political personal life. The decision not to go on a Black Lives Matter march is in its own way just as much a political decision as going.

My area of work, like most policy areas, had both a contribution to make on emissions, and would also be affected by climate change. It wasn't something we really talked about. I managed to include climate change in my objectives, but there wasn't much senior (or ministerial) interest in it as far as I could see. I was so conscious of how heavily the science weighed on me, and my increasing interest in activism that I was careful – perhaps overly so – in how hard I pushed the science and what it would mean for our stakeholders. I felt like I was "seeing the bigger picture". But if the senior departmental interest in climate change was fairly shallow, then it felt difficult to work out how much to push it.

I've held back from recapping the science. You've probably seen it. The countries most affected by climate change, and least able to mitigate those effects, are asking for a global deal which aims to limit temperature rises to below 1.5 degrees. The Paris Agreement hedged and settled for less than two degrees. The current global trajectories estimate that we could be heading for double that. The difference between these numbers is massive in terms of the associated forecasted number of deaths. The longer we take to act, the more carbon there is in the atmosphere and the worse the effects. The difference between focusing on 2050 (i.e. a generation away) and aiming for something much more ambitious sooner is huge in terms of the impact on human suffering. And this is what creates the urgency among climate activists. That's not to say a fast transition won't be challenging; it will be. It will be disruptive. But I've seen this government first hand put its energy into delivering a challenging, disruptive policy which had plenty of sceptics – but they made it happen. I know the same can happen for climate change.

"There isn't such a thing as a non-political personal life"

I don't know if we will get an outcome at COP26 that does what it needs to do, particularly for the most vulnerable and least-resourced communities across the world. I can't be sure that what I am doing will make a difference. But sometimes change requires a little disobedience, even from the civil service. ■

Cee MacDonald is a former government economist now working full time on Buddhist and interfaith climate activism including XR Buddhists and a pilgrimage to Glasgow called Camino to COP

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