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FROM THE EDITOR

Invocations of the '90s movie *Groundhog Day* are overbaked, but at CSW towers it's easy to feel like Bill Murray's jaded weatherman Phil, reliving the same experience day in, day out.

While Phil is eternally doomed to report on the incomprehensible squeaks coming out of the film's titular rodent, we are eternally doomed to report on the incomprehensible squeaks coming out of ministers and their anonymous "allies".

The latest noises were from the new minister for government efficiency, Jacob Rees-Mogg, who used a *Times* interview to question the worth of civil servants and gleefully hint at job cuts to come.

This kind of rhetoric from ministers has always been insulting, but what makes it particularly depressing today is how many civil servants are in real danger of burnout through overwork.

Throughout the pandemic, they have run themselves ragged to keep public services going. The vast majority of officials care hugely about their work, which itself is a

common factor in burnout.

Too often, employees are told to deal with extreme stress by devoting more time to self-care. But psychologist Dr Justin Henderson argues that work environments, not individual workers, are the greatest contributor to burnout. "It is salt on the wounds of [...] people who are struggling to suggest that the problem is that they are not doing enough yoga," he has written.

Of course individuals must look after themselves, but it's high time government leaders examined the cultural and organisational factors that lead to burnout in the first place.

One senior official CSW spoke to believes the recent three-year spending review could hold part of the answer. "There should be a lot more certainty about how the civil service can run itself now," he says. "We've been working hand to mouth year in, year out. And people don't really think about the impact of that, because, on the whole, civil servants have secure jobs. But in terms of being able to plan and resource properly, this is really important."



With departmental allocations being agreed right now, the onus is on perm secs to ensure their departments have clear plans in place.

"The pandemic has meant endless uncertainty for two years," the senior official says. "Actually, if you can now say to a department: 'These are our priorities up to the next election,' that will really help people."

The civil service must also call time on the expectation that officials will simply put in hours of unpaid overtime each week.

Achieving this will mean ruthlessly deprioritising. But, as our contact points out, this is exactly what happens in the allocations process after a spending review.

"You've worked out what your priorities are, your secretary of state has decided what they want to spend their

money on. So why are you doing all these other things that there's no money to fund?" Statutory requirements must be met, he continues, "but there shouldn't be all sorts of ad-hoc programmes going on."

There will be hurdles: individuals will fight for projects they've been running; junior ministers don't always follow what a secretary of state decides. But these are not insurmountable if perm secs demonstrate firm leadership. Doing so will allow staff to focus on the things that matter and, crucially, keep them safe from burnout.

As for those cabinet ministers who think now is a good moment to traduce the officials employed to serve them, they – like the groundhog after he's made his rodential pronouncements about the weather – can get back in their box. ■

CSW

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INBOX

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HATCHET MOGG

Newly minted minister for government efficiency Jacob Rees-Mogg's recent pledge to cut 65,000 civil service jobs didn't win him many fans

"Following the script of Yes, Minister I see," **Robert Hoare** said.

"Appalling. Not a smidgin of credit for civil servants," added **Kathy Barnes**.

Sarah Browne commented: "It still astounds me that there is little knowledge about what civil servants actually do. You want to cut numbers, okay, so are you going to choose between delivering green policies or education and benefits? Or do you want immigration policies or transport?"

"Stop using us as a punching bag, and stop telling people we are overpaid. We are actually incredible value for money given how much the private sector would charge for the same thing. We are incredibly proud of doing the best we can for the country."

David Turner predicted Rees-Mogg's plan would

lead to "lots more consultants and contractors to fill the gaps", adding: "That will save shedloads of money."

Martin Kelsey @history-monk To put this crap into perspective: 65,000 is the equivalent of the total workforce of HMRC, the 2nd largest government department. The same department whose operating of the CJRS and SEISS furlough schemes helped millions of people who were threatened with near-total destitution.

NO BIG DEAL

Readers shared their musings on what Cabinet Office minister and No.10 chief of staff Steve Barclay meant when he said the government wanted a "smaller state".

James Mullen @jameswmullen Bigger workload for fewer people

Rob Jenkins @robej68 Higher costs and dysfunction, generally

"Usually means reducing civil servant numbers and replacing them with more expensive consultants," **Joanne Davis** said.

George Reid added: "Next thing they'll be talking about 'cutting bureaucracy and red tape'. Many of us have been here before."

Tony Hall shared his take: "It'll probably mean another 10 year pay freeze."

LEAVE IT OUT

Many readers questioned PACAC's decision to green light former MP and Vote Leave co-chair Gisela Stuart's appointment as the next first civil service commissioner – despite saying they had "reservations" about her "perceived impartiality".

David Jackdaw @DJackdaw Overt politicisation of the civil service. Impossible to see how that's an improvement.

John @Bluebearjr1 Should be surprising but sadly sounds about par for the course these days.

kennipod @kennipod Cronyism ad infinitum

Susan O'Brien @seobrien2 What are her qualifications for this job? Genuine question. I know all the reasons why

her impartiality is absolutely in question, but what is the rationale for her getting the job?

Cleantechwales @cleantechwales

Yep that's exactly who we need, another Boris groupie!

Ruth Shaw @IntegrityOK

All appointments must not only be impartial; they must be seen to be impartial. Otherwise trust is lost in government

Jonathan Banks @Jonathan_MBanks

The Vote Leave types are very happy with unelected bureaucrats... when it suits them.

...but not everyone was disappointed with the decision

Jason Brownlee @Dollywaggon

Excellent - let's hope she brings a little German efficiency to the running of our hiccuping Rolls Royce of a civil service

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

CSW meets Sir Simon Bollow, outgoing head of Defence Equipment & Support, and Paul Taylor, the first national policing chief scientific adviser

WHITEHALL WISDOM

The great and good pass judgement on government

Quote taken from *Little Dorrit*

DICKENS OF A DEPARTMENT

The Circumlocution Office was (as everybody knows without being told) the most important Department under Government. No public business of any kind could possibly be done at any time without the acquiescence of the Circumlocution Office. Its finger was in the largest public pie, and in the smallest public tart. It was equally impossible to do the plainest right and to undo the plainest wrong without the express authority of the Circumlocu-

tion Office. If another Gunpowder Plot had been discovered half an hour before the lighting of the match, nobody would have been justified in saving the parliament until there had been half a score of boards, half a bushel of minutes, several sacks of official memoranda, and a family-vault full of ungrammatical correspondence, on the part of the Circumlocution Office.

This glorious establishment had been early in the field, when the one sublime principle involving the difficult art of

governing a country, was first distinctly revealed to statesmen. It had been foremost to study that bright revelation and to carry its shining influence through the whole of the official proceedings. Whatever was required to be done, the Circumlocution Office was beforehand with all the public departments in the art of perceiving — HOW NOT TO DO IT.

Charles Dickens satirises the civil service in his 1857 novel *Little Dorrit*

Civil service churn is a 'core part' of government's long term problems, says IfG

Think tank director Bronwen Maddox warns a lack of institutional memory could jeopardise the levelling up agenda. **Jim Dunton** reports

Rapid turnover of officials is one of the biggest issues affecting the government's ability to deliver policy and plan for the future, Institute for Government director Bronwen Maddox has said.

Delivering the think tank's annual director's lecture, Maddox said she shared former prime minister Tony Blair's recently-expressed view that British government was losing the capacity to identify and solve the nation's big problems. She said expertise of civil servants and ministers was a major factor.

"There are zones of government where ministers and their civil servants have little deep knowledge of their subjects and they have little understanding of the implications of making a bad decision, and may not have immersed themselves in the experiences of people on the receiving end to know what that really means," Maddox said. "A big part of that is because they change jobs too often."

The IfG's latest Whitehall Monitor report acknowledges that churn among civil servants reduced during the pandemic, with around 8.4% of officials

either moving jobs or leaving the civil service between March 2020 and March 2021 – down from 10.3% the previous year. However, the report said the figures demonstrated

officials continued to move between jobs "too frequently".

Maddox said the UK's chaotic Afghan evacuation efforts last year, 2020's sham-bolic handling of the use of

algorithms to generate A Level results, and Lord Theodore Agnew's scathing resignation comments about attitudes to fraud in the Treasury highlighted an expertise deficit in government.

She said there was a "state of complacency" among ministers and officials about those failings, and that civil service churn had a "pernicious" impact on departments' ability to function well.

"The motives, generally, are pay, promotion, wanting to get on," she said of officials' desire to secure their next move. "The civil service is really blessed with many dedicated, ambitious people who want to do just that. But the result is that they may stay only a year or two in post and may know comparatively little about their subject – and they may suddenly be dealing with whole new aspects of it."

"It was evident in the Afghan exit last summer, where quite a few of those dealing with petitions for help and evacuation were said to know little about the country. The big block of people who did had long before moved on."

Maddox said a deficit of institu-



Institute for Government director Bronwen Maddox

tional memory in departments led to a failure to learn lessons about what had not worked in the past and “wasted huge amounts of time” in the process.

She said further education, regional policy and industrial policy were enduring areas that every government sought to address – with the current government’s flagship levelling up agenda being the latest effort.

Maddox said that if it lasted long enough to proceed with levelling up, the government would “have to recognise why so many similar efforts have failed and draw on the ones that have succeeded” if it was to achieve anything at all.

When he quit as efficiency minister last month, Agnew said the Treasury appeared “to have no knowledge or little interest in the consequences of fraud to our economy or society”. Around £10bn is currently estimated to have been lost to fraud in schemes run by HM Revenue and Customs and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy.

Maddox said Agnew’s comments about a culture of indifference or ignorance as to the effect of bad decisions had struck a chord.

“It’s hard to put your finger on it, but you know it when you see it,” she said – citing the Ministry of Justice’s Transforming Rehabilitation programme and the Department for Education’s handling of exams algorithms.

“The core culture of the civil service is one of dedicat-

ed public service. And many people give their professional lives to that. But you also find an evasion of responsibility and an obsession with promotion that is less attractive. A disdain for politics, a lack of understanding of the pressures on politicians, and sometimes a shortage of people who can find practical answers to the problems that ministers identify.”

questioned the forces at work.

Moriarty, who left government in 2020 following DExEU’s demise, said her early career moves were rarely her own choice and had usually been driven by organisational demands.

“My experience was mostly being hoiked out of things that I was stuck into and sent to do something else because that was what the department

of the civil service, but the way the civil service operates is fundamentally to do with being in an adversarial majoritarian political system.”

O’Brien, who was DH perm sec from 2010-2016, said that when she joined the civil service in 1990 she had experienced a distinct lack of churn. She said the result was that officials were too close to the sectors they covered,

damaging their ability to provide independent analysis.

“There was a reason why things changed, but arguably it has gone too far,” she said.

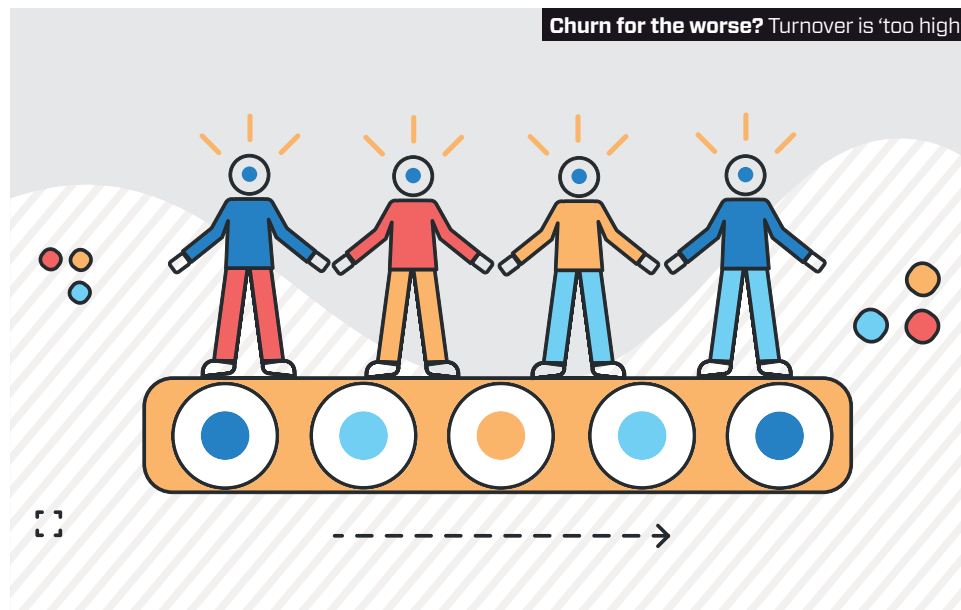
However, she also made the point that in complex areas like energy, health, or the environment, “there is a need for a certain cadre of civil servants to get experience across a range of different roles. Because without that they’re really not much use to ministers”.

O’Brien said having directors general in DH who had started out in the department then gone on to gain experience working in the NHS and local government before returning was extremely useful.

“There is a subtlety to the churn argument that I think it is important to embrace, although I do agree there is a fundamental issue about the pay and conditions that needs to be addressed,” she said.

Maddox acknowledged earlier in the session that departments’ ability to offer attractive pay rises to candidates for internal promotion was a central issue for churn.

“It’s a trap that a large bureaucracy has constructed over the years, and is finding ways at the margin to get better at, but it is really very hard,” she said. ■



“In complex policy areas there is a need for a certain cadre of civil servants to have experience across a range of different roles. Without that, they’re not much use to ministers”
Una O’Brien

Ex-perm secs give their take on churn

Former Department for Exiting the European Union permanent secretary Dame Clare Moriarty and her ex-Department of Health counterpart Dame Una O’Brien were in the audience for Maddox’s lecture. Both recognised the churn phenomenon in a question-and-answer session afterwards, but

needed,” she said. “I used to describe myself as the Department of Health’s human cannonball. It was a business need.

“I don’t remember myself thinking: ‘I’ve only done this job for a very short amount of time but I want to go on to the next level and put myself forward.’ It was much more that there was a constant supply of things that needed fixing and there was probably an under-availability of people who could be hurled into things.”

Moriarty said churn was intertwined with civil service pay, which ultimately came back to politics.

“The way in which pay in the civil service is constrained is fundamentally to do with the optics of it and what people feel about how much it’s reasonable to pay,” she said. “There’s a lot of criticism



Is the levelling up white paper fit for purpose?

Weighing in at more than 300 pages, the government's flagship policy document is not short of words. **Tevye Markson** reports on reaction to the long-awaited substance

The government has published its levelling up white paper for England, more than two years after announcing the flagship policy in its 2019 election manifesto.

The white paper set out 12 missions to reduce the gap between the richer and poorer parts of the UK by 2030. They cover pay and productivity, public transport improvements, and offer devolution deals to every part of England.

Michael Gove, secretary of state at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, said: "For too many decades, too many communities have been overlooked and undervalued." He said the levelling-up agenda was about ending "historic injustice" and "calling time on the postcode lottery".

But reaction has been mixed, with praise for the document's ambition and criticism for the lack of funding, originality and focus.

Think tank the **Institute for Government** said the white paper was a "genuine attempt" by government to turn a slogan into a plan of action that could be measured and judged. It said further devolution of powers "could be genuinely radical" but warned government risked "falling well short of its targets" due to the absence of a "clear sense of priorities about which issues are most important, and where intervention can be most effective".

The IfG also questioned the lack of new major policies and additional funding – just £11bn over the next five years – to achieve the priorities set out.

Think tank the **Centre for Cities** noted that Germany spent 2 trillion euros between 1990 and 2014 on levelling up measures following reunification.

Policy director **Paul Swinney** said the lack of long-term funding for the measures outlined in the white paper was troubling. “The huge concern is that this signals that Treasury is not behind the agenda. And history tells us that is the death knell to any policy plans,” he said.

Former No.10 chief of staff **Lord Gavin Barwell** agreed the funding announced so far was insufficient, but said the white paper was a “big step in the right direction”, building on former PM Theresa May’s Industrial Strategy and ex-chancellor George Osborne’s plans for powerful elected mayors across England.

Others criticised the similarities between the goals and plans announced by previous governments, including May’s Industrial Strategy.

Darren Jones, who chairs parliament’s Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, said the white paper was “essentially the recently-scraped Industrial Strategy rebranded as levelling up”.

The Industrial Strategy was shelved in March last year, but elements were absorbed into the government’s Plan for Growth. “Government

was failing at delivering the Industrial Strategy missions so how will government now deliver this?” Jones asked.

Shadow levelling up secretary **Lisa Nandy** described the white paper as full of “recycled, watered-down ambitions”, adding that one of the better announcements in the publication was made by Gordon Brown in 2008.

But the IfG said it was good that the government was not pretending to be the first to have identified or tried to tackle problems at the heart of the agenda. “Instead, it sets out why – in its view – previous attempts failed and why the contents of its new white paper mean this time

will be different,” the think tank said.

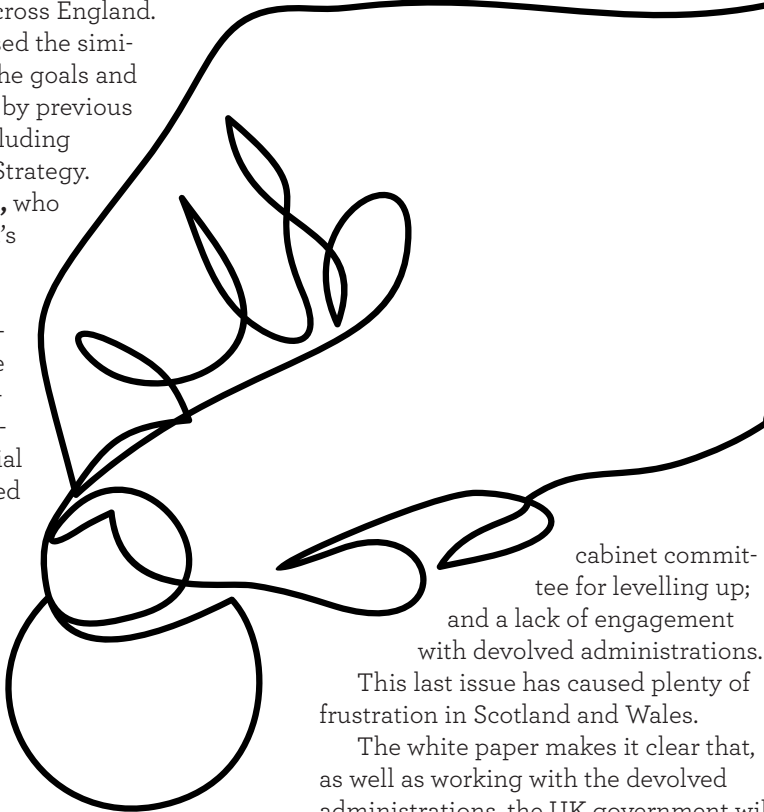
Colin Talbot, professor emeritus of government at the University of Manchester, said some levelling up initiatives predated even the New Labour government.

He told CSW: “The 1992 John Major government used things like Single Regeneration Budgets and European Structural Funds to target what we now call ‘left behind’ areas under the direction of Michael Heseltine.”

The chief area of concern for Talbot, however, is that the organisation and management of the levelling up agenda “does not look fit for purpose”, with “constant changes” to the scope and size of DLUHC; secrecy over the new

for the responsibilities of governments, and for building and maintaining trust based on effective communication.”

Also speaking to CSW, **Mick Antoniw**, counsel general and minister for the constitution in the Welsh Government, said: “When we responded to the Intergovernmental Relations Review, we said the test would be whether the UK government followed the spirit of the review, based on



cabinet committee for levelling up; and a lack of engagement with devolved administrations.

This last issue has caused plenty of frustration in Scotland and Wales.

The white paper makes it clear that, as well as working with the devolved administrations, the UK government will be engaging directly with local government across the UK. Talbot says this is “almost certain to irritate the devolved administrations” – and so it has.

Angus Robertson, the Scottish Government’s constitution secretary, told CSW: “It was regrettable that devolved governments did not receive any specific information about the content and timing of the levelling up white paper, and, despite the clear interest of devolved governments, there was little meaningful engagement before it was published.

“This approach is of course completely at odds with the principles set out in the recently published Intergovernmental Relations Review – of mutual respect

“The huge concern is that the Treasury is not behind the agenda. History tells us that is the death knell to any policy plans”
Paul Swinney

respect and a new approach that serves all governments equally and fairly.

“The early signs have not been good. We continue to receive extremely limited information on very significant initiatives, when engagement with devolved governments would be essential in bringing forward meaningful reform.

“Westminster seems content to drive a coach and horses through the concept of mutual consent, on which the devolution settlement was designed to operate.”

While English local government sources say their involvement has been more positive, they said this was due to the amount of detail about devolution within England in the white paper that needed local government engagement and knowledge. ■

DAVE PENMAN NASTY BUSINESS AT BEIS

THE PRIME MINISTER'S EIGHTEENTH CENTURY NAMESAKE COULD TEACH SOME VALUABLE LESSONS TO MEMBERS OF THE CURRENT CABINET

It's not often I quote Johnson, but sometimes it just seems apposite. Not that Johnson, of course, this one: "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." As is so often the case with historical quotes, there is much debate as to its meaning. Was old Sam J denouncing all patriotism? James Boswell, a diarist at the time, said: "But let it be considered that he did not mean a real and generous love of our country, but that pretended patriotism which so many, in all ages and countries, have made a cloak for self-interest."

Which brings me swiftly to Kwasi Kwarteng, or to be more accurate, "allies" of the secretary of state at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy - normally code for special advisers, special friends or anyone close enough to the minister to convince a journalist they have the minister's ear and/or are essentially representing his/her views. All, of course, anonymous and deniable by the minister. More on that later.

New Year's Day is usually a slow news day and inevitably some stories are filed, shall we say, "in advance". Even by those standards, the story published in the *Telegraph* was a doozy. Civil servants were accused of, and I quote, "disrespecting the Queen after they refused to rehang a large portrait of the

"Fake news stories accusing civil servants of disrespecting the Queen and the war dead have not gone down well"

monarch in their Whitehall headquarters".

The story went on to explain that, post refurbishment, civil servants refused to rehang a picture of the Queen and, when pressed, hung a teeny tiny one instead, the size of a "postage stamp" according to one member of the business secretary's team.

Not content with that egregious act of monarch dissing, the memorial plaque commemorating officials from the for-

mer Ministry of Power who died during the second world war had been "consigned to the basement".

"I think some of my colleagues forget we work for Her Majesty's Government," an official told the *Telegraph*, in a cutting jibe aimed at the republican, soya-latte loving, wokerati civil servants who are responsible for these acts.

All good stuff to fill the pages on 1 January. Except, of course, it isn't true. Not only is it not true, the truth actually tells a different story, if the *Telegraph* had cared to ask, which they didn't. Fact-checking is apparently soooo 2021.

The portrait of the monarch was moved during refurbishment, then put back where it originally hung. End of. Except, of course, that some special advisers got a bit jealous after a visit to the Home Office where a much larger portrait hangs (of course it does). Unfortunately, there was no room for the Priti large one they desired so, instead, they fabricated this story in what I can only assume is considered the next best thing, a civil service-bashing article. High five!

What about the remembrance plaque, I hear you ask? That was moved: five points for accuracy there, *Telegraph*.

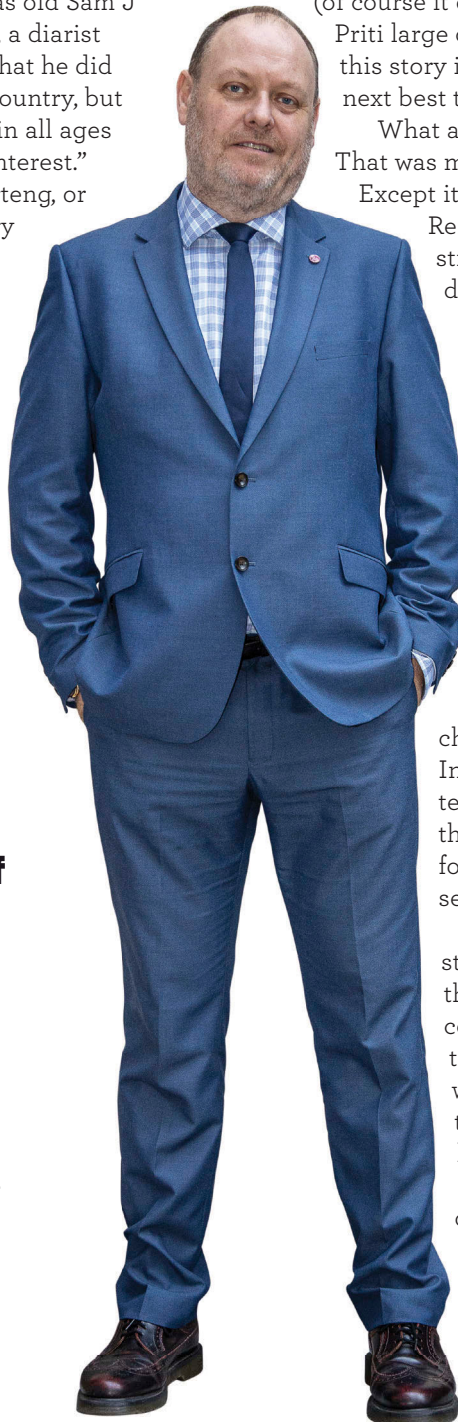
Except it was moved to provide greater access to the Remembrance Day memorial and allow it to be streamed across the department. As Dumbledore would say, minus 10 points to Slytherin.

As you can imagine, fake news stories accusing them of disrespecting the Queen and the war dead have not gone down well with civil servants in BEIS. Ever more so when those that throw these anonymous accusations around view the monarch and those who gave their lives for our country as nothing more than convenient tools to get a cheap headline.

Now you would think that the business secretary might be interested to know that his "allies" are spreading such malicious lies about his loyal civil servants. So, I wrote to him, pointing this out and offering him the chance to clear matters up. Answer was there none. Indeed, not only did he refuse to answer my letter, but felt that saying absolutely nothing about the matter was the best way to show his support for his officials. I kid you not. I'm sure the civil servants in BEIS are feeling that love as I type.

Of course, Kwasi Kwarteng knows where this story came from. The civil servants know where this story came from. But as ever, the anonymous, cowardly "allies" source allows the pretence that this is all a mystery not worthy of comment. You would have thought that on this occasion, given the despicable nature of this story, it might just have shamed him in to calling it out. Think again.

So, we're left with Johnson's quote - Samuel, of course - and Boswell's interpretation: "that pretended patriotism which so many, in all ages and countries, have made a cloak for self-interest". ■



Dave Penman is general secretary of the FDA

ED REZA SCHWITZER CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

THE CIVIL SERVICE CAN CERTAINLY LEARN FROM THE PRIVATE SECTOR, BUT WE SHOULD ALSO BE BOLDER IN REMINDING THE COUNTRY OF ITS STRENGTHS

It took me a while to work out why my childhood best friend's parents never liked me – turns out I'd been blamed for confiscated Rizlas, whisky bottles and other contraband for years without my knowledge. Another "mate" once told his then-girlfriend he only went into a seedy bar in Bulgaria to "keep me company". Sure, mate.

In politics, there is an array of scapegoats to blame your problems on – immigrants, terrorists or even people with glasses in one particularly tragic case. In Westminster, one of the most popular targets in recent times has been civil servants – whether it's Oliver Dowden telling them to "get off their Pelotons" or Jacob Rees-Mogg suggesting civil service efficiencies (cuts) should cover the proposed national insurance hike. Or that employing so many civil servants does not provide value "because the British public helps pay for them".

There are good reasons they say these things. The most obvious is that the civil service is unable to defend itself. It is pretty much never allowed to publicly contradict anything said or done by an elected official – so it's the easiest of targets.

The second is that it is easy to present its staff as "other". Civil servants are poorly understood. Ministers are the visible figurehead of government departments – few people know what the civil servants underneath them actually do



New minister for government efficiency

(even amongst politicians, I have been shocked to find).

The final reason is, bluntly, there are things in the civil service that do need to change. It is perfectly legitimate to question whether the civil service's structure provides the right amount of accountability for senior officials, whether more civil servants should be based outside of London, or whether "churn" amongst the senior civil service is too high. Sometimes I fear we flip-flop too much on some of these issues – not long ago, civil servants used to

be accused of staying in one job for too often and getting "siloed" in their thinking, for example. But there is certainly a debate to be had.

But the recent criticism the civil service has been subjected to is light years from these sensible debates. The civil service's total paybill is around £14bn a year – so for Rees-Mogg to be right about the NI increase, we'd basically have to abolish the whole civil service. I'm not sure how efficient that would be.

Rees-Mogg and others are no fools – they are smart enough to know exactly what they're saying and why. So simply responding with "that's not true!" will not diminish the attacks in any way or lessen their impact.

So what if, like me, you believe an impartial and effective civil service is fundamental to our democracy, and that we need to protect against these attacks? I offer three thoughts.

Firstly, former civil servants can be more vocal. There are plenty of highly intelligent, erudite former permanent secretaries and others who could do an excellent job of giving the other side of the debate.

Secondly, we must reduce the sense of "otherness". Civil servants are human beings. Having moved from the civil service to the private sector in the last six months, I can assure you that civil servants go to work much like anyone else. They have the same pride in their jobs, and the same gut-wrenching feel when things go wrong (which is often, at the moment). We need people to better understand the work of almost half a million civil servants through

"Rees-Mogg and others are no fools – they are smart enough to know exactly what they're saying and why. Simply responding with 'that's not true!' will not diminish the attacks"

a lens that isn't a clip of *Yes, Minister* from four decades ago. How many people know that the Border Force officials and jobcentre staff they interact with are civil servants? Institute for Government reports help, but I suspect their reports do not have the same

level of cut through as a comment from Dowden or Rees-Mogg splashed over the front pages of a tabloid.

Finally, we need to present an alternative narrative in response to more reasonable criticisms. The answer to "aren't civil servants skiving off at home?" can't be that they're actually superheroes who are working 60-hour weeks. The response must be realistic – that, yes, many of the issues raised are relevant to the civil service, but they're also relevant to every large organisation. And actually, don't most of us want to live lives where we work a reasonable number of hours and have time at the end of the day to see family or friends? There is much that the civil service can learn from the private sector, but we should also be bolder in reminding the country of the best of the civil service.

So the next time a minister blames the Rizla papers on the civil service, let's resist the urge to cry foul, and focus more on reminding the public that these are working people who, for the most part, are much like them. ■

Ed Reza Schwitzer is an associate director in the education practice at Public First and a former DfE civil servant

ANDY COWPER DOG DAYS ARE NEARLY OVER



THE NHS ELECTIVE RECOVERY PLAN FORMS A HANDY BATTLEGROUND FOR CONSERVATIVE PARTY LEADERSHIP AMBITIONS BUT GIVES US LITTLE DETAIL ABOUT HOW ASPIRATIONS TO CUT WAITING LISTS WILL BE MET

It is a truth universally acknowledged that if it's a month with a vowel in the name, the *Daily Mail* will be doing one of their “public sector leaders who earn more than the prime minister SHOCK!” pieces.

Along came NHS England chief executive Amanda Pritchard's turn, as the *Mail* spotted that she had got the full salary for her job. (For context: her predecessor, Lord Simon Stevens of Birmingham, volunteered for a 10% pay cut on taking the role. This is rather easier to do if your previous job was running US health insur-

Of Big Dogs and Briefinggate

The political context of this battle is pertinent. The anti-Midas touch of the Boris Johnson administration crystallised over the scandal around disgraced Randox lobbyist and former MP Owen Paterson; and was then amplified and magnified by the still-ongoing Partygate scandals. Johnson's self-promotion as the “Big Dog” of the government has been terminally punctured, leaving him looking more King Charles spaniel than husky.

Now that the (ahem) Big Dog is nearing his final trip to the vet, the puppies

Boo, nasty mean Treasury people! Boo! The Treasury was briefing back, to *The Times* that the “incredibly well-funded NHS” would have to deliver on targets.

Would The Saj be left out of these skirmishes? Of course he wouldn't! He made sure that *The Times* had a story about the Treasury blocking the ERP. It's even sillier than usual, including as it does a quote from one source that “the NHS are the ones who didn't want to announce any targets”.

So about those targets ...

OK: what did the Elective/Electoral Recovery Plan say? First and foremost, it is very much Not A Plan. The document has “ambitions, guidance, and best practice”. So creating 30% more elective capacity over pre-pandemic levels by 2024-5 is an “aim”.

Other aims include to “make progressive improvements on long waits, with a goal to eliminate waits of over one year by March 2025, and waits of over two years by July 2022”.

The words “ambition”, “aim” and “goal” all allow for a lot of wriggle-room, obviously.

There are re-statements of the cancer plan targets, of course. Likewise, there are commitments that by March 2025 there will be no 52-week waits.

The document hopes that by July 2022, no patient will wait longer than two years for elective care; that by April 2023, no patient will wait over 18 months; and that by March 2024, the waiting list will be falling and no patient will wait longer than 65 weeks.

Waiting lists are to be prioritised by age, deprivation and ethnicity. That's sensible.

The plan also dilutes the existing (but un-hit) diagnostics target: presently, 99% of patients needing a diagnostic test should get it within six weeks. The ERP says that by March 2025, the NHS will deliver this for 95% of patients.

It's not long until we get to caveat time: “these ambitions ... of course depend on returning to and maintaining low levels of Covid-19, enabling the NHS to restore normalised operating conditions and reduce high levels of staff absence”.

Ahem. At the time of writing, there are 11,000 Covid patients in hospital currently, and just over 300 in critical care beds, on ventilators. The Omicron wave is going out, but it's very much not yet all over.



ance giant UnitedHealth, meaning you have quite a few dollars in the bank.)

Good on Pritchard, frankly. She displayed her mettle and earned her corn by winning a battle with the Treasury over the NHS elective recovery plan. Not many people win fights with the Treasury. CSW readers will have spotted that the NHS backlog rose over 6.1 million (and will keep rising), and probably noticed a “war of the briefings” in the national newspapers.

all start to wonder which of them comes next. And it is in terms of leadership ambitions that we must read the media briefings from the PM For The Time Being, the Chancellor Rishi Sunak and the Health But Social Care Secretary (and ex-chancellor) Sajid “The Saj” Javid.

Briefinggate kicked off with a story briefed by Mr Johnson to his real boss the *Telegraph* that those mean, nasty Treasury folks weren't letting him have the money for the NHS elective/electoral recovery plan.



Health Service Journal's coverage suggests that the elimination of 52-week waiters by March 2024 (before the next general election) was a bone of contention between the government and NHS England. Agreement that the relevant March 2024 target should be a falling waiting list represents a good win for NHS England's chief exec.

To state the obvious: ongoing demand from Covid-19 and associated infection controls makes it hard to quantify how big the waiting list is yet to become. Likewise, our lack of clarity about how much once-anticipated demand has simply disappeared because of deaths. So an activity-based target makes sense.

Nothing on workforce

Workforce issues are not seriously addressed, in any way. That seems unsustain-



able, to put it mildly. The ERP requires an expansion of NHS capacity: to expand NHS capacity is going to require more staff.

There is still no workforce plan; nor any sign of a budget for Health Education England for the next financial year, which is less than six weeks away.

The most important passage on workforce states: "Any solutions for tackling the Covid-19 elective backlog cannot rely on making the same staff ... work ever harder. To succeed, we have to grow and support

our workforce, so they can deliver excellent care".

Pritchard is clearly no mean counter-puncher in negotiations. Good for her. Indeed, she made clear in her latest message to the service that she intends

to build on this win by pushing for a workforce strategy: "We cannot build the recovery on our staff working at ever increasing levels of intensity ... a long term plan for the workforce is essential, and I'll continue to work hard and make the case for that plan to deliver and get the backing it needs, for staff and patients alike".

Health But Social Care Secretary Sajid 'The Saj' Javid, of course, already told the Health Select Committee recently that he wants a workforce plan: "there's some Health Education England work working on a framework for workforce ... back in July last year, I commissioned what I call this framework ... just recently, I commissioned the NHS to develop a long-term workforce strategy, which hasn't been done before ... the merger between HEE and NHS England should

"Now that the 'Big Dog' is nearing his final trip to the vet, the puppies all start to wonder which of them comes next"

hopefully make this more joined-up".

So that's nice. But there's nothing in terms of a commitment about when this workforce plan will actually arrive, though.

One final thought about the ERP: if this really is the version after the Treasury put their adorable little feet down and insisted on more targets, then it'd be comedy gold to see the previous version.

They think it's all over ...

This week the PM announced early ending of the remaining Covid-19 restrictions this week, including the mandate to self-isolate once diagnosed as infected. Free mass testing will also end from 1 April.

The proposed basis for this was the reduction in infections and hospitalisa-

tions. And where were the scientists to back this widely-trailed move?

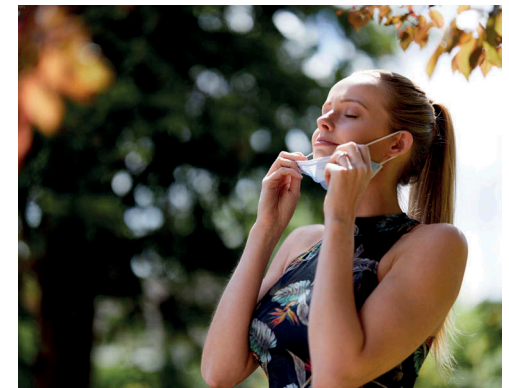
After weeks of remaining catherdrally silent, chief medical officer Prof Sir Chris Whitty and chief scientific adviser Sir Patrick Vallance emerged to stand beside the PM as he urged the public to be "considerate" to others if they test positive for Covid after restrictions end - assuming they can pay for the test, of course.

In contrast to the PM's bullish tone, Whitty and Vallance sounded notes of caution, referring to high case rates and "significant problems" which could be caused by new variants. Their muted messages revealed the deeply unscientific nature of this announcement.

Just before parliamentary recess, the PM told the commons "we have to clear our Covid backlogs". Yet here he was, ending restrictions a month early, at a time when there are over 11,000 in hospital for Covid and 300 in mechanical ventilator beds.

A small positive note was the decision to retain the Office for National Statistics weekly Covid19 infection sampling survey - albeit scaled down. This survey is regarded as the "gold standard" because it has tracked the same households since June 2020: as such, it is not subject to variations in numbers of people self-testing.

All of this matters to the NHS's prospects. Because as the Ipsos MORI opinion polling work for Health Foundation pointed out, people have started



paying attention to the state of the NHS: and they have started to expect that it will deteriorate further.

Electorally, not only will this have consequences for the government, it is already having them: new polling for Redfield and Wilton found Labour in the lead across all principal public policy areas for the first time in a very long time. ■

Andy Cowper is editor of Health Policy Insight

JEFFREY MATSU I'LL LEVEL WITH YOU

THE LEVELLING UP WHITE PAPER HAS GRAND AND WORTHY AIMS, BUT, WITH SOARING INFLATION SET TO BITE, HOW WELL-OFF WILL LEVELLED-UP PLACES REALLY BE?

Two years after breaking through the red wall with a promise to “get Brexit done”, Boris Johnson has, at long last, provided a roadmap to levelling up. The timing could not have been any worse with an economy now facing the potential upward spiral of prices. Meanwhile, tighter monetary and less accommodative fiscal policy will squeeze household finances, weighing further on the poorest.

Central to the UK government’s levelling up ambition is its 12-point plan, made up of “missions” designed to spread opportunity, supercharge productivity and improve quality of life through a stronger local voice. Noble and worthwhile aims, of course, but such fundamental and sweeping change needs three essential ingredients to produce meaningful results: time, money and commitment. These are things which are not always in plentiful supply.

The levelling up white paper confidently sets out its objectives, but is less definitive on how government expects to achieve them. Knowing when you have arrived at a destination is sometimes obvious – train doors opening, a plane landing or a satnav prompt. But at other times we do not have these helpful signals to hand.

How will we know, for example, if we have a “globally competitive city in every area”? What does such a city look like? Absent the government marking its own work, who decides?

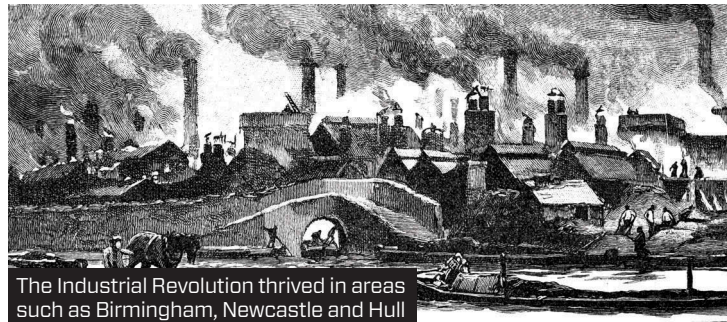
Measurement, monitoring and evaluation are instrumental steps in the design and delivery of effective policy. Too often, competitive bids are evaluated at the bidding and project approval stage rather than over the project’s lifetime. This can encourage optimism bias and challenge accountability in project delivery. Improved evaluation is crucial for understanding the impact on hard-to-reach groups, which are often those experiencing the greatest inequalities. But how do we measure outcomes that do not always lend themselves neatly to quantitative expression?

The technical annex to the white paper is a treasure trove of potentially useful indicators that are structured neatly around a framework which incorporates the six “capitals” driving growth and outcomes: physical, intangible, human, financial, social and institutional capital. But data is only readily available for one of these, and at the sub-national level three of the six capitals have “little to no established

methods” of measurement. Given the intention to level up by 2030, this will present a lot of work for the Office for National Statistics.

If levelling up is to be a defining feature of this government, it would do well to provide local authorities the certainty and continuity needed to get on with the task. Little capacity remains within the system to absorb another sharp change in policy direction like that experienced with the industrial strategy that ran from 2017 to 2021. Beyond the grand vision must lay a funding structure that supports local autonomy within an allocative process that does not disadvantage smaller or less-resourced councils. A planning cycle that extends beyond a year would incentivise innovative thinking and collaboration as well.

The government must not forget that the inequalities it seeks to address today have been long in the making. The Industrial Revolution supported British manufacturing in centres such as Birmingham, Newcastle and Hull, only to be succeeded by a digital revolution (that they have struggled to escape). Meanwhile, rapid urbanisation and a shift toward a services-based economy have boosted the competitiveness and productivity of cities like London and Bristol. It will take decades, rather than years, to effect change under such strong currents.



The Industrial Revolution thrived in areas such as Birmingham, Newcastle and Hull

Large and successful economies of various parts of society cannot be simply ordered or created overnight, but must be nurtured through a set of foundations that connect human capital, social wellbeing, infrastructure, innovation, the economy and the environment. CIPFA’s *Investing in Regional Equality - lessons from four cities* report looks at what has worked internationally, and how good measurement strategies play a role in the delivery of more sustainable outcomes.

In our report, one of the key factors evident across the case studies was an acknowledgement that scale and a long-term strategy are essential. In Cleveland, in the US, for example, the city’s flagship investment project for regeneration has a 20 to 30-year time horizon. This is notably longer than the UK government’s nine-year ambition for the entire country, which was announced with limited new funding.

As the UK embarks on two other flagship journeys towards Net Zero and creating a global Britain, we need a more joined-up approach. Top-down, vertical siloes will need to give way to shared political will and partnerships that can come together around a common vision.

Against this backdrop looms a potential cost-of-living crisis not seen in 30 years. With inflation set to exceed 7% by the end of 2022, the desire to reduce the gap between the haves and have-nots may be overwhelmed by a necessity to help the poorest in society who are likely to become poorer still. Whether that is considered levelling up or basic survival will be the litmus test for how this government is judged. ■

Jeffrey Matsu is chief economist at the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy

JORDAN URBAN THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

THERE ARE GOOD REASONS FOR CIVIL SERVANTS TO RETURN TO THE OFFICE BUT A FLEXIBLE APPROACH IS NEEDED TO SUPPORT REFORM

Whether civil servants work from home or in the office has become a point of contention. Some ministers have been critical of home working and, as Covid restrictions ease, have demanded more in-person attendance.

Physical co-location can help the effective running of an organisation and it is right to expect civil servants to return to spending more time in the office. But the civil service has also taken advantage of the benefits of flexibility during the pandemic. For example, normalising virtual attendance to meetings has given officials outside London greater opportunity to meaningfully contribute to discussions. An FDA survey last year showed 97% of its members wanted to retain the option to work from home. A happier workforce is a higher performing one; ministers and civil service leaders should not lightly dismiss colleagues' views.

So while a return to the office should be encouraged, a blanket approach will undermine ministers' own aims for civil service relocation and damage recruitment plans. It is also directly at odds with long-established plans to reduce the size of the government estate.

Flexible working underpins relocation agenda

In our report *Moving Out*, the IfG recommended that, in general, it would be most effective for relocated offices to be in big cities. Cities have large, skilled workforces and relocating roles to them will allow talented people who do not want to live or work in London to contribute more effectively to the civil service. Without an adequate supply of highly skilled workers, relocated offices are likely to fail.

The same logic underpins the consolidation of the government's estate through the "hubs programme": smaller offices dotted around the country are being closed and roles relocated to bigger, more cost-efficient ones in cities.

However, locating civil servants in cities does not help the government achieve two other goals it has set for the relocation agenda – economically "levelling up" deprived areas and shifting what it perceives as "metropolitan" mindsets by encouraging civil servants to experience life in non-metropolitan areas. This is where a more flexible approach comes in.

Allowing civil servants more flexibility about when they come into the office substantially changes where they can live. Living outside the city where their office is based becomes more attractive – longer commutes are balanced out by having to do them less often, while officials' pay packets will go further in the towns and villages around big cities than in the cities themselves. With their extra spending power, civil servants will inject more money into the types of local economies that the government wants to "level up". Furthermore, if living outside metropolitan areas can change

civil servants' mindsets – though our research is cautious about the benefits of this – then these are the types of places that will do so.

Hybrid working is key to recruitment battle

The Declaration on Government Reform commits to encouraging entrants from outside government as well as those with specialist skills. Historically, government has struggled to attract these types of candidates, who often have options for where they can work and may gravitate towards higher paying private and wider public sector jobs.

The civil service will always struggle to compete on salary, so it needs to make itself attractive by matching or going beyond what other sectors can offer in other ways. Hybrid working arrangements in the private sector look set to continue for the long term. Employees say they enjoy this flexibility, so the civil service needs to match this offer to even begin to compete for top talent.

Full return to the office is not possible

Between 2010 and 2019, the size of the government estate shrank by 30% as part of an effort to consolidate government property. During this period, hybrid and home working was promoted as a tool to make the civil service more efficient. Government hubs have been built on the assumption of a low desk-to-employee ratio, while the Government Property Agency said "the Covid-19 response confirmed that, in most cases, desk-based work can be done effectively at home".

Meanwhile, there are currently more civil servants than there were in 2010, when the coalition government first set out plans to substantially cut staff numbers. Any attempt to get civil servants back into the office has to reckon with the fact that the last decade of estate management and the growth of the civil service since the EU referendum means there are more civil servants than in 2010 but far less office space to put them in.

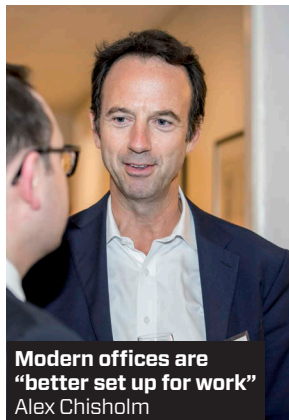
Common sense is needed about when to come into the office

The government needs to find a balance. It is important that civil servants work in the office when doing so would be beneficial. Civil service chief operating officer Alex Chisholm has noted that the modern workplace is "much better set up for work than most people's homes" and that "a certain type of learning from each other is easier done by direct observation and it is difficult to fully replicate that online".

The ease of communication that physical co-location allows for is also important when facing particularly fast-moving or important situations.

But forcing civil servants back into the office full-time will undermine the government's stated aims for civil service reform and is logistically impossible. The experience of the pandemic showed that there are some benefits to home working. Common sense is needed. The government should not rip up a decade of estate strategy and workforce planning for the sake of a few headlines. ■

Jordan Urban is a researcher at the Institute for Government



“There are more civil servants than in 2010 but far less office space”

COLIN TALBOT A LURCH TOWARDS 'CLIENTELISM'?

MINISTERS CAN'T USUALLY INTERVENE TO DETERMINE THE ALLOCATION OF FUNDS TO PARTICULAR TOWNS OR CONSTITUENCIES. ARE WE STARTING TO SEE WHAT IS TANTAMOUNT TO DISCRETIONARY FUNDING?

In 2019, just under 14 million UK voters supported the Conservatives. But just over 18 million voters opted for other parties. Another 15.5 million didn't vote.

The result, under our antiquated "first past the post" system, was a Conservative government with 365 MPs, out of 650, in the House of Commons – an 80-seat majority.

Many Tory wins were in the "Red Wall" of traditionally Labour areas. And those wins depended, in large part, on promises about "levelling up" these so-called left-behind areas, which makes decisions about public money even more sensitive than usual.

This note is not about our voting system. It's about money: how the government gets and spends it. Legitimately, or not.

The question is a simple one – why do the 18 million who voted against the Tory party, and the additional 15.5 million who didn't vote at all, accept taxes and public spending decided by a government they didn't elect?

Loser's consent

This isn't an irrelevant question because we have experience in recent history where many voters decided not to accept a decision about public money by a duly elected government. Many of the losers in the 1987 general election clearly did not consent to the Poll Tax.

The Poll Tax was a flat-rate tax per head to pay for local government, introduced by Margaret Thatcher's government and implemented in 1989 in Scotland and 1990 in England and Wales. It led to widespread demonstrations, riots, and up to 30% of those eligible to pay refusing to do so in some areas.

The Poll Tax revolt was not normal – usually everyone goes along with tax changes, even when they don't like them or the government that introduced them.

So how and why does this happen?

The answer is that in modern democracies, there is an array of what are usually called "checks and balances" to ensure the proper management of public money in the public interest.

These rules and institutions are there to stop politicians or public servants stealing public money – and to stop them from unfairly rewarding or punishing individuals, organisations or communities for purely political reasons. In other words, to stop the private (political) government of public money.

Getting and spending

Let's start with the "getting" side of public money.

There are two main general rules that apply to taxation. The first is that all tax rules should be universal – that is, they

'Not normal' Protestors in Trafalgar Square in March 1990 to oppose the government's Poll Tax



apply to everyone in the same way in the same circumstances.

The second is that tax administration is kept at arms-length from politicians. That is why in HMRC, and its forerunners the Inland Revenue and Customs & Excise, were always “non-ministerial” government departments. There is no politician in direct charge of them so they cannot interfere with individual taxation decisions – either to favour their friends or punish their enemies.

This separation is common across nearly all advanced democracies, and a lot of other countries too. And there are plenty of examples of the corruption that follows from not having this division in place.

Of course, politicians can still make tax policies that favour or penalise whole groups or classes of people or organisations, but those are public policy decisions subject to the usual democratic processes.

On the “spending” side, the controls to prevent private political corruption are rather more complicated and diverse. One of the biggest, and least discussed, is “formula funding” for public bodies. This is the

idea that public funds are distributed to public bodies through some sort of formula used to decide who gets what.

In England some of the biggest areas of public spending flow through various public bodies in health and social care (£169bn), education (£83bn), local government (£24bn), and so on. Traditionally this has all been done through some sort of metric based on population, demography and economic criteria combined in a complex formula.

It’s also worth mentioning that a huge chunk of public spending – about £70bn – is decided by the Barnett Formula that is used to calculate how much money is allocated to the governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. They control how much areas like health and education get, but this is in turn mostly allocated within policy areas by formula funding.

While politicians in government can, and often do, fiddle with these formulae to the benefit or loss of various areas and groups, they cannot usually intervene to determine the allocation of funds to, say, a particular town or constituency – any more than they could decide an individual’s tax liability.

What has changed in England recently – especially under the Johnson administration – is the growth in funds distributed through “competitions” that are subject to far less obvious criteria for “winning” and far more susceptible to political interference. As the *Guardian* has reported, mysteriously most of the funding was going to Tory-held areas – 39 of the first tranche of 45 towns – and the criteria that resulted in this outcome have remained opaque to say the least.

This is not entirely new; similar selective, as opposed to universal, schemes date back to the Major and Blair governments at least.



Ex-Tory MP Christian Wakeford, who defected to Labour, says he was threatened he would not get a school in his constituency if he didn't vote in a particular way

What is new is the size and, crucially, the political importance when so many MPs were elected on a “levelling up” promise – a promise they need to be seen to be fulfilling.

Moreover, the current government is extending the reach of this effectively discretionary funding into the devolved governments’ territories as part of what has been dubbed “muscular unionism” – asserting central government’s continued role in devolved areas.

For those who have read *The Private Government of Public Money* (1974) – an excellent analysis of the murky world of Whitehall decisionmaking about tax and spend by Hugh Heclo and Aaron Wildavsky – much of this will feel familiar.

Many of the secretive practices they identified nearly 50 years ago still exist. Britain has one of the least transparent and open budgetary and public finance systems in the democratic world.

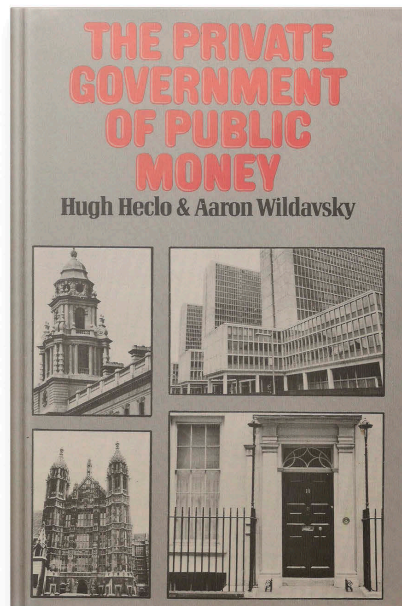
Threatening to remove public funding from specific MPs’ constituencies was not only almost impossible in the past, except in a few exceptional ways and conditions. It was also not acceptable.

It would be a lurch in the direction of “clientelism” – a system where political support is rewarded or punished through the giving and withholding of public money or services.

Further evidence we may be moving in that direction comes from the so-called “VIP lane” for procurement of PPE during the pandemic. It was declared unlawful by the High Court and was a classic example of politicians finding a way to award public contracts to private friends.

The awarding of top jobs to politicians’ relatives and the outsourcing of NHS Test and Trace to yet more private sector allies are yet to be fully scrutinised.

But if it is now becoming common practice in government to use public funds to reward or punish, we are entering a new, much darker, place. ■



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

In ordinary times and in crisis, CCS works in the background to ensure government can procure the goods and services it needs. Its chief exec **Simon Tse** tells **Beckie Smith** what it's like to be the “silent partner” in these crucial transactions. Photography by Simon Ridgway

AT YOUR SERVICE



When Kabul fell to the Taliban last August, evacuees didn't have time to pack. As thousands of people arrived across the UK, hungry and tired, airports began declaring a state of emergency as they ran low on food and other essentials while refugees waited for admin to be completed.

The Crown Commercial Service stepped in to set up a supply chain and logistics operation, calling on existing suppliers and other retailers to bring in food and sanitary products, as well as blankets and nappies for the days-old babies who had arrived at Birmingham, Manchester and Heathrow airports.

"We set up a 24/7 service. I didn't even have to ask the staff to do it; they decided themselves and rotad themselves to do email and

phone calls because that's what they needed to do," CCS's chief executive, Simon Tse, says.

The team set about procuring essentials, including working directly with manufacturers to enable donations of highly-regulated products like baby formula. "We were very transparent. In some places we were saying 'we don't have a commercial agreement with you, but this is a state of crisis and we need some help here'. And actually, they said 'yes, as part of our corporate social responsibility agenda, we'll help you,'" Tse says.

The team sourced 150,000 items altogether, including 40,000 donations. By 11pm on 27 August, all three airports confirmed that their requirements had been met.

CCS is used to being what Tse calls the "silent partner in the background" - both in ordinary times and in crisis. From the start of the coronavirus pandemic, staff were working with the Foreign Office to help repatriate British nationals from Wuhan, then with the Department of Health and Social



Care to secure coaches to transport them from RAF bases to quarantine facility on the Wirral.

Since then, departments have signed countless contracts for testing labs, mobile testing units, cleaning services and other Covid necessities. The Department for Education had to source free school meal vouchers and more than a million laptops and other devices as it scrambled to manage the transition to remote learning when schools closed during the first lockdown. Hotel rooms were needed to allow lorry drivers entering the UK to self-isolate after being tested at Dover. “Who were the ones that were advising behind [the scenes], and in some cases placing the contracts? CCS,” Tse says.

The government spends around £290bn a year on buying things. Around £120bn of this is spent on common goods and services – everything from office stationery to the construction of new hospitals.

At any one time, CCS is running between 80 and 100 commercial agreements that its customers – which include both central government and wider public sector organisations – can use to procure those goods and services. Four years ago, £12.7bn was spent through those agreements. By the end of this year, Tse says that figure could more than double to £27bn.

“There are lots of things that we are doing as an organisation to make certain that we’re leveraging the power of that spend, in what we say to the marketplaces,” Tse says. In other words, CCS is using its immense buying power to support government’s goals – such as trying to reach net zero emissions and to promote social value.

CCS specialists and account managers advise departments on how to refine their bid criteria – one of public sector organisations’ biggest challenges – “on a daily basis”, Tse says. These issues are also built into CCS’s frameworks.

Furniture manufacturers on CCS’s commercial agreements, for example, are signed up to the Greening Government commitments – which aim to reduce departments’ environmental impact by cutting waste and using resources efficiently. Among other things, that means companies are expected to cut down on non-recyclable packaging.

CSW wonders if CCS has encountered resistance when doing this – but Tse says there has been little pushback so far, partly because the opportunity to access lucrative government contracts is a strong incentive. “The feedback from my team is that the supply industry is recognising that they want to contribute to these things. Whether it be carbon net zero or social value, what they’re saying is, ‘how do we get behind the policies that government is coming forward with, so that we can position ourselves in a strong way to win business from the public sector?’”

Departments have no obligation to use CCS’s commercial agreements. Instead, the service operates on what Tse calls an “open-door” basis. But, he says, “as

“We started to get involved in PPE procurement in the early days... there’s a risk in some of these things. But during times of crisis, you try to do the right thing”

soon as we start the conversation about carbon net zero and social value, what we’re finding is that customers are massively receptive to it. And in some cases, they’re actually coming to us and saying, ‘what can you do to help us with this?’ So I can see there’s been a sea change in terms of these two particular agendas.”

One of the measures the Cabinet Office proposed in its Transforming Public Procurement green paper in late 2020 was the creation of a central digital platform for commercial data. At the moment, suppliers have to provide details of their accounts, liabilities and other data for every CCS agreement that they are part of. “Worse, everyone that then runs a procurement off one of my agreements will be asked for exactly the same informa-



tion. Think of the burden that creates,” Tse says.

The new platform would require suppliers to provide that data only once to qualify for any public sector procurement exercise. The idea has proved popular: 80% of the hundreds of responses to a consultation on the reforms last year approved.

As well as cutting down bureaucracy, the centralised model will give buyers – from government agencies to local authorities and NHS trusts – access to information on suppliers’ past performance on things like net zero or social value. “I think there will be more and more requirement to put that information in an intelligent way into a platform that then gives transparency,” Tse says.

“Up to now, we’ve not been able to take past

performance into consideration. But moving forward, it’s one of the key planks within the new public procurement policy statement... so you can start to see how the parts of the jigsaw connect together.”

At the moment, CCS and the Cabinet Office are looking at how to “operationalise” that past-performance information, Tse says. CCS will then educate organisations on how to implement the policy changes.

Meanwhile, CCS is helping departments to improve contract management. When Tse became chief exec in 2018, he was aware of two things: government was “not necessarily good” at placing contracts, and it was also “not that good” at managing the contracts once it had awarded them.

“Well, we’ve done a heck of a lot of fixing the first >>

one in terms of the type of contracts that are now awarded,” he says, nodding to the doubling of spending via CCS agreements in recent years. To address the second point, Tse’s organisation recently ran a pilot scheme funding the training of contract managers for public sector customers, which he says had “tremendous” feedback and could lead to a wider rollout.

“Public procurement” may not be a phrase that has typically captured the imagination – but events of the last few years have brought government contracts under close scrutiny. Huge deals awarded during the pandemic and Brexit preparations led to ever-louder calls for transparency about the way contracts are awarded.

There have been particular questions raised about the purchasing of personal protective equipment during Covid, and the use of emergency procurement regulations to award contracts outside the normal tender process.

Regulations are a matter for the Cabinet Office, not CCS, so Tse opts not to talk about what he calls the “probity side” of PPE procurement. CCS’s role was to ensure the deals it was involved with were compliant and, Tse says, “my observation from the contracts that I’ve looked at is there was nothing inappropriate around them”.

He goes on: “You’re in a crisis situation – we started to get involved in [PPE procurement] in the early days, but actually, it was very apparent that everyone was stepping over each other’s toes. And globally, the prices were being inflated and so on... So yes, there’s a risk in some of these things. There always is. But during times of crisis, you try to do the right thing.”

The Boardman review into pandemic procurement, published at the end of 2020, included stern warnings on the need to improve contingency planning and organisational structures across government; but its observations concerning CCS were less about compliance and more about communication.

The review found that when Cabinet Office and CCS teams were deployed to support pandemic response programmes, not everyone they came into contact with was clear on what the different groups of commercial specialists did. The review called for “more clarity and communication” of their respective roles.

Some officials, Boardman found, were “aware that there was a pool of specialist resources in the Cabinet Office, including in CCS, but were not sure how to access it for greatest effect”. At times, that

hindered CCS’s ability to support departments. Boardman called for the commercial service to review “whether and how best to broaden the scope of its products and services in a crisis situation to maximise the impact of its skilled resources”.

Tse and the CCS board have been considering the recommendation, he says, “so in the event that there is something else, it becomes more clear what our role is in some of these things”.

This was not CCS’s only brush with Boardman – Tse has also had to answer to both the reviewer and parliament’s Public Accounts Committee for CCS’s role in the awarding of a contract to provide an early-payments scheme for pharmacies to Greensill Capital. The supply-chain finance firm was running the scheme for DHSC at the time it collapsed in March 2021. But Tse says CCS fared well in last year’s review into the use of supply-chain finance. “From a CCS perspective, we did everything in the appropriate way. We didn’t break the regulations, we didn’t break the rules,” he says.

In 2019, Tse was named race champion for the Cabinet Office. In a blog post last summer, he described how two issues had brought a “sense of urgency and a sharper focus” to conversations about race: the coronavirus pandemic that disproportionately affected people from ethnic minorities, and the murder of George Floyd in the US.

According to official statistics, around one in five Cabinet Office staff are from a black or minority-ethnic background – more than

the economically-active population of the UK, and more than the public sector overall.

Yet that stat “masks a few things”, Tse tells CSW. “I am one of a very, very small handful of director generals that have come from an ethnic background; I was the first person with an ethnic background to take on the Cabinet Office [race champion] role – it had always been someone from a white background.” There are also too few directors and deputy directors from an ethnic-minority background, he says.

In an effort to rectify this, Tse has set up a Cabinet Office

race board, with offshoot working groups on talent management, data – “I don’t think we had good data or enough data,” Tse says – and education. He nods to press coverage – not all of it positive – of the Let’s Talk About Race training modules, in which around 2,500 people in the department have taken part. He explains: “I wanted people to hear the lived experiences – not fabricated ones, not ones from another department – of what it’s really like in the Cabinet Office.”

The fourth working group is focused on gov-

“I’ve experienced bullying and harassment and discrimination during my career, which is why I’m so passionate about wanting to make a change”



ernance and policies. In other words: “Is it easy for someone to declare that they’ve been the subject of bullying, harassment and discrimination? Are there things that we can do to improve?”

“I’m seeing lots of incremental changes across the organisation: bullying and harassment was down last year [across the civil service but] it’s gone up slightly this year in the Cabinet Office, so there’s more that we need to do,” Tse says. And there are also “microaggressions that might sound ‘micro’ to the person saying them, but to the person that’s receiving them, it ain’t micro at all”.

This is something with which he is sadly familiar. In his 2021 blog, he wrote about disliking his surname when he was younger, and having to explain how to pronounce it (“Tse pronounced as Chair, as in table and Tse.”)

Tse – whose father is from Hong Kong and whose

mother is Welsh – recalls that for several years growing up in Swansea, he and his siblings were the only non-white pupils at his school. “So, can I talk firsthand of what it’s like being beaten up in the schoolyard all the way from infancy through to secondary school? Yes, I can,” he says.

“Has [discrimination] been overt during my career? I can only think back to a couple of times actually... But whether it was racial or whether it was something else, I’ve experienced bullying and harassment and discrimination during my career, absolutely, which is why I’m so passionate about wanting to try and make a change – not just in CCS, but also in the Cabinet Office. And, if I can, across the public sector as a whole.”

He says the Cabinet Office is making progress – “for some, it will be too fast; for some, it will be too slow.” He says he wants a “richness of diversity” in the department, which should encompass not just race but a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and experiences.

“Because the Cabinet Office is right at the centre of policy development, what we need is a broad representation of a diverse workforce that knows what it’s like to come from a single-parent family, knows what it’s like to be on the breadline,” he says. “There’s nothing wrong with [being educated at] Oxford and Cambridge, but I want to make certain that we’ve got that richness of thought and understanding. Because there is sometimes policy across government that doesn’t work – and you think, well, actu-

ally, what were the voices in the room saying? Did you have the right voices in the room?”

One of the ways he’s trying to ensure CCS lives up to that standard is the way it recruits staff: having just opened an office in Birmingham, the service has run a recruitment campaign deliberately targeting underrepresented groups. “It meant that about 50% of applicants were people from ethnic backgrounds and different social backgrounds. That was maintained at the shortlist stage, and more importantly, it was maintained at appointment stage.

“You need to look at how you advertise roles, even down to the wording, the branding, the images of people that you use on brochures,” he says. “I’m really pleased that not only am I trying to instil that message at the Cabinet Office, but I’m trying to show through my own organisation that if you want to do this, it can be done.” ■

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Missed information

The government unit charged with identifying and rectifying false information and promoting trusted sources is strikingly cagey about its own operations. **Sam Trendall** reports

Despite the sustained efforts of parliamentarians and journalists, the government continues to withhold basic details about its Counter-Disinformation Unit.

The secrecy around its work is maintained on the grounds of a need to protect government's "relationship with social media platforms", as well as a desire to "preserve a 'safe space' around ministers and government officials", *PublicTechnology* can reveal.

The CDU was "stood up" in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport in March 2020 with a remit to respond to false information about coronavirus circulating on social networks and other websites. According to the government, the unit had previously been activated to monitor online activity related to the European Parliament election and the UK general election that both took place in 2019.

The unit brought together resources from the Home Office, Foreign Office, Cabinet Office and the intelligence services. It is understood to have remained in operation and has been responsible for leading government's response to disinformation – which is defined as the deliberate and malicious dissemination of false or misleading information with the intention to deceive people for political or financial reasons.

The CDU's remit also includes responding to misinformation, which is described as the the inadvertent sharing of falsehoods, largely by members of the general public.

Since its creation, very little additional detail has been made available about the CDU or its work. There is no public information on the number of staff or funding for the unit, its management, the volume of disinformation being tackled, where this information has been pub-

lished, any examples of false narratives encountered, and very little detail on the subject of misinformation or the steps being taken to remove or counter it.

Mind your PQs

In the last two years, ministers have responded to 69 written parliamentary questions – from MPs on all sides of the house – enquiring about the work of the CDU.

Three recent examples came from Manchester Central MP Lucy Powell, who asked about the number of pieces of false information that have been "directly rebutted on social media", the number that have been flagged to each of Twitter, Google, Facebook, and YouTube, and how many staff work at the CDU.

The response from minister for tech and the digital economy Chris Philp – while answering none of Powell's questions – indicated that the anti-disinformation function is "still fully operational".

"The CDU is resourced full time and works in close partnership with cross-government teams," he said. "In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the size of the team in DCMS has increased. Requirements are continually reviewed to ensure appropriate levels of resourcing, including surge capacity as needed."

The minister added: "When false narratives are identified, the CDU coordinates departments across Whitehall to deploy the appropriate response. This can include a direct rebuttal on social media, flagging content to platforms and ensuring public health campaigns are promoted through reliable sources."

No detail was provided on the volume of information the unit has identified, where it is being published, or how many staff work at the CDU. This is in line with the minister's previous comments that "as an operational matter, it is not appropriate for the government to give a running commentary on the amount of disinformation identified".

Philp's parliamentary responses came as *PublicTechnology* neared the end of its own six-month quest to find answers to similar questions, or at least a more detailed explanation of why even limited and basic detail has continually been withheld by an entity whose remit is to root out and combat false and inaccurate information, and promote public bodies as trusted and reliable sources.

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Request pending

A Freedom of Information request made to DCMS on 26 July asked whether the CDU was still operational and if its operations were subject to any ongoing periodic review process. The department's response – which arrived in late January – indicated that the unit “remains operational and there are no plans for it to be stood down”.

PublicTechnology also asked how many full-time equivalent staff worked at the unit and how many pieces of disinformation it has identified in total since March 2020. We further requested outline details – including subject and platform – of the three most recent instances of information that had been flagged, rebutted, or removed.

Answers to all these questions were ultimately not provided. DCMS cited FoI exemptions in cases where “disclosure would, or would be likely to, prejudice the effective conduct of public affairs”.

The department's response indicated that “in order to apply the [cited] exemption... the department is obliged to receive the ‘reasonable opinion’ of a ‘qualified person’ – in this case a minister of the crown”.

Having sought the opinion of this – unnamed – minister, DCMS laid out, as per its legal duties, the arguments for and against the public interest in releasing the information.

“After careful consideration, we do not feel the public interest is greater than the interest in withholding this information,” it said.

“As an operational matter, it is not appropriate for the government to give a running commentary on the amount of disinformation identified” *Tech minister Chris Philp*

The refusal to provide any detail on the number of staff, the volume of disinformation identified, or even a description of the kinds of false narratives being tackled was attributed to the need to maintain good relations with platforms where such material is published. The department also claimed that public detail on

5 March 2020

Date on which the CDU was set up

69

Number of parliamentary written ministerial answers concerning the work of the CDU

126 working days

Time it took DCMS to adequately respond to *PublicTechnology*'s FOI request. Regulations require a response within 20 working days

10%

Proportion of global turnover firms could be fined under proposed online harms laws for failing to remove harmful content; in Facebook's case this would equate to £8.7bn

the size of CDU's operations would allow those promoting disinformation to adapt their methods and strategy of doing so.

“In favour of withholding the information we considered that there is a strong public interest in preserving a ‘safe space’ around ministers and government officials so that they can communicate with confidence, including with external third parties,” the response said. “In particular, we consider release of the information would have a negative impact on our relationship with social media platforms. It could risk effective information sharing and data critical to our work. In addition, we consider the release of information would undermine the CDU's effectiveness by providing insight into the scope and scale of CDU capabilities which could allow malign disinformation actors to tailor their tactics to evade our monitoring capabilities.”

The department did, however, acknowledge that there are arguments “in favour of releasing the information”.

“We recognise there is a general public interest in government transparency,” it said. “We recognise that greater transparency makes the government more accountable to the electorate and increases trust. We also recognise the current heightened public interest in the issue of disinformation.”

Waiting game

DCMS originally responded to the request in August 2021, indicating that – while it

believed it was exempted from releasing the requested information – it needed more time to conduct the necessary tests as to whether “the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information”.

Having indicated that it aimed to respond by 22 September with details of the public-interest test, no further communication from the department was received until 21 January.

In the meantime, the Information Commissioner's Office – following a complaint made by *PublicTechnology* – had also contacted DCMS multiple times in relation to the request. This included the official notice, sent on 29 November, that the complaint had been upheld and that DCMS must either disclose the information or issue a response that adequately explained the refusal to do so.

“DCMS must take this step within 35 calendar days of the date of this decision notice,” the ICO notice said. “Failure to comply may result in the commissioner making written certification of this fact to the High Court... and may be dealt with as a contempt of court.”

Those 35 days came and went with no response. But a further reminder from the ICO in January did, finally, prompt DCMS to explain its refusal to disclose information.

PublicTechnology intends to contact the department to appeal the refusal – and make the counter-argument. ■

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DDaT profession maps out digital accessibility career



The government has mapped out a proposal for a dedicated career path within the digital, data and technology profession for accessibility specialists.

The DDaT Profession Capability Framework was established in 2017 to define the common roles that collectively constitute the profession. The guidance initially contained 38 specified roles, and two more have since been added. Posts are divided into six “job families”: data; IT operations; product and delivery; quality assurance testing; technical; and user-centred design.

For each of the 40 roles, the framework provides an introduction to the job and its responsibilities, details the skills needed to perform it, and sets out how civil servants can progress through levels of seniority.

There is currently no

government-wide formal career path for digital accessibility specialists. But, according to safeguarding minister Rachel Maclean, the Home Office has developed an internal framework to support the work and progression of the department’s accessibility professionals.

The department has been cen-

tral in helping to develop a proposal for the implementation of a similar model throughout government.

“Home Office officials are working in collaboration with officials from the Central Digital and Data Office and other government departments to gather and build the evidence and business case for a digital accessibility career path within the DDaT profession,” Maclean said. “An outline proposal has been submitted to the CDDO’s profession management function for consideration and officials are due to meet in the coming weeks to discuss the proposals.

“Work has begun to scope the roles and supporting framework in anticipation of approval.”

In recent years, accessibility work has become increasingly important in the development of government’s digital services – not least because, since September 2020, regulation has required all public-sector websites to comply with internationally agreed online accessibility standards.

Research conducted by government over the past two years found that about 99% of public sector websites contained

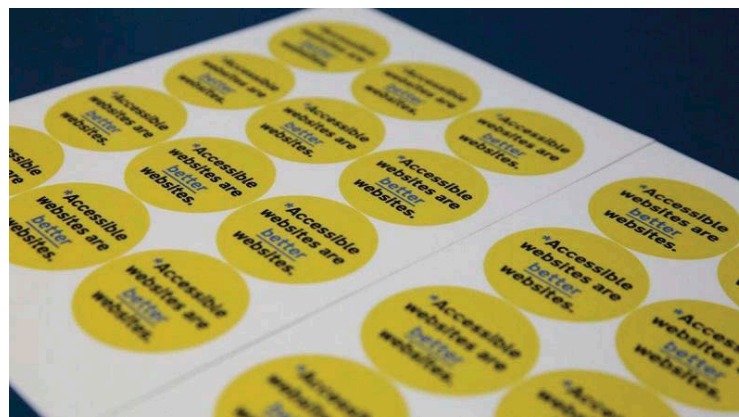
accessibility issues representing a potential problem for users with physical or cognitive impairments – as well as a breach of the new regulatory requirements.

The CDDO, which was formed last year, has taken over the accessibility brief from its

“Work has begun to scope the roles and supporting framework”
Rachel Maclean

Cabinet Office sister agency, the Government Digital Service, which previously employed a team of about 10 specialists. GDS also delivered training on accessi-

bility issues to hundreds of officials across other departments – many of which now have their own dedicated accessibility teams. The east London headquarters of GDS and CDDO also houses an “accessibility empathy lab”, where visitors can use a range of technology to try and better understand the needs and experiences of users with physical or cognitive impairments. ■



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Government chief digital officer role up for grabs

A salary of £190,000 is on offer for a new government chief digital officer, with Whitehall's most senior digital leader, Joanna Davinson, set to depart her role imminently.

The incoming GCDO will be "the most senior digital data and technology leader in the UK government", assuming direct leadership of the 200 staff of the Central Digital and Data Office, as well as "wider accountability... as leader and professional head of HM Government's 20,000-strong digital, data and technology community".

It is understood that the incumbent executive director of CDDO, Davinson, will depart her role once the new leader is on board. The Cabinet Office indicated she had been appointed to fulfil a fixed-term appointment, with the intention that a permanent government chief digital officer would be recruited at the end of that contract.

The GCDO's primary duties will include "owning the vision and strategy for digital,

data and technology" for government, as well as "providing the professional leadership of the DDaT function, including setting cross-government workforce strategy".

The digital chief will also work closely with the Treasury to ensure the £8bn-plus cumulatively spent by departments on technology and IT services each year provides value for money and delivers the desired outcomes. This includes assisting departments in "updating or replacing legacy technologies [and] accelerating the move

to scalable cloud-based technologies".

The GCDO appointment requires prime ministerial approval, and the digital bigwig will have a "direct line to Downing Street and cabinet ministers".

Applications for the role are open until midday on 18 March.

The recruitment process is the third time in less than three years that government has sought to hire an overall digital leader.

In September 2019, the newly created position of government chief digital and information officer was advertised. This role was never filled and, 11 months later, a new advert was published to fill a vacancy as government chief digital officer.

In January 2021, the creation of the Central Digital and Data Office was announced, with Davinson unveiled as its executive leader. Although she did not take on the title, her appointment came instead of the planned recruitment of the GCDO. ■



Joanna Davinson

Work begins on online platform for government's 'Civilian Reserve'

Work has begun on the development of an online platform for managing the government's planned "Civilian Reserve" of external experts that will be deployed to support ministers and officials in responding to future emergencies.

The Cabinet Office is leading the project to create the reserve. A contract notice published by the department said: "The civil service will respond better to the next crisis if we can rapidly identify and deploy individuals with the needed skills and experience to meet that crisis."

The reserve will be divided into two strands, the first of which will comprise a "group of senior leaders from the public, private, third sectors with expertise in matters relating to resilience and national security".

"Members of the group would offer their time to advise ministers and senior officials, and would be willing to use their organisations to facilitate government policy in times of crisis," the notice said.

The second strand will be composed of a "network of experienced former crown and civil servants, who can be surged into

critical crown and civil service roles or local resilience forums during a crisis, or be used to support a particular need where we might otherwise outsource to consultants".

The department wishes to create an online platform to "effectively on-board, manage and deploy members of the Civilian Reserve". The system will allow reservists to provide information on their skills and availability, while enabling departments to communicate with them, manage their deployments and, where necessary, pay them for their work.

IT company Version 1 has been appointed to a six-month £230,000 contract to support the discovery and alpha development phases for the digital service.

This will include user research intended to "ensure the service is feasible", before "developing and testing approaches to deliver the digital service".

At the conclusion of the two opening phases, results of work undertaken "will be collated into an alpha service review pack... including modelling of the costs and budget required to set up and run" a permanent live service. ■





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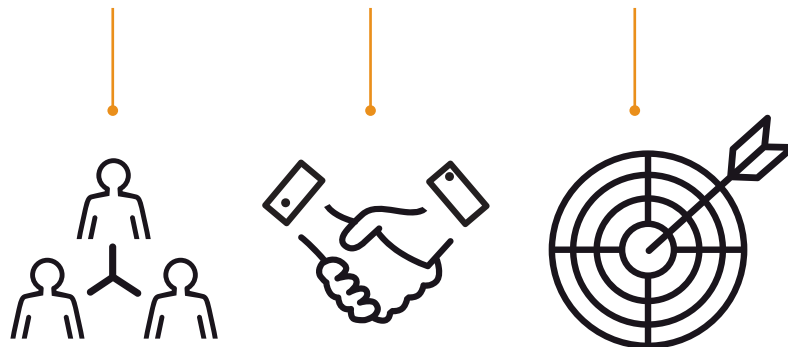


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SOMETHING TO DECLARE

Trumpeted as a plan to rewire and renew government, the Declaration on Government Reform was agreed in June 2021 after the first-ever meeting of all departmental permanent secretaries and cabinet ministers. The joint agreement between government’s political and civil service leaders heralded – according to then-Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove – “a unity of resolve that we need to see these changes through”.

The document included 30 actions to be completed by the end of 2021, grouped under three headings:
people, partnership, performance



In this new mini-series, CSW will be exploring progress against actions set out in the DGR, starting with work to improve how government

evaluates policy. Next month, we’ll be assessing more actions under the performance and partnership headings and in April we’ll consider

what is being done to get the right people with the right skills into government, and ensure they are properly supported.





STOP!

EVALUATE AND LISTEN

The government's 2021 reform plan set out the ambition for civil servants to be "creative and imaginative in problem-solving and policy formulation" as well as "rigorous in welcoming evaluation and scrutiny."

But government is not good at evaluating what it does – a recent National Audit Office report found that just 8% of spending on major government projects is evaluated robustly, while 64% is not evaluated at all.

And that's just major projects – there are many other policy areas where poor or non-existent review processes mean that government isn't learning from success and failures.

Why does government struggle to evaluate policies, and what is it doing to improve this? The Declaration on Government Reform included a specific action to create a new Evaluation Task Force alongside a revamped delivery unit to monitor progress.

CSW spoke to the Institute for Government to find out more and heard from officials who are at the centre of these attempts to improve evaluation.

Why evaluation is important

Evaluation allows the government to understand if projects are working and to demonstrate account-

ability for its use of public money.

It can help policymakers decide whether initiatives should be continued, expanded, improved, targeted in different ways, or stopped altogether.

Central government guidance makes it clear that departments should evaluate projects comprehensively.

What makes good evaluation?

Finding out what is and what isn't working is the most important thing, Catherine Hutchinson, head of the new Evaluation Task Force, told a recent CSW webinar – held in partnership with Oracle to discuss making outcome delivery plans a success.

Jemma Fisher, deputy director, in the Cabinet Office's strategy, planning and performance team added: "Sometimes people feel if the evaluation shows that something wasn't effective, that isn't as good as [evaluation] showing it is [effective]. In actual fact, a finding that shows

that you should stop or modify is as good, because you can reroute public money and spend it in a much more effective way."

Sian Jones, NAO director of value for money for public service, said seeing the government abandon more projects would be a good sign and she hopes the new task force will lead to "much more honest discussion about reprioritisation".

"That's a much more healthy place to be than trying to deliver despite unsuccessful piloting or projects and programmes," she said.

Evaluation struggles and a renewed focus on outcomes

An NAO report on evaluation, released in December, found that the government has made progress towards using evidence better and improving value for money, but its use of evaluation "continues to be variable and inconsistent" and it has been "slow to address known barriers to improvement".

Another longstanding criticism is that government has, for far too long, focused too much on inputs (such as the number of GPs) and outputs (the number of GP appointments available) and not placed enough of a focus on real-world outcomes (patient satisfaction).

There was previously too much focus on the money going into the system and not enough on "what we get as a result of the money", Fran Sims, deputy





director of the public value unit in the Treasury, told the CSW webinar.

Since 2017, the government has taken a series of steps to prioritise outcomes in the way it makes spending decisions, analyses performance and evaluates actions.

First came the creation of the public value framework, spearheaded by Tony Blair's onetime Delivery Unit chief and "delivery expert" Sir Michael Barber, which set out how departments should maximise real-world outcomes.

The next big step was the introduction of priority outcomes in 2020, which asked departments bidding in spending reviews to explain the real-world impact the spending would have.

Outcome delivery plans were then introduced last year, replacing the old single departmental plans. ODPs take the agreed outcomes, which are updated in each spending review, and ask departments to set out how they will deliver them.

Throughout the year, the Cabinet Office is then able to monitor the extent to which real-world outcomes are being achieved.

ODPs: How good are they?

Describing the aim of ODPs, Fisher said: "Ultimately, the government spends billions of pounds, if not trillions of pounds, every year. And there is a common saying that our goals become wishes without a robust plan. And so, in essence, ODPs are exactly

that: they are just a plan for how departments intend to spend taxpayers' money, and give us a way of driving transparency and accountability across government."

She later made the point that the government has "put much more of an onus on more frequent and transparent sharing of information between departments", calling this "quite a big shift and culture change from Single Departmental Plans".

The IfG's latest Whitehall Monitor report says ODPs are an improvement on SDPs.

SDPs laid out detailed lists of policies and actions that departments planned to take, but often failed to connect these to the outcomes they wished to achieve, or give metrics by which success could be measured, the IfG says.

The new ODPs place outcomes and metrics front and centre, often listing

"There is a common saying that our goals become wishes without a robust plan"
Jemma Fisher, Cabinet Office



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multiple metrics for each outcome.

The IfG welcomes the focus on real-world impact, but says outcomes are “frequently too vague or high-level, and often disconnected from the metrics”.

The think tank says the new framework is “promising but does not yet amount to a full step forward in government performance management or transparency”.

It adds that the government needs to set more specific targets for the metrics it is using to measure outcomes, share more information about how ODPs will be used to track performance, and commit to sharing more performance data with the public.

“I think the shift towards an outcome-focused approach is the right one,” Rhys Clyne, a senior researcher at the IfG, says.

“That will hopefully help to address the problems that government has long been criticised for – namely losing focus on real-world impact. But the job isn’t finished.”

Clyne says there are also inconsistencies between the different departments.

“They don’t all use metrics in the same consistent way. Some of them use them more than others, for example.”

One example of this, highlighted by the IfG, is the DWP’s aim to “improve opportunities for all through work, including groups that are currently underrepresented in the workforce”, which is measured solely through the disability employment-rate gap.

As well as outcomes for each department, the government has also set cross-cutting outcomes, where several departments are responsible for achieving an outcome, such as levelling up.

Clyne says the use of cross-cutting outcomes is an improvement on the previous system, but there are inconsistencies in how departments describe and recognise their role in achieving them and there is a long way to go for the government to “shore up the coordination” of crossing-cutting outcomes.

Training departments and monitoring evaluation

The Cabinet Office set out its plans to improve evaluation in last year’s Dec-

laration on Government Reform, which included aims to “set up an Evaluation Task Force to ensure consistent high quality impact evaluation and transparency and a refreshed delivery unit to drive progress on the government’s headline priorities” by the end of 2021.

The creation of the Task Force had already been achieved at this point, having been set up in spring 2021 and coming in alongside a £15m evaluation accelerator fund to improve the government’s understanding of the impact of its activity in key policy areas such as net zero and levelling up.

The ETF offers training to departments, showing them good evaluation methodology and giving them tem-

plates to help them evaluate their own work, to make departments better at evaluation themselves, rather than relying on the centre of government.

It also assesses departments’ evaluation performance and advises the Treasury on how to best target expenditure to have the biggest impact.

The Task Force was integral in informing the 2021 Spending Review, including detailed involvement in bids and depart-

mental settlements, CSW understands.

It has also been heavily involved in supporting departments to develop new policies and ensuring that potential impacts are comprehensively thought through and robust evaluation strategies are in place to understand the impact policies are having.

The Task Force is also producing a strategy that will reflect on past challenges and future opportunities for the What Works Network, which was established in 2013 and has informed many policy decisions.

The refreshed No.10 Delivery Unit is currently focused on five policy priorities: levelling up; net zero; education, jobs and skills; health; and crime and justice.

Clyne says the unit’s evaluation role could include

tracking the delivery of key priority outcomes in a select few areas and then helping departments to make progress on them.

Impact has always been the goal of government policies and in recent decades, numerous attempts have been made to measure it. If these rushed new initiatives seem somewhat like reinventing the wheel, then maybe they are. But perhaps thinking in government has finally turned a corner. Watch this space. ■

“The shift towards an outcome-focused approach is the right one. But the job isn’t finished”
Rhys Clyne, Institute for Government





People at the heart of updating government's legacy systems

Transforming citizen experience requires motivation, close collaboration and communication

For individuals in the UK, replacing outdated personal technology is a relatively easy thing to do. Replacing a mobile phone or moving to voice activated speakers is straightforward and simple. Citizens now expect a similar experience from the services they consume from government.

However, for government departments to digitally transform systems while continuing to support the current ones is a complex task. According to a December 2021 report from Parliament's Public Accounts Committee, the vital systems that manage the UK's borders and paying state pensions

are still being run on decades-old legacy technology. The use of ageing technologies that software suppliers stopped supporting long ago hugely increases the risk of failure and downtime. This leads to services that are no longer agile, are costly and no longer meet the requirements of the citizen. To boot legacy technology requires huge amounts of maintenance and in many cases poses cyber security risks.

This has not gone unnoticed, with a National Audit Office report published in July last year stated that government digital programmes have shown “a consistent pattern of underperformance” over quarter of a century. The report identified legacy systems as one of six key areas of concern. Furthermore in 2021, the prime minister and the cabinet secretary signed a pledge to “introduce mandatory reporting of the costs and risks of outdated IT systems”. Government departments need to take action.

In a recent panel discussion run by government IT supplier Leidos, its UK civil division’s head of business development Roz Barrance described this challenge: “Systems have been built up over many years to support changing legislation and urgent policy requirements. They contain workarounds and temporary solutions, some many years old that are not sustainable. All these changes over time have added layer upon layer of complexity, risk and cost.”

A report published last July by independent advisory committee Digital Economy Council said that in 2019 £2.3bn went on maintaining legacy technology, half of the government’s spending on digital technology that year. November 2021’s comprehensive spending review included £2.6bn to update old technology and tackle cybersecurity risks over three years.

Barrance said that optimising legacy systems requires digital transformation to the new, while keeping the lights on of the existing ones. This puts conflicting pressure on the people that understand and support the systems today as they are asked to input into the new. “How do we actually go about operationally delivering this?” she asked participants in the discussion.

There is no greater asset than people

During the panel discussion Leidos’ chief architect Mark Watson spoke about the importance of people. He said it is very important to recognise that those in the business today with the technical knowledge of the aging systems are one of the top assets available and unpicking the existing system to understand how it can be transformed cannot be done without deep understanding gained over many years.

Organisations must recognise this and provide their staff with a realistic view of the transformation process, rather

than just selling benefits, Watson said, adding that these people will become stretched as they maintain the existing and help out on the new. But there are ways to motivate such as including them in the decision-making process, giving ownership of elements and providing training to carry on and support the new. It is a very hard balancing act but it is key to success, he added.

It is vital that technology change is understood and shaped by the people that use it, Watson added, as when users are left out of decision-making and handed a new system often adoption of the system can be slow as issues appear with usability or ineffective workflows. “They know how to do their job and they know how to design a system that will make them more effective,” said Watson. “Standing up user groups where they have a voice and input to future systems is a very effective way of bringing users on the journey with the business.”

One of Leidos’ government customers supports people facing or going through bankruptcy. Working with its technical and user communities the company was able to bring the organisation on the journey of digital transformation where its input was invaluable and the new system was quickly adopted with minimal teething issues. The organisation successfully redesigned workflows to allow bankruptcy applications to be dealt with in an average of 1.4 days, down from 10. The benefit to people facing the uncertainty of bankruptcy is immeasurable and employee engagement and satisfaction went up.

Stay agile

Watson added that large government systems are complex and the services they provide can be life-preserving. But digital transformation can be agile and ongoing and it is important to realise that the services an organisation needs to deliver now will not be the same in two or three years.

He said that agile development has other benefits for legacy transformation work, such as bringing in new elements as soon as they are ready which enables pieces of the existing IT estate to be turned off saving cost, reducing risk and freeing up the workforce to accelerate the transformation, meaning it becomes a snowball. “It’s my experience that 99% of organisations that switch from waterfall to agile never want to go back,” he said.

“We can’t move forward with digital transformation without people, whether it’s the people that are consuming services, those involved in delivering the legacy today, or those that are involved in the future,” summed up Barrance. “And I think it’s also about recognising that no one person has all of the answers. Collaboration and communication are key to success.”

NORTHCOTE-TREVELYAN AND THE CIVIL SERVICE CODE

Andrew Southam offers a whistlestop tour of civil service conduct and ethics

Last month, Sue Gray reported on socialising in government during lockdown. A decade ago, the government enshrined civil service conduct in law. One hundred and sixty-eight years earlier, Victorian reformers Charles Trevelyan and Stafford Northcote laid the path towards that code.

Mid-nineteenth century government was polluted by patronage and favouritism and even “gifts”. Prominent families gained advantage through personal influence: writer Anthony Trollope acquired a coveted Post Office clerkship through family connections. Northcote and Trevelyan found that candidates of “slender ability” or “questionable character” and even those who “failed in other professions” won positions.

Favouritism governed careers. Sir William Hayter, a parliamentary and patronage secretary to the Treasury in the early 1850s, used two nitwits to compete against favoured candidates, which he claimed had secured many appointments for his Wells constituents.

Growing state complexity, a rising educated middle class, reform influences from intellectual movements stressing “common good”, and growing ideas of virtue in Victorian society pushed for change.

Chancellor of the exchequer William Gladstone asked his permanent secretary Trevelyan and conservative politician Stafford Northcote to improve the civil service.

Inspired by seventh century imperial China mandarin exams, their 1854 *Report on the Organisation of the Permanent Civil Service* recommended recruitment of people with sound “general ability” by open competition, and promotion on merit not “preferment, patronage or purchase”.

A Civil Service Commission followed in 1855 to oversee these exams and issue certificates of qualification – from 1859, pensions weren’t granted without them – and supervise appointments to departments.

Change took time. Critics attacked government incompetence during the Crimea

War of 1853-56. Charles Dickens even lampooned the civil service as the “Circumlocution Office” in *Little Dorrit* (see p5’s Words on Whitehall for an extract from the novel).

In June 1879, Liberal Party chancellor of the exchequer Robert Lowe used an order in council to push through the recommendations. While Northcote and Trevelyan preferred statute to overcome “long usage and powerful interests”, the civil service mostly developed through royal prerogative rather than acts of parliament.

A permanent, professional and impartial civil service emerged over the next 50 years.

In 1884, Gladstone, by then prime minister, enforced the separation between politicians and officials by insisting civil servants resign when standing for parliament.

Liberal politician Viscount Haldane then established the doctrine of ministerial accountability in 1918. Ministers were accountable to parliament and civil servants advised ministers.

Twentieth century tensions were

“Candidates of ‘slender ability’ or ‘questionable character’ won positions”

broke down when they thought he was exceeding government policy. In frustration, Benn sent them a copy of Labour’s manifesto saying: “That’s what we have been elected to do”. Senior officials thought otherwise and insisted on ministerial directions to carry out some instructions.

Whistleblowing brought a new dimension. High-flying defence official Clive Ponting leaked information about the sinking of Argentine naval ship the General Belgrano during the 1982 Falklands conflict. A jury notably acquitted him in 1985 despite his breaching the 1911 Official Secrets Act.

Cabinet secretary Sir Robert Armstrong consequently insisted on loyalty to ministers but gave officials opportunity to speak with senior officers or a permanent secretary – later extended to the civil service head – on matters of conscience.

A parliamentary committee then argued in 1994 for a civil service code of ethics, an independent appeals process and an act to protect civil service values. This was supported by the

Nolan Committee on Standards in Public Life set up by John Major after two MPs were caught earning “cash for questions”.

While previous circulars, regulations and handbooks (like those of 1949 or 1980) had described elements of civil servants’ behaviour, the resulting new code, published in 1996, defined their essential values as integrity, honesty, objectivity, and impartiality. And gave them the right to report criminal or unlawful activity to the Civil Service Commission.

Politicisation fears then caused concern. Growing news coverage, a higher profile for civil servants appearing before parliament and growing numbers of special advisers raised worries about eroding civil service values.

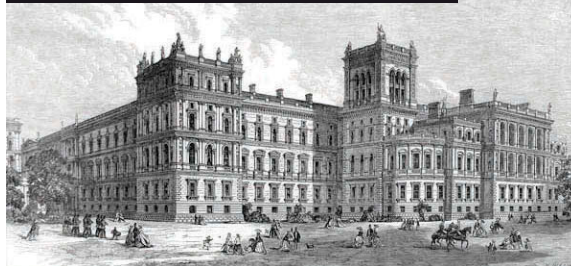
Fleet Street journalist Alistair Campbell notably took charge of the Downing Street Press Office, controlling civil servants.

The Nolan Committee pushed for a civil service act. Although critics argued that statute protection hindered civil service modernisation, Gordon Brown introduced the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act just before the 2010 general election.

Northcote’s and Trevelyan’s aspirations for an impartial, meritocratic and objective civil service free from the “evils of patronage”, now with a code of behaviour embedded within, had reached the statute book! ■

Andrew Southam is a freelance history correspondent and writer

The Foreign Office from 1866 shortly after the Northcote-Trevelyan report was published



navigated. Civil servants were caught up in 1920s’ scandals of stock market insider trading and the infamous Zinoviev letter, a supposed Soviet plot fomenting British unrest which possibly affected the 1924 general election.

A subsequent investigation set down general principles of officials’ behaviour, making clear that civil service conduct “like every other profession, has an unwritten code of ethics and conduct for which the most effective sanction lies in the public opinion of the service itself”.

Some 40 years later, senior civil servants’ relationship with 1974/5 radical left-wing industry secretary Tony Benn

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