

No time is perfect for civil service reform, so let's do it now

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In 1968, the Fulton Committee identified serious failings in the structure and operations of the UK's civil service. It pointed to the dominance of generalists — what they called “the cult of the gifted amateur”, as well as churn (the unplanned and rapid movement of officials from post to post), a closed culture uneasy with incomers and the lower status of officials charged with implementation rather than policy.

Now, 55 years later, it faces the same criticisms. The Institute for Government and many former civil servants confirm that not nearly enough has changed. Reforms to rectify these defects are difficult to implement or sustain. When asked last year to review civil service governance and accountability, my first question was — why is it so hard? The answers quickly became clear.

First, no one is in charge — the role of the head of the civil service is nearly always split, doubling as cabinet secretary. Second, there is no formal delegation of the prime minister's statutory power to manage the civil service; third, there is no systematic external scrutiny.

So I recommend the appointment of a dedicated, full-time head of the civil service, with a proven record of delivering transformation of complex organisations. I recommend clear delegation of power to ensure authority. And I recommend beefing up the existing Civil Service Commission as genuine regulator, holding to account the civil service head for implementing reforms and for continuous improvement. The commission would report annually to parlia-

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ment, enabling it to call out backsliding and fudge.

As I conducted my review, it also became clear that the archaic structure of the centre of government breeds confusion, blurs accountability and masks inadequacy. Other countries with similar systems to the UK have a strong office of prime minister and cabinet, bringing together what in our case would be Number 10 with the cabinet secretariats to create a genuine strategic centre. Canada, Australia and Ireland have all separated out the management of public expenditure from the main finance ministry to create, in effect, a budget ministry. All have proved more effective than the UK at controlling public expenditure.

I recommend that when a new government is formed — or re-formed — after the election, the centre should be reorganised to create an Office of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and an Office of Budget and Management, with the Treasury retaining responsibility for economic policy, macro-fiscal policy, including the overall spending envelope, taxation and financial regulation. The Office of Budget and Management would house the cross-cutting functions through which public money is spent — procurement, financial management, project oversight, IT and digital, and human resources. This would make possible an efficiency drive similar to that of the coalition government, which delivered savings from government running costs of £52bn over five years.

I make other recommendations to strengthen governance and improve accountability — some controversial, some less so. None of what I recommend requires changes to the law, challenges established constitutional norms or reduces political impartiality or appointments on merit. But the two principal changes — a dedicated, empowered and accountable Head of the Civil Service, and a modernised and streamlined centre of government — are the keys to unlock real and lasting change.

There is never a perfect moment — few are more familiar than I with Sir Humphrey's last resort: the doctrine of unripe time. Change like this needs cross-party bipartisan support, too, and there is no ideology here. But without these changes, another 55 years will roll by, 2078 will arrive, and the same sad story will unfold.

The writer is a former Conservative minister and the author of a government review into civil service governance