

Reforming Whitehall

Michael Gove's lecture makes interesting reading. He says he wants a civil service which is better at delivering and places more emphasis on the implementation of agreed policy. Previous governments too have sought to make distinction between the civil service as policy advisers to Ministers, and the civil service administering large programmes of tax and grants, or managing public services and investment programmes. Tony Blair set up a Delivery unit in the Number 10, to reflect his frustrations that things he wanted done were delayed or diluted.

When I was Margaret Thatcher's Policy Adviser I always regarded getting the policy worked out and agreed by Cabinet and Parliament as the start, not the end of the process. It then had to be turned into practical administration or spending. Margaret embarked on a substantial reform of the civil service, encouraged by Michael Heseltine who ran a Ministerial information system based on big data. Michael was right that Ministers often were not shown the key data any business person would expect at the top of a large company. The purpose of the reform was to separate the implementation or administration of various activities from the policy work and Cabinet level decisions over priorities and resources. A set of Next Steps Agencies were set up under professional public sector chief executives to run substantial services or programmes. The CEOs were set targets, offered bonuses for good performance, and were responsible for the day to day detail. Ministers remained responsible for the policy, the overall results and the financing.

A service like the NHS has long had professional and medical management running it. There is management at the national level, at the regional level, at the local level and in each hospital and surgery. They have large budgets and considerable devolved power. Ministers do not expect to be making decisions about which cleaning services to use or how much protective clothing to buy. Ministers are never involved in awarding huge contracts to suppliers. During the recent crisis responsibility moved upwards, and Ministers were drawn into procurement of ventilators and clothing, blurring the divisions between overall responsibility and the day to day judgements about how to spend budgets and provide for staff in each unit. Ministers had asked for plentiful supplies of PPE and tests and had offered the money to pay for them, but found they were pulled into how to do this at a time of world scarcity and rapidly changing views of how to defeat the virus

Under Labour some hospitals had scandals over high death rates or poor levels of care. Ministers had not ordered those to take place, and had not designed policies likely to produce such results. Once these issues became important national arguments, they of course had to step in, make decisions, and take some blame. It went to prove that in what can become a very centralised large service it is difficult to keep responsibility and remedial action at the local level, even though it was individual hospitals that created these problems.

It would be good to sharpen Whitehall's focus on delivery again, and to learn

from recent experiences in adapting a large public service to the hostile conditions of Covid 19. The call for better data is also a wise one. Often in the public sector the data is there but it is not available to decision takers in a timely and accessible way, or it comes in data series where the basis of computation is not properly understood. The data at the regular press conferences on the pandemic kept changing with different definitions and different aggregates, which made good decision taking more difficult.