

The civil service and its role

When I was a Minister I stuck to the rules. Everything I did was done with officials present or seeing the papers. I always considered the official advice carefully. The relationship needed to be properly conducted, with the Minister handling any politics outside the Ministerial office and without the back up of the civil service. As a Minister you need to understand you have to govern in the interests of the whole country, should not offer favours to your own side, and often have to operate in a quasi judicial capacity. Ministers are above all beneath the law like everyone else. The privilege is you can change the law for the future.

You also need to understand you are on your own, you will take the blame for any mistake made in your department, whoever made it, and you cannot always rely on official advice. Whilst always saying please and thank you to your officials you should not always agree with their preferred consensus view. Often I would need to hold a review meeting for the advice sent, and encourage officials to recreate the proper arguments and choices they should have considered before they had reached a single consensus piece of advice. Sometimes my own experience and past knowledge inclined me to make a decision that was not the one recommended. Quite often it was better to choose a decisive option than a compromise one.

If you review civil service advice in an area you know well you can often see the problems with it. Officials change jobs far too often, limiting the amount they know about any specialist area. They often lack specialist expertise and write generalised advice or commentaries. Sometimes they draw on the work of outside bodies and companies to fill out their knowledge, which can introduce bias into the advice to a Minister. He is not made aware of where the information came from and why it was produced. The civil service needs to keep more people in worthwhile jobs for longer and back them up with more relevant training in the given area. I tested out advice by inviting in outside interests to tell me their views, knowing their bias but recognising their understanding of the affected area.

The civil service needs to rate administration as highly as policy advice. Arguing through a new policy and setting it out to Parliament is the starting point, not the final product. What matters is implementation. There needs to be more audit and analysis of how a launch of a new policy has gone, with a willingness to amend or remove if it miscarries.

The Hancock Whatsapp and message revelations reveal some unusual developments in Minister-official relations. I objected at the time to senior officials making presentations to the media and nation about the pandemic. That along with the underlying decisions is a Minister's job. Officials should concentrate on getting the data and advice right, and on implementing the decisions like the vaccine roll out and the need for extra hospital capacity. Civil servants should not be judging which Ministers to do things or which Ministers to back. Ministers should have held officials accountable inside government for the poor data, the changes of base for the data and the

failure of some officials to even follow their own lock down rules. Ministers of course needed good science, but they had to balance the uncertain early science about the pandemic with the impact on the economy and personal freedoms of some of the options.