

The civil service should do more learning and less churning

There is some interest in civil service reform, both by Ministers and senior civil servants. Both can perform better, and both see that there are difficulties over some issues and in some departments. Today I wish to concentrate on how the civil service can respond to public needs and Ministerial decisions. I will do another piece on how Ministers can give good leadership.

The recent covid crisis showed the best and the worst of what is on offer. The existing NHS medical staff and senior management provided a lot of emergency care in difficult circumstances at some risk to themselves whilst medical science caught up with the disease and developed medicines and vaccines to combat the virus. Ministers opted for new leadership outside NHS management to drive the vaccine development and purchases very successfully. The NHS took time to test and bring on stream drug treatments.

The civil service appoints a lot of generalists and then rotates them through a wide range of very different roles, with a few emerging to the top with a general knowledge and experience of quite a lot of government. There is substantial reliance on outside consultants and advisers for technical and professional matters. An individual often has to move onwards and upwards quickly to get salary advances and to show they are the kind of talent that can rise higher. The danger of this system is twofold. Individuals do not gain sufficient expertise or a wide enough range of contacts to do any particular job well given the limited time in it. No-one is responsible for much, as projects, policies and services are shaped by a succession of people and go wrong under a range of people. If a person knows they will move on soon it must affect their degree of interest in and disclosure of things that are not working well.

There is a good case to be made for expecting people to stay for longer in posts and to back them with training and support so they become expert in their field. They should be given increments on salary scales for doing a good job whilst staying in post, and or promoted within the same area so the expertise is not wasted. The civil service should contain more of the expertise it needs and should reward it.

If we take an area of weakness, large scale procurement, it would make sense for senior people involved to expect to have to stay with the contracts they have designed and signed through a meaningful period of years of fulfilment, with possible bonuses for successful quality and cost outcomes. If it is say a 7 year project why not stay to see it to success? Whilst of course Ministers remain publicly responsible for all that is done, well paid senior civil servants should beneath that public accountability take responsibility for all their considerable delegated powers. They need to be rewarded and praised for using them well, or corrected or disciplined for using them badly as in private business.

The attempt to divide administration of policy from design of policy led to a proliferation of Executive Agencies. Their Chief Executives are civil servants, but they have some Ministerial type powers and duties as they have a public face and can speak for their bodies. Where there is a cross party accepted and largely unchanging task like issuing passports or vehicle licences there is something to be said for this approach. It needs to be sharpened so that again the CEO and senior management is rewarded for success but held accountable for failure. The model starts to break down where policy and execution are much more entwined and the resulting quango is powerful. The NHS and the Environment Agency are differing examples of large bodies with public chief executives where Ministers are held responsible for their actions by the public. In these cases it is essential the Ministers have full access to data and an ability to influence the CEOs as their work is central to the democratic process and is often highly contentious between parties. Not everything should be in external agencies.