

The role of Permanent Secretaries

The Permanent Secretary in a department is the most senior civil servant. He or she is responsible for supervising, promoting and disciplining the civil servants and for ensuring timely advice to the Secretary of State. He or she is the Accounting Officer responsible for controlling agreed budgets, for spending regularity, legal conformity and financial reporting of the department's affairs.

The Secretary of State is the Head of the Department as policy maker, chief spokesman, and decision taker. Ideally the Secretary of State after discussion with officials sets out the policy, agrees a budget with Cabinet and Treasury and expects the civil servants in his or her department to get on with implementing any changes and administering the wider corpus of departmental actions and policies.

The Permanent Secretary has no independent voice other than when reporting to the Public Accounts Committee as Accounting Officer or to a Select Committee when it is making an Enquiry into matters of implementation rather than government policy. In return for having no direct voice the Permanent Secretary expects the Secretary of State to defend the department and the actions of officials when reporting to Parliament or appearing on the media.

There are occasions when relations are strained because officials have made substantial mistakes which the Secretary of State warned them against or knew nothing about. It is best in such a situation for the politician and the senior officials to agree the way for the matter to be reported to Parliament. The Minister has to take the main hit, but it may also be agreed that there needs to be disciplinary action with an honest account made of where the mistakes or wrongdoing occurred and by whom.

It is much more difficult if relations are strained because senior officials do not like the policy being followed. This should not in theory happen. Assuming the policy decided by the Minister is not illegal or dangerous officials should accept and implement with good grace, especially if it was part of the governing party's Manifesto or it was the result of a referendum. The price of anonymity and protection from too much public scrutiny is to accept properly made Ministerial decisions and implement them in the best way even if you have reservations about them.

If a Minister disagrees strongly with an important government policy they usually have to resign. It is difficult to see why it should be different for a senior civil servant who feels so strongly that a government policy is wrong yet he or she is called upon to implement it. When I was the Prime Minister's chief Policy Adviser I had to judge on the few big issues where she and I disagreed when she had finally decided and was not going to change, and end my attempts to change her mind. Once she was committed in public to a course of action I would never do or say anything negative about the policy I was worried about. I disagreed with the Community Charge or Poll Tax and with the decision to sacrifice the veto in various single market areas.

I will be looking at issues around the performance of Permanent Secretaries in crucial departments in future posts.