



# After Boris Johnson

## *What now for the civil service?*

Alex Thomas

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### Introduction

The health of the civil service has been the subtext to much current political debate. The Johnson administration's governing style, its leadership during – and after – the partygate scandal and the long hangover of Brexit all carry the theme. Problems at home and abroad, from the Kabul evacuation to the Grenfell Tower inquiry, have further weakened the institution.

The concern will not end with the demise of Johnson's government. The next prime minister must address increasingly strained relations between the civil service and ministers who have, under Johnson's leadership at least, been seen at times as scapegoating and at others as sidelining civil servants.

The strength of the civil service matters. The institution helps determine how well government policy is implemented, it frames the advice given to ministers and is one of the main guarantors of clean and merit-based public administration. Three years of Johnson's government have not helped to create the conditions for civil service authority and effectiveness. This has not been an administration that prioritised quiet competence or the diligent accumulation and application of evidence in policy making.

The civil service must respond to the problems of the current moment with honesty about its strengths, and its weaknesses. There should be more clarity about the roles and responsibilities of ministers and senior officials, and stronger, more visible leadership and communication from top officials.

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This paper argues that the next prime minister and the head of the civil service should:

- Strengthen the purpose and remit of the civil service, including by addressing the ambiguities in responsibilities between ministers and civil servants. That also means properly reorganising the centre of government with a clear chain of command in No.10 and a stronger board to drive civil service reform.
- Make the 'case for the civil service' more assertively and reinforce the civil service code and its core values.
- Present a shared vision for the future of the civil service built on the existing *Declaration on Government Reform*, revive 'capability reviews' to provide assurance to ministers and to the public about civil service effectiveness and use the results to set out a clear proposal for the improvements needed. That must include a new workforce plan for the civil service.

Partygate was a nadir for the civil service even if there remain questions over the responsibility of officials, at all levels, and their political leaders for it. But it is not terminal. A revived purpose for the civil service, to implement government programmes while maintaining the ongoing capability of government itself, would help reaffirm an obligation on those who work for the public to act as stewards of the state. A more public voice for civil service leaders would show the value of good administration to a sceptical political class. And a serious programme of reform would improve the civil service to deliver results for this and future governments, on behalf of the country.

## **The civil service is a vital but undervalued inheritance**

The UK is fortunate to benefit from the long history of an impartial, largely non-corrupt and generally effective civil service. The civil service has never been perfect or the 'Rolls-Royce' of popular myth. But the existence of a body of people who enact the decisions of ministers and oversee public services, often motivated by a sense of public duty, is an inheritance not to be taken for granted.

The civil service at its best does things well. The May 2022 cost of living support package was an example of civil servants working at speed under the clear direction of a minister to make an important policy intervention.<sup>1</sup> The success of the vaccine and furlough programmes has been well documented.<sup>2</sup> The civil service's foreign policy, security advice and response to the Ukraine crisis has been assured, with early wobbles over the Home Office's resistance to settling refugees beginning to be resolved. And it has worked with ministers to ensure that, while there were important gaps, of the Conservative Party's 2019 manifesto commitments in our view "a good number are complete or on track".<sup>3</sup> What these successes have in common is a group of knowledgeable and confident civil servants, working under clear ministerial direction (or in the case of the Vaccine Task Force, to a temporary external appointee) with a focus on action and making change happen.

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Criticism of the civil service is not new. From John Reid’s infamous claim that Home Office processes were not fit for purpose, to Iain Duncan Smith attacking his own permanent secretary at the Department for Work and Pensions, via Tony Blair’s “scars on his back” and Francis Maude’s efficiency drives, the civil service is well used to public scrutiny and bad reviews. Ministerial questions about the willingness of the civil service to implement the policies of the government of the day are familiar – whether from memories of the conniving Sir Humphrey in *Yes Minister*, the natural suspicion of a new party coming into government or allegations of disloyalty over Brexit. But the charge that the civil service does not always work for, and with, the government of the day is hard to sustain.<sup>4</sup>

But the Johnson government has not made it easy for the civil service. It has been led by a prime minister who rejects constraints and conventions, often preferring not to acknowledge evidence-based advice or the demands of the ministerial code.<sup>5</sup> The recently departed ethics adviser Lord Geidt (Johnson’s second to leave in just three years) argued that this had put him in an “impossible and odious position”<sup>6</sup> while the cabinet secretary and head of the civil service, Simon Case, spoke of a government that believed it had “a mandate to test established boundaries”.<sup>7</sup> Periods when the cabinet is weak relative to the prime minister can also bring dangers for the civil service. Strong ministers implicitly or explicitly ally with their civil servants to develop the arguments to resist unwelcome interventions from No.10 or the Treasury, while weak ministers find it easier to deflect the blame on to civil servants for failing to deliver, saving their public praise for resignation statements and letters.

Civil service leaders have also sometimes been wrongly criticised when they have taken decisions about how best to run the organisation. Government officials have been drawn into culture war territory with permanent secretaries accused of ‘wokeness’ or being part of the ‘blob’ as they develop management policies to increase their departments’ diversity and inclusion.<sup>8</sup> Ministers should be holding their officials to account for the outcomes their departments achieve, not the way they manage the civil service to deliver them.

None of this speaks to an executive that has properly valued the civil service as an institution.

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## The civil service must tackle problems with its integrity and effectiveness

This does not let the civil service off the hook. Unfounded condemnation from powerful figures, if not rebutted, is a danger to the civil service, but not everything is unfounded. Looking beyond the heat of the current debate and political upheaval there are problems that the civil service needs to address, particularly around its integrity and its effectiveness.

### Integrity

There are valid questions about the integrity of the civil service. The main subject of partygate criticism should be Boris Johnson: as the leader of the government it is he who set the tone and from whom others took their signal. But the civil service cannot escape blame – from the principal private secretary relieved that “we seem to have got away with it” to the organisers of the bacchanal that ended up trashing the No.10 garden. Civil servants are responsible for their own behaviour, their conduct as professionals and abiding by the law. The Gray report into partygate records officials failing to act with the integrity the public has a right to expect, not just limited to workplace gatherings themselves but with mistreatment of cleaners and security guards, and press officers subsequently misleading journalists. The cabinet secretary’s initial response to a profound crisis for the institution, with a message to civil servants that did not apologise or set out a plan to move on, followed by an awkward select committee appearance, has been unconvincing.<sup>9</sup>

Partygate also showed that institutional loyalty to the Johnson government has been strained. Clearly some of the leaks about parties in Downing Street came from civil servants angry about the prime minister and senior officials using more junior staff as a shield for blame. Whistle-blowers perform a vital service and routes to raise concerns must be protected, but civil servants leaking to journalists deeply damages trust right up to the top of the government.

It is also true that Home Office officials have at some level been organising to oppose the government’s policy on directing immigrants to Rwanda.<sup>10</sup> This is inappropriate. The department’s permanent secretary has sought and received a direction from ministers for civil servants to work on the policy, the courts are doing their job in determining its legality and so the civil service must play its part in implementing the home secretary’s plans.<sup>11</sup> For all that the attacks on civil servants undermining Brexit are largely unfounded, the civil service does have its own internal biases. It needs to self-critically appraise itself where it has become disconnected from parts of the country it serves.

The integrity of the civil service machine was also called into question on the procurement of PPE during the pandemic. Court documents did record civil servants raising objections to big contracts going to personal contacts of ministers and special advisers, but these were lost in the confusion of the crisis and failed to stop the dubious award of contracts many of which led to enormous waste of public funds.<sup>12</sup> Confidence in procedures for whistle-blowing and of more junior officials in their leaders has taken a hit.

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A series of excruciating Foreign Affairs Committee appearances on the confusion around the decision to evacuate from Kabul staff from the animal charity Nowzad were difficult for the civil servants involved. The committee concluded that “the department has been unable to trace the source of [the] intervention, and that, as a result, no one can be held accountable and the decision-making process cannot be properly scrutinised”.<sup>13</sup> The report and hearings describe a haze around a decision that, while recognising there were other important security concerns at the time, showed that “at best the political leadership was chaotic and at worst that senior figures are not telling the truth”. Integrity means holding oneself to high standards of personal behaviour, but is also about standing up to ministers, providing appropriate challenge and giving clear evidence to parliament.

This is further evidence of the problems of confused accountability between ministers and civil servants, something seen throughout the pandemic – most notably in the ambiguity over whether the secretary of state, Gavin Williamson, or the permanent secretary, Jonathan Slater, were responsible for the Department for Education’s failings in summer 2020.

### **Effectiveness**

The civil service, without its own source of political or democratic legitimacy, draws much of its authority from its effectiveness. Mistakes will always happen in government, but a worrying stream of administrative failures is damaging to the reputation of the civil service.

The Afghan exit again is telling. Of life and death importance was the planning for the evacuation of Kabul in summer 2021, and while the Foreign Affairs Committee records heroism and professionalism in parts of the final stages of the evacuation, the rest of its report is damning. Simply put, the fall of Kabul was foreseen, but the Foreign Office was underprepared.

Domestically, the ongoing Grenfell Tower inquiry has exposed severe gaps in the policy strength of the civil service around building regulations in particular, with one key official acknowledging that he was “the single point of failure in the department” that led to poor decision making with catastrophic consequences.<sup>14</sup> Another major inquiry, by Wendy Williams into the Windrush scandal, concluded that “officials could and should have done more to examine, consider and explain the impacts of decisions”.<sup>15</sup> Williams herself has since claimed that few of the lessons in her report have been learned.<sup>16</sup> And the disastrous Green Homes Grant, launched at speed during the pandemic and with little forethought or good policy advice informing its design, should not, according to the Public Accounts Committee, have been allowed to proceed. Even the business department, which administered the scheme, “recognised that policy implementation can be improved”.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly the contingency plans for the pandemic have been found wanting, as will soon be exposed forensically by the Covid inquiry.<sup>18</sup> The failures as well as the strengths of the civil service during the pandemic have been well documented, but problems

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with contingency response, planning and deployment of resource were some of the most severe. An independent review of the civil contingency arrangements in the UK concluded that “successive governments have allowed the pace of development [of the UK’s resilience arrangements] to drift over the past decade and quality to decay”.<sup>19</sup>

Go-to talking points about backlogs at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) are more complex than the story some ministers want to tell.<sup>20</sup> But these parts of the civil service must not become poster children for institutional ineffectiveness. Whatever the difficulties of Covid-induced remote working or ministerial interventions in industrial relations, ultimately the backlogs need to be cleared and it is senior civil servants who need to grip the problem.

## **The reform programme has slipped away**

All of this will be a cause of major concern for anyone with an interest in maintaining the health of the civil service. These problems are not superficial or temporary. Renewal of an institution is always important as the world changes, but right now reforms are particularly vital. The government’s own plans were set out in its *Declaration on Government Reform*, published in June 2021, which included good aspirations to refresh the skills mix of civil servants, use data in new and innovative ways, improve interchange between the public and private sectors and to look deeper with a review into the way accountability works in government.

Unfortunately, what could have been a promising programme of civil service reform appears to have become a superficial exercise: plucking arbitrary and headline-chasing headcount reductions out of the air rather than a serious attempt to tailor the size of the government workforce to suit the task;<sup>21</sup> pausing the Fast Stream graduate recruitment process that has been an important – if imperfect – route to building a more diverse and talented workforce;<sup>22</sup> identifying public bodies to shut down before working out whether their functions are needed;<sup>23</sup> and attempting to shame civil servants back into Whitehall offices – at once ignoring the nationwide trend to hybrid working and running counter to the government’s own plans for levelling up and civil service relocation.<sup>24</sup>

The headcount reduction target is particularly counter-productive. The civil service should be smaller and cost less, but focusing on headcount rather than budgets leads to perverse incentives – cheaper, talented people are sacrificed for more expensive and less effective performers. For as long as the cuts play out it also means that the civil service is crippled by its own processes of job reduction and reprioritisation.

Retrenchment makes it harder to improve interchange between the private and public sector as external hires get put off and serving officials are afraid to leave their jobs. And plans for civil service relocation turn from a positive opportunity to a threat and a source of anxiety about job moves. Necessary efficiency initiatives will fail because of too much focus on headline headcount figures and cuts falling without a proper workforce plan in place to deliver them. And all the time workforce morale leaks away.

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It adds up to a fundamental additional risk to the effectiveness of the civil service and a major erosion of those aspects of the civil service job offer where there is a comparative advantage over the private sector.

The result is that reform has become incoherent, in part following the regular ministerial reshuffle merry-go-round, but also because politicians and officials with power in the centre have been focused on the political chaos surrounding the prime minister. Add that to a policy agenda careering from one priority to another and it is clear that ministers are not interested in getting the best out of the civil service. The civil service needs a serious programme of reform for its own benefit, and the sensible plan the government already had has fallen by the wayside.

## **A weak civil service leads to weak government**

A civil service that is losing the trust of ministers, confidence in itself and its reputation for effectiveness has real consequences for how well government works in the UK. It means more crises and increasing distance between ministerial decision makers and the officials who transact those decisions. There is the danger of a self-reinforcing loss of capacity in the state.

Enthusiastic government reformers will leave – there are already concerns that the civil service is starting to lose the battle for talent in a competitive marketplace. There will be recruitment and retention problems for talented ‘policy generalists’, with plenty of options to move to different parts of the public and third sectors, as well as the private sector. But more than that it will be devastating for those with highly marketable skills including digital, commercial and project management experience. Those are exactly the people the civil service needs to attract into its ranks, but are the ones who will be put off by a civil service with a battered reputation for inflexible working and ineffective delivery, under fire from its own political leadership. The civil service’s loss will be the private sector’s gain.

Decision making inside government has also got worse. A weaker civil service means that ministers will receive less confident and authoritative advice, chaotic policy initiatives and decisions will be driven by short-term imperatives and there will be fewer incentives to develop long-term evidence-based strategies to implement government priorities. It is notable that the most ordered and coherent decisions the current government has made are on security policy and Ukraine. This is a field where, especially following the Chilcot report into the invasion of Iraq, advice comes in clearer and more authoritative forms, decisions are weighty and the security apparatus frames political choices with a firm grounding in reality. Things still go wrong – as in Kabul – but applying that model to domestic policy making would lead to better decisions. There is no sign at the moment that this will happen.

In particular a loss of faith in the civil service opens the door for a dilution of the civil service’s impartiality. This core element of the civil service relies on successive governments of different political colours maintaining confidence in officials’ loyalty

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and effectiveness. While the prime minister already gets an effective veto over the most senior appointments, we are already seeing arguments that ministers' personal accountability to parliament means that they should choose who gets which jobs, rather than rely on impartial merit-based appointments, and that there should be more personal or political appointees to the civil service.<sup>25</sup> That would be a bad mistake and lead to more short-term policy thinking and personal patronage with a less skilled workforce. The civil service has an ongoing responsibility to sustain its impartiality by demonstrating that the right people are in the right jobs and that appointment on merit is flourishing.

We may not be there yet, but diluted ethical standards and a culture where honesty and integrity cease to be core to the civil service's ethos would lead to a creeping corruption of public life. The values of the civil service are an important bulwark against financial corruption in contracts and cronyism in public appointments. A less confident civil service makes it harder to maintain clean government – as the National Audit Office has described during the award of Covid contracts.<sup>26</sup>

## **A stewardship approach to government**

To address the problems of the civil service requires a revived sense of purpose for the institution, framed around maintaining the capability of the state. That includes setting a clear objective for the civil service, as well as resolving the ambiguities in responsibilities between ministers and civil servants, and underpinning that more firmly in statute. It also means making the case for the civil service publicly and more assertively – by ministers and civil servants.

A new prime minister has a big opportunity here. Setting out a positive vision for the future of the civil service and refraining from attacks on the institution (that exists to carry out ministers' business) will revive confidence and lead to more mutual respect. This is perfectly compatible with pursuing radical policies, including reform of the civil service itself.

But it also falls to the top of the civil service to set out plans for further reform. This means strong leadership and the confidence to assert authority over how the civil service is run, while clamping down on damaging leaks and improper behaviour. Civil servants have an essential role to play in the stewardship of government, and need to play it more effectively.

These reforms will not happen through exhortation or – even – by writing papers. What creates the incentives that shape behaviour inside government and the civil service need to change, with reforms that bite. Here is what should happen.



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## Address the ambiguities in civil service responsibilities and properly reorganise the centre of government

First, the purpose and objective of the civil service needs to be restated. A statutory objective to implement government programmes and to respond to events as directed by ministers should sit alongside a civil service responsibility to maintain the capability of the government. That will also better define the role and spheres of ministerial and civil service responsibility. We set this out in detail in our report in March 2022.<sup>27</sup>

It is a core principle of good organisation that responsibilities and accountabilities should be clear. That is not currently the case: ministers are held accountable for administrative decisions, but who was responsible for making those decisions is hazy. At the same time the civil service itself lacks a clear purpose and identity, which damages its confidence and staff morale. When running smoothly the UK system fosters a sense of close teamwork. But in too many areas of government the cracks are now too wide. Ministers are frustrated and the civil service is battered and bruised.

Clearly defining what civil servants are responsible for, and then holding them to account for it, is vital. This should be for maintaining the capability of the state – a stewardship role, under the direction of ministers but with institutional responsibilities. That means in particular maintaining standards of

- policy making and the quality of advice to ministers, including advice on the constitutional and administrative responsibilities of the government
- project management
- government communications, including the propriety of government messaging
- finance and procurement
- the use and management of data and digital services
- standards of legal advice
- risk management and crisis response
- human resources and the retention and recruitment on merit of people qualified to carry out these functions.

This is far from the complete solution to resolve problems with civil service and ministerial accountability, but it would create a sounder basis for identifying the proper role and functions of the civil service. The *Declaration on Government Reform* promised a review of accountabilities between ministers and civil servants as one of its actions: the government should seriously consider the model we propose. The timing was opportune even before Johnson's fall from office – the pandemic made plain the need for more resilience in the civil service and the ability to better hold its head and permanent secretaries explicitly to account for risk management and the state of contingency planning, as well as the quality of policy advice.

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This would be an evolution of the civil service's current ambiguous role and a step towards clearer accountability. There is precedent for this as described by Professor Rodney Scott of the New Zealand civil service. He sets out a form of state stewardship developed there after an environmental accident exposed the deficiencies of the government's contingency planning:

**"Ministers have said 'that's not a priority for me at the moment', and the chief executive [permanent secretary] said 'yes I understand that but I need to maintain a base level of knowledge in all the areas that I'm responsible for, in case either a future government or an event means that you do become interested in it'."**<sup>28</sup>

Permanent secretaries in the UK might currently try to do this, and look to persuade their ministers about the importance of maintaining state capability, but they are not responsible for it in the same way as their counterparts in New Zealand. The responsibility rests with ministers, whose incentives are to take short-term decisions with immediate pay-offs. That needs to change – alongside strengthened means of holding civil servants to account by ministers and to parliament for the outcomes they deliver.

The civil service should also play its part in proper reform of the centre of government, following through on existing commitments to a 'smarter centre' – going well beyond Johnson's repeated personnel clear-outs and half-hearted efforts to create an Office of the Prime Minister. The Cabinet Office and No.10 need proper reform to slim down and focus on what really matters: setting a clear direction, holding departments to account and improving the way government works.<sup>29</sup>

Reforms so far have been designed to fit the current prime minister and mitigate his anarchic approach. To some extent this is always the case with reorganisations in No.10, albeit usually with less mitigation needed, but structural change should improve the government not just the incumbent – that is, to actually make the centre of government work better.

Changes so far have not, for instance, addressed the problem of 'too many chiefs' that Sue Gray and others have pointed out. If anything there is now more potential for confusion, with a principal private secretary, permanent secretary, cabinet secretary, a chief of staff (also the most senior minister in the Cabinet Office), a chief operating officer (also the permanent secretary of the Cabinet Office), a highly influential political adviser in David Canzini and multiple directors general in Cabinet Office secretariats and the national security apparatus. They are grouped into a loose and surely dysfunctional structure that comprises two boards, one focused on the prime minister's support and the other on running the civil service.<sup>30</sup> This will not work. The former will be little more than a talking shop, and there are now more opportunities for bun fights between senior officials than before.

Johnson's government has run its course. But for his successor there are several important improvements to be made. Reducing the number of senior voices, and clarifying lines of authority in No.10 and the Cabinet Office is the first. Two direct and

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simple chains of command are needed: one from the prime minister to his political chief of staff and then to the special advisers across No.10; the other from the cabinet secretary to the No.10 permanent secretary, to Johnson's principal private secretary and then the remainder of the Downing Street staff. This is a well-tested and simple model to align the political and civil service functions of No.10.

The civil service-focused board is more likely to take root, and could prove to be a nascent executive team for an 'office of government services' or similar with a clear remit to set service standards for the civil service and to hold departments to account for the effectiveness of their reforms. Formalising the arrangement and giving the existing chief operating officer, Alex Chisholm, a personal role in communicating with the mass of the civil service would also help. The Treasury also needs to buy in to the board and be represented in its decisions so that it can deploy its authority in how the civil service is run.

### **Make the case for the civil service more assertively and reinforce the civil service code and its core values**

As Simon Case himself has argued, the civil service needs reform but has huge existing strengths that are easily overlooked.<sup>31</sup> Leaders in government should be doing more to make the case for the UK's civil service – its impartiality in particular. An impartial civil service brings both expertise and credibility into government, supporting ministers who will only rarely be deeply knowledgeable about their jobs. The civil service at its best helps create the conditions for longer-term stewardship of the state while being rightly constrained by ministers who ensure that they maintain political control of the technocracy. The best of the civil service brings together a diverse set of views, with self-critical reflection and modern recruitment practices to get more women, and people from minority ethnic groups, with disabilities and from lower socio-economic backgrounds into government service. It guards against the soft corruptions of loyalty and patronage and the hard corruption of financial impropriety and it already makes way for effective outside leaders like Kate Bingham to come in and make things happen on behalf of the public.

A public campaign means permanent secretaries as civil service leaders using parliamentary select committee hearings to set out their stall. More public speeches and on-the-record quotes would help too. To make the case for the civil service, senior officials need communications support dedicated to – subtly, and of course with impartiality – presenting how the civil service is changing and what it is doing to support ministers, public services and citizens. A 2020 campaign showing that the civil service is "here for you" was a start but has fizzled out.<sup>32</sup>

Alongside this, Case must continue forcefully to remind civil servants about the privilege of public service and the high ethical standards that go along with it. That includes the impermissibility of leaking, with tough sanctions for offenders. Then for that to be credible it must be accompanied by a newly strengthened whistle-blowing process with more separation from normal line management chains inside departments.

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Alongside the first civil service commissioner, who is the guardian of the civil service code, it must also continue to be part of the role of the head of the civil service to support officials who are pressured to bend or break their professional obligations. Anyone doing Case's job needs privately to support individual civil servants who do the right thing, and publicly champion the values of the code.

More public communication and honesty about the state of the civil service from its leadership should also encompass a realistic assessment about where the institution has drifted from the broad ethos of the country and communities it serves. Rather than hiding from the debate, civil servants should be able to rebut inaccurate assertions about their organisation but also – crucially – concede fair points and work openly to address them. To be trusted in a form of stewardship role the civil service needs to show how it is addressing complaints and that it is a legitimate holder of such a responsibility.

### **Set out a vision for the future of the civil service with a clear plan for improvement**

As noted above much of the energy around government and civil service reform has now been lost. So while all the Conservative leadership contenders must show that they care about the effectiveness and efficiency of the institution, civil service leaders should also find their voice and be honest about some of the problems that will follow from arbitrary headcount targets and crude tactics to shame workers back into the office full-time. It would be far less uncomfortable for permanent secretaries to be up front with their departmental select committees and the Public Accounts Committee about the potential consequences of government policies regarding the management of the civil service than it would be tortuously to defend the actual consequences when they materialise. The core civil service value of honesty should not be restricted to the privacy of a Whitehall meeting room.

Such honesty about the management consequences of civil service reform initiatives would, in the short term, sometimes be difficult for ministers and civil servants to navigate. But a new openness would over time encourage a return to the spirit of – albeit strained – co-operation that led to the publication of the *Declaration on Government Reform* in summer 2021.

It is this plan, including its review of accountabilities in government, that ministers, their permanent secretaries and the head of the civil service should be focused on implementing. A vision for the future civil service is what is needed, not a headcount diktat from the Cabinet Office, and the arrival of a new government is exactly the right time to reaffirm what that vision should be.

It is also the right time for the cabinet secretary to ask permanent secretaries to develop their own efficiency and capability plans. These can be evaluated by the Treasury and the Cabinet Office reform teams. Those plans should be informed by a new round of 'capability reviews'.

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Between 2005 and 2010 the civil service ran a series of reviews into departments to get an honest picture of their strengths and weaknesses and to hold permanent secretaries to account for the work and effectiveness of their departments. These, while not without flaws, were helpful in providing a detailed assessment of individual departments and the civil service as a whole.<sup>33</sup> It is time for Simon Case to revive a similar process, building on the outcome delivery plans developed over the last couple of years to set out how departments are working towards the delivery of their priorities. This should include a rigorous analysis of recent failures – especially of contingency response and rapid redeployment during crises like Covid and the Kabul evacuation.

Case has taken steps to improve the performance management of departments, thanks to the declaration, but going further to present a more open and externally assured process of review would help rebuild confidence in the civil service's capability to work at what it does best.

It is time to establish a stronger notion of stewardship for the civil service. Acting under democratic control but with a statutory responsibility for the long-term health of the state is entirely consistent with a thriving and plural democracy. A clearer purpose will lead to a more confident civil service, better able to advise on and implement government policy. And civil servants confident in their duties will perform more effectively as individuals and as part of a team.

The Johnson administration exposed some of the problems with the civil service, with partygate as its nadir. The organisation must now learn, and be seen to learn, from it. If the civil service's response to an exceptionally testing period is to enhance its capability to act as stewards of the state that will benefit future governments whatever their political colour, and ultimately the citizens they represent.

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**July 2022**

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