

Dominic Cummings's thinking on the civil service is a potent challenge to the Whitehall system – and is likely to be opposed

Patrick Diamond discusses Dominic Cummings's stated intent of imposing disruptive reforms on the civil service, and explains why his rhetoric may prove to be particularly counterproductive in a Conservative government.



Picture: [Howard Lake](#) / (CC BY-SA 2.0) licence

If President Trump governs by tweet, key players in the newly elected Johnson Administration are practicing statecraft via the blogosphere. As Chief Adviser in 10 Downing Street, Dominic Cummings's stated intent of imposing disruptive reforms on the civil service is being taken seriously in the corridors of power. The Whitehall machinery has already been reshaped by successive Conservative administrations. In the Cameron government after 2010, Francis Maude devised initiatives to weaken the civil service monopoly over policy advice, while exposing more of the public sector to outsourcing and competition. Maude, along with Michael Gove (who once employed Cummings), was one of several ministers to explicitly attack civil service incompetence. They believed that officials were obstacles to fundamental reform of the British state. Following several years of post-Brexit referendum hiatus, the war on Whitehall is being resumed.

At the core of Cummings's plan is the ambition to challenge fundamentally the 'governing marriage' between civil servants and ministers where both sides worked together harmoniously to delineate effective public policy. What made the marriage so compelling was that civil servants, by virtue of their carefully protected independence and neutrality, were willing to 'speak truth to power'. Officials were prepared to tell ministers when they believed a course of action was wrong, or that a favoured policy was misguided. According to Lord Butler, there was, 'a feeling of solidarity and companionship between ministers and civil servants'.

By and large, civil servants accepted that they must help the elected government of the day to achieve its chosen objectives, as stipulated in the manifesto. Of course, there is a danger of viewing the past through rose-tinted spectacles. Relationships between officials and their political masters did break down, as Richard Crossman's diaries from the Wilson governments in the 1960s indicate. Yet by and large, the Whitehall model persisted surviving changes of government over the last forty years. Britain is regarded as having one of the most efficient and stable government bureaucracies in the world.

Cummings's rhetoric thus signals a potentially seismic shift. His aim is to install a 'them and us' model where officials merely carry out the wishes of ministers, focusing on the delivery and implementation of policy. The civil service is deemed to be a failing institution that reinforces a sterile and insipid liberal ideology in British politics and policy-making. The policy-making process will be driven by ministers in conjunction with handpicked political advisers and externally recruited experts who are competent in data analytics, quantitative economics, and the physical sciences, particularly mathematics. Officials' substantive function will be to say 'yes, Minister'. Cummings's thinking is a potent challenge to the traditional Whitehall system. Two points are striking, however. Firstly, little of what he is proposing is actually very new. Secondly, it will be extremely difficult to make it happen, regardless of the power and patronage Cummings presently enjoys at the heart of Downing Street.

On the first point, governments have long expressed their dissatisfaction with the Whitehall machine. The critique of the civil service establishment was set out most eloquently in the 1968 Fulton report commissioned by Harold Wilson's administration. Officials were 'generalists' trained in arts and humanities subjects at Britain's ancient universities. They lacked specialist knowledge and technical expertise. Civil servants were poor managers. They presided over a culture of mediocrity which perpetuated Britain's relative economic decline. Fulton's recommendations included bringing more trained scientists into Whitehall, while training mandarins in management effectiveness. Sound familiar? The attacks on the civil service then continued into the 1980s and 1990s. Margaret Thatcher threatened to 'deprivilege Whitehall' while her ideological soulmate, Ronald Reagan, spoke of 'draining the swamp' in Washington. Under Blair's New Labour governments, more political advisers were brought onto departments, while there was an air of mistrust towards permanent officials. Yet for all that, the Whitehall model survived.

This historical perspective reinforces the point that even for an adviser as prominent as Cummings, enacting reform will be arduous to say the least. The Cummings's plan is being orchestrated from the centre in Number 10. It will be much harder to effect change in departments where most policy-making and delivery in central government takes place. Departments in the British system of government are powerful, autonomous entities, territories presided over by secretaries of state who are accountable to Parliament for everything that takes place in their name. Departments are expert in resisting the reach of the centre, as even powerful prime ministers from Margaret Thatcher to Tony Blair will testify. Cummings may simply find that his ideas are ignored or side-lined, particularly if the new Prime Minister is distracted by more pressing issues.

It is also the case that opposition to fundamental change may come from ministers themselves, as much as the civil service. Away from the highly politicised centre in Number 10, ministers generally forge close bonds with their officials, as countless academic studies have demonstrated including my recent book, *The End of Whitehall?*. Civil servants fulfil all sorts of functions: they are skilled policy advisers, problem-solvers, Machiavellian fixers, speech writers, as well as loyal aides. In a highly febrile political environment, these are the skills that ministers generally value and appreciate, more important day-to-day even than technical expertise.

Cummings's rhetoric about disruptive change may prove to be particularly counterproductive in a Conservative government. Just as there are radical reformers who are enthused by the project of remaking the UK state, there are institutional conservatives who believe in the importance of tradition and the preservation of the existing institutions. Ministers in the latter category may react against proposed changes that weaken the Northcote-Trevelyan principles of merit-based promotion and political impartiality. Within 24 hours of Cummings's blog being published, a Cabinet minister told *The Times*: 'One of the big problems with [Cummings's] pull the pin out of the grenade, drop it in the bunker, and see what happens approach is that it is so destabilising...we take several steps backwards before we've even started'.

Another factor with which Cummings must wrestle is the direct opposition of civil servants themselves. Officials who perceive themselves to be under attack are unlikely to take it lying down. Already a phalanx of former permanent secretaries have been lining up to denounce him in national newspapers. And as Dennis Grube has shown in his recent book, *Megaphone Bureaucracy*, civil servants are becoming more adept at projecting their views in the public domain. Recent surveys indicate that despite Brexit, the civil service in Britain is comparatively trusted by citizens. Cummings may have little respect for the guile of officials, but the Whitehall machine could yet prove a formidable opponent.

This article gives the views of the author, not the position of Democratic Audit. It was first published on [LSE's British Politics and Policy blog](#).

About the author



Patrick Diamond is Associate Professor of Public Policy at Queen Mary, University of London, and a former special adviser in 10 Downing Street. He is the author of [The End of Whitehall?](#) published by Palgrave MacMillan.

Similar Posts

- [Reforming Whitehall: bluff, bluster, brilliance and brains](#)
- [Governing as a permanent form of campaigning: why the civil service is in mortal danger](#)
- [Audit 2017: How representative and effective are the UK civil service and the wider public services management system?](#)
- [The requirement for civil servants to “promote” government policy has inevitably led to the perception of partisanship](#)
- [Civil servants are taking on an increasingly public role, allowing for perceptions of partisanship to emerge](#)