

Governing as a permanent form of campaigning: why the civil service is in mortal danger

Patrick Diamond writes that the process of governing is being transformed into a highly politicised form of campaigning, with polling and short-term politics being more important to Ministers than long-term policy. This puts the capacity of the state to steer a sensible course through the perilous post-Brexit landscape in serious doubt.



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Dominic Cummings' arrival as chief strategist in Downing Street has led to a flurry of speculation about the seemingly imminent demise of the British civil service. The newly appointed Number Ten supremo has been a [vehement and long standing critic](#) of Whitehall. He believes civil servants are incompetent generalists who are incapable of thinking imaginatively about policy, and hopeless at executing ministerial initiatives. Departments are littered with examples of failed implementation. For Cummings, the very idea of a permanent civil service is '[one for the history books](#)'. He promises a '[reign of terror](#)' that enforces the Prime Minister's will across Whitehall, and drains the swamp of bureaucratic largesse.

Yet the precarious position in which the civil service now finds itself certainly precedes the arrival of Cummings. As Whitehall watchers have observed for two decades, the machinery of government is being steadily but fundamentally transformed by what the late Peter Aucoin termed the 'new political governance': a doctrine that regards the process of governing as a permanent and highly politicised form of campaigning, where ministers seek on a daily basis to renew their contract with voters. Heightened media scrutiny and a more consumer-orientated political culture have raised the pressures on governments. Ministers increasingly seek experts in polling and short-term politics, rather than long-term policy. We have travelled a long way from the time when the Labour Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, was able to boast that the British civil service, 'was the envy of all the world'.

This new permanent campaign style, encouraged by the crisis over Brexit and the ensuing clash between representative and direct democracy, means the structure of the civil service in Britain is being recast by three major shifts. The first is the growth of politically appointed advisers. All governments since the 1990s have sought to pack Whitehall with loyal apparatchiks. Their numbers have now reached over 90. Special advisers adept at handling an often hostile media are a particularly valuable commodity, but government has been contaminated by the rise of the spin machine and permanent campaign. Political aides help to enforce the political will of ministers, overcoming the bureaucratic inertia allegedly imposed by the Whitehall machine. Advisers are free to attack the monopoly over policy-making once coveted by the civil service, to the detriment of due process.

The second shift is the personalisation of civil service appointments with ministers increasingly hand-picking their favourite officials for the top jobs. Secretaries of state use back-channels to veto the appointment of civil servants to key posts who they believe are not 'one of us'. Mandarins who seek promotion are encouraged to fulfil the immediate wishes of their political masters. The higher turnover of permanent secretaries leads to instability in Whitehall departments. The independence of the civil service has been repeatedly undermined.

The third shift is the emergence of a bureaucracy that is becoming 'promiscuously partisan', unwilling to speak truth to power. Civil servants are more likely than ever to be dragged into defending government policy. For an official to dissent from the expressed views of their minister is to commit career suicide. Yet the ability of officials to say no is a vital ingredient in the 'governing marriage' between ministers and civil servants.

The consequence of the politicisation of the government machine for the quality of statecraft in Britain have been deleterious. British government is more exposed than ever to 'blunders'. For the last 30 years, delivery failures in the British state have ranged from the politically catastrophic poll tax to the negotiation of a series of botched government contracts that cost the British taxpayer billions. The late Anthony King observed that policy-making and implementation now resemble, 'a nineteenth century cavalry charge'. With a no deal Brexit beckoning on 31 October, policy failures may become even more catastrophic.

As well as politicising Whitehall, the ethos of governing by permanent campaign reinforces endemic short-termism. It is easier to toss difficult issues from the funding of social care to prison overcrowding into the 'too difficult' box. Governments focused on tomorrow's headlines fail to think imaginatively about how policy can address the most important issues in public life from improving the long-term rate of economic growth in an era of technological disruption, to strengthening life satisfaction and well-being across a socially and culturally polarised population.

As a consequence of perceived incompetence, trust in public institutions is eroding. The British system of government is passing through a critical juncture. A fundamental debate is required about the future of British governing institutions. Legitimate questions abound. How can the actions of political advisers be better scrutinised? Should the appointment of special advisers be regulated independently? How can civil servants be more effectively protected from political interference? What role should ministers play in appointing high-ranking officials?

The traditional model of British government where ministers and officials worked together closely to fashion effective policies has morphed into a 'them and us' model, where politicians and civil servants are at odds, believed to have conflicting interests. In an atmosphere of growing turbulence at the heart of Whitehall, the capacity of the British state to steer a sensible course through the perilous post-Brexit landscape is increasingly in doubt.

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

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