

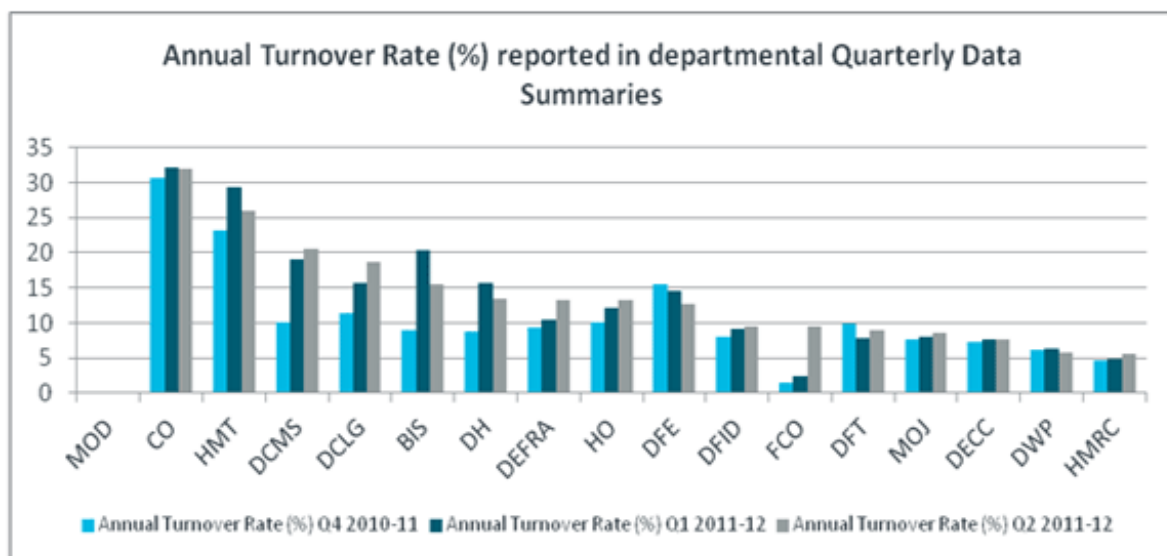
Civil servants are leaving the public sector in droves, highlighting the increasingly troublesome relationship between the executive and the ‘machinery of government’

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*The increasing turnover in the public sector presents a number of issues for effective government. Despite this, the chasm between Whitehall and the bureaucracy has continued to grow. **Benedict Dellot** argues that it has arguably never been more important for these two sides to be on the same page and to work together in tandem.*



A number of recent news stories suggest the civil service may be facing something of a brewing crisis. Both senior and junior civil servants are [reported](#) to be leaving the public sector in droves for new roles in the corporate world. [Recently released figures](#) show that a third of the country's most senior civil servants have left since the last general election. Indeed, it has been [said](#) that half of the current departmental permanent secretaries were not in post before the coalition came to power. The [Institute of Government's analysis](#) pictured in the graph below illustrates the large change in turnover across most government departments since the coalition came to power, albeit with a slight dip in 2011-12.



The concern is that a more transient workforce inevitably diminishes the ability of Whitehall to operate effectively and achieve objectives in the necessary timeframe. This was most recently highlighted in the [Treasury's internal inquiry report](#) into the department's handling of the financial crisis of 2008-09. Among other things, the report notes that the Treasury's ability to respond to the crash was severely hampered by its inability to retain staff. With people coming and going, their pool of knowledge and expertise simply never has the opportunity to accumulate.

One explanation for the high level of turnover is that once a new party takes the reins of power it's quite natural for certain staff to leave, particularly those whose work is wedded to policies now being phased out. Another driver is the growing number of lucrative opportunities that await workers in the

private sphere. Recent figures have highlighted that public sector workers earn 8 per cent more than their counterparts in the private sector, but many see this as flawed analysis. In the case of highly demanding jobs like those in the civil service, the private sector alternatives are often in well-to-do consultancy firms which can certainly afford to pay above the public sector rate.

While these explanations are useful, I'm not sure they fully account for the numbers taking flight from Whitehall, particularly junior civil servants. It could be argued that the real problem facing Whitehall stems not from the discreet issues of pay differentials or changes in government but rather from a broader problem concerning the troublesome relationship between the executive and the 'machinery of government'.

When Tony Blair complained about the "scars on my back" that he bore while driving through public service reforms, he was directly referring to the difficulty of mobilising what he saw as a clunky, insular and risk averse arm of the state. Regardless of whether or not this is an accurate portrayal of Whitehall, it is an opinion which still holds true among policy makers. Only last year, [David Cameron himself described](#) civil servants as the "enemies of enterprise" who "concoct those ridiculous rules and regulations that make life impossible".

Conversely, we are witnessing civil servants being far more vocal in their criticisms of the cabinet and wider government. It wasn't long ago that Jonathan Baume, general secretary of the First Division Association (an organisation representing some 19,000 top civil servants) [called for the new coalition government](#) to renew trust in parliament and display more "moral integrity" than their predecessors. Likewise, many junior members of staff lack morale and appear disillusioned by the direction set by ministers. A [survey conducted last year among Department of Health](#) civil servants indicated that only 14 per cent of respondents had a positive response to the statement, 'when changes are made in my department they are usually for the better'.

In what other organisation would the CEO castigate their employees so openly, and vice versa? There have always been rumblings of dissatisfaction between governments and Whitehall but it appears that the chasm separating the two has grown so deep and the differences between them so marked that it is now causing the machinery of the state to slow down. And yet given the changes currently underway in our welfare system and public service delivery programme it has arguably never been more important for these two sides to be on the same page and to work together in tandem. Perhaps for too long we have taken it for granted that once a policy is decided upon and signed off by the head of state then everything is a done deal. But as we are finding out it is only the start of a long, messy and arduous journey.

This post was originally [published](#) on RSA blogs

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About the author

Benedict Dello is a Researcher at the Royal Society of Arts and works on both the Citizen Power and Enterprise programmes. Prior to this, he was a Researcher to Matthew Taylor, CEO.

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