

The Public Administration Select Committee continues to push for greater leadership on reforms and for more strategic thought at the heart of government.

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*One of the main accusations that have been levelled at the current government, despite its ambitious reform agenda, is that it does not 'do' strategy. Ahead of a [lecture](#) at the LSE tonight, the Chairman of the Public Administration Select Committee, **Bernard Jenkin MP**, looks at the recent work of the committee that aims to redress this criticism through many enquiries, including reducing the number of ministers, using IT in government much more intelligently and efficiently, reforming the civil service, and implementing the Big Society agenda.*



The Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) was established in 1997. It combined the roles of two previous select committees, a committee on the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman and a committee on Public Service. PASC has a broad, cross-departmental remit, examining the quality and standards of administration within the Civil Service and scrutinising the reports of the Ombudsman.

The ambitious and often controversial reform agenda of the Coalition Government has given PASC plenty to scrutinise over the last 18 months. Our first inquiry, carried out at the time of the Strategic Defence and Security Review, was into the question of who in Government actually does national strategy for the UK. The answer we received, alarmingly, was essentially 'no one'. We found that Whitehall had fallen out of the habit of strategic thinking and that departments often worked at cross-purposes. We called for the remit of the new National Security Council to be broadened to encompass national strategy and for greater emphasis to be placed on strategic studies and training both within Whitehall and in academia.

Several of our inquiries revolved around the theme of 'smaller government'. The Coalition's '[bonfire of the quangos](#)' was an early topic for PASC. We found that the tests used to evaluate public bodies and whether they should be abolished were "hopelessly unclear" and the process was "rushed and poorly handled". In another inquiry into the work of ministers, we argued that as more power was devolved downwards to the local level the Government should appoint fewer. If it does not, then the Government's localism agenda can only be regarded as a failure. We also argued that there must be a reduction in ministers to at least match the planned reduction of MPs, to stop the 'payroll vote' from strengthening the Executive at the expense of Parliament – a point which the Government now seems to have accepted.

In a different inquiry, we examined the [Government's use of IT](#), finding that successive governments' over-reliance on large contractors for IT needs combined with a lack of in-house skills is a "recipe for rip-offs". This is an area where the Government has set out an ambitious programme for reform, which we welcome.

One of our biggest inquiries was into the [Big Society](#) agenda, which we found to be hampered by the lack of a clear implementation plan, leading to public confusion about the policy agenda, eighteen months into this administration. The project by its very nature requires substantial change in Whitehall and to the nature of government, one example of which would be a Big Society Minister.

Our inquiry into reform of the civil service found the same problem: the lack of a comprehensive plan

for cross-departmental reform. Without this, we warned that the Government's wider ambitions for public service reform, localism, decentralisation and the Big Society will fail. There is a culture in the Civil Service which makes change very difficult. Civil Service reform is something Ministers talk about, but which most civil servants feel does not affect them. They keep their heads down until the latest reform has passed over, and then carry on as before. With the challenges of cuts and downsizing on top of the reforms, that is simply not an option this time. The Government must address this if it is to succeed where previous governments have failed.

Our most recent inquiry, on the [splitting of the role](#) of Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service, warned that this change "could lead to weaker leadership and disperse power at a critical time of change in government". All four former surviving Cabinet Secretaries expressed deep reservations about splitting the role of the Cabinet Secretary. The risk is that the Cabinet Secretary will be "top dog", and the Head of the Civil service will be relegated to a subservient role, rendering them ineffective.

We are currently carrying out a new inquiry into strategic thinking in Whitehall, building on our previous work in our national strategy inquiry, as well as examining business appointment rules and the so-called 'revolving door' between business and Whitehall. We also intend to look at the Business Plan of the Cabinet Office, the department responsible for implementing the Government's Whitehall reforms and overseeing the Big Society agenda.

Our work is varied, but the one theme that has emerged from our inquiries so far is the need for clear programmes for change and strong leadership from the centre if reforms are to be successful, which requires sustained strategic thought at the heart of government.

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