

## Civil servants advising opposition parties: can we afford not to do this?

**James Lloyd** explains why it should be a no-brainer for civil servants to advise political parties in opposition if it helps to avoid potential policy disasters and the future waste of public money.



A recent story in The Times reported that senior civil servants want closer links with Labour before the next general election, including helping with the party's manifesto. Although different options are available, one or two-year secondments seem the most likely model.

The purpose is simple: to avoid bad policy choices that subsequently cause policy disasters and U-turns when opposition parties get into government. This is not about the current Labour opposition: the inspiration for the initiative has come to mandarins by reflecting on the experiences of the Coalition government. Predictably, some politicians have poured cold water on the idea. However, with the public finances set to remain dire for years to come, the question should be: can society afford not to have civil servants helping opposition parties with their manifestos and policy positions?

Let's be clear: bad policy analysis by opposition parties costs real money when they come into power, whether in the form of mopping up after policy disasters have occurred, or wasted staff salaries as civil servants spend years trying to show Ministers why their ideas are unworkable. There's also an opportunity cost: we all need governments to govern when in power, not spend their first couple of years subjecting their ideas to proper scrutiny for the first time, and then trying to work out what the right answer is.

So, there is a trade-off here: a small risk of politicisation of a small number of civil servants on secondment, versus the many millions of pounds that could be saved by enabling opposition ministers access to high quality policy analysis and advice.

This should be a no-brainer. And the apparent risk of politicising civil servants should not be overstated: no other group in society has more exposure to the limitations of political parties and political masters. Operating as a senior civil servant requires a kind of infinite patience that is more than enough to drive out febrile partisan attachment.

But there's also a broader issue here: the severe lack of proper policy analysis capability available across all aspects of how policy development occurs, and the effect it has on public policy in the UK. This applies both in Whitehall, but also outside it.

Consider the primary alternative source of policy analysis for opposition parties: think-tanks. Many supposedly 'independent' think-tanks are nakedly politically aligned. They are frequently used as launchpads for political careers, with researchers inclined to bend to the values, pre-conceptions and world-views of senior politicians they eventually hope to work for when they get into government. Many Westminster think-tanks also obtain funding by claiming influence on ministers – influence which would surely be undermined if it meant going through a shadow ministers proposals and saying: "sorry, this will never work".

In fact, the only flaw with the idea that civil servants should work with opposition parties is that it makes an assumption that mandarins know is often wrong: that when good policy advice is provided, it will be listened to.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog,*

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