

Yet another feeble paper on civil service reform that will achieve little for local government

George Jones and John Stewart *dismiss the Government's new paper outlining their plan for civil service reform as another inadequate attempt. Civil-service reform should draw heavily upon the experience of local government.*

Here we go again. The Government's paper, [The Civil Service Reform Plan](#), is the latest in a long series of such documents that have been published since the Fulton Report of 1968. The same themes are re-cooked, and radical change never occurs, stymied by ministerial lack-of-interest and civil-service resistance. From the perspective of local government, little has changed as a result of all those papers, or is likely to now, since they fail to grapple with the main problems.

The main problems of the civil service, as recognised by many councillors and officers, are: the centralist culture undermining any rhetorical commitment to localism; excessive departmentalism with its feeble corporate approach; over-prescription and control; and failure to understand the problems faced at local level where national policies are implemented. Yet none of these issues is tackled in the paper, so local government can expect little change from its publication.

The centralist culture that permeates both ministers and civil servants, and the national media, fails to recognise the issues faced at the local level not merely by local authorities, but also by many other public institutions that make up our system of local governance and are called upon to implement legislation.

There is a failure to analyse the actual tasks facing the civil service, in particular the variety of relationships involved in implementation. The assumption is that the civil service governs directly instead of acting through other organisations with their own responsibilities. There is no adequate recognition in the paper that legislation, policy and decisions by central government are implemented less by the civil service and more by local authorities, schools, hospitals, the police, probation services and prisons, and many other organisations.

The key issues which one would have expected the paper to tackle are the requirements of indirect government where neither ministers nor the civil service act directly. The paper stresses the need for the civil service to be skilled in implementation without even referring to the fact that much actual implementation takes place beyond the direct control of the civil service. Failure to recognise this reality means that civil servants behave as if they are in direct control, hence the detailed prescription and guidance, often ineffective in achieving their assumed purpose, which would hardly be justified even in direct government.

The paper lacks an adequate approach to meeting the requirements of indirect government. Its perspective is that implementation is a stage in direct government under the direct control of departments. There is no discussion in the paper of this crucial issue, which must be of concern for local government and the other organisations at the local level.

The failure to clarify the nature of the work of the civil service in its relationship to local government and to the organisational complexity of the local public sector leads to another weakness in the paper. Since the civil service is often not directly responsible for implementation, there is the need for the civil service in developing legislation to understand the conditions where policy has to be implemented, which is often very different from the world seen from the offices of government departments at the national level. Yet there is no recognition in the paper of the relative ignorance in Whitehall departments of the need to learn from those like local authorities that operate at the interface between government and public.

Civil-service reform should therefore draw heavily upon the experience of local government. Not only

because local government is more aware of local circumstances that have an impact on implementation, but also because local government has proved much more successful in management in the public domain than has the civil service. It has made more progress than central government in overcoming the excesses of departmentalism by adopting a corporate approach; in operating partnerships and collaborations, with shared officers and services; in developing public participation; and in transforming public management while enabling democratic values. It is no accident that local government has been much more effective in handling the conditions of austerity than have central-government departments.

Of course, all is not well in the workings of local government, but there is recognition of its need to learn and experiment. This attitude is absent from central government except where it thinks it can learn from the private sector. Where mistakes are made it has often been because so-called lessons from the private sector have been introduced without testing them against the distinctive requirements of the public domain. The civil service should turn to local government rather than to big business for lessons about delivering public services.

This Government paper, as well as previous papers, has stressed the need for the civil service to learn from the private sector. It is naive to believe that lessons from the private sector can be applied to the civil service, which is why so many previous attempts at civil-service reform have come to nothing. Proposals that have emerged from the involvement of the private sector have not fitted the reality of the public domain.

There are critical differences between the public domain and the private sector that are not weaknesses in that domain but rather the expression of its distinctive purposes and the conditions that shape effective public action. In the public domain action should be the expression of democratic will expressed by elected representatives, requiring political control, public accountability and open government.

The main lesson that should be learnt is that when the private sector operates in the public domain it should accept the requirements of that domain. There should be “publicisation” from the private sector rather than just “privatisation”. We have heard it said “It would be easy to manage in the public sector if it were not for the political process”. This observation reflects a failure to understand the purposes and conditions of public action. It is the equivalent of saying “It would be easy to manage in the private sector if it were not for the need to make a profit.” The political process of balancing needs, interests and resources, subject to the requirements of democracy, public accountability and politician/officer relationships are fundamentally and necessarily different from the experience of the private sector.

Our conclusion is the paper is flawed and will achieve little for local government and for the many other governmental organisations operating locally. Our message is “think again” and this time involve local government in your thinking, because there is much to learn as certainly Sir Bob Kerslake should realise after his previous distinguished career in local government. He must know that local government has much to teach the civil service.

But even the above approach may not be enough if the fiscal crisis and austerity continue. More radical and drastic changes may then be required. The new order could well be based on a rejection of failed centralism and an embracing of real localism, that is, decentralisation to local government. There are four main aspects to that transformation.

(i) The accompanying paper to the main paper called *The Context for Civil Service Reform* shows that out of the total civil service of 435,000 only 16 per cent are in London and only 9 per cent work in central London postcodes. The overwhelming majority of civil servants are outside London, and their main work, with over 70 per cent of staff, is performing operational tasks of policy and service delivery. The civil service is already localised in its physical location, and most of them should come under local-government control.

(ii) Corporate management, and performance and project management in Whitehall are weak. These responsibilities are unmanageable at the centre, and are better done by local government.

(iii) The Total Place approach, fusing budget streams, fizzled out in the face of Whitehall obstruction into four pilots focussed on problem families. Local government is better at joining up public services

than is central government, and has the potential to join up most of them in a locality.

(iv) Radical reform to local-government finance is needed, not the minor confusing reforms to business rates, but reducing local-authority dependence on central grant by decentralised local taxation that bears on local voters. The Treasury should concentrate on overall fiscal and economic management, and on international financial matters, and not be distracted by local government self-funded matters. The Treasury should cease being such a monopolist of taxation. It might then manage better the economy of the UK, and lead us out of crisis.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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