

Improving government accountability— an urgent search without easy solutions

The Government has announced [a competition](#) asking for think tanks and academic institutions to bid to undertake a review of how other governments and multilateral organisations are structured and how they operate. [Peter Riddell](#) thinks this is a good question, but one without easy answers.



The Government is right [to look overseas for ideas](#) on alternative structures of ministerial/civil service relations. There is a strong case for strengthening accountability, both within Whitehall and with Parliament. But the new review, to be conducted by outsiders, is likely to find that, while there are intriguing lessons from abroad, there are no ready-made transferable models.

The Institute for Government has already begun work on a wide-ranging, year-long project on accountability in central government and with parliament. A priority is the much discussed New Zealand model of a contractual relationship with Permanent Secretaries. Chief executives/permanent secretaries are appointed for three or five years at a time under contracts with performance objectives supervised by the [State Services Commission](#) (broadly combining the roles of Head of the Civil Service and Civil Service Commission). This depends on much stronger performance management of permanent secretaries than so far exists in the UK.

Not least of the benefits of looking overseas is getting behind the myths and looking at what works. The evidence is mixed, and, indeed, New Zealand is looking to the UK to resolve many of the problems they have found – for instance, the extent to which it is possible to differentiate between policy and management; how to put more focus on outcomes rather than outputs; and how to offset the fragmentation of policymaking between contractually different departments. So the New Zealand model has already been modified, notably by the publication of cross-government goals to encourage inter-departmental working.

Moreover, these are interesting examples of cross-departmental work elsewhere, in Finland, and even closer in the unified structure in Scotland, which deserve attention.

The IfG inquiry will also look at the fraught issue of the appointments process for senior civil servants; the key question of performance management of senior civil servants; the role of the accounting officer and ministerial directions; the accountability of the civil service to Parliament; and the statutory and legal position of the civil service. We intend to publish a series of discussion and briefing papers over the course of the inquiry, as well as a final report next summer.

It is all too easy to take entrenched positions on these issues. But, after some bruising exchanges over the winter and spring, there are encouraging signs that the key players are willing to look at the evidence of what works and to talk to each other..

Institute position on the bid

Government structures, and ministerial/civil service relations, have been made the first competition for outside input under the new Contestable Policy Fund announced in the [Civil Service Reform plan](#) in June. Think tanks or academic institutions are being asked to bid for a [review into overseas experience](#) and how these approaches might be applied to the UK. This experiment has been misleadingly described as policy outsourcing, akin to, say, bringing in outside contractors for security or cleaning. In reality, the proposal is more limited, and is essentially a further step towards opening up policy thinking and advice from outside Whitehall, as the Institute has repeatedly recommended. Under the government proposals, civil servants will continue to support ministers in securing agreement on policy and in turning ideas into workable measures.

As such, the Institute supports the initiative but we will not be submitting a bid. This is both because we wish to preserve our independence to analyse and comment on these issues and because we have already launched our own inquiry, as outlined above.

We will continue to work with ministers, civil servants, MPs, peers and commentators, as well as with the successful bidder, on these issues. This debate is already wide-ranging with leading MPs sponsoring seminars and the Lords Constitutional Committee due to publish a report this autumn on the accountability of civil servants- to which the Institute has contributed.

This article was first published on the [IFG blog](#).

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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