

Grand Brexit Strategies – can Whitehall cope?

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The civil service has a key role to play in how Brexit will be delivered. [Dave Richards](#) and [Martin Smith](#) outline the organisational and cultural shifts that are required so that the process can be coordinated effectively across government.



One of the fundamental lessons of policy making is that you should not develop a policy that you cannot implement. The problem that's keeping Teresa May awake is how to implement Brexit. The complexity of the task is enormous not least because the EU is deeply embedded in every aspect of the British legal, political and economic framework.

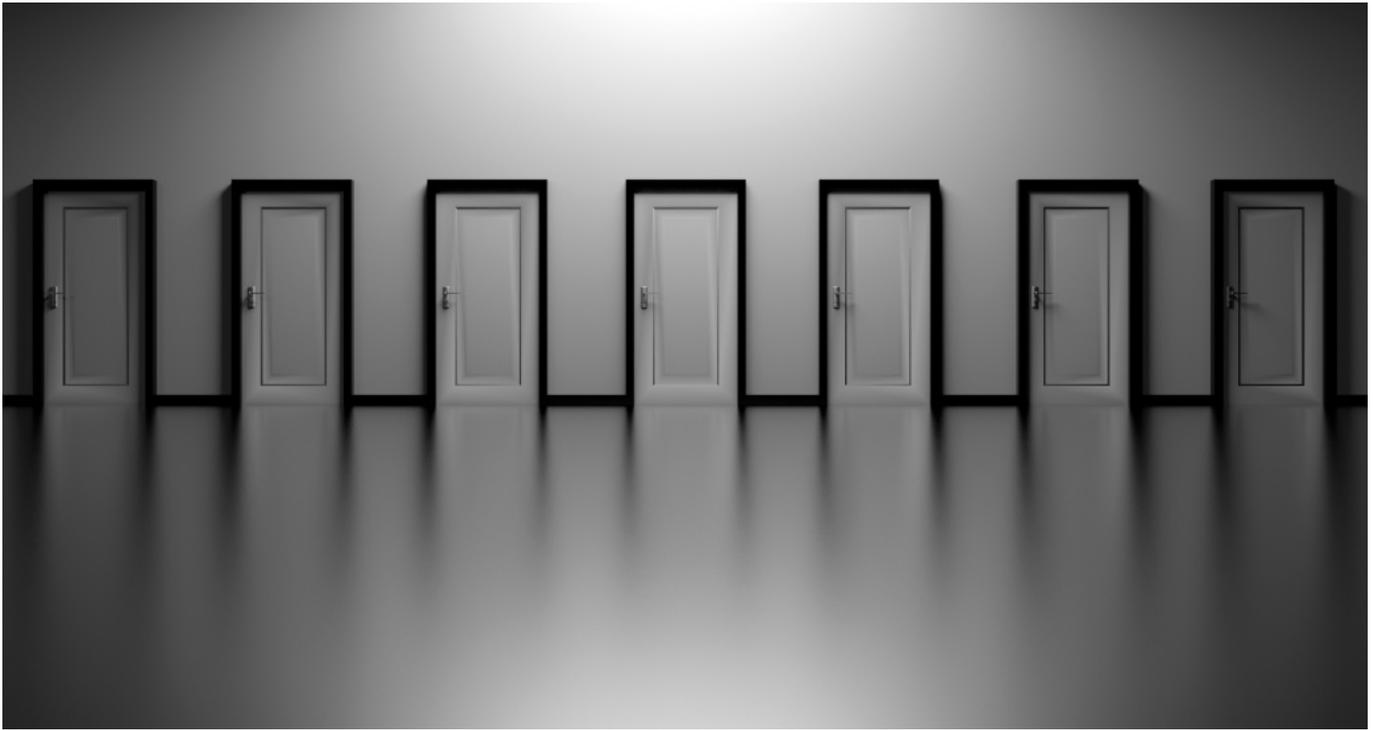
If Brexit is to be achieved in a way that does not lead, wholesale, to the breakdown in Britain's economic and political relations it will need all the skills that the civil service can bring to bear to coordinate a smooth exit. This, in an environment in which many Conservative politicians suspiciously regard the Civil Service as institutionally pro-European. It is also a civil service whose record on coordination is patchy and where questions are rightly asked as to whether it has the appropriate skills for undertaking such an enormous task.



To prepare for Brexit, the [Cabinet Office's Brexit Unit](#) under [Olly Robbins](#), formerly of the Home Office, has been created. Why? Well if ever there has been a moment in the last 60 years of the need for Whitehall to act in a coherent and cohesive manner, it is now. But then you might ask, surely Whitehall has already done some hard yards in putting together contingency plans to deal with Brexit, [as is the norm](#) in the run up to a General Election? Yet the somewhat opaque picture emerging from Whitehall is that beyond some very limited precautionary work done on the part of the [Bank of England and the Treasury](#) to placate the markets in the event of a 'Leave' vote, no one had a plan – never mind it being contingent!

David Cameron's line was that there should be [no contingency planning](#) by Whitehall during the campaign, for fear of potentially politicising the process. In practice, this did not strictly occur. As Bernard Jenkin MP, recently wittingly [let slip](#), in the lead up to the referendum, Whitehall's Permanent Secretaries were so vexed by the ban on any pre-Brexit discussions that they scurried off for an illicit away day to do just that. The current Cabinet Secretary Jeremy Heywood described this as doing some '[confidential thinking](#)'. Even with the greatest minds in Whitehall joined together as one, the possibility that they would be capable of pulling together a Grand Strategy for Brexit at a one-off work's outing, would surely be a task even beyond that of Hercules.

Since the referendum, and in the absence of any steer from a government holding its cards firmly to its chest, much has been made of whether or not there should be a hard or soft exit, linked to the broader theme of what a grand strategy might entail.



Breaking the Whitehall Brexit purdah has been the somewhat infamous [Deloitte 'insider' report](#). It infers that rather than Whitehall doing the over-arching 'vision-thing' to address what Britain's place in the world should be and how to deliver on it, officials have instead scurried back to their departments to work on 500 'Brexit-related' projects. Pulling all these component parts together in a cohesive way is no small challenge and prompts the obvious question: does Whitehall have a strong track record in delivering on what public administration wonks have long referred to as ['joined-up government'](#)?

The institutional problem is that British government has fragmentation embedded in its DNA. The 1854 Northcote-Trevelyan Report, which enshrined the architectural arrangements of Whitehall, created a model of functionally distinct departments that meant they and not the central units of government – No.10, Cabinet Office, and the Treasury – were resource-rich and powerful, developing the necessary expertise and organisational capability to command control of their policy domains. Ever since, there has been an emergent need to overcome the pathology of departments acting in their own self-interest [departmentalism] rather than the wider interests of the government.

A potted-history of (not) joining government up

Overtime, various governments have sought to address this pathology in different ways. In the 1950s, Churchill experimented with a system of 'overlords', drawn from the House of Lords to oversee and co-ordinate the activities of different departments and spheres of interest. During the 1960s and 1970s, 'super-ministries' and new central coordinating units became fashionable, in an attempt to effect a more joined-up approach to policy-making. The Heath Government created the Central Policy Review Staff, effectively an 'insider government think-tank' to provide a broad overview of the direction of general government policy and challenge the entrenched views of departments.

After 1979, the Conservative Administration sought to impose greater ministerial control over Whitehall and bring in the discipline of the market. New Public Management became the rage and led to various waves of managerialist-informed reforms – the Rayner Scrutinies (1979-82), the Financial Management Initiative (1982-84), Next Steps Agencies (after 1988) and the Senior Management Review (1995). Collectively, they transformed the way Whitehall operated emphasising [a principal-agent](#) approach, yet they did not abandon the Northcote-Trevelyan principle of 'functional departments' and the tendency for each to operate in a hierarchical, sometimes inflexible manner.

The 1997 Labour Government came to office with a view that in a climate of governance, globalisation and

Europeanisation, departments had become increasingly insular, hierarchical and inward-looking. Blair observed: *'Joined-up government ... is one of the greatest challenges. We owe it to citizens to focus on what needs to be done, not on protecting our turf...that will require working across boundaries ... [Whitehall] needs to become more open, and responsibility needs to be devolved.'* Its solution was to pursue reforms focused on restructuring the central coordinating units – Number 10, the Cabinet Office, and the Treasury – and fortifying their resources. The result was anything but the devolution of power downwards. What followed was an era of Treasury-driven, hyper-activity in the form of targets and audit mechanisms through Public Service Agreements and the use of Comprehensive Spending Reviews and with it a [cascading culture of centrally-driven governing by target](#) across the whole public sector.

Since 2010, despite the rhetoric of abandoning Labour's centralising strategy of control, under both the Coalition and the current Conservative Administration it has [continued in all but name](#). *'The combination of both departmental business plans operating in conjunction with a new set of objectives specified for each individual Permanent Secretary suggest an informal culture of targets across Whitehall is thriving.'*

What binds all these reforms together has been the impulse to centralise as a means of imposing a coherence and rationality over the way Whitehall goes about its business. It is an approach that fits hand-in-glove with the [traditions associated with the Westminster Model](#). In practice, the solutions to ['departmentalism'](#), ['wicked issues'](#) and ['the blunders of government'](#) and the affecting of a cultural shift in Whitehall from hierarchical to horizontal, holistic or joined-up governance have rarely been achieved.

At the same time, the current climate requires a sea change in Whitehall. Civil servants are still trained as policy-makers, but in a post-Brexit world the new priorities stress management, contract negotiation, project management and implementation. So a skills gap is opening up, where [officials are identified](#) as lacking the ability to oversee complex contract negotiations. [Whitehall's approach](#) to large and complex problems is not defined as an issue of 'project management', as it would be in the private sector, but instead is seen in terms of delivering the normal run of business.

The vision of the civil service operating in a post-Brexit world is very different to the nineteenth century Northcote-Trevelyan paradigm. In a rapidly shifting environment of pluralised policy-making and delivery, officials need to become the 'arbiters' and 'overseers' of the system ensuring transparency, fairness and accountability in a fractured system of governance. They need new skills to oversee contracts, accountability and democratic processes, and ensure equity in a devolved and fragmented system.

In so doing, functional loyalty needs to be cast aside if the potential to deliver on a joined-up approach is to be realised. This might involve an organisational and cultural shift from a departmental-facing to a problem-focused approach which is more flexible, smaller and digitally based. It involves then a grand strategy for Whitehall, not countless officials beavering away on micro-Brexit projects in the sanctuary of their own departments.

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