

# REFORM

## BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS

**Why Whitehall is so hard to reform**

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## ABOUT REFORM

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After a decade of disruption, the country faces a moment of national reflection. For too long, Britain has been papering over the cracks in an outdated social and economic model, but while this may bring temporary respite, it doesn't fix the foundations. In 1942 Beveridge stated: "a revolutionary moment in the world's history is a time for revolutions, not for patching." 80 years on, and in the wake of a devastating national crisis, that statement once again rings true. Now is the time to fix Britain's foundations.

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*Reimagining Whitehall* is one of the major work streams within this programme.

## ABOUT THIS PAPER

This paper is part of the *Reimagining Whitehall* work stream. To effectively reimagine the State, major change must occur in the behaviours, processes, and structures of central government. A more diverse, dynamic, and decentralised government machine is needed. Yet while successive administrations have attempted to modernise the civil service and improve the structure of Whitehall, the same problems recur. This paper seeks to understand why this is the case, to identify the barriers that stand in the way of successful reform. Future publications will put forward proposals for overcoming these barriers.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all 27 interviewees for giving their time and candid insights to support this research paper. We would also like to thank Peter Thomas, an expert on the civil service, for speaking to us as part of the research process.

In addition, we are deeply grateful to Paul Kissack, Philip Rycroft CB, Sir Jon Thompson and Ian Watmore for reviewing an early draft of this paper. All opinions and any errors are the authors' alone.

The full list of interviewees is as follows:

### **Former Cabinet Secretaries**

- Lord Mark Sedwill GCMG, Cabinet Secretary (2018 – 2020)
- Lord Andrew Turnbull KCB CVO, Cabinet Secretary (2002 – 2005)

### **Former Permanent Secretaries**

- Dame Helen Ghosh DCB, Permanent Secretary (2005 – 2012)
- Sir John Manzoni KCB, Permanent Secretary (2015 – 2020); CEO of the Civil Service (2014 – 2020)
- Dame Clare Moriarty, Permanent Secretary (2015 – 2020)
- Sir Richard Mottram GCB, Permanent Secretary (1992 – 2007)
- Sir David Omand GCB, Permanent Secretary (1997 – 2000; 2002 – 2005)
- Dame Sue Owen DCB, Permanent Secretary (2013 – 2019)
- Philip Rycroft CB, Permanent Secretary (2017 – 2019)
- Jonathan Slater, Permanent Secretary (2016 – 2020)
- Sir Jon Thompson KCB, Permanent Secretary (2012 – 2019)
- Ian Watmore, Permanent Secretary (2005 – 2009; 2010 – 2012)

### **Former Senior Civil Servants (below Permanent Secretary level)**

- Paul Kissack, Director General (2014 – 2017; 2019 – 2020)
- Rupert McNeil, Government Chief People Officer (2016 – 2022)
- One other interviewee chose to remain anonymous.

### **Former Cabinet Ministers<sup>1</sup>**

- Rt Hon Liam Byrne MP (2008 – 2010)
- Rt Hon David Gauke (2014 – 2019)
- Rt Hon Philip Hammond (2010 – 2019)
- Rt Hon Sir Oliver Letwin (2014 – 2016)
- Rt Hon Dame Priti Patel DBE MP (2016 – 2017; 2019 – 2022)
- Rt Hon Jacqui Smith (2006 – 2009)

### **Former political or government advisers**

- Professor Sir John Aston, Home Office Chief Scientific Adviser (2017 – 2020)
- Dr David Bennett, Head of the No.10 Policy Unit and PM's Strategy Unit (2005 – 2007)
- Baroness Simone Finn, Deputy Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister (2021 – 2022); Special Advisor to Lord Francis Maude, Minister for the Cabinet Office (2012 – 2015)
- Professor David Halpern CBE, CEO, Behavioural Insights Team (2010 – 2023); Chief Analyst in the PM's Strategy Unit (2001 – 2007)
- James Marshall CBE, Director of the No.10 Policy Unit (2017 – 2019)

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<sup>1</sup> Dates listed here show years spent in Cabinet roles.

- Nick Timothy CBE, Downing Street Chief of Staff (2016 – 2017); Special Advisor to Rt Hon Theresa May MP, Home Secretary (2010 – 2015)

### A NOTE ON SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

There will be people who argue that the lion's share of the blame for recent failure lies at the feet of politicians, and specifically ministers. Indeed, this argument was put forward by a very small number of the interviewees for this paper. Quite clearly, the consequences of politics – election cycles, at times underprepared or ill-suited ministers, ministerial churn, and lack of political courage – have a profound impact on the functioning of government. For example, preparing for and managing a crisis is the responsibility of both political leaders and the civil servants who work for them, just as agreeing an executable plan to deliver a major infrastructure project is reliant on both.

Yet while Britain should indeed expect better of her politicians and equip them better for ministerial roles, that is the nature of democracy. Our civil service is, in part, the technocratic counterbalance to the ambition and uncertainty inherent in politics. It is therefore essential that this permanent body is operationally brilliant – and that means addressing the deep-rooted flaws in how Whitehall functions. As one of the former permanent secretaries interviewed put it, it means ensuring “systemic capability”.

The focus of this paper is Whitehall,<sup>2</sup> not public services more generally. The analysis is of the subset of public servants that are, on a daily basis, supporting the government of the day to govern. This group represents a tiny proportion of those employed in the public sector, but it is within the Whitehall machine that priorities and budgets are set and policies impacting all public services are shaped. This small group of officials therefore have an outsize impact on how the State functions, and how well they perform impacts us all.

Mapping the barriers to reforming Whitehall is the crucial first step to developing a plan to overcome those flaws. To do this, *Reform* interviewed senior leaders – former ministers, cabinet secretaries, permanent secretaries and other senior civil servants, and political and non-political government advisers – with direct experience of reform programmes. Their candid reflections – across different decades, departments, governments, and political contexts – form the basis for this paper.

Together, their insights offer a striking insider view of why Whitehall is so difficult to change, and hints at what future reform programmes must do differently in order to succeed. That their diagnosis of the problem is so consistent, and yet they were, with some notable exceptions, unable to overcome these barriers is testament to how intractable they appear. At a minimum it demonstrates that reform requires not a heroic individual, but the collective efforts of the entire Whitehall leadership.

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<sup>2</sup> Whitehall, while a geographic area, denotes a sub-set of civil servants. Increasing numbers of these are being moved out of SW1 to locations such as Darlington and Glasgow, but the role of these civil servants remains the same.

This paper does not put forward recommendations – though many of the comments from former Whitehall leaders point towards solutions. Proposals for structural, process and behavioural reform will come in subsequent papers in the *Reimagining Whitehall* programme.

The paper is largely the words of those interviewed, but to enable the interviewees to speak freely about their time in government, the quotes are anonymous – with any identifying information stripped out. However, 26 of the 27 interviewees who generously gave up their time to speak to *Reform* agreed to be named, and a list is included above. *Reform* wishes to emphasise that the conclusions are the authors' own, as are any errors.

Please note that former cabinet secretaries are referred to as 'former permanent secretaries' throughout the paper in order to preserve anonymity.

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# Foreword

## Lord Mark Sedwill GCMG

Having long taken for granted Britain's national identity and global position, the 2014 and 2016 referendums heralded a decade of introspection. Paradoxically, the global pandemic both deepened this trend and revived the demand that government be both omniscient and omnipotent: as Keith Joseph joked 50 years ago, the first phrase every child learns in the English language is: "What is the Government going to do about it?"

For one of the most open economies and societies in the world, affected by global environmental, socio-economic and geopolitical trends, the role of government is not just to act but to convene, orchestrate and ensure that policy interventions catalyse the right response from citizens, communities, businesses and other countries. That requires first-rate professional and political leadership, and a first-rate, modern public service to be led.

This means systemic reform. Whitehall structures would be familiar to Gladstone. Governance is highly centralised but federated at that centre. The British Cabinet is twice the size of President Biden's and four times the size of President Xi Jinping's. Three-quarters of the most senior civil servants are based in London. Too few are from ethnic minorities. Departmental boundaries are largely happenstance, but skew ministerial and official behaviour. Central government is too metropolitan, too short-term, too siloed, too rivalrous and too focused on the preoccupations of Westminster and Whitehall.

We need the horizontal structures of Government to be as strong as the vertical: the weft holds the warp together. Technology will (or at least should) transform the wider public service, improving productivity, responsiveness, service levels and precision. Whitehall needs the capability to lead that transformation with sufficient diversity, including cognitive diversity, at the heart of government to understand the nation's varied communities, challenge perceived wisdom and innovate. This will require new accountability and incentive structures, more interchange with the private and third sectors, and more modular careers.

A package along these lines would amount to the most ambitious peace-time reforms to Whitehall, the wider public service and the governance system since Attlee. Trying to transform the economy and society through an untransformed governance system is unlikely to prosper. What DNA do we need in the Whitehall nucleus to lead that transformation? This paper from *Reform* examines that question, shining a light on the barriers that must be overcome, and is a timely contribution to the debate about the governance of Britain in the second quarter of the 21st century.

Lord Mark Sedwill GCMG

Cabinet Secretary (2017 – 2020)

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 A remarkable consensus

“It may be safely asserted that, as matters now stand, the Government of the country could not be carried out without the aid of an efficient body of permanent officers, occupying a position duly subordinate to that to the ministers who are directly responsible to the Crown and to Parliament, yet possessing sufficient independence, character, ability, and experience to be able to advise, assist, and, to some extent, influence, those who are from time to time sent over to them.”<sup>3</sup>

Much ink has been spilled, and many speeches delivered, on the subject of reforming the Whitehall machine since the 1854 publication of the Northcote-Trevelyan ‘Report on the organisation of the Permanent Civil Service’.<sup>4</sup> Yet while debates have raged on the strengths and weaknesses of our model, that description of its purpose – a permanent (and therefore politically impartial), high-performing body of officials who serve the government of the day – remains true and essential. The question exercising successive governments, and indeed the reason for that 1854 review, is *how* to achieve that.

This is because, despite its many strengths (the British civil service was rated top in the 2019 International Civil Service Effectiveness Index<sup>5</sup>), successive governments have been frustrated by consistent shortcomings in Whitehall’s ability to deliver their policy priorities, to respond to crises and emerging threats, and even, at times, to execute business as usual services.

A remarkable consensus – including among many working within the civil service – has therefore developed about the key flaws in the Whitehall machine. From specific skills shortages to inadequacies in operational experience, high staff churn to extreme risk-aversion and over-reliance on process, repeated reviews and action plans have highlighted the same problems (see Figure 1). And yet, with some improvements, these problems largely persist.<sup>6</sup>

As one notably reforming minister, (now Lord) Francis Maude, said back in 2013:

“When I was sent Blair’s 2004 speech some months after we had published our reform plan, I was struck by the *déjà vu*. I found I had been echoing his concerns, indeed his very phrases. The one specific change he announced – that senior officials would in future be appointed on fixed tenures – mysteriously never made it into action. In short, civil service reform plans generally end up gathering dust on library shelves.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> ‘The Northcote-Trevelyan Report’, *Public Administration* 32, no. 1 (March 1954).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> InCISE, *Results Report 2019* (Blavatnik School of Government and Institute for Government, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Cabinet Office, *Declaration on Government Reform*, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Cabinet Office, ‘Ministers and Mandarins: Speaking Truth unto Power’, Webpage, 5 June 2013.



At a time of heightened uncertainty, when the nation is facing era-defining global, demographic and technological changes, the imperative for reform could not be more urgent. What happens in Whitehall has consequences far beyond SW1 – it is where priorities are set, policy is developed, expenditure decisions are made, and legislation and regulation is enacted.

Addressing these shortcomings is therefore not only key to better government, but to Britain's future prosperity. This paper seeks to understand why, despite that consensus and repeat efforts at reform, insufficient progress has been made – either because reforms stalled, were only partially successful, or their impact was not sustained. In other words, what are the barriers to Whitehall reform?

## 1.2 The barriers

***“Why have previous reform attempts failed? Answer: because the most powerful people in government – both politicians and civil servants – move their attention on to the next most pressing policy issue of the day. And don't have time to focus their attention on the machine that's delivering it. They don't lift their heads – or perhaps bury their heads – into the machinery.”***

***Former cabinet minister***

Our interviews revealed a system in which initiating a new reform programme is fiendishly complicated and in which responsibility for doing so is diffuse. Above all, there is a lack of ownership for the essential work of corporate transformation. While ministers are sometimes the drivers of system change (despite questions over whether they are best placed to do so), this is a minority interest among politicians. Yet the executive core of government is not strong enough, and departmental permanent secretaries not interested enough – and do not tend to see it as their job – to drive this.

Even when an individual within the system – whether a politician personally interested in the machinery of government or a reforming civil service leader – does decide to instigate a change programme, the barriers are high. Winning the backing of (or at least avoiding resistance from) all of the players upon which success depends appears a Herculean feat. One of the most common phrases uttered by interviewees when asked how civil service leaders responded to reform efforts instigated by the centre, for example, was: “eye rolling”.

In addition, the process of developing new ideas or operating models is often hamstrung by a Whitehall system that is relatively insular. Where few system leaders have substantive external experience, identifying different ways of working is limited: “It's always easier to see opportunities for reform if you haven't spent your entire career in one place”, as one former permanent secretary put it. This lack of alternative experience can also create a bias towards the status quo, while change can appear as criticism of a system in which the current crop of leaders succeeded and for which they are now responsible.

Yet despite these barriers to instigating change, as Figure 1 shows, there is nearly always some form of reform programme in train. At this stage, barriers to *implementation* come into play. Change management is a complex and resource-intensive process, and in general, the

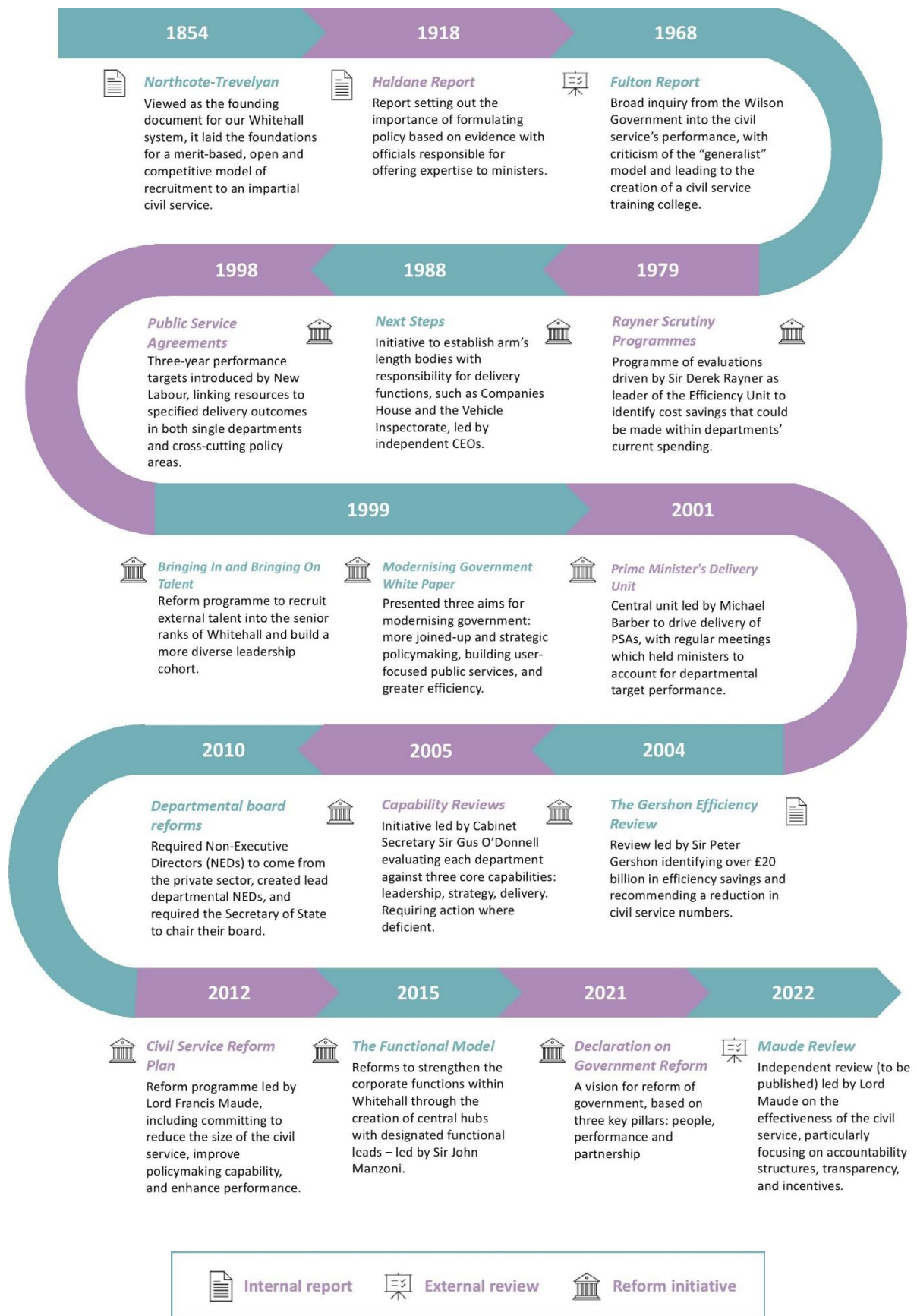
level of commitment required to succeed is rarely in place. In addition, the tangible value of that change to those expected to enact it is often poorly communicated, reducing buy-in and hindering success.

Finally, even where good ideas for reform are instigated and a serious implementation plan is in place, *embedding and sustaining* those reforms requires a different set of actions. Whitehall reform cannot be seen as a 'once and done' process – the business of change must be business-as-usual.

Maintaining the corporate health of an organisation requires constant vigilance as the world changes around it. That means everyone must act as stewards. Civil service leaders must constantly be asking whether Whitehall is equipped to best serve the public and the administration of the day. A self-reforming mentality must be embedded throughout. Change cannot be seen as an elite activity, instead the aim must be to build movements which will help both to deliver specific reform programmes, and also secure momentum for future waves of corporate change.

The paper follows this chronological change process. Chapter 2 identifies the essential *pre-conditions* needed to ensure that when reform is initiated, it is not dead on arrival. Chapter 3 covers the role of the executive centre in *instigating* reform. Chapter 4 covers the essential role permanent secretaries must play in enabling the *transition* from idea to delivery. Chapter 5 discusses the necessary conditions for successful *implementation*, and Chapter 6 focuses on *sustaining* change.

Figure 1: New plans, old priorities



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## 2. Essential preconditions

***“If No.10, the Cabinet Office and the Treasury want it to happen it will, and if either No.10, the Cabinet Office or the Treasury don’t want it to happen, it won’t.”***

***Former senior civil servant***

Interviewees were broadly consistent in their view that sustainable, cross-Whitehall reform must be instigated and driven (though not delivered) from the centre – this is covered in the next chapter.

However, interviewees were equally clear that the fate of any reform relies on the support, or at minimum the acquiescence, of politicians, and in particular the PM, Secretaries of State, and the Treasury. In short, no reform can get off the ground without their endorsement, it is an essential precondition for any change agenda.

### 2.1 The politicians

As a senior minister singularly committed to reforming the machinery of government, Francis Maude is often cited – including in the interviews for this paper – as an example of how a politician can drive change in Whitehall. One former permanent secretary put it simply: “Maude and Manzoni showed what it was possible to do with enough drive and energy”.

However, while the general view among interviewees was that Maude delivered valuable improvements to functional capabilities – most notably in commercial and digital – it was noted that his efforts were not always welcomed by senior leaders. Another former permanent secretary stated:

“He was cordially loathed by most civil servants, because he was actually quite effective and what made him effective, he was bloody-minded and wouldn’t take no for an answer...and he brought in [external experts], these were disrupters, but they were disrupting in quite a narrow domain...And to be fair, it broke the mould...he did irritate a lot of people, but he did achieve outcomes.”

Maude was, in fact, the only minister frequently referenced in the context of Whitehall (as opposed to public service) reform, and appears the exception that proves the much repeated point: Whitehall reform is not the job of ministers.

#### 2.1.1 Where responsibility lies

Interviewees suggested that most politicians are uninterested in Whitehall reform, likely reflecting the relatively low salience of the issue among voters: “It’s totally politically unrewarding”, said one former cabinet minister.

“There’s no political reward in that type of thinking. In an age of shock waves, how and where are you going to create capacity for system level thinking?”

Former cabinet minister

“There isn’t the electoral imperative, the incentives for ministers [to drive reform].”

Former cabinet minister

As one former permanent secretary put it, “politicians are interested in policy, not management”, and given the Whitehall model, in which ministers cannot make, for example, core management decisions like staffing appointments, it is unclear how far ministers can impact the latter.

Reflecting the role of minister versus senior civil servant, another former permanent secretary argued that “when ministers are interested in civil service reform, that’s a bad sign.” At best it signifies a view that the system requires improvement, at worst it represents a breakdown of trust in the system, which too often leads to a damaging ‘them and us’ culture. Another former permanent secretary reflected “I don’t think it is right for the public, in general, for politicians to be that in the weeds of it”.

“The thing that doesn’t work as well is when ministers endlessly get their screwdriver out and fiddle around.”

Former senior civil servant

“[Reform is] absolutely the guarded property of the civil service, the politicians are passing flotsam and jetsam.”

Former senior political adviser

It is not, therefore, clear that politicians should be the ones responsible for instigating reform of Whitehall, but where it does fall to ministers, or they choose to attempt it, several interviewees suggested they are ill-suited to doing so. For some, this reflected a scepticism about the capabilities of politicians – according to one former cabinet minister, “ministers are of wild and varying qualities and many have as much administrative capacity as the average tortoise.”

For others, politicians lack the nuanced understanding of Whitehall required to succeed. One former permanent secretary put it bluntly: “Politicians haven’t got the faintest idea what the civil service is...as a new arrival, you have no clear idea how it works...and we don’t help them.” This was expressed less as a criticism and more as an observation that the civil service is a complex machine and ministers are, in a sense, outsiders. Ministers, it was argued, have a clear understanding of parts of Whitehall – especially the most proximate parts, such as their private office – but their visibility of the wider machine is, unsurprisingly, much more limited. Which means, as another former permanent secretary argued, “politicians cannot own the agenda”.

Finally, even where a politician does demonstrate a clear grasp of, and interest in, the Whitehall machine, they are temporary – and seen as such. One former senior civil servant described what they characterised as a typical response to reforming ministerial zeal: “Oh, here we go again. It’s the latest fad, usually driven by a particular minister.”

Several interviewees talked of senior Whitehall leaders ‘waiting out’ ministers, knowing if they proceed slowly, ministers are likely to have moved on before the reform is in place, particularly in recent years. As one former cabinet minister put it: “it’s fleeting versus permanent participants...[the minister] may crash and burn and be gone in a year.”

## 2.1.2 The ministerial seal of approval

However, while interviewees felt that Whitehall reform must be owned by civil servants, there was a broad consensus that instigating reform requires political permission *and* endorsement, and that, as is explored in Section 6.1, it aligns with political priorities.

The primary purpose of the civil service is to deliver the agenda of the government of the day, which means that allocating time and resource to Whitehall reform requires ministerial agreement, and, crucially, getting the machine to respond requires explicit support. One former permanent secretary expressed it simply: “You don’t achieve much without political support”. Another said:

“How far do you expect the elected politicians to get involved in what are essentially managerial issues?...You have to have more than the consent, you have to have the support, active support, of the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State needs to lay down some parameters, not least about the priority.”

Former permanent secretary

“You can only make this work if you have unified political and official leadership.”

Former permanent secretary

In addition to the importance of having the support of departmental secretaries of state (see also Section 3.3), among the most common observations by interviewees was the need for both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor to get behind reform. As one former permanent secretary put it, “If the PM or Chancellor really wants something to happen then you have a decent chance of it happening”.

“Generally speaking, in my time, I don’t think the Cabinet Office, No.10 and the Treasury got seriously behind any of the civil service reform agendas. Partly because civil service reform is not that interesting and important to the PM and the Chancellor.”

Former senior civil servant

“They [permanent secretaries] were only with me because they thought I could snitch on them [to No.10].”

Former permanent secretary

“Francis Maude had a very close relationship with the PM and Chancellor, therefore he was allowed to get on with it; he was trusted and it was known he had the ear of the centre.”

Former senior political adviser

“I think [named senior civil servant] had the clout – or would have a bit more clout – because everyone knew that she was then directly accountable to the Prime Minister.”

Former senior political adviser

One former permanent secretary talked about literally having to bring the Prime Minister in to get the behaviour change needed:

“‘You wanted accountability, we gave you power and authority and delegation and now you’re not doing it.’ So it took the Prime Minister to get involved in shifting the culture.”

## 2.2 The Treasury

“Clearly, no significant change can occur in any aspect of government without the unified support of the Prime Minister, the Cabinet Office and the Treasury. Everything in government depends on these three bodies working together. And that’s simply because they’re each powerful enough to derail things.”

Former cabinet minister

As captured in the above quote, to have any chance of success, reforms must secure buy-in from a trio of system leaders and their respective departments: the Prime Minister and No. 10 (discussed above), the Cabinet Secretary and the Cabinet Office (discussed in the next chapter), and the Chancellor and the Treasury.

Each one of these has the ability to derail or undermine a reform programme that they disagree with, or which they believe threatens their interests. United system leadership must, therefore, be a core component of Whitehall change programmes. Or, as one former senior civil servant succinctly put it:

“If No.10, the Cabinet Office and the Treasury want it to happen it will, and if either No.10, the Cabinet Office or the Treasury don’t want it to happen, it won’t.”

Yet while buy-in from the PM and Cabinet Office was deemed critical, when it came to the Treasury, interviewees presented a subtly different view. Having the backing of the Treasury was not usually described as key to persuading others to support a reform effort, but their

opposition was deemed terminal. In short, attempting to proceed without at least the acquiescence of the Treasury meant reform was unlikely to prove successful:

“If the Treasury’s not on board, as we saw right through the Blair years and the rest of it, then everyone thinks it’ll never go anywhere. Because the Treasury has a lot of the real levers in its hands which are, of course, the financial levers.”

Former permanent secretary

“He [the Cabinet Secretary] didn’t want rows between me and the Treasury, because (a) he was ex-Treasury, and (b) he could see that if these rows were going on, they’d get around the system and people would say: ‘Oh, they’re not really united on this’.”

Former permanent secretary

“One of the first things I learned as the incoming guy in charge of [named reform programme] was if I got into a row with the Treasury, and I expected the Cabinet Secretary to back me up, he didn’t.”

Former permanent secretary

This is a particular challenge because Treasury resistance to reform is tangled up with its own relationship with the Cabinet Office, as described by two former senior civil servants with direct experience of this problem:

“The Treasury has an instinctive reflex on anything that comes out of the Cabinet Office, which is just sort of an eye roll...it is unlikely to actively and outwardly oppose civil service reform measures, but it might be as equally unlikely to swing in behind them and give it the priority it needs.”

Former senior civil servant

“The thing that’s difficult about the Treasury is that they wax and wane in terms of how willing they are to be open with both Number 10 and the Cabinet Office.”

Former senior civil servant

One former permanent secretary was especially scathing about the Treasury’s attitude to reform:

“I think it does prevent reform, I think partly because, you know, it protects its own power with the allocation of resources. Its fundamental philosophy is, anything that anybody else does is going to be bad, because it’s not going to work. And that reinforces the cycle.”

Former permanent secretary



Interestingly, one interviewee explained how the PM's Delivery Unit – usually cited as a reform programme that was very successful – sought to overcome this peculiar Treasury-Cabinet Office tension:

“... [the PM's Delivery Unit] had a Cabinet Office staff, primarily working for Blair, but physically located in the Treasury. It really worked because I was able to walk around the building, if I needed to get something fixed, you could probably catch them at lunch in the canteen. Or I knew I could go and talk to Nick Macpherson or whoever it was at the time and just get stuff done. And because you were there, you weren't seen as quite so much of an enemy.”

Former permanent secretary

The importance of physical proximity to power is also discussed in Chapter 3.

## 2.3 Conclusion

Any hope of successfully delivering Whitehall reform requires the support of two key actors: ministers and the Treasury.

Yet, while ministerial endorsement is key, interviewees were clear that officials, not politicians must own the agenda: ministers are unlikely to have the depth of knowledge, specific skills, or time to prioritise and successfully design corporate change programmes. Nor should it be their job to. The civil service is there to serve the government, it is therefore the job of its leadership to ensure it is properly equipped to do so. And while Treasury approval is desirable, Treasury opposition is fatal, meaning the exchequer must be brought on board.

If the PM, their Cabinet and the Treasury are supportive, the pre-conditions of a successful reform programme are set. Though as the following chapters show, while essential, those conditions are in no way sufficient – there are numerous other barriers to overcome.

### 3. Owning the agenda, instigating reform: the role of the centre

***“There’s a question mark over whether there is a structure at the top of the civil service which is actually, in any meaningful way, managing it.”***

***Former permanent secretary***

***“You need a centre...to help to devise a strategy, to work with the teams to develop the strategy, and then to make sure it’s implemented. You need a strong centre. But you don’t get change unless you have that buy in. In other words, the change programme can’t be owned by the centre, it has to be owned by the senior leadership across the piece. And the centre is then a delivery mechanism. It is ideally out there helping people to do the change. And the Cabinet Office isn’t very good at that. The Cabinet Office isn’t an ‘out there’, for the most part, sort of organisation. In its central function, it’s solving problems for the Cabinet Office, not for departments.”***

***Former permanent secretary***

While certain preconditions must be met for any reform to get off the ground, it is the corporate centre which must drive that reform. Herein lies the most fatal barrier to success: the centre is too weak to drive it.

In a siloed model, cross-Whitehall reform can only be driven and sustained by a corporate centre with the levers to make change happen. That means powerful leadership, the right incentives and aligned accountability mechanisms. A major reason why reform has proven so elusive is that the civil service lacks these.

Almost a decade ago, a report by the Institute for Government described the “historic weakness of corporate leadership in the civil service and the fragmented nature of the centre.”<sup>8</sup> The interviews for this paper suggest that statement remains true today. Many of those interviewed questioned who, in reality, is responsible for the long-term health of the civil service.

***“There’s a question mark over whether there is a structure at the top of the civil service which is actually, in any meaningful way, managing it. And that is their job, that is their job...we used to struggle to work out how best to do this, to be honest with you, but we knew it was something we had to do.”***

***Former permanent secretary***

<sup>8</sup> James Page et al., *Leading Change in the Civil Service* (Institute for Government, 2014).

“I mean, this is where you come to the fundamental problem, there’s no one in charge. Who’s going to be making these people do what is required?”

Former senior political adviser

For an organisation of its size, the civil service has relatively underdeveloped corporate capabilities, and a comparative lack of levers for driving corporate change. This combination limits the likelihood of successful reform and mitigates against a vigilant approach to corporate health.

Nearly all interviewees reflected on the Cabinet Office and its leadership in this context. Interviewees highlighted the relatively peculiar nature of the Cabinet Office, with the constant changes in the composition of this department, and the lack of clarity over its purpose. Similarly, the roles of Cabinet Secretary, Head of the Civil Service and Chief Executive or Chief Operating Officer of the Civil Service were a subject of significant discussion.

### 3.1 A split personality

One former senior civil servant described the Cabinet Office as having a split personality, capturing the tension at the executive centre of government. The Cabinet Office is tasked with doing two fundamentally different things, advising the PM and enabling collective cabinet government (as well as housing national security infrastructure), and acting as a corporate HQ.

This is compounded by the fact that, in practice, the Cabinet Office doubles as a department for the Prime Minister, meaning special projects and units are added based on the interests of the then PM (for example civil society, social exclusion, veterans). The risk is that this dilutes the centre’s primary functions, and its role as a corporate HQ gets pushed further down the priority list.

“The idea that the very same bit of an organisation that is trying to make sure there is a cabinet agenda that week and get the Prime Minister and Chancellor to agree on building a bit of infrastructure should also be the organisation that’s worrying about exactly what the resourcing for that infrastructure is just doesn’t work. It’s too broad a scope.

Be a bit ruthless, this is the corporate HQ, you wouldn’t take the corporate HQ at Shell and in addition to reporting on risk management and the overall financing of the group we’re going to have a unit which does drilling in Namibia. You would say that’s insane. The same for the Cabinet Office. Accept it’s going to have two personalities, but then be ruthless about what those personalities have to contain.”

The failure to be “ruthless” and maintain clarity of purpose and function – essential for driving change – was reflected in interviewees’ comments. Several specifically highlighted the huge

increase in the size of the Cabinet Office, which has gained 6,000 additional full-time equivalent staff between Q2 of 2016 and Q3 of 2022.<sup>9</sup>

“The Cabinet Office is a uniquely dysfunctional organisation.”

Former permanent secretary

“In most departments... the structure and shape looks pretty much the same from one decade to the next. The Cabinet Office just goes around all over the place, because it is the sort of department that Prime Ministers put stuff into that they want to give priority.”

Former permanent secretary

“As for the Cabinet Office, I’ve got no idea whatsoever what they do.”

Former cabinet minister

These comments capture the underlying sense among interviewees that, while able to attract high-calibre personnel due to the proximity to the Prime Minister, the competing priorities and the lack of laser focus on the corporate health of Whitehall undermines the Cabinet Office’s ability to command action.

### 3.2 ‘The functions guy’

Crucially, the corporate HQ side of the Cabinet Office lacks status and power – a common interview theme. This helps explain why senior departmental leaders are able to fudge, or even ignore, requests for action. As one former senior political adviser put it: “the authority sits with the Cabinet Secretary in the minds of the perm secs”.

“The Cabinet Office is famously in two halves – the secretariat, the Cabinet Secretary’s bit, and then the chief operating officer’s, CEO’s, whatever it’s called that year, side, and they’re in the – inverted commas – unglamorous bit and they therefore struggle sometimes to get traction with the rest of Whitehall.”

Former senior civil servant

“Everything is about power, so people are parsing power all the time. And so, having positional power is necessary but insufficient, and John Manzoni had positional authority, but he wasn’t regarded as a major source of power.”

Former permanent secretary

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<sup>9</sup> Rhys Clyne et al., *Whitehall Monitor 2023*, (Institute for Government, 2023).

“Permanent secretaries don’t mind being held to account by [the Cabinet Secretary], but they hated having it done by [the COO], like, ‘why is this functions guy asking me how I’m getting on with delivery of my minister’s manifesto pledges.’”

Former senior civil servant

One former senior political adviser succinctly captured the insufficient power vested in the ‘functions’ role: “Permanent secretaries ask themselves: ‘Do I take the phone call from [the COO]?’”

This reflects a wider civil service pathology that prizes ‘clever’ policy brains above operational expertise. As one former permanent secretary bluntly expressed it: “fast streamers don’t want to be John Manzoni, they want to be Jeremy Heywood”.

“Operational leadership and work is not valued...there’s a disrespect for expertise...they’re very snobby about operational jobs.”

Former senior political adviser

“It is the way the Civil Service defines its role...as providing the best advice to ministers...it is literally just an intellectual exercise...but successful strategy implementation is 90 per cent implementation and 10 per cent strategy, right. And of course, when you define the role as providing the best advice to ministers it’s the 10 per cent...and I think a lot stems from that...that’s what they’ve grown up in. That’s what they think they do, but I mean, it’s appalling.”

Former permanent secretary

“This is a question as old as the hills...how should the Cabinet Office be organised and how do you give parity of esteem to skills that are not just policy generalists.”

Former permanent secretary

“...implementation sits below policy. You know [named politician] used to describe it as the blue collar and the white collar. And the functions are seen as a bit blue collar as well, and they shouldn’t be because implementation is key.”

Former senior political adviser

This, combined with Whitehall’s siloed structure, means that securing the buy-in and action of departmental permanent secretaries is almost impossible. Ultimately, it is what prevents delivery excellence, which, in turn, means government struggles to deliver its political priorities.

### 3.3 Fiefdom government

The respective power of departments versus the centre is a key barrier to reform within the Whitehall model. From policy development through delivery to accountability, the department

is the primary unit. While No.10 – and at times HM Treasury – can veto or demand policy initiatives, the bureaucratic heft of the centre is no match for most delivery departments.

One former permanent secretary characterised the relationship as “rather like the balance between nations and the United Nations”, where the department is the nation and so “the permanent secretary and the secretary of state, not the Prime Minister, has the statutory authority.” Another former permanent secretary explained that “even the hard accountabilities, if you like, the political sort of incentives for the cross-cutting work, are much weaker.”

Interviewees argued that, with the department as the predominant Whitehall actor, boundaries between different parts of government are fiercely protected by both ministers and permanent secretaries – one manifestation of the “power hoarding bias” identified in *Reform’s* ‘Reimagining Whitehall: an essay’.<sup>10</sup> As a consequence, any pan-government initiative tends to encounter resistance, something which is consistently highlighted as a barrier to tackling complex policy problems, but is just as much a barrier to delivering corporate change in Whitehall.

“...it’s a culture that’s manifested in a structure which prioritises departmental autonomy, essentially. That your loyalty, and I used to say this when I was in government, is primarily to your department. Secondly, but quite a long way second, to the government of the day.”

Former permanent secretary

“There’s a strong incentive for anybody who’s ambitious to have complete control up to the edge of your boundary. And then particularly in a competitive and adversarial political system, to take no responsibility for anything on the other side. It’s a kind of sovereignty thing. And it applies to Whitehall as well. So, if you have 20 plus main government departments, you have an awful lot of those boundaries to deal with.”

Former permanent secretary

The result is a system that is more than capable of frustrating centrally driven reforms. In other words, there is an absence of collective accountability for the corporate health of the machinery of government.

“It’s extraordinary how non-compliant permanent secretaries and DGs are. The centre is something you doff you cap [to] when in view, but as soon as they’re out of view, you just manage it...”

Former permanent secretary

“All these people had talked about reform, then Gus [O’Donnell] comes in with his capability review programme for Whitehall, and I had to implement that. And God, you know, you should see some different sides of people then. One permanent secretary hauled me into his office, shut the door, and in a 35-word rant used the ‘f’ word 25

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<sup>10</sup> Simon Kaye, *Reimagining Whitehall: An Essay* (Reform, 2022).

times... Somebody who would go out and talk very positively about public reform. And it was because he felt his department was being criticised and didn't like it."

Former permanent secretary

"When the Cabinet Office tries to reform departments, there is quite a bit of eye rolling about the latest initiative to come out of the centre."

Former senior civil servant

"[Some permanent secretaries said] we're not going to roll it out in that department, it's going to cost too much and we're not doing it. And in effect could get away with it, because Francis [Maude] didn't have authority over their secretaries of state."

Former permanent secretary

"As a senior official, I tended to switch off [when people spoke about the latest reform effort]."

Former permanent secretary

"...very often you'll be working for a secretary of state who is, you know, probably interested in some aspects of the civil service reform agenda of the day, probably inclined to cherry-pick the bits which played to their sort of pet interests and prejudices, probably happy to ignore the stuff that they're not that interested in..."

Former senior civil servant

"I remember the [programme name] reform agenda, where we were sent a document about it. The Permanent Secretary ordered me to 'just bin it immediately'. Their view was that it was just the centre pissing around."

Former senior adviser

One former permanent secretary who had attempted cross-Whitehall civil service reform – and who agreed with the challenge described above – provided an additional observation: permanent secretaries who had been in post for some time prior to a reform effort were notably more intransigent. This, it was posited, was because they were invested in the status quo, and change represented a threat to their legacy.

Some interviewees reflected on how far even the Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service can get departments to act. There was a strong consensus that – as is the case with ministers – their endorsement is essential, but perhaps not sufficient. Talking about driving fundamental reform across Whitehall, one former cabinet minister said:

"...even if backed by the Prime Minister – even someone like Jeremy [Heywood] or Robin Butler who were very powerful people with very high reputations and a high degree of ministerial support, I don't think either of them could have [enacted

meaningful reform]...I think the answer is that you could only do it as Head of the Civil Service if you had quite a considerable core of permanent secretaries with you.”

One former Cabinet Secretary himself highlighted the stark difference between being a departmental permanent secretary and the most senior civil servant in the country:

“It was really striking going from being the Permanent Secretary of an operational department like the Home Office to become Cabinet Secretary. At the Home Office, I'd sometimes find I'd pulled levers and commissioned work, even if I didn't know I had, just by casual remarks ... so I had to learn to say 'OK everyone, just thinking out loud. No one's to do anything!' To being Cabinet Secretary, when I could barely find a lever that was connected to anything.”

It was suggested that one of the reasons why departmental permanent secretaries appear so “non-compliant” is that they do not view corporate reform as an essential part of their role. Providing policy advice to ministers is the priority, and, according to interviewees, the principal route to promotion. One former permanent secretary characterised the “natural space” of their fellow permanent secretaries as “operating like a principal private secretary”. This is precisely why, as discussed in Chapter 2, ministerial endorsement is essential.

“The first [barrier] is the way the civil service defines its role, right? So its role is defined as providing the best advice to ministers.”

Former permanent secretary

“The thing that Perm Secs seem to really, really love doing is that whole big policy stuff. What's the future of energy in this country – all this kind of stuff. But my view is very strongly that very few of them are Chief Executives of their organisations.”

Former permanent secretary

Another former permanent secretary talked about how decisions about promotions reinforce this problem:

“We'd persistently have the conversation where someone would say, 'Well, so-and-so, they haven't really shown themselves in the management context, basically there are some issues, but you know, they can learn that'. So it wasn't so much 'it doesn't matter' – you know, 'they're good with ministers, that's all that matters' – because people had kind of swallowed the pill that that isn't the answer. It was more, 'these are the things that you have to have, and which to some extent are regarded as either innate or, you know, necessary. And then other things could be learned.' So they were quite happy to promote people on the basis that they were very good with ministers, and they could learn how to be leaders.”

Another confirmed the lack of focus on corporate capability in the selection of permanent secretaries:



“So you want to talk about [corporate] change, but we could easily sit here and talk about information security or procurement or anything like that. It’s just not their bag, they don’t find it interesting. They made their career on solving difficult policy problems and that’s what got them promoted largely up the policy profession into being permanent secretaries.”

Former permanent secretary

### 3.4 From barrier to enabler

Discussion of these structural and cultural barriers surfaced differing views among interviewees about the right organisational design for the Cabinet Office and its leadership. Much of the debate centred around the most effective division of the three core functions: Head of the Civil Service, Cabinet Secretary and Permanent Secretary of the Cabinet Office.

Over the past century these three roles have been divided and combined in different ways.<sup>11</sup> The position of Cabinet Secretary was established during the First World War. The Head of the Home Civil Service, originally combined with the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury, was established as a stand-alone role in the late 1960s, leading a newly created Civil Service Department. It was then combined with the Cabinet Secretary role under Margaret Thatcher (who also abolished the Civil Service Department). The Cabinet Secretary was also de-facto permanent secretary at the Cabinet Office.

Then in 2012, with the retirement of (now Lord) Gus O’Donnell, what had become one person – by all accounts effectively – wearing three hats, was split into three separate positions. Jeremy Heywood took on the role of Cabinet Secretary, (later Lord) Bob Kerslake served as Head of the Civil Service (combining this with his full-time role as Permanent Secretary to the then Department for Communities and Local Government), and Ian Watmore briefly took on the role of Permanent Secretary at the Cabinet Office before being succeeded by (now) Sir Richard Heaton.

In addition, to complicate things further, when Kerslake stepped down as Head of the Home Civil Service in 2014, the title passed to Jeremy Heywood, but a new role, CEO of the Civil Service, was created. The CEO would “have executive control over the key functions that make government as a whole work more efficiently and improve Whitehall’s ability to deliver”.<sup>12</sup> This position was occupied by Sir John Manzoni, creating a fourth position until he also took on the role of Permanent Secretary of the Cabinet Office when Richard Heaton left the post.

Currently the now four roles are split between two people (Simon Case and Alex Chisholm), and the CEO of the Civil Service has become the COO. All of which shows a significant level of change at the very top of the civil service, and is illustrative of the fact that finding the right solution – one which gives adequate weight to both advising the PM and servicing the Cabinet, and stewarding the corporate health of the civil service – has proven elusive.

<sup>11</sup> Professor George Jones and Dr Andrew Blick, ‘The Cabinet Secretary - A Tale of Three Roles’, *HM Government*, 1 April 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Cabinet Office, ‘Chief Executive for Civil Service Appointed’, Press Release, 2 October 2014.

While there was broad consensus that, as noted above, the operational side lacked the status required to drive fundamental change across Whitehall, among the interviewees there was no consensus as to how to address this.

In general, interviewees felt that separating the Cabinet Secretary role from the position of Head of the Home Civil Service had been unwise. The Cabinet Secretary's proximity to the PM is key to their power – a separate Head of the Home Civil Service lacks this authority (as does a CEO or COO), meaning that the individual who leads Whitehall change has far less impact.

One former permanent secretary we interviewed recounted being asked by then Cabinet Secretary Jeremy Heywood why it didn't work having Bob Kerslake as Head of the Civil Service. The then permanent secretary responded: "Well, I'll give you lots of reasons. But the simple truth is his minister is Frances Maude and your minister is David Cameron. Who wins?" Other interviewees made similar observations:

"Splitting the civil service role from the Cabinet Secretary role was a disaster... It's so important that the Cabinet Secretary is the Head of the Civil Service, because the source of power that the Cabinet Secretary has comes from being Cabinet Secretary [and] they need to apply that power to being Head of the Civil Service."

Former permanent secretary

"Splitting the role can lead to a perception that the other guy [Head of the Home Civil Service] is just left doing the boring things."

Former senior political adviser

"The truth is, if the Cabinet Secretary is the PM's absolute right-hand person, then in a sense it doesn't matter whether they are called the Head of the Civil Service or not... They are always going to be the most powerful figure."

Former permanent secretary

Yet there was also a strong view that combining the roles was not working particularly well: "It's a trade-off between authority and presence, and time to allocate to reform", as one former senior political adviser put it. One former permanent secretary described the challenge:

"You cannot be the head of the home civil service, and the Cabinet Secretary, you can't do both those jobs, they are too big. I know, Jeremy attempted it, but he did clock the fact that he needed someone who could remove the sort of running of the service, which is why he got John [Manzoni].

... if you're involved in the whole 'number 10, what's the PM doing, actually running cabinet', all that kind of thing, you haven't got time to worry about procurement. You've got to have two people do it. And the second person, whether they're the chief executive, or whatever you want to call them, does really need to focus on the

mechanics of how the civil service works more effectively to achieve the policy outcomes of ministers.”

Another long-standing former permanent secretary described the conundrum at the heart of it:

“The problem, I think, is every time the civil service has tried having a Head of the Home Civil Service, who is separate from the Cabinet Secretary, it hasn’t quite worked. For various reasons...

I think there’s a fundamental problem, that logically you divide these functions out and you would have someone who was Head of the Civil Service, and actually, because of the centralisation of all these functions [in the Cabinet Office], you would probably have another senior-ish person who was the number two, sort of COO, doing all those things. And their job would be the management of this organisation. But it’s absolutely in the culture of the civil service that this won’t work. Because it’s about the anointing by the Prime Minister.”

In other words, splitting the roles is necessary – due to the scale of each task – but doomed to fail because the political patronage only exists for the Cabinet Secretary:

“The Cabinet Secretary, in theory at least, has a lot of access to the Prime Minister, the Prime Minister is not going to spend a lot of time with [a separate] Head of the Civil Service, because let’s face it, prime ministers are not really very interested in all that stuff. And so the feeling will be [the Head of the Civil Service will] lack credibility.”

Which has, the same interviewee argued, created the “very odd” current situation in which:

“The Cabinet Secretary...is no longer even in charge, really, in any meaningful way in the Cabinet Office. I mean, he’s not its accounting officer. You know, he’s just sort of floating around. What’s that about? Well answer is, the job’s too big.”

Which may just be the worst of all worlds, because, as the former permanent secretary put it:

“A cabinet secretary who is head of the civil service, but is not in any meaningful way *heading* the civil service. What the hell’s that?...The head on the civil service is thinking he’s too busy. Because he’s the sidekick of the Prime Minister.”

In a 2015 Institute for Government interview, then Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service Sir Jeremy Heywood outlined eight functions the role must cover, with leading the civil service coming in at number five.<sup>13</sup> Heywood said: “For many people this would be one of the biggest things they did”, yet he estimated he allocated just 25 per cent of his time to it, with a further 13 per cent spent on permanent secretary management. The remaining 62 per cent was dedicated to advising the PM, supporting the cabinet, driving the implementation of the PM’s priorities, and representing the civil service externally. Heywood also said “I simply

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<sup>13</sup> Institute for Government, ‘The Role of the Modern Cabinet Secretary: A Conversation with Sir Jeremy Heywood’, Webinar event, 23 September 2015.

couldn't do everything I am doing now, plus John [Manzoni]'s job, plus Cabinet Office Permanent Secretary. Not possible in my view".

Yet this raises two key questions. Can a cabinet secretary really do justice to the Head of the Civil Service role with so many other, more pressing, demands – won't the urgent always take precedence over the important? Or, as one former senior civil servant put it, the person in charge of reforming the civil service also has a job "which involves everything being on fire next door all the time". Yet, if the ability to successfully drive that reform comes from seniority and proximity to the Prime Minister, what is required to ensure a separate Head of the Civil Service/CEO has the status and levers to compel action?

### 3.4.1 Structural clarity

Interviewees had mixed views on how to resolve these issues, but several reflected on possible structural reforms. This included establishing a Prime Minister's Department:

"The intent...to create a Prime Minister's department was really an attempt to properly integrate the cabinet secretariat and the number 10 machine. And there's a very good case for that."

Former permanent secretary

"I would make the Cabinet Office, the PM's department formally. Officials in the Cabinet Office think they work for the Cabinet Secretary and the permanent secretary, they don't think they work for the Minister for the Cabinet Office... I would formally make the Cabinet Office the PMs department. And I would have either a Deputy Prime Minister or a very powerful minister in charge of it, and make sure that everyone knows that that is the place that helps to set the agenda with the PM, working for the PM. And that is the place that holds government departments to account for the delivery against that plan."

Former senior political adviser

It is worth noting that through 2008-2011, Jeremy Heywood served as Permanent Secretary, No.10 Downing Street, which included acting as Principal Private Secretary to the PM, and reporting directly to the Prime Minister and (then Sir) Gus O'Donnell as Cabinet Secretary. This did not go as far as creating a PM's department (then PM Gordon Brown wanted Heywood at No.10, and by then he was already a permanent secretary, hence the new role<sup>14</sup>), but it has been suggested that one reason that O'Donnell was able to so effectively wear all three hats was that Heywood was performing a good deal of the day-to-day PM adviser role, freeing up the Cabinet Secretary to do more on leading the civil service. It is also worth noting that their very close working relationship was clearly a big factor in how effective this double act proved to be – a point that could also apply with regards the relationships between senior officials in general and officials and ministers.

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<sup>14</sup> Suzanne Heywood, *What Does Jeremy Think?: Jeremy Heywood and the Making of Modern Britain* (UK: William Collins, 2021).

In other words, while the main aim of carving off a PM's department would be to formalise and boost the infrastructure focused on serving the PM and driving their agenda across government, another possible advantage is that it would leave the parts focused on corporate functionality as a separate entity and enable the Cabinet Secretary to spend more time on them.

To this end, a couple of interviewees reflected on whether the Civil Service Department should be formally brought back, given the lion's share of those working in the Cabinet Office are in fact working on civil service functionality and reform. As one former permanent secretary put it:

"It's just worth remembering what the centre, and particularly the Cabinet Office now, is. It really combines two things. It combines the cabinet secretariat, which is the part that works for the Cabinet Secretary, which is a few hundred people. And you would include the National Security Secretariat and all those kind of pieces within that, propriety and ethics, and all that kind of stuff. And then the bulk of those, whatever it is now, 7000-odd people, are in what we used to call the civil service department. And it's just it isn't called that anymore, because it was abolished. But that is fundamentally what it is...."

But I think if you had a perm sec of the civil service department – I'm not even sure they would have to be Head of the Civil Service – but with the responsibility for the running of the civil service, public service reform all the rest of it, who is working for a powerful sort of Michael Gove like CDL [Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster], or first secretary or Deputy Prime Minister, then I think you could perhaps see people who would aspire to that role."

The argument put forward was that creating a separate department, with serious political leadership, would attract a different calibre of civil service leader – "someone who's a big institutional leader".

"The chief executive role should be someone who's been in the system, but whose much more interested in the effectiveness of organisations, and the system as a whole.... [you need] someone in the system, who really cares passionately about delivery and operational effectiveness and improvement and systems thinking and all that kind of thing. And isn't particularly interested in 'well okay, you want to respond to the Ukraine invasion or whatever.'"

Former permanent secretary

In other words, split the Cabinet Office in two to create a Prime Minister's Department and a Civil Service Department, both with senior political leadership and each with appropriate civil service leaders.

"[The] answer really is to find a way of getting that job genuine, independent status on its own. So the people who don't want to be the Cab Sec, who don't feel they're equipped for the courtier-like world of Number 10, but want to have a big impact, have a sort of final top, top job in them. Because if you're a perm sec, like [named permanent

secretaries with deep delivery experience] or people who come up the operational side, you don't really have a route to the very top. Because you're not going to be Cabinet Secretary and you aren't going to be perm sec of the Treasury. And so the question is not how to create something that's as strong as the Cab Sec but to create something as strong as the Perm Sec of the Treasury... That means giving the same kind of status to operational experiences we tend to give to policy cleverness."

Former permanent secretary

### 3.4.2 Real power

Structural changes, while tackling the barrier to reform presented by a nebulous Cabinet Office, do not, however, address the power problem.

It was suggested that one way of providing both status and a tangible lever with which to drive cross-Whitehall reform would be to change the reporting structures:

"Most permanent secretaries would hate me for saying this. But, you know, part of the reason [the COO] doesn't have the levers is because they don't report to him and they don't want to... Why not have the CEO or COO be that effective deputy, why not give them line management of some of the bigger departments?"

Former senior civil servant

Other interviewees focused on the cultural capital garnered from having the ear of the PM.

"If the Cabinet Secretary had a chief operating officer or CEO of the civil service, and their job was basically make stuff happen, deliver, run the organisation, and that person was in and out of Number 10, with the Cabinet Secretary, and was seen by Number 10, as: 'kay, I get that the Cabinet Secretary is going to give me my advice on how I triangulate this difficult issue, but when we get to the conversation about how we're going to bloody implement this, you've got your chief operating officer in there as well. That is how it happens in a company, right.'"

Former senior civil servant

"The person driving civil service reform needs to sit with the PM several times a day."

Former senior civil servant

It was also suggested that physical proximity to the PM should be considered. Clearly this would not work in a model within which the PM-focused elements of the Cabinet Office were carved off from what would then become a department for the civil service, but under the current model, seating the CEO/COO with the Cabinet Secretary in No10 could be a key signifier of power.

## 3.5 Conclusion

Interviewees were consistent in their view that the executive centre is responsible for the corporate health of the system. They were equally consistent in their view that, as currently constituted, the centre is unable to fully execute this responsibility.

The lack of clarity and/or competing priorities in the Cabinet Office means that activities relating to the corporate health of Whitehall are not given the attention and impetus they require. Structural and cultural factors mean it is almost impossible to drive change cross-government. And no answer has yet been found as to the optimal model for filing the roles of Cabinet Secretary, Head of the Civil Service and Permanent Secretary of the Cabinet Office.

## 4. From idea to delivery: the role of permanent secretaries

***“You can’t say reform the organisation to someone who’s never run an organisation”***

***Former senior civil servant***

Interviewees were consistent in their view that permanent secretaries are fundamental to the success of any reform programme. They are the bridge between the executive centre and departmental delivery.

In the previous chapter, the fragmented, ‘fiefdom’ model was identified as a barrier. This chapter explores the impact of cognitive homogeneity. One of the key barriers to reform cited by interviewees relates to the diversity of career experience among civil service leaders. This was linked to two challenges: generating ideas for reform and embracing the need for reform.

Longstanding government experience does, of course, yield significant benefits, not least a strong understanding of the complex environment that working in Whitehall requires. As many interviewees pointed out, including those with private sector experience, leading a public sector organisation is very different from leading a business: “in general the public service world is a lot harder than the private sector world”.

“...the people who join the civil service from the bottom and work their way up are utterly brilliant, they’re usually highly talented, very well-motivated and they learn loads of stuff that they probably don’t realise they know. They’re very good at political handling, they have a political nose for things, they are calm in crisis...”

Former permanent secretary

### 4.1 Cut from the same cloth

However, this deep but singular experience also creates limitations. Having a cadre of senior civil service leaders who have almost exclusively spent their working lives in Whitehall, and have similar backgrounds, creates a relatively insular culture, one which may not be naturally disposed to change. This is partly because those who might lead reform efforts have limited understanding of how things could be different – they have no comparator – but also because they are comfortable with how things already work. “They never did that, why would they tell others to?”, asked one former permanent secretary. Or to put it another way, the system worked for them, why change it?

A majority of the people interviewed raised this as a barrier to identifying the need for, and thus embracing, reform. Another former permanent secretary talked about the “narrowness of



experience” combining with the “huge self-confidence” of a more privileged background acting as a barrier to reform.

“There’s a lot of people who are pretty much the same. They either went to selective grammar school or private school. They went to Oxbridge largely. They largely joined the Fast Stream. They’ve known each other since they were 24, now they happen to be 48 and permanent secretaries.”

Former permanent secretary

“Typically, people who have spent their entire career in something don’t want to change things. They don’t argue for something different to come next because they don’t think it is important. It’s always easier to see opportunities for reform when you haven’t spent your career in one place.”

Former permanent secretary

“There’s a problem with the culture, because most people joined at the bottom of the ladder and so senior people have been there their whole lives and don’t realise it can be different...the process of reinvention from within is really difficult.”

Former senior adviser

If those who have only ever experienced the civil service are unlikely to be interested in fundamentally reshaping the system they grew up in, then overcoming this barrier means introducing a change of perspective.

“It’s very difficult to break the cycle, the only way to break the cycle is to have people with different experiences.”

Former permanent secretary

“It’s not that outsiders are special, but they have a different experience.”

Former permanent secretary

## 4.2 Disrupting the status quo

That can be achieved in one of two ways: requiring civil servants to obtain alternative experience in order to progress, and/or bringing in people from outside (including from other parts of the public sector such as local government).

On the former, interviewees generally agreed that Whitehall as a system does not reward senior staff for gaining external experience and expertise, rather it creates implicit disincentives for doing so: “if you’re outside, you’re out of mind”, according to one permanent

secretary. In fact, another former permanent secretary suggested it would be seen as “bad for your career”.

“...if you ask them about their secondment programme, where we advocated sending civil servants out into the big world for a few years... It started in the Civil Service Reform Plan in 2012 and I think there have been about 20 in the year or whatever. It's not a system that's managed properly and it really should be.”

Former senior political adviser

“It's absolutely essential that there's permeability, and both ways...we don't have that organised flow as well as we should.”

Former permanent secretary

In terms of bringing external experience into Whitehall, interviewees were clear this was a good thing, as long as it was done at the right level – namely below permanent secretary level.

“Don't come in at the very highest level on your first job. Come in a notch below, learn what planet you've landed on, which way is up and then move on... If I'd landed as a perm sec straight out, I think I would have struggled.”

Former permanent secretary

“It is complex, so I think you probably don't bring in people as perm secs. I think you probably bring them in at DG level.”

Former permanent secretary

“It's not wise to parachute in external people as permanent secretaries. The complexity of the role and the politics means it's better to come in just below that level and then move up.”

Former permanent secretary

Even then, recruiting talented people at the right level is only part of the process. The Baxendale Report, published in 2014, found that the civil service demonstrated “an unwillingness to learn new ways of doing things, or to harness the experience that external hires bring to the organisation.”<sup>15</sup> It also described the experience of new entrants who “find the culture closed, resembling ‘a club you cannot join – a little like Lord's Cricket Club’.”

Multiple interviewees described a similar situation, in which external talent struggles to navigate the complex Whitehall system:

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<sup>15</sup> Catherine Baxendale, *How to Best Attract, Induct and Retain Talent Recruited into the Senior Civil Service* (Cabinet Office, 2014).

“And, you know, a lot of people from outside...spend their time trying to find [levers in Whitehall] as opposed to being used for the expertise that they’re meant to be bringing.”

Former senior political adviser

“There were attempts to bring senior business people in from time to time – I suppose a bit like Kate Bingham – and most of them crashed and burned to be honest, because the culture was so different. They just couldn’t cope with it.”

Former senior adviser

“You’re bringing in folks from outside but without a clearly defined remit where they, their external experience, is brought to bear in a way that people understand... bringing in random folk from outside and saying, ‘well, you’re from outside, you’ll do a better job’ is a bit unfair on the people coming from outside...So external people? Yes, but it has to be in the context of a senior leadership team that knows what it’s doing, where it’s going.”

Former permanent secretary

### 4.3 Conclusion

Interviewees were clear that if permanent secretaries are not on board with reform programmes, then there is no realistic way of moving from idea to implementation. In practice, only with their buy-in can the barrier of departmental fiefdoms be overcome.

This is where the cognitive homogeneity comes in. Interviewees consistently spoke of a narrowness of experience among the top leaders in the system leading to a status quo bias – that “single mindset” identified in ‘Reimagining Whitehall: an essay’ – and therefore acting as a fundamental barrier to reform. Interviews were also consistent in their view that greater porosity is key, but that the movement between sectors that would develop different experiences and perspectives is at best ad hoc and at worst discouraged, and that external hires are too often poorly integrated.

## 5. Implementing reform: the art of delivery

*“You need to decide this is important and I’m going to devote focus and resource to it.”*

*Former senior civil servant*

Even if the centre were set up in a way which prioritised the corporate health of the government machine, and permanent secretaries were universally responsive, significant barriers remain to successfully implementing change across Whitehall.

In part, this reflects the extraordinary complexity of trying to shift how government works. As several interviewees pointed out, this is a much more challenging task than delivering change programmes in the private sector – Whitehall reform efforts must navigate a far more complex set of stakeholders as well as a political context which, especially in recent years, has proven turbulent, offering plenty of distractions from the work of corporate change.

However, while clearly a factor, this contextual point alone is not a sufficient explanation for why reform has been so slow or partial. Whitehall reform efforts have long proven difficult, and the recent political upheaval can, as several interviewees suggested, become a convenient excuse for those resistant to change to continue down the path of inaction. As one former permanent secretary put it:

*“You’ve had quite crushing public finances, the huge distraction of Brexit, politicians who themselves are very distracted by the whole political context – which provides you with in a sense of context, where some people will say it’s excusable...but that sort of set of excuses, I think, doesn’t take you all the way there.”*

*Former permanent secretary*

In fact, a few interviewees noted that crises can provide burning platforms for change.

*“The final thing I said to [ministers before leaving] was: you better fucking move quickly. Because things are freezing over...The opportunity to change will go. You’ve had Brexit, you had COVID. That is an absolute gift to stimulate the change. And if you don’t, people will drop back into their old habits. And you’ll lose the opportunity that only comes up every 100 years to transform.”*

*Former senior civil servant*

Rather than, or perhaps in addition to, political failure to act, interviewees identified a combination of factors which help explain the failure to implement reform.

Interviewees stressed that successful change initiatives rely on setting out a clear purpose and communicating the value of reform to the civil servants who will be tasked with delivering

it, dedicating sufficient time and resources to implementation, and ensuring the right incentives and accountability processes are in place.

## 5.1 Clear purpose and effective messaging

Interviewees repeatedly highlighted the need for both clarity of purpose and clarity of benefit. While this may sound obvious, in a fragmented system lacking the direct corporate levers to command change, winning over those who will ultimately be putting that change into practice is essential.

First, any reform programme must set out exactly what problem it is trying to solve. This has not always been the case historically, as Whitehall expert Peter Thomas argued in a 2020 paper: “an enduring weakness of corporate leadership in the civil service is the lack of time spent really nailing down what reforms are trying to achieve.”<sup>16</sup>

Several of those interviewed talked of solutions being put forward, particularly by politicians, based on a general sense of the need for reform, which have little chance of gaining traction.

“I think, when successive civil service reform things came along, there was a mixture of, on the one hand, sort of intellectual curiosity, because actually, most people who work in the civil service, particularly at senior levels, are deeply interested in the civil service. And generally, in my experience, not that defensive of civil service reform. They’re quite happy to accept a degree of ‘yes, these are the problems, some of them are long standing, well known, etc.’. But coupled with a kind of eye rolling, ‘oh, here we go again. It’s the latest fad, usually driven by a particular minister’.”

Former senior civil servant

“I think, with civil service reform, you need to persuade people that there is a need for change, and that you understand that this change solves a real problem that we really have.”

Former permanent secretary

“What is the purpose of your reform?...reform for reform’s sake is not what this is about, it’s got to be for a proper purpose.”

Former permanent secretary

“If I had one criticism, we weren’t sufficiently smart in thinking about – if the ideas were fairly complex – how we get them across. And pursuing them sort of consistently so that you built one thing on another.”

Former permanent secretary

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Thomas, ‘Building Transformative Capability through Civil Service Reform’, *Administration* 68, no. 4 (December 2020).

As the last quote shows, once the specific problem and appropriate solution has been identified, the messaging becomes crucial. Interviewees emphasised that Whitehall reform can only be implemented successfully if those leading it can communicate the value of change to those who will ultimately deliver it. This requires a positive vision to be articulated, whereas, too often, the demand for change comes from a generalised assumption of inadequacy.

It is clear that political attacks on the civil service – regardless of whether the criticism is rooted in genuine and legitimate performance issues – create an instinctive defensiveness which ultimately undermines change in the long-run. When it comes to messaging, interviewees were clear that changing the Whitehall machine requires an approach that seeks to build consensus and support.

“You know, you don’t go into an ultra-large organisation and change it by telling people how shit they are. That’s a bad idea, right?”

Former senior civil servant

“I do think that politicians coming along and saying it’s all your fault is (a) untrue and (b) unhelpful.”

Former permanent secretary

“You’ve got to come at this from a love of public services, not a hatred of them. People are very happy to engage in conversations about reform when they believe that we’re all on the same side.”

Former permanent secretary

By contrast, a far more effective approach to ensuring civil servants back reform is to demonstrate the value it will offer in tackling issues they care about. This not only builds support by illustrating how reformers’ interests are aligned with those of the wider civil service, it also develops a more inclusive conversation that can help to build reforming movements (see section 6.2). As one former senior adviser put it, when it comes to implementing change: “You want conversion not compliance.”

Linking a fresh reform programme to common interests – whether solving problems or providing opportunities – was discussed by several interviewees. One senior adviser tasked with driving change in departments talked of the need to ground reform in reality – to be able to answer “what is useful about this?”, in order to overcome the common narrative that it’s “the centre pissing around”.

“I think [with] civil service reform, you need to start by persuading people that there is a need for change and that you understand that this change solves a real problem that we really have.

Former permanent secretary

“A guy called [named individual who led an organisation overseen by the department] completely and utterly embraced this idea. It’s like, ‘well hang on a minute, I can actually take responsibility for my organisation. And I can recycle my efficiencies. And I can think about my prioritisation and all this kind of stuff, within envelopes and so on’. And so [they] completely and utterly embraced it.”

Former permanent secretary

This also means leaning in to change where there is appetite for it. One former permanent secretary talked about a project they were involved in with senior civil servants below director general level who were energetic about Whitehall reform.

Tangible, “good” ideas were put forward to support a key reform priority – digitisation – with a plan to present them at a ‘top 200’ event.<sup>17</sup> The then Cabinet Secretary rejected the ideas as insufficiently “game changing”. “Reform”, the former permanent secretary concluded, appeared to be “a document...not organic change and people then given licence to do things differently.”

This was echoed by another former permanent secretary who lamented an unwillingness among senior leaders to just “do something”.

“The civil service culture is deeply flawed in many ways...what I observe is a culture which is risk averse, where time is a free good – it doesn’t matter how long it takes, there’s no pace – where perfection is the enemy of ‘it’s good enough, let’s just go and do something, let’s get some momentum going’.”

In other words, a key ingredient of success is buy-in, and to secure buy-in people need to understand the value of any reform and they need to feel a sense of shared ownership. One former permanent secretary described why a reform programme they had led was successful:

“Very good people were involved...So you had this groundswell of ‘this is the place to be, this is a programme that’s important, here’s ways of making it even better’. It was an optimistic, positive thing. And also, it was driven from inside the civil service – so, almost from the beginning, the flavour was ‘OK, you’ve got the prime minister, and we had a very good minister as well, [name], and they were very supportive, but it was a civil service thing, what the civil service wanted to do.’”

Former permanent secretary

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<sup>17</sup> The ‘Top 200’ group refers to the most senior 200 civil servants in Whitehall. The exact definition of ‘most senior’ has varied over time, however, as an example, the 2016 Civil Service Management Code used salary bandings to determine this group – stating that the “Top 200 posts are defined as SCS Payband 3 and above.” (See HM Government, *Civil Service Management Code*, 2016.)

## 5.2 Getting serious about change management

“I hope that you’ve walked away from this thinking that it’s unbelievably difficult to do [systemic reform]. You’ve really got to put a lot of time and effort into it.”

Former permanent secretary

Having a clear objective and articulating it in a compelling way is an essential prerequisite of successful reform, but, as the quote above captures, dedicating serious time and effort to delivering change is the make or break of success.

Interviewees stressed that, even in times of relative political quietude, where Whitehall reform has struggled to bed in it has often been due to inadequate recognition of just what it takes to deliver a major change programme. The truth is, as previously noted, that delivering meaningful change in government is more complex than delivering change in large private sector organisations. There are more stakeholders to navigate and interests to balance.

“You need to get all of this into the minds of a group of people that starts with the Cab Sec, goes out to the Permanent Secretaries, involves the trade unions, the media and so on. And, of course, you have to carry successive governments with you as you do so... It is a colossal ship.”

Former cabinet minister

At the most basic level, implementing a Whitehall change programme requires considerable time, and dedicated resources, and as interviewees consistently pointed out, that sort of commitment is rarely applied.

One former permanent secretary talked about the general approach in Whitehall being more like a “parody of tough change management”. As one former senior civil servant put it, “[y]ou need to decide this is important and I’m going to devote focus and resource to it.”

One former permanent secretary drew a comparison with the level of investment he had seen in business:

“You look at change programmes in the corporate world, they don’t enter them lightly because they know they are difficult things to manage... I worked for a [private company] that did a big change programme. I said to the CEO: ‘How much of your time are you spending on this?’ ‘50%’. ‘For how long?’ ‘Six months’. Because you know, this was mission critical to the business...”

Former permanent secretary

Another permanent secretary who led multiple major departmental change programmes talked about needing “enough leadership bandwidth”, and explained that it took “incredible investment in the leadership of the organisation to think and behave differently”.



“We created a unit that reported directly to me...that looked at organisational design and the leadership of the transformation programme, as we called it. So we had two directors that...did nothing else but work for me and think about transformation, how do we get everyone to buy in, how do we communicate it, track progress, that sort of thing. That I think made a significant difference to implementation.”

In addition to appointing dedicated senior leaders whose sole job it was to deliver the change programme, the permanent secretary also “really seriously invested in [the departmental leadership’s] capacity and capability to think, to act, to behave, to do, and so on”.

“We scooped up the 100 biggest leaders in the organisation and said ‘we’re currently here, and we want to go over there, you know what our mission is’... and we put 100 people through an 18-month development programme to make them think more strategically, more like [the department] is in a system...to make them think much, much more about what it is we’re trying to do...we’re trying to completely change the mindset...As that programme developed, more and more of the 100 bought into it, at that point it’s beginning to penetrate down the organisation.”

Former permanent secretary

Interviewees recognised that change takes time – “the big question, actually, was about sequencing and communication and in my view *sticking at things*” (former permanent secretary) – and rarely is enough time allocated, over a suitably long timeframe.

### 5.3 Conclusion

Change management is time-consuming, often complex, and requires significant investment of time and energy – particularly from an organisation’s senior leadership. Securing buy-in throughout the organisation is essential, and that means being clear about the purpose and value of any initiative, not just at an organisational level, but to those impacted. Serious management time must be dedicated to ensuring success, with visible leadership from the very top.

Interviewees were clear that these basics were too often missing, reducing the likelihood of successful implementation.

## 6. Continuous evolution: towards a self-reforming system

*“It’s just a constant round of reform and renewal”*

*Former permanent secretary*

As several interviewees argued, reform is never finished. If all the barriers identified in the chapters above were addressed, far more change programmes would achieve the desired outcomes. But the risk is that change is seen as a one-off event, rather than a mentality underpinned by a culture of continuous improvement. Big, bold reform programmes will always be part of the answer, but they can’t be the whole answer, small or incremental change is also important.

A high-performing Whitehall is one in which each person feels a responsibility for its corporate health, and leaders act as stewards for this. A self-reforming system should be the goal.

### 6.1 Whitehall leaders as stewards

A 2005 *Reform* paper discussed the challenge of ensuring top civil servants have sufficient accountability for managing the system: “...go to Whitehall and ask: ‘Who manages?’ It’s not the politicians. But neither is it Whitehall’s permanent secretaries, who lack the fundamental attributes required of the manager – delegated authority for which they are personally accountable.”<sup>18</sup>

Interviewees for this paper, almost two decades on, implied that accountability structures remain inadequate and suggested that senior civil servants can be resistant to initiatives aimed at changing that.

This lack of accountability compounds the problems identified in previous chapters. Permanent secretaries, who see delivering against a minister’s short-term priorities as their primary role, know they are unlikely to be held accountable for the long-term corporate performance of their departments.

In this context, permanent secretaries fail to act as stewards of the civil service. Interviewees indicated that a reformed model is required in which the democratically-endorsed priorities of ministers are delivered, but which also establishes the permanent civil service as stewards of the long-term health of the government machine. As has already been argued, the former is only really possible if the latter is true. Given the strength of departmental fiefdoms, corporate change will only be achieved if permanent secretaries and senior leaders commit to becoming active stewards.

<sup>18</sup> Rupert Darwall, *The Reluctant Managers* (Reform, 2005).

Several former permanent secretaries pointed to cultural barriers that mitigate against the sort of accountability that would lead to stewardship:

“...the big problem with all these promotion systems is everyone refers decisions up all the time...And they’ve never grown the muscles of proper decision making, taking accountability, owning the judgement, holding yourself responsible afterwards. Whereas if you’ve been in the police or the army, operating overseas in smaller teams, all that kind of thing, you have no choice but to do that, because that is just the way you grew up and learn those habits very early on in your 20s.”

Former permanent secretary

“Anybody who has run large organisations spends their time worrying about how you build systemic capability in that organisation, how you build competence, how you grow people, how you create...Well, you provide them accountability, you give them increasing amounts of accountability, you worry about who you pick on your team, you feel accountable for an individual’s development, you do all of those things, right. And what that builds over time is what I’ve come to call systemic capability of that organisation...”

The civil service allows itself to delegate upwards, not downwards... waiting for permission. And at some level, yes, the boss has to say, yes. But if the system had greater systemic capability, it felt greater accountability for its own future, it would need that permission less.”

Former permanent secretary

“Who wants to be held to account? If you have a choice to be held to account for something or not be held to account I think I’ll choose the second option. It’s not comfortable.”

Former permanent secretary

For some interviewees, this was in part the result of high ‘churn’, whereby civil servants frequently move posts. This means that officials are rarely held accountable for the end-to-end delivery of things they work on. As one former politician explained:

“If you have the whirligig going on, you can guarantee that there won’t be anyone at the beginning of the process who’s there at the end of the process, and therefore nobody will be taking any kind of serious responsibility. And nobody really knows anything.”

Former cabinet minister

Conversely, the permanence of the civil service, and the fact that senior civil servants often do outlive ministers, also acts against accountability: the “reverse thrust mode” is applied (former cabinet minister). Interviewees suggested that permanent secretaries use this permanence to avoid focusing on corporate reform:

“There was a sense that canny old hands had seen you before and would see the next lot of reformers too... Permanent secretaries know how to ride out the storm.”

Former senior adviser

One interviewee contrasted this with the approach taken in some other countries, where political turnover is seen not as a blocker to reform efforts or an excuse for inaction, but as the very reason why civil servants should lead it:

“It creates a different environment in which the ministers come and go, and actually, they’re only here on a three-year electoral cycle. So that really reinforces the idea – they come and go, we civil servants are here, we are the permanent civil service, we are here to steward good governance within this country.”

Former senior civil servant

This is not to suggest politicians should have no involvement – as discussed in Chapter 2 – but that they should set out their political priorities, set the broad terms for what the future civil service should look like, and then senior Whitehall leaders should drive and embed reform.

“In a large corporate, the Board will not say: ‘You need to improve performance or what’s your talent pipeline?’ But the Board will say: ‘These are the things you’ve got to deliver. I want a strategy on this and go away, chief executive, and deliver something deliverable, and then do it.’”

Former senior civil servant

“In general, the corporate leadership of the civil service should be civil servant-led, but it should be responsive to the political agendas of the day.”

Former permanent secretary

“In your ideal world, you’d have a structure where ministers would say, I want a civil service, which at the end of this Parliament is, you know, measurably better at the following three or four things. How you do it is up to you, but I need to see that improvement. And I need regular reporting on it.”

Former senior civil servant

In other words, permanent secretaries should *lead* the civil service, continually ensuring that it is equipped to best serve the public and the administration of the day.

“For me, the idea that you’d be thinking about the stewardship of an institution, and you’d be trying to position it somewhere beyond the horizon of the present group of ministers, it seemed to me self-evident that’s what you would do. And that’s the real obligation on the people at the top.”

Former permanent secretary

Or as civil service reform expert Peter Thomas put it:

“The question is, what leadership do you need? I think it’s step up as corporate leaders...what leadership does it take individually and collectively to allow a lot of the latent capability that’s there to really deliver.”

That sort of visible leadership was identified not just as necessary from a system perspective, but also to the successful delivery of individual reform programmes:

“So, say this is the programme that we’re trying to deliver...I really own this. It’s my programme, yeah? Very visible leadership that I’m driving this reform programme, I’m not sort of burying it in the organisation somewhere assuming it will happen.”

Former permanent secretary

“And so, for example, the first thing I did was refused to have an office or a desk. And I said: ‘If I’m going to ask all of you to do it, I’m going to do it.’ And me and my little private office team used to do what we called extreme hotdesking. So we used to go into a different bit of the department every week and just plonk ourselves down and sit there and spend the week with them. That just meant there was a bit of visibility, people could see that it was do as I do, not as I say. I think that definitely helps.”

Former permanent secretary

This again raises the question of accountability. Just as a majority of interviewees talked about the role delivery experience should play in promotion to permanent secretary, questions were raised about the role that improving the health of the broader institution should play in permanent secretary appraisal.

## 6.2 Building movements

Ensuring that permanent secretaries feel an obligation to promote reform and act as true stewards of the civil service, regardless of the current incentives they face, is essential. But embedding reform also means building the systemic capacity needed for change to become business-as-usual for the civil service, rather than the product of sporadic transformation programmes.

“There’s a natural flow to these things. There are some reforms, some excitement, you move something on, then it’s steady states, then it declines. And then it’s time to move on again. And it’s just a constant round of reform and renewal...”

Former permanent secretary

This means viewing reform as more than just an elite activity. Instead, the aim must be to build movements which can help ensure successful delivery of both the current reform programme, but also future waves of corporate change.

Several interviewees described their experience of broadening the ownership of reform programmes, identifying pro-reform staff who could later function as change agents and help to persuade those who are more hesitant. However, developing these movements requires effective and persuasive corporate leaders to be in place – several former permanent secretaries raised concerns about how the civil service now builds these skills among its most promising talent.

Two former permanent secretaries – both leaders of successful change programmes – described how they sought to build movements that would embed reform in the long-term:

“There was a very deliberate sense to create support groups across Whitehall, at levels below the permanent secretary. This was not a top-down thing focused on permanent secretaries [alone]...[To support] the drive for how you took it forward, we created networks of enthusiasts.”

Former permanent secretary

“We shipped in [named company] as a learning provider, scooped up the 100 biggest leaders in the organisation...and we put them through an 18-month development programme to make them think more strategically...And then we, unbelievably, tried to scoop up the next 8000 people and put them through a shortened programme, to begin to make them think more about, OK your job for however long has been to do X. But we need you to think about how do I relate to the customer? Is this customer friendly?”

Former permanent secretary

Another former permanent secretary described their experience of a private sector change programme which reached staff throughout the organisation:

“And everywhere you went in the building they were visual reminders of the [change] programme. And there was constant checkpoints and it engaged everyone in the business. And that was what I would think of as a serious change programme. The civil service stuff never gets dropped that deep.”

Former permanent secretary

Another benefit of this approach – of creating “networks of enthusiasts” – is that it can uncover advocates previously unidentified and who can generate ideas and help embed change for the long-term. In addition, when civil servants see the tangible impacts of reform they have been involved in, they can become more disposed to changing the system in future or push for change themselves.

“The tragedy, in a sense, of what I experienced through this [rejected reform programme]...[was that] we discovered a whole group of people who are really interested in making change happen, thinking about it in very imaginative ways...And they came up with some really brilliant ideas.”

Former permanent secretary

“Interestingly, [my organisation] was no longer the worst performer on the Civil Service Staff Survey, because people were like, ‘Oh, actually, I’m quite proud of what we’re doing. This is good.’ And we instituted this programme called co-creation, which I know sounds a bit management speak-y, but it’s essentially, ‘OK, I’ve got this problem, we, the management, don’t know how to solve it. We invite you into the conversation’.”

Former permanent secretary

“What a lot of the people...then started to do [when they joined new departments]...was to argue for things that sometimes [they] were originally opposing...they then became reformers themselves.”

Former permanent secretary

This is particularly important given that, as one former permanent secretary explained, the majority of people are indifferent, but can be influenced either way – to support or to oppose the reforms.

“You generally have 20 per cent enthusiasts, 20 per cent Luddites and 60 percent in the middle. It’s how you approach the 60 per cent that matters, which 20 per cent do they tack towards.”

Former permanent secretary

### 6.3 Building future leaders

In Chapter 4, a lack of external experience was identified as a barrier to permanent secretaries driving change. This lack of exposure to alternative organisational models and ways of working was also identified by interviewees among more junior ranks. This lack of porosity within Whitehall, it was argued, undermines efforts to embed a long-term culture of change within the civil service – as one former permanent secretary put it, “No organisation transforms itself via people who’ve been there forever”.

“...we need more crossover between public and private sectors. We need more people with private sector skills working in the public sector and more people who have experienced the public sector working in the private sector.”

Former cabinet minister

“Porous I think is the right word. It does feel too closed.”

Former senior civil servant

“The civil servants there [in France] spend time in industry, don’t they? And there’s more interchange like that. So, there must be some way that we could work in that we would have more of a kind of mixed economy.”

Former permanent secretary

Interviewees also highlighted the need to increase exposure to other sectors through training and development opportunities.

One former permanent secretary talked about introducing external participants at National Leadership College sessions.

“The idea was to bring the top of the civil service together with the rest of the public service, and I sort of reformed the top 200 civil servants to make it a top 300, to include 100 or plus people from outside the civil service as well. And I think the national leadership thing was really a great success. People really loved the interaction with others. I think that was a good thing – it ventilated that experience of civil servants in particular.”

However, interestingly, and reinforcing the observations in Chapter 4, the interviewee went on to explain that the very top of Whitehall, the permanent secretaries, were less supportive.

“The Top 300 thing was really interesting. The DGs and co really enjoyed it. They really enjoyed spending time with chief constables and heads of NHS Trusts and all that stuff. Some of the core perm sec policy people, in the policy profession, utterly loathed it. They said: ‘When can we have our own session where we talk among ourselves?’ I said, but your job isn’t to talk among yourselves. Your job isn’t policy, its policy delivery, which means system leadership...”

[The purpose was to] get a group of people who are much more comfortable talking to themselves, who are, as a self-selecting metropolitan elite, quite inward looking, and who slide into the view that the preoccupations of Whitehall and Westminster are what it’s all about – to force some ventilation. And to get some different experiences. And by the way, the more junior civil servants we did absolutely loved it, we created ad hoc teams, director level and below, across departments and into these big operational structures. And you could just see the buzz that was among these people to deal some cross cutting project.”

## 6.4 Conclusion

High-performing organisations adapt to changing circumstances, they embrace new technologies and ways of working, they test and learn and they continuously evolve. They are self-reforming.

Interviewees were clear that for Whitehall to sustain reform, and ensure it is always as effective as it can be, its leaders must act as constant stewards, and it must embed this culture at every level.



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## 7. Conclusion

Whitehall's ability to serve the government of the day is entirely dependent on how well it functions – its corporate health. Yet too often, reforms that would improve its performance are deprioritised in favour of 'serving' ministers. This is a false dichotomy – as this paper has argued, the latter is not possible without the former.

Over the previous six chapters, this paper has explored, through the personal experiences of former Whitehall leaders and advisers, why it has proven so difficult to drive change. While acknowledging the complexity of the Whitehall system, and the challenges of operating in a political context and an environment of heightened uncertainty, interviewees were clear that structural, process and cultural barriers are impeding reform efforts.

The barriers identified include:

- A lack of clarity about who is responsible for instigating change
- Ministerial uninterest
- A poorly defined and weak executive centre
- A bias for policy and ministerial handling skills over corporate and organisational capabilities in promotion
- Departmental fiefdoms
- A leadership cadre with limited external experience and a status quo bias
- Insufficient investment in change management and poor communication of the tangible value for reform
- Limited attempts to build enthusiasts for reform throughout the civil service
- Limited exposure at all levels to alternative organisational models and ways for working
- The absence of a self-reforming, or stewardship, mentality

However, interviewees also highlighted approaches to reform that had been successful – where visible leadership was in place, where serious investment was allocated, and where deep operational experience was deployed. They provided examples of where “networks of enthusiasts” had been built and buy-in secured. In short, they showed that Whitehall reform is possible. The task is to enable that system-wide, to make the ingredients for success systemic.

From identifying the barriers to reform – and those examples of success – solutions can be put forward. That process will form the next stage of *Reform's* 'Reimagining Whitehall' programme.

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