



## Debate: Trust and accountability—consequences for the quality of policy advice

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## Debate: Trust and accountability—consequences for the quality of policy advice

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Civil servants in the UK have no legal personality (Armstrong, 1985; Richards & Smith, 2016). Ministers do, however, and that means that every decision taken, or action performed by the civil service, is done for or on behalf of the relevant secretary of state. Nevertheless, the business of governing is massive, and it is unreasonable to expect ministers to personally take every decision necessary for the effective functioning of government (Lodge, 2014; Rhodes, 2013). That is where the civil service should add value: by conducting relevant analysis in support of ministerial decision making delivered through the provision of advice (Lodge et al., 2013). In some cases, ministers may even delegate certain decisions down to civil servants, particularly those that are process-heavy, like those connected with individual claims for benefit, or the release of prisoners on license. While ministers may rely upon advice in making a decision, or delegate certain matters in order not to overburden themselves, they cannot delegate accountability for decisions; that stays with the minister, save in certain specified circumstances prescribed by law (Lodge, 2014). Trust is therefore important if the relationship between ministers and officials is to function effectively.

### The blame game

The significance of trust has been a feature of administrative models since at least the Tang Dynasty in the 7th century (Hsieh, 1925). It is also central to the role of the British civil service (Wilson, 2008). In truth, the relationship of trust between ministers and officials has often been strained, with ministers increasingly likely to openly discuss perceived obfuscation by officials and even publicly blame officials for failure (Diamond, 2019; Public Administration Select Committee, 2013). Ministers approach this blame game as a necessity and are more likely to attempt to offload accountability than they are to accept it themselves (Diamond, 2019; Rhodes et al., 2009). This is likely due to the emerging predilection amongst the mainstream media to call for ministerial resignation in the event of even modest policy failure, as if there is no lesser form of sanction (Dewan & Myatt, 2010); such absolutism has diminished the effectiveness of ministerial accountability (Rhodes et al., 2009). The apportionment of blame onto officials is not a sport isolated to ministers, with the UK parliament increasingly adopting a tendency to hold officials personally accountable for policy failures they have been involved in (Stark, 2011). In some cases, the desire to hold officials

personally accountable has led parliament to summon named officials notwithstanding objections from their secretary of state (Constitution Committee, 2012). Permanent secretaries have themselves sometimes failed to enforce the Westminster model of ministerial accountability appropriately and have instead accepted responsibility for failure (for example the West Coast Main Line—see *ibid.*). Bernard Jenkin expressed this evolution in straightforward terms: ‘the idea that [civil servants] are unfortunate, beleaguered public servants who cannot speak for themselves is of an era that has passed. They are being held, certainly by the public, to be more directly accountable and it would seem odd if Parliament did not do the same’ (*ibid.*, para. 77). Some parliamentary committees have even expressed the view that they should be entitled to direct that a named official face disciplinary sanction (*ibid.*).

There seem to be two broad reasons that UK government ministers lose trust in the advice of the civil service (Stokes, 2016):

- They perceive the civil service to be incompetent.
- They believe the civil service is deliberately trying to obfuscate.

Sometimes ministers will confuse strong advice with obstruction; they have felt that the giving of unattractive advice must mean that the civil service is against them (Marsh et al., 2000). In some cases, this has led to ministers ostracising official advice (Diamond, 2019; Marsh et al., 2000) and adopting an adversarial approach to governing (Dowding, 1995; Hood, 2000). There are, of course, ministers who believe the civil service is neither incompetent nor prone to obfuscation. There is no available data to indicate what proportion of ministers feel what, but such negative views are common and they do possess a substantial degree of longitudinal consistency (Stokes, 2016).

### The official’s response

The attempted transfer of ministerial accountability has been keenly felt by officials, who are now more likely to adopt a more conservative approach to risk taking (Papadopoulos, 2023). It has also been suggested that officials will tailor their advice to what they believe ministers want if they suspect they will be penalized for revealing inconvenient truths (Mulgan, 2007). Where that happens, it is likely because senior officials know that they will be pushed out if they fail to satisfy ministerial demands (Diamond, 2019).

When she was prime minister, Theresa May, for example, removed five permanent secretaries distrusted by those around her (Diamond, 2019; Freeguard et al., 2018).

This presents an obvious conflict: do officials speak truth to power and provide honest advice, or do they tell ministers what they want to hear? While officials and ministers alike historically understood the appropriate constitutional boundaries, the marginalization of officials has led to the understanding and application of these boundaries becoming more nebulous (Richards & Smith, 2016) and civil service leadership declining towards a model that encourages officials to fit a single mould centred around delivery (Chapman & O'Toole, 2010; Diamond, 2023). The reorientation towards delivery has come at the cost of the quality of individual work, with value for money and performance overwriting public interest and the common good; it also comes at a cost to the business of giving policy advice, which is now deemed less valuable (Craft & Halligan, 2017).

### Moving forwards

Civil servants have been described as lazy, inflexible and boring (Willems, 2020). These stereotypes have negative consequences for citizen satisfaction and for the perceptions of performance (Bertram et al., 2024). Maintaining a workforce and expecting it to perform well within an increasingly complex context, while simultaneously requiring it to silently shoulder blame, is a poor strategy for improving the quality of policy advice. As new ministers establish themselves, they should consider seriously the relationship they wish to have with civil service.

### Conflicts of interest

The author is not aware of any conflicts of interest.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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