

The role of Permanent Secretaries

The Permanent Secretary in a department is the most senior civil servant. He or she is responsible for supervising, promoting and disciplining the civil servants and for ensuring timely advice to the Secretary of State. He or she is the Accounting Officer responsible for controlling agreed budgets, for spending regularity, legal conformity and financial reporting of the department's affairs.

The Secretary of State is the Head of the Department as policy maker, chief spokesman, and decision taker. Ideally the Secretary of State after discussion with officials sets out the policy, agrees a budget with Cabinet and Treasury and expects the civil servants in his or her department to get on with implementing any changes and administering the wider corpus of departmental actions and policies.

The Permanent Secretary has no independent voice other than when reporting to the Public Accounts Committee as Accounting Officer or to a Select Committee when it is making an Enquiry into matters of implementation rather than government policy. In return for having no direct voice the Permanent Secretary expects the Secretary of State to defend the department and the actions of officials when reporting to Parliament or appearing on the media.

There are occasions when relations are strained because officials have made substantial mistakes which the Secretary of State warned them against or knew nothing about. It is best in such a situation for the politician and the senior officials to agree the way for the matter to be reported to Parliament. The Minister has to take the main hit, but it may also be agreed that there needs to be disciplinary action with an honest account made of where the mistakes or wrongdoing occurred and by whom.

It is much more difficult if relations are strained because senior officials do not like the policy being followed. This should not in theory happen. Assuming the policy decided by the Minister is not illegal or dangerous officials should accept and implement with good grace, especially if it was part of the governing party's Manifesto or it was the result of a referendum. The price of anonymity and protection from too much public scrutiny is to accept properly made Ministerial decisions and implement them in the best way even if you have reservations about them.

If a Minister disagrees strongly with an important government policy they usually have to resign. It is difficult to see why it should be different for a senior civil servant who feels so strongly that a government policy is wrong yet he or she is called upon to implement it. When I was the Prime Minister's chief Policy Adviser I had to judge on the few big issues where she and I disagreed when she had finally decided and was not going to change, and end my attempts to change her mind. Once she was committed in public to a course of action I would never do or say anything negative about the policy I was worried about. I disagreed with the Community Charge or Poll Tax and with the decision to sacrifice the veto in various single market areas.

I will be looking at issues around the performance of Permanent Secretaries in crucial departments in future posts.

Changing people's lives

People's lives are changing a lot. Some of us welcome change when it is for the better, as much of it is. There is plenty of change which is driven by us as consumers. We willingly buy the product or service when it is better than the old or when it allows us to enjoy new experiences.

It is consumers who choose to watch downloaded films rather than BBC programmes, or who use a mobile phone to shop or pay a bill. It is people who choose to spend more of their lives on line and to learn and be informed from the web.

There is another kind of change which is more contentious. That is top down change driven by governments. Governments sometimes presume to know better than we do. They seek to stop us buying some goods and service with higher taxes, regulations or outright bans. They want us to buy or use other goods and services so they subsidise them ,give us tax breaks or supply them free at the point of use.

Some people think this is becoming excessive. They see too many attacks on their traditional way of life or their pleasures. The fire in the grate is to be changed. The roast beef meal may have too large a carbon footprint. The tried and tested diesel car is evil. Offering cash for a transaction is old fashioned. Their electricity meter has to be ripped out and replaced by a meter too smart for users to understand what it is really up to.

The quest to change public services does not always lead to improvements in them. The GP no longer does home visits. A telephone or on line surgery booking service does not always allow a same day appointment. Many public libraries are only open when working people are at work in the week and not open on Sundays. Governments want people to leave the car at home so they make it more and more difficult to use it, whilst many people regard it as the only way to get to work and to get the children to school.

Government needs reforming to get closer to how people lead their lives, and be more understanding of people's aspirations.

The missing fire service budget

Some weeks ago I was asked to support a substantial tax increase for the fire service. Before doing so I asked to see the existing budget and the case for how the extra money would be spent. This was not available at the event I was attending but they promised to send me these documents.

When they did not turn up I reminded a senior Councillor involved with the Fire service. He promised to follow up to get them to me. They still did not arrive. I concluded they had either thought better of their tax rise or did not need MP support.

Yesterday my office told me the Fire service wished to talk to me on the phone about this. I said I would be happy to talk to them about their budget once I had read it. They told my office in that case they would send it to me. It has still not turned up. I wonder why it is so difficult to send it. Presumably the Councillors who back this tax rise were shown it before they agreed.

The continuing collapse of the car industry

Car sales in China fell 92% in the latest figures reflecting the closures and stay at home advice in that epidemic torn country. Meanwhile EU plans to accelerate the shift to electric cars is hitting diesel and petrol sales in Europe.

Countries are falling over each other to cut demand for petrol and diesel vehicles with steep car purchase taxes geared to output of CO₂. French sales fell sharply in January by 13% on the back of new higher taxes. UK diesel car sales are well down over the last year thanks to higher VED and threats of more taxes and regulations to come. Germany is imposing bans on older diesels from entering various cities. The new EU Commission intends to make a frontal assault on CO₂ the centrepiece of its economic and industrial strategy.

Even in the USA where the government does not share EU fervour against CO₂ car sales fell last year. The industry is wrestling with the shift to electric, the more draconian environmental regulations, higher taxes and a strike by many buyers not persuaded by the new ideas.

On top of this a new generation of urban dwellers doubts they need to own a car, whilst some look forward to a future when many more will hire a car when they need it, slashing the number of cars required to sit in the garage or in on street parking for most of their lives.

It is unusual for governments to set out to damage a big industry like this in quite such a concerted way. It is even more unusual for the industry to accept it and to collaborate as freely with the demise of its existing products and method of working. I find it odd the industry in the UK lobbied so hard against Brexit which was not designed to damage it, yet does not lobby against the many EU policies determined to close all factories making diesel and petrol cars as quickly as possible. It means writing off huge amounts of sunk capital and firing many workers. It is also possible the winners in the electric car wars will be new companies.

Flood risk

The bad floods in some parts of the country are a reminder of the dangers of building on flood plains and low lying land. One of the best arguments for a lower rate of new building in Wokingham in the next plan period is the need to protect the remaining floodplain in our area. Those of you responding to the Council Consultation document on the local plan might like to include this crucial point. Putting in better management of the water around development to dump it more quickly into the rivers is not the answer as the rivers are already full when it rains a lot.