

Government accountability

Recent events have turned the spotlight on Ministerial accountability, leading some to explore what responsibility if any unelected officials have for mistakes in government. The failure over some ten years to send out the right reminders for breast cancer screening follows hard on the heels of a longer time period of failure to equip Windrush arrivals with proper papers as British citizens. We have seen rail franchises collapse, and other contractors of government get into financial trouble after bidding for government contracts.

Under our system Ministers take responsibility for anything government does wrongly or fails to do. This is based on ultimate policy authority resting with them, and the fact that they are the public voice and face of their departments. Officials are not normally allowed public voice and can usually expect Ministers to take the rap, in return for sharing with Ministers what is happening and seeking Ministerial approval for policies.

This traditional model has been subject to amendments in recent decades. The idea behind the Next Steps Agencies and their Labour successors was to split policy from implementation. Executive Agencies to implement environmental controls or to build and maintain highways were established, with accountable officials as CEOs. They directly answer to Parliamentary Committees and are responsible for spending money, reporting to the PAC where necessary. The idea was to make the professionals and experts responsible for executing policy, and to distance Ministers from writing and letting contracts and from judging complex technical issues like railway safety features or highways design.

There was always in the traditional model a separate line of accountability and responsibility for proper spending through the Permanent Secretary as Accounting Officer to the PAC, in parallel to the Minister's responsibility for budget choices and overall adequacy.

These latest debates do require further exploration of how much the Minister is to blame for problems that go back years, and for matters which have rested entirely or largely with officials. Ministers had always said the Windrush arrivals were British, and had said they wanted women up to 70 to have breast screening. The policy was the one Parliament wanted. The issue is why was it not seen through?

More difficult is the situation over Brexit customs policy. I read that some officials think we cannot be ready for 2019 or 2021 for exit with smooth operation of the borders. yet Ministers have asked the civil service to make sure we are ready, and Ministers and senior officials who have been asked by Parliamentary Committees have assured us they will be ready for any eventuality over the talks. This kind of noise off, and selective leaks of official papers that Ministers do not agree with, is not part of the deal between Ministers and officials. If Ministers are to defend officials, they should expect officials to put their concerns to Ministers and then to stick

to the agreed line when decisions are made.