

Memo to an incoming PM Changing the Downing Street organisation

Under Boris Johnson the size of the Downing Street and Cabinet offices expanded. Each time Boris was persuaded that the centre was not working as it should nor serving him well he would add additional people. It became increasingly difficult to know who under the PM was in charge, who was responsible for any given policy or problem, who might write the brief for the PM or who might follow up any PM decision and get action from Whitehall once decided.

The simple structure under Margaret Thatcher rested on three senior officials, the Principal Private Secretary, the Head of Policy and the Chief Spokesman. Each of us knew the PM's mind on things we were handling and each of us made sure in our spheres of action that any wish or decision by the PM was put through the proper Cabinet and Cabinet Committee procedures or referred to the responsible department for decision and action. As Head of Policy I made sure the PM had personal briefing on the major issues coming before her from Cabinet and from inter departmental correspondence analysing problems from a Head of government viewpoint to see if they were in line with strategy and made sense in the light of the government's other objectives.

Number 10 today has a Chief of Staff, a Permanent Secretary, a Principal Private Secretary, three Deputy Chiefs of Staff, a political Head of Policy and an official Head of policy, a Cabinet Office Minister of State and various other senior officials. The Cabinet Office has expanded its roles with a Permanent Secretary as well as the Cabinet Secretary who used to run it. Clearly many of these individuals cannot always be in the room when the PM considers or decides something. There is no clear structure of who should brief the PM on an issue, attend the meeting and organise the follow up.

The incoming PM would be well advised to slim the structure down and appoint a handful of senior people they trust, with a working plan to ensure that every meeting matters, every meeting with an outcome is properly recorded, and every issue the PM wishes to pursue is properly followed up. The PM also needs to take more control of the diary. Time is the most precious PM commodity. How it is allocated will help determine what gets done and what is important to the government. Slimming Downing Street would be visible proof of the wish to run a leaner and more effective government machine more generally.