

Ministers and civil servants

Our constitutional practice used to be based around the fundamental proposition that government power must be accountable and this is best done by Ministers reporting to an elected Parliament on the conduct of government. Ministers have to defend the actions of their officials and departmental administrations, or explain what action they are taking to correct mistakes, reform policies and change personnel where things go wrong. Ministers are meant to decide and civil servants are meant to advise. In the toughest version of the doctrine Ministers had to resign for mistakes made by officials which they knew nothing about until they came to light with the damage they caused.

This practice could scarcely apply to a large number of areas of government activity when we were in the EU that came under EU regulation, directives and court decisions. There was no serious attempt to think through the consequences of these changes. Ministers usually shouldered the burden of responsibility for laws and decisions taken in Brussels, even where they had opposed them. The public decided to sort this out and reassert the need for genuinely accountable Ministers who could change laws and policies where needed by voting to leave the EU legal structures. With EU laws and policies Ministers could face failing policies which they were both blamed for and could not change.

In recent years under governments of all three main UK parties this has been further modified. There has been a growing enthusiasm for so called independent bodies. Many politicians came to the conclusion that it was better to appoint specialists to run quangos that could take big decisions, make a wide range of rules under statute, enforce rules, impose penalties, spend large budgets and set out blueprints for the future. The Bank of England gained control of interest rates and money policy. The Environment Agency set policy on water and flooding. NHS England gained more control over health budgets and management. The vast HS2 project was run by an independent highly paid team of managers.

As we survey the surge in inflation and the giant bond losses of the Bank, the flooded farms and the pollution of rivers from the Environment Agency, and the huge waiting lists at the NHS the public demands Ministers sort it out. They do not want to hear that the main budgets and powers are all exercised by highly paid managers who insist on independence from Ministers. HS 2 showed that high pay with plenty of independence did not necessarily produce a good outcome.

There is much to be said for reasserting the original idea that Ministers can direct and alter the management of these bodies as they will take the blame when things go wrong. Some things done by quangos would be better done directly by the sponsor government department, cutting overheads. Ministers may well opt for substantial management delegation, but need to find good managers they trust and who deliver to make that model work. They need to be able to reward and promote them and in bad cases to remove them. They need

full ,access to important information about the way the service and the policies are working out.

Appointing Ministers who know the subject or who have an enthusiasm for it would help. Keeping them in post for long enough to have an impact and to know the area well is important. A Minister like Nick Gibb was allowed to work in Education where he was a great advocate of synthetic phonics to improve reading abilities. More importantly he was allowed long enough there to make a big difference and see the results of his approach come through with better literacy scores. We need more of that.