

Ministers decide, civil servants advise

David Davis's letter raised important issues about the process of government. We learned from the background to it that the Secretary of State for Brexit who should be the principal adviser of the PM on these matters, and the main negotiator under the PM, was often sidelined by the official civil service. Of course this could only happen if No 10 let it happen, whether by design or by misunderstanding. It nonetheless raises crucial issues about how democratic government is functioning at an important time for our country.

There appears to have been a tough approach taken towards much of the Cabinet over the production of the White Paper. Apparently many Ministers saw the draft late, and were given little time to respond. On a major policy document like this, published two years after the first demand for it, you would expect all relevant Ministers to be fully engaged through correspondence, sharing drafts, and through Cabinet committees where necessary. At its best UK government is very good at this, with several drafts refining views as Ministers seek improvement, attend to detail, or find compromises.

There needs to be trust between all Ministers and senior officials. They need to share their work in private with each other. Officials are welcome to their views and to put in suggestions, but in the end Ministers have to decide, to approve the lines and sign off the final text. Clearly this did not happen with the Chequers Statement and White Paper, which is why it triggered several resignations of Cabinet Ministers, junior Ministers, and Parliamentary Private secretaries. It also led to the resignation of two Vice Chairmen of the Conservative party who would of course be outside the formation of a collective view on this or any other government matter, but need to sell the policy. Their refusal to do so reflects the fact that the more politically minded members of the Cabinet did not have enough chance or enough support to get the strategy amended to one which could gain more popularity.

The lack of trust by some Ministers is part of a much wider distrust between public and officials on the mighty topic of the EU. Viewed from the outside to many members of the public it looks as if a large number of officials voted remain, think the voters were wrong to vote Leave, and are doing their best to re run Project Fear in various guises. I of course appreciate there are many good officials who do not let their personal political views influence their work, and some officials who did vote Leave who therefore support the government policy of leaving willingly. What is undeniable is the civil service as a whole have taken to the task of trying to find as many difficulties as possible that they think might delay or impede Brexit, and have been very shy about finding and tackling all the opportunities that a clean Brexit brings.

Of course where something needs fixing by March 2019 to make sure things work as planned, the civil service are right to flag that up. They should also

flag up the remedies as well as the problems. They also need to help Ministers knock back the self serving and factually incorrect fears that some Remain oriented groups and businesses are putting forward.

I trust now Cabinet has reaffirmed its wish to get on with the WTO Global UK option there will be strong co-operation to do so. I would also like to see good news policies covering a new migration policy, a new farming policy, ways of spending the money we will free if we simply leave in March 2019, and what we should do with all the customs revenue if we end up on WTO terms. The civil service at its best is balanced in its judgement of risks and opportunities, and keen to implement the government's policy. The government's policy as specified in 2017 was to leave the EU. The civil service have helped talk the remaining Ministers into a policy which does not amount to leaving the EU. The Ministers who relied on this bad advice have now placed themselves in a difficult position, where they need to change their policy as soon as possible so we can conduct good and strong negotiations for the UK.