

Minister's statements and lies

Most of what a Minister says in the Commons has been scripted by officials. Even the few Ministers who insist on writing their own texts as I did would always get it checked by officials, as what a Ministers says has to reflect what the department has done and is doing as well as the Minister's interpretation of government policy.

Departments are large and employ many senior people who have some powers to make decisions and make statements to individuals and companies coming into contact with their department. Any one of these contacts can miscarry. The Minister has to accept the blame and handle the fall out when official conduct of business causes a national outcry or a media storm. Officials of course have to operate within the policy framework laid down by Ministers, but the framework allows for flex and officials are good at selective enforcement of the policies depending on their own enthusiasm level for what the government is trying to do.

When I first became a Minister I was asked a question about what the Business department knew about a company that was behaving badly. The officials drafted the reply as of course it all related to a time before I was a Minister. The reply stated clearly the department had had no contact with or knowledge of the miscreant company. Realising the importance of this answer I invited the relevant officials to a meeting and stressed the importance of this being accurate, as it was a convenient response for the Department. They confirmed they had checked files and there were no complaints/reports/queries. Shortly after I had published this written answer I was sent a memo by a different official telling me I had given a wrong answer as he had a file and contacts with the company which the officials answering had not known about! It meant I put myself on a crash course into the inadequacies of central filing in the department, whilst apologising fully and promptly for the mistake to the Shadow Minister who had rightly asked the question.

The employment of a lot of officials with a general education not relevant to the specialist area they are handling, coupled with rapid changes of job and personnel drives officials when drafting for Ministers to ambiguity, vagueness or generality away from specific, data driven replies. These are "safer" and easier to write. A Minister supervising replies to Parliamentary Questions needs to insist on a proper answer with relevant and factual back up and data.

The issue over whether the former PM misled the House over gatherings in Downing Street raises important issues about the interplay of officials and Ministers. The gatherings in question were organised by officials who sent out invites, arranged any food and drink and attended themselves. In Downing Street they did so under the eyes of very senior officials who also came to some of these events. Several of the events were not attended by any Minister, and others were subject to the Prime Minister dropping in briefly. Presumably the officials thought these happenings were within the rules, as

part of the permissions within a workplace between colleagues. Clearly no senior official intervened to stop them or to alert the Prime Minister to their possible illegality. They would have to brief the Prime Minister for subsequent questions about their conduct that nothing had occurred that broke the law.

The civil service is understandably defensive. In a democracy it has to deal with many false allegations about its services from people who are angry the policy does not help them or with the decisions made. Ministers need to help-sift the complaints and make sure the ones that are true are followed up with suitable remedies and apologies.