

Remodel the bureaucracy

The Chief Secretary needs to come forward urgently with a good plan to raise productivity in the public services, at least back up to 2019 levels. Setting this an immediate task should not be threatening or should it require large amounts of new capital investment to bring it about, as four years ago we are at the levels we should wish to regain.

Central to this task must be reviews with the 4000 senior managers at Director level and above and their equivalents in the quangos. This is a good job for junior Ministers to lead or review. What has changed for the worse? What immediate steps can be taken to boost output. There should be a comprehensive freeze on new staff from outside, and a review process to amalgamate or remove jobs as people leave by natural wastage. External recruitment should only be allowed where there is a clear need approved by a Minister.

The reviews should encompass use of external consultants. Staff should be encouraged to replace some of the consultancy contracts that come up for renewal by offering cheaper in house routes of doing the work using present staff.

There can also be plans to get above older levels. After all, the private sector has exceeded pre covid levels of productivity, in services as well as in manufactures. One thing to do is to eliminate some of the duplication and overlap between central government departments and quangos. More work should be taken into the department under proper Ministerial supervision. Ministers in many cases will be blamed when the quango makes a mistake or gets it wrong, so better to have more control where there is accountability. Employees in the civil service should be allowed or encouraged to bid to take over areas of work to run as contracted out activities where they turn themselves into contractors and can use their skills to win work from others. This would not apply to matters relating to national security, policy and other sensitive matters. I led such changes to the old Property Services Agency, the direct labour organisation within the civil service that maintained public sector properties.

The application of more computing power through AI and related technologies can also produce plenty of productivity gains. Much of government is processing data, awarding grants and benefits, answering similar queries from the public, handling applications and ensuring access to public services. This is eminently suitable for more automation.