

Should civil servants be accountable for delivering policies and services?

It has been fashionable for many years to set up so called independent state financed bodies to carry out functions of government away from direct Ministerial supervision. Thus transport Ministers created a Highways Agency to run the main roads, the Environment Department an Environmental Agency to run water, anti flooding and a range of other environmental policies, and the Treasury set up the Office of Budget Responsibility and a so called Independent Central Bank to limit Ministerial control over economic policy.

Some MPs seem to want to transfer more and more things to such bodies. The ultimate of course was the mass transfer of powers to the EU. The public often say this trust the experts approach is a good idea, until the policy miscarries or mistakes are made. Then they expect Ministers to intervene, sort it out and take the blame.

The problem is independent civil service activity often does go wrong. I have chronicled the bad mistakes of the Bank of England in recent years which helped create the ERM recession, the banking crash and the recent economic slowdown. The Environment Agency policy of discontinuing pumping and dredging led to bad floods in Somerset and the need for Ministerial intervention. The EU invented the Common Fishery Policy which did so much damage to UK fish stocks and to our fishing industry.

Well paid senior civil servants in or out of quangos are set targets and asked to run particular programmes or services. There is nothing political about ensuring high quality and efficiency in most cases. Should these targets be used to influence promotion? Is there a level of performance so bad that it warrants loss of job? Should senior civil servants stay put in a role for bit longer than the current average, with named responsibility for what they are meant to be managing?

In a democracy there can be no independent branch of government. The public through their Parliament or Congress can demand that anything changes or gets better. Ministers cannot go on saying a branch of government is independent of them when it is doing harm or failing to perform. They will be forced into changing the structure and or the personnel, in order to get the change of policy people want.