

What do mediocre Ministers do?

Mediocre Ministers go with the flow. Civil servants present them with issues to consider and problems to tackle. The Minister accepts the inherited policies and is guided by the submissions, often consenting to the civil service description of the problem and the preferred solution. The minister will let the civil service organise the diary which will shape the agenda and define the problems to solve in the way the diary master wants.

The advice has usually been through many hands, and a consensus has been reached. If options are offered the preferred solution will often run alongside clearly bad choices. The advice may suffer from being a compromise view. The Minister really needs to know the range of views and examine whether a different option could be better.

Quite often the best response will be to do nothing. The problem may be contrived or beyond government power to resolve. Any further intervention may make things worse. Doing nothing is an undervalued option, leading us to governments that over claim and underperform.

In recent years from Blair onwards there has been abuse of the power to legislate, with various laws instructing the government itself what to do in the future. This is fatuous. An honest government can announce what it is going to do and then over the years do it. It does not need to embed it in law. These so called laws never have clauses to impose penalties on Ministers and senior civil servants for breaking them. If the government finds it no longer wants to do what it said or is incapable of doing it it can anyway repeal the requirement.

Ministers are most wanted by officials when the department has made a major mistake. The Minister may have known nothing about it or the mistake may predate the Minister's arrival in the department. It will however be the Ministers job to explain the failure and remedial action to Parliament, and to take the blame. Internal review will always show no single official or small group was in sole and continuous charge. No- one is to blame and maybe a lack of resources caused the issue.