

# Who rules? Ministers or civil servants?

Our constitutional theory is democratic. Civil servants advise, Ministers decide. Civil servants remain anonymous, putting their views to Ministers in private. Ministers defend the collective government decision in public which is a decision relevant Ministers and officials have reached through discussion and email exchanges.

This means a good Minister can make a difference, can change policy and can offer informed leadership. It means mediocre and bad Ministers simply do what the officials or Number 10 tell them, and gives great opportunities to civil servants to block, subvert or delay government policies they do not like.

There have been too few good Ministers this century. Nick Gibb was allowed to stay in post as Schools Minister for a long period and did important work helping raise standards. He pursued the need to use synthetic phonics as the best method to teach reading. One of the unsung achievements of the period of Coalition and Conservative government was a big rise in U.K. child literacy as a result. He handled those in the teaching profession and some officials who were hostile to this approach.

More recently Claire Coutinho started to introduce some realism into the self harming energy policy that most officials and the Opposition parties favoured. The U.K. government overrode official advice to ban new oil and gas wells in the U.K. This crazy policy increases world CO<sub>2</sub> by forcing the U.K. to import more CO<sub>2</sub> intensive LNG in place of using U.K. pipeline gas. She started to abate other areas of self harm like the early ban on the sale of petrol and diesel cars and the premature phasing out of gas boilers. Much of the last government's policy was derived from the international Treaty based consensus on climate change, WHO responses to the pandemic, EU regulation and the hopeless forecasts and views of the Bank of England and OBR. We were governed in many areas by an official tyranny based on wildly wrong forecasts and an official consensus shared by the political Opposition that Ministers were unwilling to challenge. The new government will double up on the official consensus as they believe it all, especially the bits where it is obviously wrong.

Some think the lockdown consensus, the money printing bonanza, the pursuit of net zero whilst importing more from high CO<sub>2</sub> countries, the mass migration policies and the rest are the ideas of a few influential billionaires. If only. These are policies shared by armies of officials, baked into global Treaties and pursued by many political parties.