REFORM

REIMAGINING WHITEHALL

An essay

Dr Simon Kaye

September 2022

ABOUT REFORM

Reform is established as the leading Westminster think tank for public service reform. We believe that the State has a fundamental role to play in enabling individuals, families and communities to thrive. But our vision is one in which the State delivers only the services that it is best placed to deliver, within sound public finances, and that both decision-making and delivery is devolved to the most appropriate level. We are committed to driving systemic change that will deliver better outcomes for all.

We are determinedly independent and strictly non-party in our approach. This is reflected in our cross-party Advisory Board and our events programme which seeks to convene likeminded reformers from across the political spectrum.

Reform is a registered charity, the *Reform* Research Trust, charity no. 1103739.

ABOUT REIMAGINING THE STATE

After a decade of disruption, the country faces a moment of national reflection. For too long, Britain has been papering over the cracks in an outdated social and economic model, but while this may bring temporary respite, it doesn't fix the foundations. In 1942 Beveridge stated: "a revolutionary moment in the world's history is a time for revolutions, not for patching." 80 years on, and in the wake of a devastating national crisis, that statement once again rings true. Now is the time to fix Britain's foundations.

Reform's new programme, *Reimagining the State*, will put forward a bold new vision for the role and shape of the State. One that can create the conditions for strong, confident communities, dynamic, innovative markets, and transformative, sustainable public services.

Reimagining Whitehall is one of the major work streams within this programme.

ABOUT THIS PAPER

This paper marks the launch of our *Reimagining Whitehall* programme. It provides a high-level analysis of what we think needs to be addressed to deliver world-class, fit for the future machinery of government. Over the course of the programme, we will seek to identify ways to dismantle the biases identified in this essay and to put forward specific, implementable recommendations to overhaul the structures, processes and behaviours that impede performance.

We hope this essay stimulates discussion, and would love to hear from you, whether you agree or disagree with our analysis.

INTRODUCTION: REIMAGINING WHITEHALL

For decades, consensus has grown that the Whitehall system – comprising the Civil Service and the departments and institutions of central government, and the way that these relate to other centres of power – needs reform. To tackle current crises and prepare for future challenges, a more diverse, dynamic, and decentralised government machine will be needed. So far, despite successive efforts, the necessary changes have not been realised. This essay sets out a new account of why Whitehall has tended to underperform, and why reform efforts have stalled.

The core of the problem can be understood as three biases, which lead Whitehall and the key players within it to hoard power, behave bureaucratically, and gravitate toward a single, shared mindset. These biases play out not only in the structures of Whitehall, but can be seen in the norms and behaviours of officials and decision-makers, the organisational cultures they generate, and the cross-cutting processes in which all participate. A successful programme of reform must therefore address all aspects of the system: it must reimagine Whitehall.

Figure 1: Whitehall biases and implications (summary)

	The power-hoarding bias	The single mindset bias	The bureaucratic bias
Structural implications	Over-centralisation	Cognitive homogeneity	Process-dominance
Process implications	Rigid hierarchy	Institutionalised incentives	Short-termism and reactivity
Behavioural implications	A low-trust culture	An exclusionary culture	A low-resilience culture

1. OVERVIEW: GOVERNMENT IN AN AGE OF CRISIS

In the last few years, the limitations of the UK's central machinery of government have been systematically exposed. The process of galvanising Whitehall in preparation for Brexit was, by all accounts, painful.[1] The unprecedented challenge of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted a system that was unprepared, slow to react, lacking in relevant expertise, and hidebound by risk-aversion and bureaucracy.[2]

---

[1] Jill Rutter, *The Civil Service and Brexit* (UK in a Changing Europe, 2021).
[2] University of Oxford, '"Another War Is Coming", Kate Bingham DBE, Delivers Romanes Lecture', Webpage, 24 November 2021.

Beyond new challenges for government, the last 15 years have also produced a general shift in the overarching context within which policymakers do their work. Financial crises have shifted the economic model upon which policymaking is predicated. Brexit has sharply switched the onus of policy design and accountability to the domestic sphere. The COVID pandemic, meanwhile, augurs a new era where challenges will arise from unpredictable sources and worsen at exponential rates – and where the State will often be called upon to make excruciatingly difficult decisions with limited information and in the context of rising geopolitical instability.

The UK government now faces a century of long-term challenges and large-scale policy priorities, many of which simply transcend party politics. The drive toward net-zero and adaptation to climate change will extend far beyond the lifespan of any given government. The challenge of equalising opportunities across the whole country and among all groups – whether called 'levelling up' or not – has been a central concern of many past governments, and will be of importance for decades to come. Adapting to an ageing population, with the associated challenges for public services and the public finances, has yet to be meaningfully grasped. We can add to this list the need to boost resilience to future pandemics and other civil emergencies, ensure our economy is robust in the face of a new era of supply chain disruptions and international aggression, and prepare for the revolutionary impact of new technologies.

There is a need for government that both espouses and models long-term thinking on strategic, national-scale challenges, fosters cognitively diverse expertise, and incorporates a practical understanding of the realities of implementation and delivery. These needs, and the challenges that create them, transcend party politics. The natural place for them to be met is – or ought to be – Whitehall.

At the same time, Whitehall must also be able to think intelligently about, and act on, risk. Risk-aversion and myopia currently leads the system to avoid innovative approaches and adapt slowly in the face of urgent challenges – the very opposite of what is required for an age of crisis.

In the aftermath of previous crises, the machinery of government has been rewired. Those in government and policy moved to self-consciously rethink the nature of the State and its role, and, at its core, the norms, behaviours, and structures of government.

Despite a decade of disruption, this transformative impulse is yet to find expression. Part of the reason for this is that we have been identifying the same problems with the Whitehall system, and attempting to address them, for decades. Crises have deepened the consequences of these problems and made it more urgent that we find solutions, but the underlying pathologies have not changed.

WHEN VIRTUES BECOME VICES

The civil service and the bureaucratic structures and systems that surround it may best be understood as the hardware – the wiring – of the government machine. The *software* may change from year to year or from administration to administration as ministers move on, elections are held, and priorities shift. But the genius of the Whitehall system as it became more formalised in the second half of the 19th Century lies in the provision of a consistent underlying official fabric, carrying forward institutional memory and the practical experience of policy thinking and implementation.

Perhaps a mechanistic metaphor is wrong: better to say that the traditional model for our civil service positions Whitehall as the great tree whose essential structure and stability stays unchanged while the seasons turn, the leaves and fruit grow and fade, and the world changes around it. Politicians – with their preferences and priorities – come and go, but the civil service remains much as it was before them. And, like a tree, this structure was not really *built*, but has *grown*: the emergent, organic product of a complex and long-standing interaction between political decisions and shifting national context.

Yet this celebrated pattern of public administration is also the source of many of its woes. It is striking to note how longstanding the challenges of the Whitehall system are. Even the Northcote-Trevelyan report of 1853, in some ways the 'founding document' of the Whitehall system, set out a familiar critique, with the same concerns about capability, competitiveness with other employers and lack of wider experience among officials that could easily appear in a policy paper published this year.

One way to explain the intractability of such concerns may be to consider the extent to which they are necessarily produced by the organic features of this system as it is currently constituted. To what extent does the adherence to some of the core, founding virtues of the civil service – many of which featured in the Northcote-Trevelyan report – now become a barrier to necessary evolution?[3]

While Whitehall's long-term dedication to supplying honest, objective and private advice is of course crucial, this now, in a modern context, also translates into a relative lack of transparency and direct accountability. Similarly, the need for stability and institutional memory now also seems to entail an inability to adapt and a resistance to reform. While the constant 'churn' of civil servants through different parts of the system (recommended by Northcote-Trevelyan) actually undermines some of the desirable aspects of the service's 'permanence'.

The civil service, designed to be resilient to instability, has found itself to be resistant to improvement. To the list of unchanging Whitehall virtues – "integrity, propriety, objectivity

---

[3] 'The Northcote-Trevelyan Report', *Public Administration* 32, no. 1 (March 1954).

and … merit", as some have put it[4] – we might also add a harder constant: underperformance.

It seems that no government has been wholly satisfied with the Whitehall machine that it has inherited. Johnson complained of a "nightmare" where his "feet would not move"; Cameron said that the system's "rules and regulations … make life impossible"; Blair suggested that attempting to reform the machine resulted in "scars on my back." As a result, government after government has promised to change the way that the administrative centre functions: to reform the civil service and modernise Whitehall.

THE TOMBS OF VANQUISHED REFORM PROGRAMMES

In the coalition years, a major reform effort – led by Francis Maude – sought to build a more efficient Whitehall machine and to strengthen its capacity for gripping major policy challenges and tangibly delivering on government priorities. One aspect was the introduction of departmental business plans, which sought to boost transparency and therefore accountability, and drive a focus on delivery.[5]

A few years before that, under Gordon Brown, a Civil Service Act was passed, alongside a strategy for "smarter" government – that is, a more affordable one – and "a radical shift of power to the users of public services": the "biggest shakeup of Whitehall in a generation".[6] Before Brown, Blair promised to "modernise" the system, and make it better engaged with the outside world, more able to recruit outside expertise and bring talent to bear against problems.[7] Before Blair, Major instituted a 'Citizen's Charter' initiative to bring policymaking and services closer to the public and improve the performance of the civil service.[8]

What became of all these efforts? A decade on from his reform project, Francis Maude reflected upon the ways that the system resisted change. He reports facing opposition from the Treasury, to the point of "active hostility", and direct obstruction from civil servants. He recognised the importance of skills, expertise, and policy continuity, but found himself unable to end the staffing 'churn' that so drastically impacts upon the civil service's institutional memory and policy expertise.[9] Notably, it is Maude who, seven years later, is now leading a high-speed, broad-remit review into governance and accountability in Whitehall.[10]

Brown's Civil Service Act made little real difference. The radical empowerment of public service users never became much more than rhetoric. Earlier, under Blair, eight solid years

---

[4] Ruth Winstone, *Whither the Civil Service?* (House of Commons Library, 2003).
[5] HM Government, *The Civil Service Reform Plan*, 2012.
[6] Nicholas Watt, 'Civil Servants Face Axe as Brown Acts to Cut Deficit', *The Guardian*, 4 December 2009.
[7] Martin Stanley, 'Civil Service Reform 2', Blog, 2017.
[8] John Mullen, *John Major's Citizens Charter - Fifteen Years Later* (Hal Open Science, 2006).
[9] Richard Johnstone, 'Francis Maude: Senior Civil Servants "Tried to Undermine Reform Plan"', *Civil Service World*, 7 April 2017.
[10] Francis Maude, *Independent Review of Governance and Accountability: Terms of Reference* (Cabinet Office, 2022).

of 'modernisation' ambitions culminated in little lasting change to the underlying biases of the system, beyond the introduction of departmental boards and a sense among some commentators that the Whitehall machine was becoming more politicised.[11]

Christopher Hood calls this "Civil Service Reform Syndrome". Regardless of how keen and energetic a machinery of government reform programme is at its start, political attention is eventually diverted elsewhere, while parts of the system selectively filter out different aspects of the proposed change. The result is that all such initiatives "come and go, overlap and ignore each other, leaving behind tombstones of varying size and style."[12]

2. A NEW PROGRAMME: BUILDING A FRESH ANALYSIS

What is the basis for Hood's 'syndrome'? If everyone agrees on what is required, why hasn't the underlying system changed? Why do we keep hearing the same complaints – and encountering the same issues – time and again?

We believe that fundamental pathologies within the Whitehall system are acting against meaningful change. These take the form of (at least) three systemic biases, deeply entrenched within the system, that erect barriers against change.

Understanding and addressing these biases – both their causes and their effects within the complex Whitehall system – means deliberately taking into account the diverse elements of how that system functions. Here, we recommend an approach that considers structures, processes, and the behaviours of both the system itself and the people who operate in it.

RECOGNISING THREE BIASES

The biases set out below reflect the centralising, homogenising, and risk-averse instincts of the Whitehall system. They influence the structures, processes, and behaviours in every part of that system, and are, in turn, the product of all those elements in the aggregate. These biases, so far, appear to be more than a match for any impetus to reform, however urgent.

These overlapping biases include:

- A **power-hoarding bias**, which leads Whitehall and the central civil service to attempt to micromanage a system that is too complex to command from the centre, while dislocating Whitehall from the public that it is supposed to serve. This also results in a low-trust culture with distorted accountability, so that nobody has the autonomy to try new things, collaborate, or drive results.

---

[11] Stanley, 'Civil Service Reform 2'.
[12] Christopher Hood, 'A Cultural Theory Perspective', in *Theory and Practice of Public Sector Reform*, Ed. Steven Van de Walle, Sandra Groeneveld (New York: Routledge, 2016).

- A **single mindset bias**, producing a workforce that is too cognitively homogeneous, prone to groupthink, and lacking in varied expertise, experience, specialism, and competence in the practical skills of innovation and delivery. This also results in an insularity, or defensiveness, when it comes to external scrutiny and input.
- A **bureaucratic bias**, where an obsession with processes incentivises risk-averse behaviours, constrains Whitehall's ability to respond to major challenges and deliver on important projects, depletes capacity for strategic thinking, and undermines policy that could help prevent future demand.

Biases such as these are seemingly rediscovered by each new administration. Yet each successive administration tends to focus on addressing the symptoms, rather than the foundational causes, and therefore makes limited progress in addressing them.

3. A NEW LENS: STRUCTURE, PROCESSES, BEHAVIOURS

Cutting through these biases will require a new approach – one which takes seriously the structures, processes, and behaviours which both contribute to, and are in turn influenced by, the biases of the Whitehall system.

These relationships are complex, but the alternative is to replicate previous approaches. For example focusing on the perceived failings of civil servants and so imagining that a major reduction in the size of the workforce will result in higher performance; or proposing new departmental structures assuming that policy realisation will improve. Neither yields real change in delivery, culture, or outcomes, as neither addresses the three pathologies.

Figure 2 (below) gives a sense of the different ways that the Whitehall system's biases play out at the scale of behaviours, processes, and structures.

Figure 2: Whitehall biases and implications (detailed)

	The power-hoarding bias	The single mindset bias	The bureaucratic bias
Structural implications	**Over-centralisation** - Both within Whitehall and across the whole govt system - Downing street tries to grip everything – and fails - Treasury holds too much power - Individual departments behave like siloed fiefdoms	**Cognitive homogeneity** - Particularly within the SCS, people are alike - Their management and recruitment practices reflect this and perpetuate the single perspective	**Process-dominance** - Processes are treated as panaceas - These become the main priority, weakening strategic capability and an inability to focus on outcomes
Process implications	**Rigid hierarchy** - Individuals are tightly constrained by the chain of command - Relevant information and options filtered by SCS - Perspective of implementers rarely included	**Institutionalised incentives** - Promotion is tied to very specific attributes and behaviours - There is poor retention of people who think differently or are interested in innovating - Normalised staff churn to help produce more generalists	**Short-termism and reactivity** - Decay of strategic core - Lack of strategic capability means CS is mainly preoccupied with reaction and firefighting - Rigid processes also impede ability to respond speedily and solve problems
Behavioural implications	**A low-trust culture** - Teams are given insufficient autonomy to problem solve or work efficiently - Collaboration becomes uncommon - Contextual factors are missed - Opportunities to innovate are missed - Pockets of underachievement are easy to miss	**An exclusionary culture** - The prizing of the CS 'temperament' - Groupthink becomes more common - CS lacks people with specific areas of specialism and expertise - Issues and ideas are missed - Connections and relationships with the outside world (and other tiers of government) are weakened	**A low-resilience culture** - Risk intelligence is damaged - Risk myopia – inability to balance long-term risks against short-term - Risk aversion – a general tendency toward avoiding risks at all costs - Preventative or pre-emptive policymaking is disincentivised - Sustainability – in every sense – becomes a lower priority - Neither preparing nor responding speedily leads to low resilience

THE POWER-HOARDING BIAS

The structures and norms visible within the Whitehall system are in part the product of a general belief that the distribution of power is a zero-sum game.[13] This produces a power-hoarding bias.

Internally, this can be seen in the way that the executive core relates to government departments. This also explains the way that departments themselves often behave as defensive, siloed 'fiefdoms'.[14] In each case power is explicitly centralised and carefully protected, reinforced by strict hierarchies for staff. Departments effectively petition the

---

[13] Adrian Brown, 'Whitehall and the Psychology of Control', Blog, 15 February 2019.
[14] Simon Parker et al., *Shaping up: A Whitehall for the Future* (Institute for Government, 2010).

executive core that surrounds the Prime Minister and the Chancellor for resources and political authority, and then are strongly incentivised to defend their share.

The power-hoarding bias within Whitehall is a microcosm for the way that central government itself relates to other tiers of government and, indeed, the country as a whole. Local government raises the lowest proportion of revenue in the G7: 96 pence in every pound is raised by Whitehall.[15] Local authorities do not have the autonomy to decide the best format for their own meetings or the regularity of their own newsletters, let alone have the power and resources to shape local economic decisions. The knock-on effect is that communities themselves feel detached from these distant centres of power, and lack any real sense of influence or efficacy even over local issues.[16]

This power-hoarding bias also produces a variety of undesirable outcomes in the way that government functions, and at multiple scales:

Micromanagement diminishing results. Whitehall itself is paradoxically disadvantaged by its power relative to local government and communities. Power is so concentrated within central government that it becomes impossible for that core system to grip key issues as they arise or guarantee delivery on major policy priorities. The push toward net-zero carbon emissions, for example, is heavily centralised even though the low-hanging fruit that can be picked by central government was harvested long ago.[17] The central pandemic response crowded-out local public health and other experts[18] – part of a closed culture, disconnected from private and non-central input, which undermined the resilience of the whole system.[19]

Government departments have limited capacity, and they seek to do and control too much of the UK's complex system. This tendency toward micromanagement-at-range isn't inevitable: so much could be devolved or decentralised to be handled locally. This would not only help to improve policymaking, but enable Whitehall to focus on the challenges it is best placed to tackle, and the outcomes it seeks.

Information-loss to hierarchy. According to the 2021 Civil Service People Survey, fewer than half of civil servants feel they have opportunities to contribute their perspective on decisions that affect their work, and only 55 per cent respond that they feel "safe" to challenge the way things are usually done.[20]

This picture is well understood in the policy world: deeply ingrained hierarchies are a hallmark of how the Whitehall system operates. The Senior Civil Service reserves for itself contact with ministers, with the unintended consequence that, on important decisions or complex problems, Ministers will only reliably be exposed to the perspectives of a narrow

---

[15] Jonathan Webb et al., *State of the North 2021/22* (IPPR North, 2022).

[16] Office for National Statistics, *Social Capital Headline Indicators*, 2022.

[17] The Commission for Smart Government, *Smart Devolution to Level Up*, 2021.

[18] Dan Peters, 'EXCLUSIVE: Local Areas Left in the Dark by Government', *The Municipal Journal*, 13 May 2020.

[19] Aidan Shilson-Thomas, Sebastian Rees, and Charlotte Pickles, *A State of Preparedness: How Government Can Build Resilience to Civil Emergencies* (Reform, 2021).

[20] Cabinet Office, *Civil Service People Survey: 2021 Results*, 2022.

group of well-established Whitehall operators. The views of more junior civil servants – even if they are pertinent, offer alternative approaches, or reflect a view that is better connected to the challenges of design and implementation – will, at best, reach ministers in a filtered way.[21]

One-size-fits-all inefficiencies. For much of policymaking, implementation ought to be context-specific. Yet the power-hoarding bias results in a system where implementers, and indeed the citizens and service users who are most effected, are rarely able to have significant impact on strategic priorities or policy design. This leads to an unnecessary barrier for the kind of information-sharing that could contribute to more consistent and coherent policymaking. Moreover, the idea of subsidiarity – that policies and projects should be 'owned' by whatever scale of organisation is most consistent with success – is lost.[22]

Pockets of underperformance. The hierarchical, centralised, and opaque nature of this system also results in purely vertical accountability structures. Unable to observe all aspects of the system at work simultaneously, managers (and, in turn, their managers) are also unable, in every case, to consistently ensure the highest standards from every participant in every team. What is lost is the scope for horizontal 'peer accountability'.[23]

This means that mistakes are not always learnt from, development is not sufficiently well targeted, and poor outcomes are difficult to directly connect back to those responsible. The Civil Service People Survey finds that only 4 in 10 civil servants agree that "poor performance is dealt with effectively in my team", a finding consistent over twelve years.[24] This expectation of pockets of poor performance contributes, in turn, to a low-trust culture.

Lack of operational autonomy for teams. This bias also ultimately contributes to a culture with low trust and minimal problem-solving autonomy for teams working in both central and local government. This reduces the scope for agility, learning, and innovative new approaches.[25] Another result is an infantilising and counter-productive management mentality – directly micromanaging colleagues rather than setting high standards and facilitating their achievement.[26]

THE SINGLE MINDSET BIAS

In 1854, Northcote and Trevelyan asked of the civil service: "[w]hat is the best method of providing it with a supply of good [people], and of making the most of them after they have

---

[21] Benjamin Barnard, *Government Reimagined: A Handbook for Reform* (Policy Exchange, 2021).
[22] Simon Kaye, *Think Big, Act Small: Elinor Ostrom's Radical Vision for Community Power* (New Local, 2020).
[23] Yannis Papadopoulos, 'Accountability and Multi-Level Governance: More Accountability, Less Democracy?', *West European Politics* 33, no. 5 (August 2010).
[24] Cabinet Office, *Civil Service People Survey: 2021 Results*.
[25] Toby Lowe, 'Beyond Adaptation: Lessons from the Frontline on How Shared Learning Fosters Trust', *Centre for Public Impact*, 10 December 2020.
[26] See, for example, rumours that civil servants in one department were told not to look out of the windows too much amid Royal processions following the death of Queen Elizabeth II (Pickard, Jim, Tweet, at 16:07, 14 September 2022).

been admitted?"[27] This remains a pertinent question for Whitehall today. Importantly, the desire to recruit "good" people and inculcate in them a particular civil service way, or style of doing things, may be producing an unintended consequence: because merit is narrowly defined by a somewhat homogenous group, current recruitment and development is having an institutionalising side-effect.

Civil servants can be very talented individuals, but the result of this bias is that they also tend to be quite similar to one another: descriptively, experientially, and in terms of hard-to-pin-down attributes, such as temperament and mindset. These similarities are more likely among more senior civil servants – who are then more likely to look for those attributes in colleagues, creating a feedback loop.

Consciously or otherwise, the recruitment, development, and norms of the civil service tend to develop these similarities further (though with some interesting in-group variations in particular departments).[28] Notably, this also means the participants of the Whitehall system do not reflect much of the public that they serve, deepening the dislocation between citizens and public servants mentioned in the previous section.

The knock-on implications for the quality of decisions and policy design can be serious. Without cognitive and experiential diversity, a team's understanding of a given issue or problem will always be, at best, intellectual: an abstracted, second-hand perspective that will be divorced of the detail and nuance of genuine experience and the possible implications of tackling it. There is a difference between even a very well-informed view of the challenges around a struggling school or life in a high-crime neighbourhood, and the view of someone who has actually lived with those realities.

Though his adversarial approach was often unhelpful, Dominic Cummings' interventions about the lack of "genuine cognitive diversity" within the Whitehall System – widely mocked at the time – are still worthy of attention: "We need true wild cards, artists, people who never went to university and fought their way out of an appalling hell hole, weirdos… you don't want more Oxbridge English graduates who chat about Lacan at dinner parties with TV producers".[29]

This was clearly not a perspective which sat well with the usual *temperament* within the Whitehall System – what former permanent secretary Clare Moriarty has referred to as "an environment where people feel they need to take their red shoelaces out. … We are clearly still acting out of discomfort with those who don't fit the norm."[30]

---

[27] 'The Northcote-Trevelyan Report'.

[28] Training opportunities abound, though apparently with little effect on performance: around half of civil servants report that the learning and development activities that are available to them have not improved their performance or enhanced their career prospects; See Cabinet Office, *Civil Service People Survey: 2021 Results*.

[29] Dominic Cummings, '"Two Hands Are a Lot" — We're Hiring Data Scientists, Project Managers, Policy Experts, Assorted Weirdos…', Blog, 2 January 2020.

[30] Jess Bowie, 'People Person: An Interview with Clare Moriarty as She Leaves the Civil Service', *Civil Service World*, 16 April 2020.

The effective, institutionalised monoculture produced by this single mindset bias can have important implications. And, quite rightly, the need for a more diverse civil service often features in efforts and recommendations for reform, and across a multitude of categories:

- **Gender, ability, and ethnicity:** Though in the aggregate civil servants reflect the demography of the UK (as of 2022, around 54% of civil servants are women, around 14% have a disability, and around 14% come from an ethnic minority background), at more senior levels there is still notable dominance by white men.[31]
- **Educational background:** Educational divides are more striking. As of 2019, a quarter of Senior Civil Servants and 59% of permanent secretaries had originally attended independent schools. 56% of permanent secretaries graduated from Oxford or Cambridge, and 39% both attended Oxbridge and independent schools.[32] This creates a tendency toward shared perspectives among key decision-makers. Factor in that Ministers are also far more likely to be independently educated and/or Oxbridge graduates and the potential for groupthink is clear.
- **Socioeconomic class:** Civil servants are on average more likely to hail from more privileged backgrounds. 54% of all officials are from high socioeconomic groups, as defined by parental occupation, while only 18% of Senior Civil Servants come from low socioeconomic backgrounds – which is just 1% lower than the situation in 1967.[33]
- **Generalists vs. specialists:** Homogeneity in professional experience and skills has long been criticised, yet the highest levels are still, quite intentionally, dominated by "generalists".[34] This generalism is further institutionalised by the way that progression is tied to a civil servant's movement through different departments and policy areas.[35]

This is important, particularly to the extent that such demographic and descriptive homogeneity also limits cognitive diversity. Academic studies have shown that discussions and decisions are improved by cognitively diverse participants versus ones where people have similar backgrounds, experiences, and ways of thinking.[36] Such diversity also contributes to higher performance.[37] The combined effect of a political establishment and a senior civil service that primarily includes people from similar backgrounds and with similar professional experiences is a likely contributor to recent government policy failures.[38] Similarly concerning is the possibility that the prevailing culture and mechanisms of advancement and development within the Whitehall system will tend to minimise the differences of those who do in fact come from different backgrounds.

---

[31] Cabinet Office, *Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Dashboard*, 2022.
[32] Alice Lilly et al., *Whitehall Monitor 2022* (Institute for Government, 2022).
[33] Social Mobility Commission, *Navigating the Labyrinth: Socio-Economic Background and Career Progression within the Civil Service*, 2021.
[34] James Ball and Andrew Greenway, *Bluffocracy* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2018).
[35] Tom Sasse and Alex Thomas, *Better Policy Making* (Institute for Government, 2022).
[36] Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).
[37] Alison Reynolds and David Lewis, 'Teams Solve Problems Faster When They're More Cognitively Diverse', *Harvard Business Review*, 30 March 2017.
[38] Isabel Hardman, *Why We Get the Wrong Politicians* (London: Atlantic Books, 2019).

Some of the undesirable results of this single mindset bias are worth spelling out:

Lack of specific expertise. In practice, this narrowness may involve a lack of scientific or technical expertise – or, indeed, insufficient scientific or technical literacy to effectively interpret advice from an outside expert. Reflecting on the challenges of working closely with Whitehall amid the pandemic, Dame Kate Bingham – the venture capitalist who was appointed to run the government's Vaccines Task Force during the pandemic – noted that:

> "Across government there is a devastating lack of skills and experience in science, industry, commerce, and manufacturing … Currently there are very few with science or operating backgrounds at all levels of government. If you lack scientific knowledge, then you cannot make decisions about science …[.] We need to embed science into policymaking, at every level of government."[39]

Lack of delivery experience. Lack of specific expertise can also extend to a lack of delivery experience within civil service teams – a longstanding bugbear for those in government. A 2002 review on improving government services found that "delivery experience is rarely found at the heart of departments", partly because the requisite skills were not "valued equally" with those more traditional to policy professionals.[40] Thirteen years later, John Manzoni, then the chief executive of the civil service, was attempting to encourage civil servants to "own the how … [because] we are really not so good at execution and delivery."[41] His attempted improvements were only partially functional at the point of his departure, leaving a continued skills gap.[42]

Increased risk of groupthink. Groupthink, a concept coined in the 1970s, incorporates findings from group psychology, many of which are intuitive. Individuals will often seek to avoid ostracism among a group of peers by being the only one to disagree; in more homogenous groups this effect is more pronounced, as individuals reinforce each others' assumptions. Eventually, in the worst cases, this effect will skew group discourse away from reality. This can be very damaging to policy decisions. In 2012, the collapse of the West Coast Main Line franchising deal was put down to "human error" by the Department for Transport, where three officials were – temporarily – suspended. Ultimately the problem was that the people involved were so isolated from alternative or contradictory voices that they advised that the franchise award should plough ahead.[43]

Under the current Government, renewed focus is being placed on the groupthink of 'Treasury orthodoxy', and rightly so. The structural power of the Treasury means that its microculture has been a significant contributor to unbalanced economic development, the

---

[39] University of Oxford, '"Another War Is Coming", Kate Bingham DBE, Delivers Romanes Lecture'.
[40] HM Treasury, *Report: Better Government Services: Executive Agencies in the 21st Century*, 2002.
[41] Sarah Aston, 'John Manzoni: Civil Servants Must "Own the How" of Policy Delivery', *Civil Service World*, 9 July 2015.
[42] Benoit Guerin, 'What Does John Manzoni's Departure Mean for Civil Service Skills Reforms?', *Institute for Government*, 11 February 2020.
[43] BBC News, 'West Coast Main Line Fiasco Caused by "Major Failures"', 31 January 2013.

privileging of price over value, and the under-prioritisation of growth.[44] However, rather than diversifying this part of the system and addressing its underlying biases, we are (at the time of writing) seeing what happens when longstanding groupthink is rapidly ripped up.

THE BUREAUCRACY BIAS

Bureaucracy is not a dirty word. Administrative functions must be fulfilled: any system that fulfils them with a degree of specialisation, organised accountability, and attention to merit will be, in the purest sense, bureaucratic. If well designed, this can be an efficient way to get things done.[45]

A bureaucratic commitment to process is crucial for accountability. But when these processes become not only the means to achieving certain outcomes but the ends themselves, a bureaucracy bias emerges. The emphasis on actually achieving outcomes is lost; more strategic thinking may be crowded-out by self-protective bureaucratic activities; and there remains little room for informality, flexibility, and agility. These are well-rehearsed criticisms for the Whitehall system, and anti-bureaucracy was a major focus of reform efforts under Blair and Cameron.[46]

This is also the critique that underlies the ongoing liberal criticism of bureaucracy as an unnecessary burden on non-state systems – and why reform efforts have often involved an attempt to bring private sector mentalities into the Whitehall system in order to reduce bureaucracy. In the words of von Mises, "the strait jacket of bureaucratic organisation paralyses the individual's initiative… [which] makes for stagnation and preservation of inveterate methods."[47]

Recent experience suggests that this criticism is not wholly misplaced.[48] Kate Bingham's experience of engaging with the Whitehall system suggests a systemic tendency toward process-dominance – and a generally conservative attitude toward risk – whose limitations and dangers became starkly clear amid genuine crisis. In her 2021 Romanes Lecture at Oxford University, she described witnessing an "almost obsessive desire among officials to avoid any suggestion of personal error or scope for criticism", which led to "groupthink and a massive aversion to risk, which in turn held back innovation and the pace of execution." She went on:

> "Officials are not generally rewarded for specialist skills, flair or drive, but for following correct procedures. Individual energisers and doers were outnumbered by officials able to think of reasons not to do something. … [W]hat I repeatedly saw was a compulsive

---

[44] Tom Sasse, 'Why Can't BEIS and the Treasury Get On?', *PoliticsHome*, 23 June 2022.
[45] Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968).
[46] Dave Richards et al., 'Cummings and Gove Cannot Reform Whitehall without Reforming the Treasury', *LSE British Politics and Policy*, 3 August 2020.
[47] Ludwig von Mises, *Bureaucracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944).
[48] Charlotte Pickles, *Delivering Value: Building a Smarter Post-COVID State* (Reform, 2022).

> preoccupation to follow a specific and frequently time-consuming and wasteful formal process, rather than place the focus and emphasis where they ultimately should be, on the outcome. The paradox is that the obsessive desire to avoid a known risk to oneself in the short term, often creates a much bigger unknown risk that falls on others, or on society as a whole. I do not think that the civil service has properly understood and absorbed this point."[49]

Bingham's analysis is that the Whitehall establishment may be the last to recognise that a deeply hierarchical and defensive culture might, far from avoiding risks, generate more pernicious risks, externally and over the longer term. A bureaucratic bias privileges the easily measurable and the already-tried over the experimental or the original, preventing innovative, entrepreneurial, or longer-term thinking.

One victim of this bias is therefore the kind of strategic capability that might allow for the prioritisation of more preventative, resilient, and sustainable policymaking. Bureaucracy asks that immediate needs be met, and established performance indicators satisfied – leaving little room for horizon-scanning or demand-prediction.

Policymakers and politicians can perhaps be forgiven if their thinking tends toward the short-term. Elected representatives have strong incentives to work toward 'quick wins' whose effects will hopefully be felt before the next election arrives. Officials who are not reliant on re-election are instructed by those who are – and, regardless, often have the scope of their work contained by short-term funding.

The unintended consequences of the bureaucracy bias include:

An inability to manage issues over longer periods and larger scales. The challenges we face do not play out over the convenient timespan of one or two electoral cycles. Indeed, many of these challenges appear insuperable because of the mismatch between their timescales and the rapid cycles of activity within our machinery of government. Bureaucracy does not sit well with consideration of future generations – an issue that is recognised as a source of tension for the devolved government in Wales, which is experimenting with new ways to build long-term thinking into its systems.[50] This ties in with the power-hoarding bias: in a more effectively devolved system, central government would become a natural home for long range thinking at the national strategic scale.

Anti-prevention prejudice. Relatedly, the requirements of bureaucratic approaches make it harder to make the case for approaches and policies which do not directly contribute to pre-established targets and well-defined metrics. This leaves little room for attempts to pre-empt demand (which has not yet emerged and so cannot be measured) or build collaborations

---

[49] University of Oxford, '"Another War Is Coming", Kate Bingham DBE, Delivers Romanes Lecture'.
[50] Owen Donovan, 'Bureaucracy and Short-Term Thinking Limits Future Generations Act's Impact', *Senedd Home*, 18 March 2021.

that build resilience against potential future need (which looks like a source of inefficiency to the bureaucratic mindset).

Risk-aversion and risk-myopia. When processes are treated as ends in themselves, rigid thinking can be the result. The bureaucratic framework is a source of personal protection for the people operating within the system: even if something goes wrong, it will be possible to say that all relevant procedure was satisfied. This reinforces an intrinsically conservative attitude to risk, as well as a 'myopic' one, where attempts to minimise immediate risks make larger external crisis more, rather than less, likely.

4. CONCLUSION: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Current challenges to our approach to government – those beyond our control and those of our own making – represent a kind of warning-shot for the Whitehall system. The challenges of the 21st Century will not be amenable to 20th Century structures or approaches.

In this context it is particularly disheartening to note that much public debate on this topic revolves around reducing the total numbers of civil servants. Arguing over a bigger or smaller machine is irrelevant if it operates in the wrong way, in the wrong places, or on the basis of outmoded principles.

INSTEAD OF POWER-HOARDING, POWER-SHARING

Power-hoarding isn't only a powerful explanation as to why Whitehall policymaking underperforms and how Whitehall reforms tend to underdeliver on their promise. It is a major reason for the lack of resilience in our national response to major emergencies, and our failure to make progress against the 'hard problems' of domestic policy: getting more people into work, supporting families with complex needs, or delivering locally tailored, preventative public services.

When the COVID pandemic presented a generationally unique threat to our health and way of life, the centre's reaction was to closely hold on to the key decisions and powers. This was an approach that played into the worst of Whitehall's pathologies and led to poorer outcomes. The overextended centre could not act in time – the Prime Minister would later compare the experience to the kind of "bad dream" where your feet refuse to move.[51]

Local public health experts were underutilised for track-and-trace efforts. Local resources were not put to sufficient use to scale-up testing. Local government was necessarily required to support and collaborate with communities directly and implement changes in public services which were major planks of the wider COVID response strategy – and they did this with an unpardonable lack of clarity about their own financial position as the costs racked up.

---

[51] Prime Minister's Office, 'PM Economy Speech: 30 June 2020', 30 June 2020.

Whitehall cannot do everything – and, in fact, it shouldn't. Micromanagement should not be confused with grip. There is a need now to clarify the true core functions of central government, and turn Whitehall into a far more specialised, dynamic bureaucracy that is explicitly tasked with the delivery only of these responsibilities and the highest-level strategic direction-setting. This would create the necessary space for genuine accountability, long-term thinking, deep expertise, genuine adaptability, innovative approaches and effective collaboration.

Tackling power-hoarding biases within the government machine promises a double benefit to the Whitehall system. Greater power at smaller scales not only enables greater collaboration, citizen involvement, and context-sensitivity, but also an increase in Whitehall's ability to deliver outcomes, and benefit from a national capacity for innovation and experimentation that is enhanced by distribution through the whole system.[52] Most attempts to reform Whitehall have at worst ignored, and at best only partially recognised, this fundamental underlying factor in government underperformance: the arguments for devolution are justified – with limited success – on their own terms, rather than as a necessary precondition for a more effective central government machine.[53]

INSTEAD OF A SINGLE MINDSET, COGNITIVE DIVERSITY

Spanning skills, experience, background, and mindset, the Whitehall system struggles to bring a cognitively diverse workforce to bear against the many – and often complex – policy challenges that it faces.

This affects outcomes, and also in itself erects a barrier against reform, reflecting a deep-running (and perhaps even unconscious) tendency to recruit and promote officials with a certain shared temperament. Pinning down the nature of this temperament is a challenge: a personality type that is committed to operating within a large system, resigned to accept the changing whims of ministers. In the words of Sir John Kingman, it is "just not a personality type which is ever likely to include many hard-driving reformers or drivers of systemic change."[54]

This being so, improving the cognitive diversity within Whitehall – hiring and retaining those "wild cards" and "singleton oddities" – would be an important catalyst of deeper improvements to the functioning of government.[55]

---

[52] The Commission for Smart Government, *Smart Devolution to Level Up*.
[53] Martin Wheatley, *Localism 2.0* (GovernUp, 2015).
[54] Institute for Government, *Why Is Civil Service Reform so Hard? Sir John Kingman in Conversation with Bronwen Maddox*, 2020.
[55] See Cummings, '"Two Hands Are a Lot" — We're Hiring Data Scientists, Project Managers, Policy Experts, Assorted Weirdos…'; Bowie, 'People Person: An Interview with Clare Moriarty as She Leaves the Civil Service'.

INSTEAD OF BUREAUCRACY, STRATEGIC DRIVE

The signature achievement of the UK's COVID response – vaccine investment and acquisition – was achieved by a specially-created new team with a unique degree of operational autonomy. This fact contains a lesson: actors within the system of government understood that, however hard-working and well-intentioned, Whitehall itself could not deliver the urgent, measured risk-taking and innovation that were called for during a genuine emergency.

It is well understood that this bureaucratic bias undermines the agility, and thereby the resilience, of the Whitehall system. But at the other end of the spectrum, the bureaucratic processes of this system also have the effect of denuding from it the longer-term, strategic capacities that might enable the system as a whole to better prepare for coming challenges, or act pre-emptively to head-off demand.

A more predictive, preventative, and strategic system will be needed for future challenges. A reformed Whitehall would be able to move beyond reaction and fire-fighting to longer-term thinking. It would provide a strategic core and demonstrate the slow but significant benefits of taking steps today that can reduce demand or prevent emergencies tomorrow. And it could place at its core a dedication to the long-range interests of future generations.

To achieve all this, the tendencies toward power-hoarding, a single shared mindset, and bureaucracy must each be challenged. They are not only produced by the structures of Whitehall, but by the norms and behaviours of officials and decision-makers, and by the cross-cutting processes in which all participate. A successful programme of reform must therefore address all these aspects of the system if the aim is nimble, capable, diverse, and outcomes-focused government. To achieve this, it must wholly reimagine Whitehall.