

Guardian Public Services Summit speech

FOR PUBLICATION: CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**THE MODERN CIVIL SERVICE:
The Fusion of Historic Values with 21st Century Dynamism**

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27 January 2006 St Albans, Hertfordshire

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This speech is about the fusion of the civil service's traditional values with 21st century dynamism – the old with the new – to maintain and strengthen an excellent civil service for generations to come.

I want to set out how our traditional core values of honesty, objectivity, integrity and impartiality drive pride and professionalism across the Civil Service. These values are as integral to our work now as they ever were. But they are not enough on their own to meet the delivery challenges we face in the 21st century.

We need a stronger, more professional civil service – one capable of responding to the global challenges we face in the 21st century. Challenges such as the emergence of China and India as low cost producers, demographic changes at home in the UK and greater expectations of what public services should deliver.

Civil Service values

Today's civil service is a national asset – it is based on 150 years of strong values and innovation that have been copied the world over. It's an extraordinary legacy for me to inherit as Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service.

The Civil Service Code

The current Civil Service Code uses the great Northcote Trevelyan report of 1854 as its inspiration, and was first put in place a decade ago – in January 1996 - at the suggestion of the then Treasury and Civil Service Select Committee.

The Code is quite clear about values – laying out the core values and demonstrating that it is not just our right but our duty to ask ‘why’ of Ministers as well as ‘how’ – to challenge them to make the best decisions.

These values are fundamental to the ongoing success of the Civil Service and the trust that Ministers, Parliament and the wider public have in us.

Today I want reaffirm my personal commitment to our historic values. But they do not exist in isolation from the challenges I have outlined. So we must develop our values in a way that allows us to apply them to the twenty first century.

So today I am announcing consultation on a proposed new civil service code, which, I hope, delivers the fusion I have spoken of between these traditional values and the need for a dynamic, outward-facing, customer focused civil service in the 21st century.

The former First Civil Service Commissioner Baroness Usha Prashar, working with the civil service and other Commissioners, has done an excellent job to bring life to this document on its tenth anniversary. I want to record my thanks for her contribution. And Janet Paraskeva, the new First Civil Service Commissioner – who I am delighted to say is with us in the audience today – will be closely involved in taking forward the contributions we receive in the three month consultation that begins today.

The proposed new code sets out the values that are common to all civil servants wherever they might work and whatever grade they are. It is about the high standards of behaviour that I expect from all civil servants. Importantly, it strengthens the framework for policing the Code by proposing that the Commissioners can, if they choose, consider complaints about breaches of the Code directly, rather than having to go through the department. This meets one of the Public Administration Committee's key recommendations. It shows that we want to make sure that we do all in our power to keep public confidence in our values and standards.

And I am clear that senior managers have a duty to make sure that all civil servants are treated well and with respect, and that matters like bullying and discrimination are robustly addressed.

What does the new code mean?

The new code is intended to be a living document, to be read and understood by all civil servants.

You have copies of the proposed new version. It is designed to be useful guidance for real-life situations and to be much more user-friendly for all civil servants.

I want it to connect with civil servants so they are aware that it is an explicit part of their employment contract.

Impressions count – the new code will have a clean, modern look reflecting our approach to the challenges laid out before us.

I urge civil servants and others to visit the revamped Civil Service website and contribute to the consultation exercise. And later on when it is finalised the new code will be part of induction processes and on the websites of all departments.

But the code is just a beginning, not an end to our values. I want to signal through the new code that we are an outward-facing civil service. Frequently we deliver with and through others in the rest of the public sector, and with the voluntary and private sectors, all of whom I consider to be key partners.

I want to signal to the citizens who fund and use our public services that we know they expect the best from us and that it is the duty of each and every civil servant to strive to meet their expectations.

What that means in practice is that we must adhere to our traditional values, but recognise that on their own they are not enough to meet the new challenges.

Flexibility, Creativity, Passion

One of our traditional values is impartiality but this has mistakenly led some to argue that we must not be passionate about performing to the highest standards. Passion is not only possible, but necessary. We are not robots - we are here to use our intelligence, skills, judgment and commitment to deliver good policy advice and good public services.

Whether you are a prison guard or a policy official, successfully delivering your work to the best of your ability requires flexibility, creativity and passion for the job.

We must also learn from others. People at the BBC, for instance, walk a similar tightrope to civil servants. Over the years the BBC has won much admiration for

its ability to combine independence and passion. It also debates its values regularly and adjusts to changing circumstances.

But while our values are non-negotiable, our relationships and methods and language must be flexible.

Dealing with rapid change in a global context requires dynamism and flexibility. We must be flexible enough to meet the needs of whatever democratically elected Government we serve. It is the absolute right of the Government of the day to challenge what it may see as our settled ways, and it is our duty to be efficient, effective and passionate in meeting those challenges.

Like our core values one constant in the life of a civil servant is the need to hold the confidence and confidences of the public and Ministers.

MORI research shows that civil servants are trusted by twice as many Britons as journalists.

More interestingly, we are trusted by twice as many people as we were 20 years ago, which is a welcome change. But it is still the case that Senior Civil Servants are not as highly trusted as front line deliverers, such as teachers, doctors, nurses and the Armed Forces.

It right to have values and it is good to be trusted – but what are these values for? They are a means to an end and the end is improving the way in which we formulate policies and the quality of the services we deliver as a result of those policies.

If we aren't delivering what the public and Ministers expect we aren't going to remain relevant and we aren't going to retain confidence. In the modern world the civil service has no automatic entitlement to a monopoly on either policy advice or service provision.

The public have seen and grown used to improvements in the way the private sector serves them as customers, and it is reasonable that they have the same expectations of the public sector. The wider public sector has an added challenge in meeting such expectations – that we cannot pick and target our customers. We often have to deliver for all, including the most vulnerable and hard to reach people in society.

The fact that citizens are required to fund our services through taxation puts a moral duty on us as well as a governing duty on Ministers to use those resources effectively. This is particularly so at a time of increased public spending.

This is, in effect, a huge productivity challenge for the public sector. It will become even more important to meet this as the rate of growth in public spending slows, as the Government has indicated it will.

Being efficient and customer focused is at the core of the public sector ethos because it results in better policy and better services.

Improving the performance of the civil service

So what can I do as Head of the Civil Service? Will Hutton and others have done very interesting work on the concept of public value - which should develop from greater investment in public services. And in the civil service specifically we have strategies in place such as the new Transformational Government IT strategy to create further public value. But there needs to be a quicker turnaround between those investments and better services.

This is a challenge for all public servants. Now, I am not the head of all public services – and I will return to this theme a little later – so first I want to focus on the civil service.

I have grouped my thoughts into five themes for the productivity drive I wish to pursue, namely: Diversity, Leadership, Skills, Capability and Governance.

Diversity

First diversity, which is more than a moral imperative – it is also a business imperative. On both counts we're convinced that diversity matters.

Allan Leighton of the Royal Mail has overseen some fascinating research demonstrating that diversity has added £32bn to the bottom line of the 113 members of the 'Race for Opportunity' alliance he heads.

The civil service does much better than the private sector on diversity, with, for example, three times as many women in senior leadership posts¹. So it is my hope that we are reaping some of these benefits already, but the potential should be huge.

Diversity is about getting the best people in the right jobs: bringing in and bringing on talented people from a wide range of backgrounds. We're rightly proud of our tradition of fair, open competition and appointment on merit, but on its own it hasn't achieved sufficient diversity in our top jobs. There is no skirting around that fact.

The diversity 10 point plan I launched with Waqar Azmi in October is a tough framework for putting that right. I am also keen for us to learn from the work of groups like IDeA (Ideas Development Agency) who have set up in partnership

¹ Women make up 29.1% of our senior leadership in the Civil Service compared to 9% in the private sector.

with the Association of Directors of Social Services to give Black and Minority Ethnic managers greater exposure to higher level work through mentoring relationships and development workshops.

By improving diversity we are broadening our talent pool as well as gaining greater insight into the society we serve.

Leadership

This brings me to leadership, my second theme. The Prime Minister and I want to see first rate leaders with diverse backgrounds at the highest levels of the Civil Service. The series of Permanent Secretary appointments the Prime Minister has made on my advice reflect this shared desire. We are giving experienced leaders new challenges, promoting top internal talent and bringing in the best from outside.

It is also why a greater number – now 1 in 5 – of Senior Civil Service appointments are being made from outside. I want to see that proportion rise still further.

Skills

Thirdly, skills. Wherever our people come from one thing is clear – the pressure on them is greater than ever. The professional skills we need for our jobs are more sophisticated and stretching today than in previous generations.

That's why our new Professional Skills for Government programme is so important. Like our values, Professional Skills for Government is codified in documents, but fundamentally it is about a culture change. It is an inclusive culture change that values the concept that 'you never stop learning.'

Professional Skills for Government covers the well-known fields of operational and policy delivery, but it also emphasises the specialist corporate services roles that help civil servants get their jobs done.

No one should be exempt from professionalism, I might add. Let me give you an example you mightn't have thought of - No10 Downing Street itself. The frantic nature of the place means it is quite an achievement for them to have been re-accredited this week with Investors in People status at the new, higher standards.

Capability

Fourth, capabilities. Just as crucial as the right skills are the right capabilities and a strong sense of how well we are performing.

In October I explained to the Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) a proposal to undertake capability reviews of government departments, and identify what targeted support they required in those areas where they need to improve.

Since then, with external experts like the Audit Commission and the National Audit Office, we have been developing how we will actually carry out the reviews.

I am now able to announce that the first three departments to be reviewed will be:

- the Department for Constitutional Affairs,
- the Home Office, and
- the Department for Work and Pensions.

The programme will be rolled out across more than a dozen departments over the next 18 months.

Governance

Capability reviews are about how individual departments perform. My fifth and final point is about how the civil service works as a corporate whole. We are also improving our governance structures at the highest levels of the civil service to give stronger, more transparent corporate leadership from the very top.

In the extremely valuable collection of 'Dear Gus' letters published recently by the Solace Foundation, Sir Michael Bichard argued cogently that we need a stronger corporate agenda in the name of Permanent Secretaries. I'd like to take this opportunity to respond: 'Dear Sir Michael, I agree with you'.

And as a start I've already set up a new forum for all Permanent Secretary heads of department, supported by a small Steering Group of Permanent Secretaries which I also chair. They'll look at issues of relevance to the whole Civil Service, and will be supported by sub-groups to look at issues in depth. These changes will bring a greater sense of collective ownership to the reform agenda, and will mean that the corporate leadership will be able to act more quickly and more effectively.

Summer Reform Conference

I'd also like to use this conference to plug another conference, if that is allowed.

I've been talking today about changes in the Civil Service. Of course, an important part of the context for this is reform in the wider public sector. You'd be forgiven for thinking, based on some of the media coverage that we haven't progressed. Actually, Britain has made huge advances which are generating great interest around the world. And I am sure that there have been significant progress in other countries from which we can learn.

We are therefore organising a high-level conference for June, hosted by the National School for Government, looking at what has changed so far, and where things are going with public sector reform across the globe.

What can we do together?

This brings me to the point about what I want to do in terms of building partnerships in the public sector and beyond. I am excited by the prospect of providing leadership to all the elements of this reform and productivity agenda within the Civil Service. But there are many elements of the civil service's work that can only happen in partnership with other sectors.

I am not, as some have suggested I should become, head of all public services. This is a fact of life, and I am glad that the essential nature of my relationship with other public services is instead one of partnership.

I want to emphasise the importance I attach to interchange between sectors. I like to advise ambitious civil servants that “if you want to get on, get out.”

Why not try a spell in local government, or at a regulator, a charity or the private sector; or, as I did, a job abroad? But please come back to share with us what you have learned.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by drawing together the topics covered today. I firmly believe the Civil Service, and civil servants, need strong and clearly articulated values to believe in, ones they can be proud to uphold. Without that sense of purpose it is much harder to deliver anything that is asked of you.

But values alone are not enough to ensure we are meeting the needs of the Government and the public. I have outlined today a series of actions which demonstrate we are getting on with the job of making the Civil Service more able to meet the needs of the people it serves.

This is a fast changing world. We need strong values and stronger capability to deliver if we are to ensure the sort of dynamism that will keep the Civil Service strong and relevant in the 21st century.

That's what I hope to deliver during my term as Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service, with the help of my Civil Service colleagues and our partners across the whole of society.

Thank you.