It’s personal: why reform in the Civil Service succeeds or fails

“We wanted the best, but everything turned out as usual.”

The much quoted words of Viktor Chernomyrdin, the former prime minister of Russia, are apt when discussing UK civil service reform. Every few years, it seems, a new civil service reform plan is launched. The reforms often focus on well-trodden territory. Whether it’s improving public services, managing performance, generating cost savings or building the skills and capability of civil servants – it has already been tried many times before.

The 2012 Civil Service Reform Plan [2] has pushed further and faster on many of the same themes. But in their assessment one year on [3], Francis Maude, Minister for the Cabinet Office, and Sir Bob Kerslake, Head of the Civil Service, conceded that ‘[they] were too slow to mobilise’ and had made variable progress. The sense of underachievement in 2014 is nothing new.

There have been rare successes, however. In 1988, Margaret Thatcher launched Next Steps [4], one of the most ambitious and far-reaching reforms that hived off around three-quarters of civil servants into arm’s-length agencies. This is generally thought to have improved financial management, performance and customer relations, among other things.

Recently, Sir Michael Barber, former head of the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit (PMDU) [5], spoke about the unit’s approach to reforming the delivery of public services at the Mile End Group [6]. Though the PMDU’s impact is still debatable, many believe it was highly effective in supporting progress against key prime ministerial priorities – such as reducing NHS waiting times, improving the literacy of primary school children and tackling crime.

The unit also launched the Capability Reviews in 2005 to hold permanent secretaries to account for improving their departments’ capability to deliver. The PMDU model is internationally admired and has been emulated in places as far as the United States, Malaysia, Pakistan and Brazil.

A less well-known reform, Bringing in and Bringing on Talent [7], significantly contributed to changing the skills, diversity and experience of the Civil Service within a few years (from 1999-2002). There are now far more women and ethnic minorities at the top of the Civil Service as well as those with experience in local government and the private sector – albeit not quite as many as there should be [8].

So what ties these successes together? The Institute for Government’s new report, Civil Service Reform in the Real World [9], identifies the factors that may lift or drag down a reform at various stages of its life. The most fascinating insight is the role of political backing in driving progress – crucial in Next Steps, PMDU and Capability Reviews [10], but largely insignificant in Bringing in and Bringing on Talent. In the former cases, prime ministerial support – and personalised leadership from a senior official – was critical to generating energy and buy-in early on.

But the over-reliance on particular leaders or political parties eventually became a major source of weakness. Incoming leaders, anxious to build their own reputation and respond to the latest political priorities, have routinely discarded the work of their predecessors rather than building on what has gone before.

The Next Steps [11] reform only survived a change in Cabinet Secretary in 1988 (Robert Armstrong to Sir Robin Butler), prime minister in 1990 (from Margaret Thatcher to John Major) and government in 1997 (from Conservative to Labour) because extensive efforts were made to convince relevant individuals that the reform was a ‘transferable technology’ that could deliver a better model for whoever ran the government.

In contrast, the PMDU reform agenda became heavily associated with criticisms of ‘big government’, ‘central control’ and ‘target culture’, seen as the hallmarks of the Labour Government. Unsurprisingly, the Coalition immediately abolished this machinery in 2010 and replaced it with Departmental Business Plans [12], which are now seen as relatively weak in helping departments judge their performance [13].

Failure to manage these crucial leadership transitions lies at the heart of why even the more successful reforms lose momentum and tail off. So what implications does this have for current leaders of civil service reforms? With the 2015 election looming it is now critical to build a cross-party consensus and corporate leadership team around important reforms – those that have potential to improve long-term government effectiveness – before it is too late and the reforms are automatically (and mistakenly) binned.
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