

100 years of the Cabinet Secretariat

Six in conversation

A seminar held on 30 November 2016, 12:30 - 14:00, at the Institute for Government, 2 Carlton Gardens, London SW1Y 5AA

Participants:

- **Lord Armstrong of Ilminster**, Cabinet Secretary, 1979-1987
- **Lord Butler of Brockwell**, Cabinet Secretary, 1988-1998
- **Lord Wilson of Dinton**, Cabinet Secretary, 1998-2002
- **Lord Turnbull**, Cabinet Secretary, 2002-2005
- **Lord O'Donnell**, Cabinet Secretary, 2005-2011
- **Chair: Sir Jeremy Heywood**, Cabinet Secretary, 2012 – present

Transcript

Bronwen Maddox:

Good afternoon, welcome. I'm Bronwen Maddox, the Director of the Institute for Government. We're delighted to be having this event, and there has been such a buzz about it. We are more subscribed for this than for many, many of our immensely popular events for months. So thank you all very much for coming, and thank you to our panel and to the British Academy for doing that with us.

We've been very keen on this event for a long time. It draws on our sense of the history of Whitehall, a project that Dr Cath Haddon has been working on for a long time about the lessons we should learn from our past and about the need for a Cabinet Office that works in kind of coordinating government and pulling it together.

It is, I think, an extraordinary thing to reflect on that there wasn't such an organisation until the middle of the First World War – the centenary that we're now celebrating.

We are delighted to be joined by Sir Jeremy Heywood, who is going to be chairing this very interesting discussion, and Lords Armstrong, Butler, Wilson, Turnbull and O'Donnell, with their particular reflections.

I'm going to hand over right now to Alun Evans of the British Academy to say a few words about their particular interest in this, and then to Jeremy.

Alun Evans:

Thank you, Bronwen. Good afternoon. It's a very great privilege for me on behalf of the British Academy, of which I'm Chief Executive, to welcome you here as a co-sponsor with the Institute for Government. Having spent 32 years in the civil service before I became Chief Executive of the British

Academy, it's been a great privilege to actually work for all six of these Cabinet Secretaries in one way or another.

The British Academy for those of you who don't know is the national academy supporting the humanities and social sciences. So just as the Royal Society promotes science, we promote the importance of the humanities and social science to understanding all the challenges facing Britain today and all of the most complex challenges, from productivity to climate change, to ageing, to obesity etc., all rely on the need for input from all of the academic disciplines, in particular the humanities and social sciences. And of course, the biggest challenge at the moment facing the country in terms of Brexit will not in my view be solved by science and technology and engineering but by an understanding of economics, politics, history, philosophy, international relations, international law, and so on – which is one of the reasons why we in the British Academy are very keen to put the expertise of our fellowship at the disposal of government or anyone else.

It also gives me a great pleasure to welcome you to this event today because I strongly believe and the Academy strongly believes in the importance of history and learning from the lessons of history, because one of the things that history teaches us is that history can repeat itself. And so people who have knowledge and insight into the way in which history works and actually have a culture of learning from the past and ensuring that we learn those lessons seems to me very important, which is why it's a great privilege to be introducing this event.

I checked out on that most reliable source of information, Wikipedia, how many years of experience there is represented on the platform in the civil service and I made it 209 years jointly. So hopefully that will be able to inform some of our discussion. And on a personal note, of the six members on the panel, I have played cricket with 50% of them, which is also something I'm very proud of, but I'll leave you to judge which 50% that was.

So enjoy the afternoon, I'm sure it's going to be a fantastic event, and over to Jeremy.

Sir Jeremy Heywood: Thank you very much, Alun. Well, on behalf of the surviving Cabinet Secretaries and myself, thank you very much for this event. I'm going to do my best to keep some discipline over the next hour before we hand it over to you for questions. We'll try and have some sort of structured conversation. And I wanted to start, really, by asking Robert [Lord Armstrong], the oldest member, for any reflections he has on some of the five Cabinet Secretaries who aren't with us today because they've died. There are 11 of us in total, six of us surviving, five have passed away, and Robert, you might want to start with any observations on any of those former colleagues that you worked with.

Lord Armstrong: Well, I didn't know [Maurice] Hankey, the first, who of course did 22 years and was the first person to sit on the Prime Minister's right when the Cabinet met at Number 10. I remember when I became Cabinet Secretary someone said 'where does Robert sit? Does he sit behind the Prime

Minister, behind Margaret Thatcher?’ And they said ‘No, he’s sits on Margaret Thatcher’s right.’ ‘God,’ they said ‘we didn’t know there was such a place’. [Laughter]

I did know Edward Bridges, though not when he was Cabinet Secretary, but when he was Permanent Secretary at the Treasury, my first Permanent Secretary. Of course, when I became Cabinet Secretary I looked back at my predecessors, and I think that it was he, really, who established the Cabinet system – the Cabinet Office system, the Cabinet government system – more or less in its present form. Maurice Hankey had obviously started it, started the actual business of Cabinet Secretariat – the writing of minutes, circulating the agenda and all that. But Edward Bridges, who became Cabinet Secretary in 1938, coped with the war, developed the Cabinet committee system, developed the style of Cabinet minutes which I think we’ve all since followed – the great merit of which is that though the discussion is recorded faithfully, nothing is attributed to anybody, except the Prime Minister and one minister, so that nobody is going to come back and say to you ‘you have misreported what I said’.

So I think his foundations as it were, building on Hankey’s foundations, it was he who really started, really created the Cabinet Office and the Cabinet system of government as we now have it. A lot has been built on it since and we shall come to that. But I do remember him – he was a lovely man and a great man. I heard many stories of him when he was in the Treasury. I remember him when he was not very well and on his door he pinned a note saying ‘please do not ask me how I am; I will tell you when I am about to die or I am better’, signed E.B. [Laughter] He was a very direct person. I certainly look back to him as really, in a sense, the creator of the system, which has developed so much from that, since that time.

I served under Burke Trend in the Cabinet Office for a couple of years – 1964 to 1966 – so I got to know him very well. I think both he and I looked back at Bridges as a kind of mentor from our days with him in the Treasury.

Heywood:

Marvellous. Thank you very much. Robin, anything you want to add to this?

Lord Butler:

Well, just briefly, I did meet Brook when I first went into the Treasury as an Assistant Principal, as a sort of laying on of hands. Curiously, he had an office in the Treasury. I don’t know if he had an office in the Cabinet Office as well but I remember meeting him in the Treasury, but I didn’t know him.

I worked in the Cabinet Office, in the CPRS [Central Policy Review Staff] – the think tank – when Burke Trend was Cabinet Secretary and there was a certain amount of tension, really, about the role of the CPRS between Trend and [Victor] Rothschild. And I remember Trend as a very ascetic figure. I remember I made a great *faux pas* by going into the Cabinet Office mess and seeing there was one empty table in the corner and going and sitting on it. And Burke Trend arrived and he didn’t ask me to leave, he – as he thought, and as he no doubt intended – tried to put me at my ease [laughter] which he didn’t succeed in doing.

- Heywood:** Fine. Okay, well, moving on. I thought I'd next ask the panel members to tell us about their thoughts about how you best prepare to be Cabinet Secretary, what is the normal – if there is such a thing – career path that takes you from the junior ranks of the civil service right to the eminence at top of the pinnacle? Andrew, why don't you kick off?
- Lord Turnbull:** Well, I thought my preparation was just about ideal actually. I spent a lot of time in the Treasury in various divisions and then I had three spells in the centre, once as the Economic Private Secretary in Number 10, then back to the Treasury, then came back as a Principal Private Secretary, then unusually – because Treasury people normally play 'fire and forget' with people they send off to departments – I went off to the Department of the Environment after Richard [Wilson] followed Michael Howard to the Home Office, then came back to the Treasury, then came back as Cabinet Secretary, with one short spell over in the IMF [International Monetary Fund]. I couldn't really have planned it any better I think.
- Heywood:** And Richard, you're unusual in not having been a Treasury person or having been a Private Secretary in Number 10, I think.
- Lord Wilson:** I think I have those strengths, yes. *[Laughter]*
- Heywood:** Yes.
- Wilson:** I think you're right, I think I am the outsider in terms of my career. I did serve in the Cabinet Office for two years on the Assessment Staff in the early 1970s, which was absolutely invaluable and fascinating. But, other than that, I was in the Board of Trade when we were the trade-negotiating department on the Kennedy Round. A very strong department—
- Heywood:** They're going to be hiring him later... *[Laughter]*
- Wilson:** And then I was in the Department of Energy for 13 years. I applied for a Private Secretary in Number 10 and was told to wait for an interview. I got a haircut, which was a big thing in the 1970s, waited but never got called and inquired, was told it had gone to Nigel Wicks and sorry they'd forgotten to tell me I wasn't going to be interviewed. I worked with some of my colleagues here as it were as a line finance man in departments. I remember Robin [Butler] energetically telling us about something called FIS [Financial Information System] – do you remember FIS, Robin?
- Butler:** I do.
- Wilson:** And we all were summoned in to be told. I remember Andrew [Turnbull] supervising my public expenditure, being a spending man and so on. And then I got called in by Robert [Armstrong] and appointed Head of the Economic and Domestic Secretariat, which was a big break, under Margaret Thatcher for three years – thank you, Robert – which was absolutely crucial. And then under Robin too, who was very generous and gave me a lot of latitude. And Robin then said to me 'I think it's about time you had a spell in the Treasury', I'll never forget that conversation 'we need you to be more of a Treasury man', and I went to the Treasury for two years, it was a kind of

finishing school really before I became Permanent Secretary at Environment and then the Home Office for four years, and then Cabinet Secretary for five.

And the answer is, if you have a career which gets you to the Cabinet Secretary without being in the Treasury much, you know what it's like being in the line, dealing with the Treasury, and you know how departments work. And I found that really very important in terms of working in the Secretariat of the Cabinet Office and being Cabinet Secretary. It altered the way I saw the job. That's my answer, I think.

Heywood:

Brilliant. And Gus, you ended up as Treasury Permanent Secretary, but you took an unusual route to getting there – from economics, to the press – so, what's your story?

Lord O'Donnell:

So, I was an academic in the 1970s, where we definitely didn't do haircuts, and then came into [the] Treasury as a kind of economist sort of specialist, spent some time in the States. But when I look back on it, the big break for me was being made Press Secretary to Nigel Lawson, which was such a brilliant triumph that within weeks he'd resigned – fallen out with Margaret Thatcher, if I remember rightly – and quite a lot of people fell at the same time. And I got to work with Robin – we might come on to some of the things that happened jointly with us during that John Major presidency – prime ministership. *[Laughter]* So that was good and gave me my time in Number 10, and then being in the Foreign Office working in an embassy abroad was extremely useful. The big gap was not being in a spending department at any time and that would've been very useful and I would have learnt more on the operational side. So you have to try and make up for that in other ways. Certainly I'd say understanding the Treasury is an important part of it, but seeing it from the other side as well is crucial.

Heywood:

Brilliant. Okay, well, let's move on. The role of the Cabinet Secretary I think has evolved over time, and I gave a presentation to the Institute for Government a year or so ago in which I sort of tried to carve out my time. It would be very interesting to see how I've spent my time as Cabinet Secretary is different from how, for example, Robert would have spent his.

And I – from memory – had about about 40% of my time on civil service management and managing the Permanent Secretaries and that's quite a big slug of my time. Maybe about 10% directly on Cabinet business, Cabinet committees, doing the Cabinet minutes and sitting with the Prime Minister in Cabinet. A large chunk of my time doing external representation, but above all, doing policy advice and so on. So that was a rough snapshot of what I was spending my time on last year and it hasn't changed that much I would say.

Robert, thinking back, what proportion of your time did you spend on managing the civil service? Because you were, I think, Head of the Civil Service at the same time. What percentage on pure Cabinet business or Cabinet committee business? Did you spend more time on intelligence and foreign policy?

Armstrong:

Well, I started in 1979 just as Secretary of the Cabinet. I was not Head of the Civil Service at that stage. So for those years, most of my time was really devoted to servicing of the Cabinet and Cabinet committees and advising the Prime Minister for the purpose of briefing meetings, going with her in some meetings. I did do one job which I think the rest of us did not do and that was to be the Prime Minister's sherpa for G7 economic summits and that involved not merely attending the summits but three or four preliminary meetings with the sherpas from the other seven countries, and from the European Community as it then was, in various pleasurable spots round the world depending on which country happened to be in the chair that year. That was quite demanding because, apart from the expenditure of time, there was a good deal of drafting and exchange of papers with my seven colleagues abroad.

Then that began to change in 1981 when the Civil Service Department was abolished and its functions divided between the Treasury and the Cabinet Office and I became first joint Head and then sole Head of the Civil Service. I was joint Head of the Civil Service from 1981 to 1983, the other joint Head being Douglas Wass who was the Permanent Secretary at the Treasury. And then Douglas retired and I suggested to the Prime Minister that his successor should become joint Head of the Civil Service and she said 'No Robert, I can't have a Pinky and Perky arrangement – you will have to do it yourself'.

I suppose about 20-25% of my time would've been spent on civil service matters. And in order to make room for that, I changed the practice of my predecessors. My predecessors had insisted that every document that went to the Prime Minister went over their signatures. Even if it was drafted down the department, it was redone and sent to Number 10 over the Cabinet Secretary's signature. I came to the conclusion that in order to make room for the civil service work, I shouldn't try to do that. So, with the Prime Minister's agreement, I arranged that the deputy secretaries in the various secretariats in Number 10 would put up briefs and documents to the Prime Minister on their own responsibility, sending copies to me so that I could amend them or make supplementary suggestions if I felt the need to do so. And that made room to do the duties of the Head of the Civil Service. I don't think I did them as thoroughly as Robin and probably his successors did. I was able to do rather less visiting of other departments and other civil service enterprises. I did do a certain amount of visiting and I went to various departments, including the Scottish Office in Edinburgh, but I'm conscious that I wasn't able to get around as much as I think Robin Butler certainly did.

Heywood:

Interesting. Gus – when you did the job, you had three jobs: Cabinet Office Permanent Secretary as well. Do you want to take us through—

O'Donnell:

Yes, and I think the point I get across is the different splits changes through time. So with Tony Blair as Prime Minister, there was a big emphasis on modernisation of public services, big emphasis on getting out there and understanding what the blockages were, how you could improve public

services and, in those days, how you could spend more money to deliver better public services.

And as it evolved and we went through the cuts exercises, I remember saying ‘how are we going to spend fewer resources and getting better outcomes?’, and it kind of changed. And the latter obviously much harder and meant you needed to go and talk to people face to face around the country trying to empathise with a system where you were cutting their exit payments, cutting their pensions, reducing their real pay and all those sorts of things, and trying to motivate them to inspire them to produce better services for the public.

So I think that was quite big. But then Coalition; suddenly you’re into doing a lot of very Whitehall-based, you’re into classic Cabinet Secretary, setting up the Cabinet committee system, trying to make sure it works, trying to kind of— and this new beast, and you’re not really sure if it will ever fly and making sure that you’re taking away any obstacles. So it varied through time.

Heywood:

Yeah – Robin, how about you?

Butler:

Well, I think the point I like to get over – and I don’t know whether the others will agree – I think you’ll be surprised by how little secretary-ing I did. You know, I went to the Cabinet. In latter days, the Cabinet didn’t do anything really, so I didn’t do that much. I didn’t do Cabinet committees unless it was a sort of, War Cabinet or something like that. And the other thing I’d like to get across is stuff happens and takes an awful lot of time. For example, the Scott Inquiry took me a lot of time; the misbehaviour of ministers took me a lot of time [*Laughter*]. I always used to think, when I got that black box in the evening, I opened it with the greatest enthusiasm – it was like a bran tub – you know, there were wonderful things in it. I always enjoyed it and it was hugely varied. But, as Robert said, we had to implement the Next Steps, which Peter Kemp did most of the heavy lifting on, but I did spend a lot of time on going round to the civil service, using the time which Robert would have used on going away with the Prime Minister and sherpa-ing – I saved that time. And the other thing I would say is, well, people say ‘well, being Head of the Civil Service as well as the Cabinet Secretary is much too big a job for anybody’. It’s really not. [*Laughter*] As long as you can make room out of the rest for a bit of representational work and you’ve got some good lieutenants, it’s perfectly possible to unite the two effectively – and I think it works much better in both the interests of both the Prime Minister and the civil service if these two posts are united.

Heywood:

As they have been... recently. Andrew, do you much take that view?

Turnbull:

Well, the secretariats themselves didn’t take a lot of time. When a new Prime Minister comes, the first thing you do is you sort out titles, you sort out seating plans and you sort out the houses. And then you sort out the committee structure, which either gets used or not used. The actual attendance at meetings – I didn’t go to a lot of Cabinet committee meetings themselves. I spent a lot of time inside, coordinating all the bits and pieces

of the Cabinet Office, the various units: the secretariats, the Delivery Unit, OPSR [Office of Public Services Reform] while it existed, the – whatever it was called – the Office of the E-Envoy, the Strategy Unit, the PIU [Performance and Innovation Unit], and, there's a John Bird joke, there was the Social Exclusion Unit for people who couldn't find a place in one of the other units. [Laughter] There was quite a lot of problem solving: a foundation hospitals row – I was asked to deal with that. And then there was one of the most acrimonious rows Whitehall's ever seen: in the blue corner, being Rachel Lomax, and in the other corner, Michael Bichard, arguing ferociously about who should have the benefits system and out of that came DWP [the Department for Work and Pensions], which I think has been a lasting and good development. The other thing I spent time on, surprisingly, was reshuffles and machinery of government. Some of this machinery of government went under this general heading of improving professionalisation of all the things other than policy, which we've always prided ourselves on: Office of Government Commerce, Shareholder Executives Partnerships UK, Office of the E-Envoy, the Communications Function – getting those set up and properly headed and properly resourced. Also quite a lot of time on the management of the civil service: the SASC process – Senior Appointments Selection Committee, maybe called something else now – succession planning, a lot of time interviewing people for posts. Because the idea that you simply named someone had long since gone, so people applied for jobs and you had to go through a proper process of sifting and interviewing and assessing, and the same for a number of public appointments as well.

And then of course there's always the propriety, ethics, civil service code, ministerial code, relations with the PASC [Public Affairs Select Committee] or whatever it's called now. It was maybe 10% of your time but it was actually quite important work that nobody else was doing.

Heywood:

Yeah, absolutely. Richard?

Wilson:

I think about 30-40% of the time was very much on management of the civil service. I did a lot of visits; I did about 100 speeches a year – to civil service audiences mainly. And of course the drive for delivery and modernisation was very strong and we had the *Make It Different* campaign with amazing events for around 500 people up and down the country – some of you, perhaps you are all too young – we went to try to get across the message that we had to do more focus on outcomes and less on policy advice. But Ian Beesley's been doing an analysis for the Official History [of the Cabinet secretaries] of how I used my time. And the thing that he's drawn out was that I had very few periods when I was free from some sort of crisis, or emergency or another. If you look at the number of military actions: the first Iraq bombing, followed by Kosovo, followed by Sierra Leone, followed by Afghanistan, where we had a huge number of ministerial meetings. And then if you add to that 9/11, and then if you add to that other crises like the foot and mouth crisis, where Mr Blair called me – after it had really got out of control after a month, at 08:30am and [to Sir Jeremy Heywood] you may have been there.

- Heywood:** I was.
- Wilson:** And said ‘I want you to take control’ – ‘ah thank you, me and whose army?’ Well, actually we used the army. And of course, the fuel protest, when less than 100 people armed only with mobile phones brought the economy near as dammit to a complete halt in four and a half working days, which you remember, David Omand [*gestures to audience*]. If you add all those up, there were very few smooth patches where I was left, as it were, to do the day job. And if you add to that the machinery of government changes which we did before the election in 2001, which were the biggest, I think, that had been done for many years and that took months and months of preparation. And all the other troubleshooting, which included ministers and so on. I think it’s quite hard to generalise, but you have a large slug of management and then a lot of crises, and then of course the secretariat functions – though, as Robin said, they weren’t quite as intense under Mr Blair as they had been, say, under Mrs Thatcher.
- Heywood:** Well, I think the striking thing is how little the job has changed over time, actually. It does vary, as Gus said, from period to period, from Prime Minister to Prime Minister, phase to phase, but fundamentally it’s the same mix in different proportions of being the trusted adviser, being the investigator behind the scenes, advising on machinery of government, being the official note taker – all those things as well as leading the civil service. I think it’s really quite striking—
- Armstrong:** I think it’s fair, the point you’ve just made. The content of the job, but some of the way in which you do it changes from one Prime Minister to another. The personal relationship which you have – above all with the Prime Minister but also with the Prime Minister’s colleagues – goes far to determine how you’re going to spend your time, and your relationship with that Prime Minister and what that Prime Minister wants from you and needs from you.
- Heywood:** Yes, absolutely.
- Armstrong:** And the other thing I think is perhaps I am probably the only former Cabinet Secretary here who never had anything on his desk but a telephone – and not a mobile one at that!
- Heywood:** Certainly true at the moment. Okay, well, several of you have reminded us that stuff happens, we have crises, so let’s just take a little minute to reflect on the various crises that you’ve each had to deal with over the time you were in office. Robin, why don’t you kick this one off? What was your favourite crisis? [*Laughter*]
- Butler:** Well, the thing I got most satisfaction from, really, was the first Gulf War, where Iraq invaded Kuwait, Margaret Thatcher resigned halfway through, and we went to war in January. It very often happens that these uncivilised people do things during August, and Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait during August. Margaret Thatcher was due to go off on holiday. I cancelled the first week—well, she went to Aspen, Colorado, didn’t she, [*to Lord Wilson*] do you remember? And said ‘No time to go floppy, George’. Anyway I cancelled

the first bit of my holiday to set up the machinery for servicing military action if and when it happened. And we put all the machinery in place – the assessment staff meeting at four-thirty in the morning, the JIC meeting at six in the morning, the permanent secretaries meeting at a more civilised time at eight in the morning, going back to their departments, briefing their ministers, ministers taking decisions at 10am, and then the lobby at 11am – and quite apart from actually communicating with the troops about what they were meant to be doing. And that all worked, but the moment I remember is that, as I say, Margaret Thatcher had gone to Aspen, Colorado, and then she went and stayed with Widow Glover in Austria or whatever she did. And I cancelled my holiday, which I sorely needed – I think I managed to go for the last week of it. Anyway, I came back at the end of that week, Margaret Thatcher had been back a week by then, and I walked into the Cabinet room and she said ‘Oh, you’re here’, she said ‘some of us have been working while you’ve been lying on the beach’. Not for the only time I could’ve strangled her... [Laughter]

Heywood:

Very good. Alright, Andrew – what’s your favourite crisis?

Turnbull:

Crisis? What I remember from my first time in Number 10 – the miners’ strike. It showed the Cabinet Office at its best, not simply in handling the crisis, but after there was a threat of industrial action by the miners in 1982, the Prime Minister wisely decided to pass at that point and not rise to the challenge, and she said ‘Well, we must never let this happen again’. And a lot of important work on resilience led by the Cabinet Office, and in particular the absolutely wonderful head of the unit at the time, Peter Gregson, produced a plan about stockpiling coal and all the other things, and how we would handle it. And of course, when the challenge actually came in 1984, we were as ready as we could possibly have been. And then there was a committee which met several times a week – I think it was called MISC 21 – people from the Department of Energy reporting on how many miners were working, how many were going back, state of coal stocks, production etc. Handling that crisis for almost exactly a year and eventually it was brought to a conclusion in March 1985. So it shows the benefit of the preparatory work for crises absolutely at its best.

Heywood:

Yeah, absolutely. Robert, did any crises happen on your watch?

Armstrong:

Yes. I suppose the most exciting – perhaps it’s a word I oughtn’t to use – was the outbreak of the Falklands. There was, on the Thursday of that week early in April, I can remember the Prime Minister and some of her colleagues sitting around the table in her room in the House of Commons, very gloomy about the Falklands – they had been invaded by the Argentinians and how were we ever going to recover them or get the Argentinians out of the place. And while they were all sitting there gloomy, the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Henry Leach, came into the room, and he was in his full dress – he’d been to some important function and he was covered with scrambled eggs – and he sat down at the table and the Prime Minister summed up where they were, and he said very quietly ‘Prime Minister, I can have a task force on the ocean on Monday’. And if ever a remark

transformed a situation that was it. At first they didn't believe it. And then he convinced her that it was going to take a very long time to get to the Falklands anyway and that he could have the first vessels going out there on the Monday. And of course that transformed the situation, it transformed the mood. The decision was, in effect, taken at that early meeting, but it came to the Cabinet the next morning, on the Friday. Margaret Thatcher was very careful on those big moments always to make sure that the final decision was taken by the whole of the Cabinet so that she knew she had her colleagues fully behind her. And that was one of the most important Cabinet meetings I can remember, when what was proposed was described and accepted. And then of course there was the debate in the House of Commons the next day, on the Saturday.

The whole period of the Falklands was, for me, a great professional challenge because we had to run a war, an expedition to the South Atlantic, and a war with the Argentinians there, at the same time as, really, keeping the ordinary processes of civil government and economic work going forward here. So we had a War Cabinet which met every morning at about half past 10 or thereabouts with the five ministers who were members of that. The Chancellor was excluded from it on the grounds that he was going to have to find the money whatever we did. The preparations for that meeting involved a good deal of work with the Ministry of Defence and the Cabinet Office and the Foreign Office, because not only were we fighting an operation towards the South Atlantic, we were dealing with the American government, with the Secretary of State, which was [Alexander] Haig at the time, and, of course, with the United Nations, where there was a lot going on. We were marvellously well represented in Washington and in New York by Sir Nicholas Henderson and Sir Anthony Parsons. So the War Cabinet would meet at half past 10 every morning and after that the Chief of the Defence Staff and I would go back to my room in the Cabinet Office, summon the head of the Foreign Office and the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defence, and tell them exactly what had been decided and approved by ministers and commissioned the paperwork which would be needed for the meeting of ministers the next day. So it was a continuous process. That meeting that took place in my room after the War Cabinet had met was not a formal meeting; it became known as the Armstrong group because I was very keen not to make it a full-dress Cabinet committee, because I didn't want the Prime Minister and her colleagues to think that senior officials were second-guessing the decisions of ministers in any formal sense. But as well as doing that, we had to keep the regular administration going. That I felt laid a heavy burden on my Deputy Secretary and Under Secretary colleagues in the Cabinet Office while that process was going on.

The other crucial Cabinet meeting in that time was when the decision was taken to land the troops on the Falklands. It was, of course – the decision had to take account of military preparedness, the availability of the right people in the right place, and of the prospects for the weather, because it's not great weather out in the Falklands in May and June. So the War Cabinet,

the five members of that, went across to the Ministry of Defence for a very full briefing by the soldiers and sailors and went back to Number 10 and formally discussed it and decided to recommend to Cabinet that we should go ahead and put the troops onshore, and then there was a meeting of the Cabinet to make sure that the whole of the Cabinet was in line with that decision, was prepared to endorse that decision. Once again, Margaret Thatcher was extremely keen, first of all, that the plan should, as far as possible, minimise casualties, and secondly, that the whole of the Cabinet should be behind it. And we had a meeting of the Cabinet and it was approved and the signal was sent for the landing to go ahead.

- Butler:** An interesting contrast between the Falklands and the Gulf was that, of course, in the case of the Falklands we were three hours ahead, and in the case of the Gulf we were three hours behind.
- Armstrong:** Four hours, in the case of the Falklands.
- Butler:** Yes, it mattered.
- Heywood:** Well, we're going to come on to Cabinets, the greatest hits of our Cabinets, in due course, but some great ones already. Gus?
- O'Donnell:** Just one point on this, you have to remember that as Cabinet Secretary someone comes to you every single day that there is a crisis. And you do need to learn that what Robert was talking about is a genuine crisis. So the question I always used to put was 'How many people have died?' Because basically you'll get 'The crisis is Secretary of State A has briefed against Secretary of State B', or 'The Prime Minister and the Chancellor aren't entirely in agreement'. Well, you know, these are not crises. For me, Black Wednesday, when you're spending a billion dollars an hour, that counts as a crisis. You might have some difficult issues when you've got an unclear election result and you're not entirely sure where they're all going, or your Chancellor's gone missing at various points. There are times when you've got crises but mostly I think, to use a phrase I first got from Andrew, a lot of what you do in the job is act as a shock absorber not an amplifier.
- Heywood:** You did sit through the biggest international financial crisis of modern times, so tell us how that felt as Cabinet Secretary
- O'Donnell:** Yeah, the global financial crisis. I mean, when you look back on, which you and I did, and you brought in all the chairmen of the banks over the weekend and all our banks are – actually, number one, don't know, the chairmen don't know where they are. They go away, they come back and they say 'Yes, you're right: we are going to be broke on Monday morning, absolutely. We can't survive.' That's a bit tricky, that genuinely counts as a crisis.
- And I think then you're in a world where you actually, again you look back on precedents, and when there aren't any like that, or at least they're a long way away and in a different world and technology's moved on, then you have to start being creative and you have to start thinking about, let's think about these things from first principles and let's see, what were the mistakes made in the 1930s? And then you get to a global world, where you

think this is not a financial crisis that's actually about the UK alone. And you get to Gordon Brown, and I think his finest hour – the G20 – bringing everybody together, getting the world not to go down the route of protectionism – there's a lesson here – and move towards a world where you cooperate to get through a very difficult patch. And you realise, actually you've been living with a world that's a lot more risky than you realise.

Heywood: Absolutely. Richard, you and I sat at different desks through 9/11. Was that your biggest crisis?

Wilson: I think it was certainly— yes, I think it was. I was at an official lunch which I left early, got in the car and the driver said 'Someone's flown a plane into the World Trade Center', and I said 'Oh dear, I hope that's an accident'. And we turned on the radio and as we drove, they announced that the second plane had gone and it clearly wasn't. We got stuck in traffic, and you [Heywood] rang me and said you'd heard that – we both said this is serious – and you'd heard that the White House, you said, was going to evacuate, was thinking about evacuating, and should we evacuate Number 10? So I said 'If we evacuate Number 10, where would you go to?' Because I had this image of all the special advisers lined up on Whitehall with their laptops awaiting to be told where to go to. And you said 'I'm not sure where we would go to, and I said 'In that case, rule of life, do not evacuate until you know where you're going to. Let's stay where we are.' [Laughter] And I got back quickly—

Heywood: That's why he was Cabinet Secretary... [Laughter]

Wilson: That's right. And we decided, I mean the immediate panic – not panic, fear – was that this was going happen in the UK too. And I said 'We must now ring up and talk to – and I will do a great lot of phone calls', we agreed we'd have a COBRA [Cabinet Office Briefing Room] at 4:30pm. 'We've got to get hold of the Prime Minister', who was about to address the TUC [Trades Union Conference] at Brighton with all his team. We had a conference call and they were very reluctant to take it initially, but they wanted the speech as the thing, but we persuaded them that this actually was more important. And I told him he had got to come back, and the thing that was really interesting was that from the very first moment – I was saying 'Look we've got to all these following things', and he said 'Sure, sure, but where is Bush and how's he going to react and what is this going to do?' He was absolutely into what you'd call the big picture. So we've said to him you've got to come back.

We drew up a list, I drew up a list, of all the people we've got to be in touch with, beginning with the Palace. I had images of planes flying down the Mall into Buckingham Palace, or into Big Ben – all the targets, instantly. We rang up the Speaker's Office. And then the real worry was the City of London Airport, and we had a long, very rapid discussion in which I took an executive decision, which to this day – I hope is outside the statute of limitations. Anyway, I said 'Let's close it, we've got to close the City of London Airport – we can't take the risk.' And we closed it. And we rang the Security Service, we rang Buckingham Palace who got back various members of the Royal Family. In the middle of all this, the switchboard, which had

been newly installed in the Cabinet Office the previous weekend, went down. And the thing which you have to remember, which I'd learnt in the storm in 1987, when I was in charge of civil contingencies, was that you have to have an outside line which is independent of any switchboard. Anyone who deals with contingencies, it is rule number one. And we tried to get the civil contingencies unit back but they were at Easingwold, bonding. We wanted to get the Overseas Defence Secretariat in to open up the COBRA; they were on a coach on the way to Hereford to bond with the SAS [Special Air Service]. They got as far as Heathrow, we made them turn around. I remember we had a tunnel to the MoD [Ministry of Defence] in case we needed to get people out quickly. The man in charge of the tunnel was on holiday, and nobody knew where he'd left the key. The switchboard, as I say, went down. But then, in the middle of all this, we had these key conversations making sure the Speaker knew what was going on, we had got the Security Service, we had Richard Dearlove and his lot, SIS, active. We went through everything. And at 4:30pm, we had started COBRA. It is like many of these things, imprinted on my memory, one of the things that moved me, it was absolutely packed – I chaired it until we got the Prime Minister back – it was packed and the people who were there were the people who'd been dealing with foot and mouth – it was extraordinary, they just knew within a couple of hours that they'd better just come, there's something going on. And it was the most extraordinary meeting, all sorts of Cabinet ministers; Gordon Brown turned up and said 'No, you go on'. I was chairing this meeting with Cabinet ministers and people from every part of Whitehall, it was standing room only.

And we got a message then, I don't know what sort of time, that said the Prime Minister was approaching, so I went up with two or three key people and we met the Prime Minister in his study and he said 'So what is the impact of all of this going to be on the Americans?', and I said 'Look, can we just deal with the things we've done?', because I just wanted cover. We had done quite a number of things – we'd closed a number of smaller airports, we'd upped the security at Heathrow. We'd done all sorts of things solely off our bat, watching these towers collapse on television in real time while we were doing it. It felt quite dramatic, it felt quite scary. And he kept saying 'You have my permission for all that, let's just talk about...' and we talked about the big picture.

We tried to get hold of the State Department officials dealing with Afghanistan, as it became clear – I don't know how we knew – but we knew very rapidly that it was Al-Qaeda. And the officials in the senior parts of the State Department who dealt with Afghanistan, none of them had been appointed – their appointments had not been confirmed in the new administration. So we had no one we could talk to in the State Department about what was going on, it was quite extraordinary. And then Mr Blair came down and he took command, and I told him very briefly what we had done, and he said 'That's fine, that's good'. Then we talked about – I remember Jack Straw saying 'This is a moment of history, this is a historic moment, and this is actually going to change the world in important ways.'

And we all felt this feels true at the moment. And we discussed all the internal measures we'd taken and whether there was more we should do, and then Mr Blair talked about the strategic issues, and then we talked about his need to send a message to Mr Bush and speak to Bush if he could. Except nobody knew where Bush was, if you remember – there was a kind of issue there. And then we all went off to do all the things we'd agreed. We'd got a huge dossier of work going on what we knew about Afghanistan and what we knew about Al-Qaeda – all the relevant intelligence we could possibly get – and then we took it from there. I could go on at length, but I mustn't, but it was quite a striking day.

Heywood:

I think the interesting thing is when you remember back to 9/11, or the Falklands, or the miners' strike, or the Gulf War; people say the civil service can't cope with a crisis – a very topical issue at the moment – and you just look back on some of the things we've had to deal with, sometimes simultaneously. Very interesting.

I think, without wishing to dumb this whole conversation down, I'm going to ask each panel member to try and look back on a Cabinet that they remember that was the most important, the most exciting, the most dramatic – a Cabinet meeting that stuck with them. Because I think we've all said there's much more to being Cabinet Secretary than sitting next to the Prime Minister in Cabinet and taking notes, but nevertheless that is the irreducible core minimum of the job as I've said before. Andrew, why don't you start?

Turnbull:

Allow me to go back to sometime, probably about 1984, when I was the Economic Affairs Private Secretary. We used to have a system of public expenditure control and we would agree a planning total at the start of the round. There'd be a series of bilateral negotiations, and those that weren't resolved bilaterally were referred to a thing called the Star Chamber, chaired by Willie Whitelaw. And it turned out, of course, that he was the only person with the authority to make it happen and when he left the scene, this thing fell into abeyance. And the only person who had not agreed was Patrick Jenkin, Secretary of State for the Environment, and he had two bids and the Cabinet – the whole Cabinet – listened to his case. He wanted more money for social housing – but he didn't get it, or not as much as he wanted – and he wanted an increase in the EFL [External Financial Limit] for the water industry. And everyone immediately said 'Well you can have one of these things, but you can't have both', and his said 'Well it's got to be housing because it's immediate'. And Ian Gow – the late Ian Gow – was the Water Minister at the time, and he said 'We must never allow this to happen again, an EFL of a major infrastructure organisation will never prevail in this kind of shootout and we've got to prioritise it because it's the only way it's ever going to succeed'. So two things: this illustrates a way of negotiating public expenditure which has long since been confined to history, and two, it was the point at which the privatisation programme was given an extra impetus.

Heywood:

Robert, you've already given us a wonderful vignette of Cabinets in the Falklands crisis, but does anything else come to mind?

- Armstrong:** Well, there was a great meeting of the Cabinet during the Westland Affair...
- Heywood:** Ah, yes. *[Laughter]*
- Armstrong:** There was a disagreement about whether Westland should be rescued by the American company Sikorsky, which was the solution the Prime Minister favoured, or whether it should become part of a European consortium with Augusta in Italy, which was the solution that Michael Heseltine, who was, of course, Secretary of State for Defence, favoured. And there's a lot of preliminary – it's all in the history books, in Charles Moore and all that. But there was a break over Christmas, and then after Christmas the Prime Minister decided that the rift which had become very public must stop, and that any statement that any minister wanted to make about Westland would have to be cleared by the Cabinet Office, which didn't mean me so much as her. Michael Heseltine accepted that any future statements should be cleared in this way, but said he wished to be free to repeat statements he'd made in the past, that were already, as it were, in the public domain. And the Prime Minister said 'No, all statements, even those that had been made in the past, have got to be cleared if they're to be remade in the future.' And Michael wouldn't accept this and the Prime Minister wouldn't accept anything else, and you could feel the tension rising and you could feel other members of the Cabinet intervening to try to find some way of easing the tension and preventing the crisis. Finally the Prime Minister summed up, in her sense that everything must be cleared by the Cabinet Office. Michael Heseltine pulled his papers together on the table, and said 'In that case Prime Minister, I can no longer remain in this Cabinet', and walked out. And none of us knew whether he was saying he couldn't stay in this meeting of the Cabinet or whether the thing was more drastic than that. We sat there for about two minutes and somebody came in from outside and said 'Michael Heseltine is on the doorstep of Number 10 saying he's resigned'. So we had got to, I think, item two in the Cabinet business and there were three other items to come. *[Laughter]* So the Cabinet was adjourned for half an hour and some of us spoke to Sandringham and obtained the Queen's approval for the appointment of George Younger to be Secretary of State for Defence – he was Secretary of State for Scotland. And we sat down again half an hour later with a new Secretary of State for Defence. So the front page of the Cabinet minutes for this meeting is quite unique. It says The Rt Hon Michael Heseltine, Secretary of State for Defence (items 1 and 2) the Rt Hon George Younger, Secretary of State for Scotland (items 1 and 2), Secretary of State for Defence (items 3-5). *[Laughter]*
- Heywood:** Brilliant. Gus?
- O'Donnell:** Well, a number of mine I remember as exciting were with other members of the panel. The War Cabinet that we had – Robin mentioned the first Gulf War – when I think Andrew, you and Robin and I were all in there, a mortar bomb landed just outside. If that had been slightly more accurate, you'd have had a rather different, smaller or different panel. Certainly different! So there was that one. Also during that time, Maastricht. I remember John Major's discussions, again – really interesting – actual real discussions about

negotiating tactics for Maastricht Treaty, real decisions made at Cabinet, which, I think Robin was saying, quite rare that you get that sort of thing. For me, the most important in many ways was a Cabinet at which virtually nothing happened, which was the first Coalition Cabinet, because you've got the lions and the antelopes and you've taken down the wall and they're there, you know. And there's one big lot and one relatively small lot – and you kind of wonder – and you've mixed them up. They're not there by tribe. Suddenly these two tribes that spend their lives fighting for each other are mixed around the table as Secretary of State for this or that, and actually, they all did the business. It all went on, it went very smoothly. And again, the Cabinet meeting after they'd actually spent weeks fighting each other in a referendum on the voting system. You know that referendum where you had two clear outcomes, you know? Very rare, that sort of thing; you know what you're voting for. One side won, one side lost, but actually they all came back together and they shared their toys, and it was great.

Heywood:

Moving on.

Turnbull:

I'm just going to add one thing on this question of the mortar bomb: the person we should all thank was Nigel Wicks, who had begun a programme of hardening the resilience of Number 10, including putting up the gates, but we had completed the re-glazing of the Cabinet Room, so those windows, they kind of crazed over like a car crash window but they did not break. And that's why we survived.

Heywood:

Thank you, Nigel. So, Richard?

Wilson:

Well, Cabinets – I can remember a lot of Mrs Thatcher's meetings where I sat at the end and wrote the minutes, including one where Paddy Mayhew reported on a terrible bomb in Northern Ireland and just for a few minutes the Cabinet stopped being a political meeting and became a group of men and women just sobered by the horror of what had happened. That's always stuck in my memory. Endless Thatcher stories, but for the Blair years when I was Cabinet Secretary I have to admit to you the really difficult thing is that I can't remember anything. I can remember some things, but nothing that fits your, kind of, label. They were tranquil days – that's one adjective. The thing that perhaps if I remember one, it is the Gordon Brown telling the Cabinet what was in his Budget. And the thing that was memorable about that occasion was that he spoke so fast that absolutely nobody understood, let alone remembered, a word that he said. It was completely unintelligible. He gabbled, more than gabbled, it was 20 times the speed of normal conversation. Except, he slowed down and spelt out as for the stupid, 'No more boom-and-bust', and then he speeded up again [*laughter*], which is clearly the thing he was intending us to hear. We had to go and ask his office to write the minutes because we had absolutely no idea what he had said whatsoever.

Heywood:

Robin, your thunder's been stolen by many people...

Butler:

Well, I have got one and that was the resignation Cabinet of Margaret Thatcher. You remember on the eve of that when she met all of the

members of the Cabinet individually and they gave her their advice. And she was also, she came back to Number 10 – extraordinary emotional resilience – and then sat in the Cabinet Room with some speech writers and started drafting her speech for the confidence debate the next day. It wasn't absolutely clear that she was going to resign, but the writing was very obviously on the wall. And I asked myself how we were going to manage this at Cabinet the next day, and I sat at the Principal Private Secretary's desk at Number 10 with the drafting team and Margaret Thatcher inside, and I thought 'if she announces she's going to resign somebody's going to have to say something'. And I thought who should that be? And obviously it ought to be the people who'd been contenders for the succession, because they'd all beaten each other; they'd all want to do it. So I thought James Mackay is the ideal person and I drafted something for him to say and discussed it with him that evening and he had it all ready for the next morning. And then things took their course at the Cabinet, she made her statement, James Mackay then came in and said something. It was the only time that I knowingly falsified the Cabinet minutes, because she said something which was pretty well uncoded: 'I'm going, but please don't appoint Michael Heseltine my successor'. And I translated that into 'I'm going, but I rely on my colleagues to carry on the mission to which we have been committed'. [Laughter] So it's there to be seen some day.

Turnbull: If I may, she phoned me about 8am and said she was resigning, so I phoned the Palace, and then I went up there at nine o'clock, because for some reason we were starting early that day and we walked down the stairs and there was silence. And usually there was a great hubbub outside. And I thought 'was it 9:30am?' Anyway we came round the corner, and there they all were, standing there, silent, looking their shoes, you know completely in supplication thinking 'what on earth have we done?' and then off she went. But it turned out it was nine o'clock after all.

Heywood: So, I think we're almost out of time for the panel. We're going to take some questions from the floor. But just remembering why we're all here, it's the 100th anniversary of the Cabinet Office this year, not just of the Cabinet Secretaries. So can I just ask each member of the panel to sum up very quickly – no more than a minute – what is so important about the Cabinet Office? What's so good about the Cabinet Office? Why were you have been proud to lead it in your time? So who wants to start? Robert, why don't you kick off?

Armstrong: One of the important points about it is geography and proximity is power. And the Cabinet Office started under Maurice Hankey in Richmond Terrace across Whitehall from Number 10. And then, when I first came into government in 1950, the Cabinet Office was in the New Public Offices overlooking Great George Street, which was where Norman Brook was. And then he and the Permanent Secretary of the Treasury – who was Head of the Civil Service – were about equally distant from Number 10 and a walk along Whitehall to get there. At the end of the 1960s, after the reconstruction of Number 10, and the Cabinet Office in 1973, the Cabinet Office moved into what had been the old Treasury, the building overlooking

the Horse Guards Parade, with a communicating door to Number 10 – you didn't have to go outside to get to Number 10; there's a communicating door you can get through. And that meant that the Cabinet Secretary was literally 50 seconds' walk from the Prime Minister, under cover, much closer to her than any other civil servant, except her Private Office. And I think that proximity was part of the reason why the Cabinet Office has developed as it has, why the Cabinet Secretary becomes the Head of the Civil Service; he's there on the spot, within a stone's throw literally of Number 10. What was the other thing you wanted?

Heywood: To sum up, in a word or two, the importance of the Cabinet Office.

Armstrong: The other thing, of course, is that other people have Prime Minister's departments and there is a great reluctance in our system for there to be a Prime Minister's department. Other ministers, with their own departments, very much resent the idea that there might be a Prime Minister's department which would be second-guessing them for things for which they are responsible. And to some degree, the Cabinet Office has taken over the coordinating responsibility that might otherwise be with the Prime Minister's department, but is seen as serving the Government or the Cabinet as a whole, and not as the Prime Minister's instrument, and I think that's also been quite important in the way in which it has developed as the central system in government.

Heywood: Great. Robin?

Butler: Well, just taking on from there, I absolutely agree with Robert, I always thought it was really important that the Cabinet Office was neutral as regards policy. It was a processing department. It wasn't designed to achieve any result, and only thus would it have the confidence of the competing departments and of the Prime Minister. I would say the Cabinet Office did these things: it untangles knots so that you can see the issues clearly when ministers come to decide; it transmits instructions to the rest of Whitehall – what Robert described as being the chief engineer of the ship of State. What was the third? At times it is the coordinating executive for government, of which a good example Jeremy is what you must be having to do on Brexit.

Heywood: Exactly. We don't have any views on that, we just coordinate. Richard?

Wilson: I think Robert and Robin have spoken very well, and I absolutely support and agree with what they said. I think it's about good government or supporting good government. We have a system of collective responsibility and I think, exactly as Robin said, it's very important to have a body which supports ministers collectively and the Prime Minister, as chair of the ministers, collectively. If you follow the current due processes, it's no guarantee that decisions are going to be good decisions; nothing can protect ministers from a bad decision. And I can think of all sorts of things, of which perhaps the Community Charge or the Poll Tax is the most obvious example, where you went through every process absolutely brilliantly and got the decision wrong. But it gives you the best chance of getting a good decision. It gives you the best chance, if you have a lot of brains from different departmental

points of view applied to a problem, that you don't overlook some angle, or fall into the trap of having too many like-minded people discussing the problem and excluding those who might disagree. It's a check on power; it is fundamentally about balancing power within the centre of government, and I think the Cabinet Office is an absolutely crucial institution from the point of view of supporting good government.

Heywood: Andrew?

Turnbull: When you're at the top of any organisation there are three things that have to be brought together. One is giving direction to the business of the organisation; what it does. The other is to develop the resources, which could be people or it could be the structures in which people operate. And the third is to set a culture and ethical framework in which it operates. And the Cabinet Office does all three of those and they should all stay together.

Heywood: Gus?

O'Donnell: In addition to that all, which I agree with, transitions: being there when governments change, and being there when Prime Ministers change. I mean we heard about problems in America, I saw exactly the same global financial crisis, who knows what will happen in the next few months. But that gap in the US when the officials just aren't there, and the Cabinet Office, I think, does that transition incredibly quickly, in addition to the coordination work. The other point I'd make is that it has been a hub of innovation at different times, so I would say the Behavioural Insights Team, some digital stuff you've been doing...

Wilson: The Social Exclusion Unit

O'Donnell: ... the Social Exclusion Unit. There have been various things where, if you like, it's this kind of infant industry thing: it starts there, and it tries out an idea and if it works it translates out and goes into departments.

Heywood: Brilliant. So, Bronwen, I hope that's been entertaining, informative, relevant, and now over to you.

Maddox: Jeremy – and all of you – thank you very much indeed. Thank you for that marvellous slice of recent history and the memories and good humour of that, and even the mischief of it. Thank you. We're going to go to questions now, and there are going to be lots. I'm going to move over so that I don't block your view of the panellists. Who would like to kick off? Right here in the front – we're going to take two at a time and the panellists can pick what they want.

Sir Andrew Cahn: Two questions: firstly, right at the beginning, in terms of preparing yourself to be Cabinet Secretary, I notice that only Jeremy has worked outside of the civil service in the private sector. Do you think that would be a good thing for your successors? And, a more substantive question, we are led to believe that Mr Cameron instructed you, Jeremy, not to do any preparatory work for Brexit. Do you think that the Cabinet Secretary has some sort of function beyond serving the Government of the day, to some sort of constitutional

duty or public interest duty? I notice that the Bank of England didn't obey that instruction and perhaps others didn't as well.

- Maddox:** Thank you, would you like to identify yourself for the record?
- Cahn:** I'm sorry, I'm Andrew Cahn, I'm a trustee here at the Institute for Government and I was in the Cabinet Office for seven years.
- Maddox:** Fantastic, and let me take another – right at the back there.
- Iain Corby:** Thank you. Iain Corby. I believe at least five of you have worked with a Prime Minister who's had a Chief of Staff, and one of you has two Chiefs of Staff. I wonder how that development has impacted on the office that you held.
- Maddox:** Great – who'd like to kick off?
- Heywood:** Not me. Robin?
- Butler:** I'll have a go. First of all, I mean, I think all experience is relevant and I think some outside experience – one of the things that in recent years we've tried to do is to give the rising people in the civil service some experience outside it and that's a great help. I would say more important actually is to work in a wide range of government departments and particularly at the front end. Now—
- Maddox:** So that's quite a firm rebuff then to this idea of commercial experience coming in?
- Butler:** Well, yes, I'll admit others may disagree with me, but—
- Armstrong:** I think it's valuable for people who are going to be senior civil servants in any department that there should be, they should have an element of outside experience. But I think that for the Cabinet Secretary it's a profound knowledge of Whitehall, of the Government in Whitehall, which is the first key to the thing. Robin and I both came from the Treasury, I had had four years in the Home Office, so that I had experience of other departments and I think in a sense that that would have been more important than any outside experience would have been for this particular job.
- Wilson:** Can I controversially turn your question the other way round? Since I left the civil service, I've had 10 years on the board of a FTSE 100 company, and I've been chairman of a bank with eight partners carrying unlimited liability. The FTSE 100 company had the Murdochs as minority shareholders. I have found the skills I learnt as a Cabinet Secretary and as a civil servant enormously helpful in the private sector – if you see your shareholders as your ministers and if you bring to them the skills of a Permanent Secretary, that really, really is valuable. Sorry.
- Turnbull:** Can I take on the Chief of Staff question? First of all there was David Wolfson, I think, carried that title. It was completely meaningless; he was simply a political ally and a fundraiser. He did not interfere one iota in the business of Government. More controversially would be Jonathan Powell, who famously said the Cabinet Secretary wishes to be the principal adviser of the Prime Minister, but often the Prime Minister doesn't want that. And I think he made it his business to make sure that that relationship – in my

case, my relationship with Tony Blair never flourished, partly because there was that attitude there that they wanted me when they needed me, but otherwise they would try to run things themselves. I'm trying to think who the other – did someone mention three other Chiefs of Staff?

Corby: I think five of the panel have had Chiefs of Staff, and one of you has got two – and I think Sir Jeremy you've been a Chief of Staff?

Heywood: I haven't actually, that was a mistake in whichever biography it was. I've never been a Chief of Staff. Look I've worked with all three of the 'real' Chiefs of Staff, including the joint chiefs of staff at the moment, and I think it depends very much on the working relationship you've got with them. In each case I've found it relatively straightforward to work with them. They are the chief political adviser. They manage, in some sense, the special advisers inside Number 10, and I think that that function is a perfectly legitimate one. I think it would become a problem if it got in the way of the Cabinet Secretary and the civil servants in Number 10 having direct access to the Prime Minister and being able to put exactly the advice that they want to put to the Prime Minister. I think if you ever get to a situation where the civil service is so cowed that it can't put its own advice forward, unadulterated, then I think you've got a problem. That's not been my experience, but I think it's very, very important that the political side of the Number 10 operation and the civil service side work hand in hand in a cooperative way to the joint boss, as it were, and that has been my experience I'm happy to say, and therefore I don't have a problem with the role, but it's obviously something you would have to be careful about.

Wilson: If I may just, having worked alongside both Jeremy and Jonathan Powell, say that I think Jeremy was a class act in managing that, because Jeremy was also Principal Private Secretary, doing a lot of deals, also managing the relationship with Gordon Brown and doing a lot of deals and managing the relationship with that chap from 'Quickly Come Dancing'...

Heywood: Strictly. [*Laughter*]

Wilson: ... I thought I got on fine with the Chief of Staff, Jonathan Powell, until years later I read the Campbell Diaries and Jonathan Powell's books and discovered I didn't. [*Laughter*]

Butler: I've had the same experience. Can I just take Andrew [Cahn]'s second question, which I think is a really interesting one. To what extent is there a duty to prepare for things that the Government will not authorise you to prepare for? Now, Jeremy definitely ought not be asked to comment on this, but I think these days it is really difficult because I think all of us would feel yes, we've got to think about that, but in these days of leaks and so on, a leak, you know – the Cabinet Secretary was preparing for a result the Government was not envisaging and hadn't authorised any work to be done on – you would be in trouble. So I think if I'd been there before the referendum I would've felt a duty to be thinking about it and perhaps have some very confidential discussions with people I could trust, but I think it's jolly difficult to go beyond that.

O'Donnell: Can I just? So in the Cabinet Manual we lay down in black and white what happens pre-elections and we've got a standard thing of – curiously enough, the incumbent Government doesn't like the idea of it not winning – but we do plan, and have done – all of us – for various scenarios post-election during election periods. So I think one could imagine a certain stance where if you could get all parties' support for just having a convention that if you're going into a referendum – and you can only do this for the future, I think – to say that the civil service, when we hit the purdah period, post that purdah period, the civil service will then do contingency work for all possible outcomes. Who could argue with that?

Heywood: Could I just? I mean, I'm not going to comment on the philosophical question but just to clarify what actually happened on this one, fortunately Parliament had actually insisted that the Government produce various documents relating to alternatives to membership, so there was a fair amount of work that could be done that came in very handy, frankly, which Parliament had explicitly required – the House of Lords, I think – required that to be done. I don't know that it was with this eventuality in mind, but it was definitely helpful that in the public domain there was a request for the civil service and the Government to do some work on things which were highly relevant to the eventuality that we might end up leaving, so that was all very clear. The Prime Minister – and this has been sort of over-interpreted in a sense – I think the area that he would not have favoured, didn't favour, was that the civil service in the period of purdah should have explicit contacts with the other side of the referendum. In the same way that Gus has just said, in the period in the run-up to an election, there is an explicitly sanctioned conversation allowed between the civil service and the Leader of the Opposition and shadow secretaries of state, and that is useful. Everybody accepts that's useful. We didn't go as far in this referendum period to say there should be an official Leave spokesperson or spokespeople, and that that group of people should speak to the civil service and plan – we didn't go that far. And so people can have different views about that. But that still left quite a bit of space between what was explicitly authorised, which was the documents which Parliament told us to produce, and what was explicitly off limits. And I don't think it was wrong for me in any shape or form to exploit that space and do some confidential thinking, as Robin has suggested. That's what we did, and I don't think the Prime Minister would've been angry about it if he had discovered. I didn't discuss it with him, because he was out campaigning, that is what he was doing, and I think that struck the right balance on this one. But it's personally reasonable in my view to have a debate about these things. And if we ever have a huge national debate, or referendum on something like this again, it's good to have had the debate in advance because it's very difficult to change the rules halfway through, in the white heat of the campaign. It's much better to have thought these things through in advance.

Maddox: Thank you very much indeed for that. We've got a couple here near the front, and then I'm coming further back – one here, and one on the aisle.

Catherine Haddon: Thank you. Catherine Haddon from the Institute for Government. Thank you again for all being here, however... [*Laughter*] one of the questions that was put to me when we sent the invitation out was ‘why have you got an all-male panel?’ So I’d like to put that question to you – were there any women during your respective eras that would have been a marvellous Cabinet Secretary, and what are the prospects for the future?

Maddox: Thank you, and then straight behind here on the aisle.

George Jones: George Jones, LSE. I think you are all agreed that the Cabinet Secretary should be the official Head of the Home Civil Service. Is that because, as Cabinet Secretary, you’re so well-placed to protect and promote the interests of the civil service?

Maddox: Thank you – two provocative questions.

Heywood: Well, on the gender issue, I mean, I agree – it’s very frustrating that we haven’t had a female Cabinet Secretary yet or a female Head of the Civil Service. It will be one of my key objectives in life that, when I come to be replaced, that there will be a shortlist which has at least one and hopefully a balance of applicants. It is what it is. I think I’ve been involved in the appointment of about the third of the number of female permanent secretaries ever invented, if that’s the right word. Gus at one point had about 50-50 in the Permanent Secretary Group, but you need to build a long, sustained pipeline here. 40% of the senior civil service is now women, which is an extraordinary number compared to even 20 years ago, and compared to what many other organisations in Britain can boast, so I think that shows we’ve got now, we’ve real strength and depth: 40% of the senior civil service, 50% of the civil service. And on the back of that overall number, I’m very, very hopeful that it will just become no longer a talking point within 10 years and we’ll have 50-50-ish, and therefore you’d fully expect over time to have a female Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service – that, obviously, must be our aim.

Butler: I mean, just remember the civil service was absolutely in the van of having female permanent secretaries: Alix Meynell, Evelyn Sharp, Muriel Riddlelsdell – really one of the first organisations that did that.

Maddox: Great – and any point on the second question there, to represent the civil service, to protect it?

Jones: To protect and promote their interests—

Heywood: Well, I don’t think we do that beyond what is reasonable.

Armstrong: I do think it’s important, I think it’s significant that the Head of the Civil Service and the Cabinet Secretary are now conjoined. That’s partly because the Cabinet Secretary is the civil servant who has the most opportunities to see and talk to the Prime Minister – much more than any other Permanent Secretary in Whitehall or around. The Head of the Civil Service, wherever he is, is going to be less able than the Chief of the Defence Staff, or the head of some professional organisation to publicly represent his flock, but the Secretary of the Cabinet has the advantage of being able to represent the

interests of the civil service to the Prime Minister privately, and that is quite an important thing.

Wilson:

I remember when I was Cabinet Secretary, having a very interesting conversation with Douglas Allen, who had been Head of the Civil Service in the Civil Service Department, who spoke passionately about how much better it was to have the two posts united, because of this point about access that Robert Armstrong has just outlined to you, because he felt he simply did not have the access; he would put something forward and the Prime Minister would end up talking to the Cabinet Secretary about it.

And on women, can I just say, I had – like my colleagues – a real drive to try to improve the representation of women on merit in the Senior Civil Service, and I think it went up from something like 17% to 27% in my time. But I was always frustrated by the fact that a lot of really, quite often good women did not put their names forward. And we did research into it, and it was very interesting results, but one key thing that came out was a very strong statement: ‘These are jobs designed by men for men; we don’t want them in that form’. I just leave that thought.

O’Donnell:

Just on the diversity point, I think we all strongly agree with that, but it’s much broader than women, is the first point to make. The second point on the – your question about... Think about what the Cabinet Secretary and the Prime Minister are trying to do, which is actually make the world a better place. A vast amount of what Government does is via public services, a vast amount is delivered by public servants – not entirely. Actually, what all of this group have in common, the long-run trend is a reduction in the size of our civil service, and over the last 30-odd years, a big increase – Andrew talked about EFLs, external financing limits for the water industry – well, the water industry is not in the public sector anymore. A vast amount of this has now gone to the private sector in terms of regulated industries. But it’s still absolutely crucial that the Prime Minister has beside him not just a Cabinet Secretary who advises on policy, but a Head of the Civil Service who can talk about the effectiveness of the civil service and what they need to make these things work for the public.

Maddox:

Or beside her!

O’Donnell:

Indeed.

Maddox:

Okay – at the back there.

Peter Riddell:

Peter Riddell, in this capacity, former Director of the Institute for Government. Could I take up something Robert Armstrong said, that he was the last person just to have a phone on his desk, and I just wondered what the reflections were in that period of 30 years, the impact of the arrival of emails, social media, 24-hour news – both internally and externally – on the way you all did your jobs? Because it was changing throughout the period post-Robert, and it’s clearly altered the context and the space in which you can operate.

Maddox:

Thank you – another one here. And I’m going to take a third, and sadly last one, because we’re going to have to end.

- Sue Street:** Sue Street, a former civil servant and I think I've worked for all of you in different capacities over the years. The three qualities I take away, that I see from all of you, are wit, integrity, and fairness and I think that that sort of qualifies you for these roles. And you have, I think, understated your individual roles as the line managers of permanent secretaries, which can make a huge difference. And, as a woman, I think, going up the pipeline, even though I was very junior, for example, when Robert and Robin were in their posts, I still felt that I had been noticed and supported, so I thank you for that. But – there is a but – for those who think that the civil service needs to change – and this is not a point about women, or ethnicity, or other diversity – do you really believe that we need a fresh view, a change, and more emphasis on delivery, more commercial? All these things that have been said over so many years aren't actually happening, and I'm not sure whether any of you really believe that it needs to change in combination with the pride of all that's been achieved so far.
- Maddox:** And let me take a third one – here on the aisle. And real apologies to those asking at the back. I'm sorry, we're very short of time.
- Emma Downey:** Hi, thank you, I enjoyed your talks very much. Emma Downey, from the House of Commons Library. I just wondered if a prime minister should avoid suspending collective responsibility at all costs, or whether sometimes having an agreement to differ is a wise choice.
- Maddox:** Great, thank you very much indeed for that last one; three good questions. The digital age, gender again, and relationship with the Prime Minister.
- Turnbull:** I can respond – thank you to Sue for her comments – but I will dispute this question about change. The idea that the civil service hasn't changed... it's changed enormously; it's about half the size it was when I came in, for a start. Its coverage is completely different, its style of organising: it is much less stratified, much less formal. And as well as the gender diversity, there are lots of people who did not start life in the civil service and they have managed to get to the top. It has embraced technology and it's had its failures – but so too have all sorts of people in the public and the private sectors. The idea that it is still the same old civil service, I just think is completely wrong. It develops, it doesn't do so – partly because it is a very large organisation – it doesn't do so by a huge heave, it does it incrementally. And the important thing is there is always some – or some element – of reform on the agenda, rather than looking for 'the big solution' or 'the big change', and on that basis, I think you'll find a whole series of initiatives you can follow all the way through.
- Butler:** Can I just come in behind that on outcomes? I mean, you know, I remember from Next Steps, there were all sorts of respects in which the chief executives were given goals of improving services and they improved them. And I believe, you know, that the quality of services has improved hugely from 20 years ago. Of course, then, there are things that go wrong now, I mean new problems that are not successfully dealt with, but I don't think that should suggest that there's been no improvement. There will always be failures.

- Maddox:** And these two points – important points – about the digital age and indeed, about relationships with the Prime Minister.
- Wilson:** Can I talk about the digital age briefly? I think Robert’s claim, I would challenge. I think I was the last one to have just telephones on my desk, because I think Andrew had a screen. It’s extraordinary how recent it is: we introduced emails into the Cabinet Office and Number 10 – [*gestures to Sir Jeremy Heywood*] and it was your drive – at the beginning of 1998, is my memory. And I was still operating paper-based: my boxes were paper-based; if there was an email that was relevant I had a hard copy in my box. Mobile phones were still pretty much half-bricks – it was really smartphones, really are relevant, really are new in the last decade or so. It’s just very hard to remember. The difference it makes is one that I think Jeremy’s best placed to answer, or Gus, but I suspect historians are going to find it much harder to track how something was done when there isn’t a submission done on four sides of blue, one-and-a-half spaced, which you can read with the response from Number 10 when it’s done in an exchange backwards and forwards. And I think that that’s one difference, but equally the pace of media pressure on Government to take decisions makes it much more difficult to manage the process of decision-making when you’re in the glare of the publicity and the social media. And the pressure of social media on governments and the way something can go viral in no time at all is another pressure. I think it’s altered hugely, but I’d say it was a product of the last decade, almost.
- Maddox:** Well, thank you, I think that is the force of Peter’s question.
- O’Donnell:** In the 1990s, as John Major’s Press Secretary, I carried round one of those bricks and they lasted around 20 minutes. Huge battery of a phone, and I remember being with him, in Colombia, having to give an interview because there was a report on the wires that he’d died, we’d crashed. So we did an interview, live. It seemed to solve the problem. [*Laughter*] The part I think people need to realise, an added dimension to the job, has been that in the old days you go before a select committee and there’d be a lot of journalists writing it up, nowadays it’s all televised, so you become a public figure and the ability to just be, as it were, heard and not seen, is impossible nowadays. So there is a requirement for a bigger public profile for all Cabinet secretaries. It’s forced on them, whether they want it or not. And we do have to operate in a world where people are getting their news and media from all sorts of different places, so you do need to understand that presentation inevitably becomes bigger, and the 24/7 media inevitably reinforce that terrible element of ‘it’s a crisis’ and you have to spend your time, kind of, calming things down.
- Heywood:** Yeah, first of all on the digital thing, I mean, it is breathtakingly different from when I joined the civil service in 1983, or whenever it was. The pace of work is just, you know, night and day. I remember sending stuff down to the Treasury typing pool not expecting to get it back for several days and then that didn’t really matter. And then it would go through a hierarchy of people, you know Gus was my first, I think, boss, actually – [who] probably

micromanaged me. [*Laughter*] Even if I managed to get it through Gus, I'd have at least four more layers to get it through to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It didn't always work like that, of course, but in large parts of the Treasury you would have to go through several different layers of management, all of whom would put cover notes on or would redraft your work. Then it would ponderously go back down to the typing pool and come back. That sort of stuff happens in about half an hour now, with 15 people, no matter how junior, weighing in to the Cabinet Secretary's email with a point of view. So it's a far flatter organisation, much more rapid, much less tolerance in Press Offices or in Prime Minister's Offices for 'We'll come back to you tomorrow on that subject' – you've got a media agenda, and so on. Now, we might wish it wasn't like this, but this is how it is and the civil service now is totally different from how it was how it was in the 1980s, totally different, I would say, even from the 1990s. It is breathtakingly rapid, much more short-term. Try as we might to carve out time: months, weeks to sort of take an issue offline – it is really difficult. We do try and do that of course, but it is really, just, the pace of work. And Richard's totally right actually, the records, it is one of the biggest problems we've got. An issue that comes to the permanent secretaries table, probably two or three times a year is how on earth we repair the damage to our public records that took place when we didn't have proper protocols in place when email gradually took over. It's a total mess. Philip Rycroft, the Permanent Secretary I've put in charge of this thankless task, calls it "The Pile", a big old pile of stuff, somewhere, and we've got to painstakingly reassemble it for the public record. I'm a historian; I'm very committed to that. So there's definitely a knowledge management, knowledge retrieval issue. And then there's a sort of, a pace of work issue which is absolutely enormous.

But you know, and thank you again for your comments, Sue, but I'm somewhat disheartened to think that your perception is that nothing has changed, because anybody that looks at the digital services that we offer, that looks at the quality of our commercial people, that looks at the quality of our project management and the effort we now put into putting people through world-class project management courses and so on, would, I think, be bound to conclude on any fair-minded assessment that the civil service is far different from where it was years ago. We've always been really good at policy stuff, negotiation, advising ministers, doing comms, getting bills through Parliament, and I now think we are amongst the best employers in the country on commercial, definitely on digital, project management – we've got nothing to learn from the private sector in my view now; I think we are as good as the best in the private sector. And that's because we've taken all the good people in and we've trained our own people and we've put people through courses and so on. So I think we are, we're not just talking about this, we are actually delivering major change on the ground and I'm extremely proud of what we've done. And I think it's standing on the shoulders of giants, as they say, so it's the labour of many people over many years, putting this agenda forward, but it absolutely is the case that we are far more efficient, far more productive, far more effective than we were two or three decades ago.

Maddox:

On that note, we're going to have to end. We have only one dangling question, which is relationships with prime ministers, but the panel have been spared that, and the audience deprived of that because we do have to end. Thank you all very, very much for coming, and for your questions. And thank you very much, Jeremy Heywood, and to the others.

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