

IfG DISCUSSION PAPER | JUNE 2026

When trust is lost

Making sense of the damaged relationship between ministers and civil servants

Foreword

Ministers have lost trust in the civil service: that is damaging. It makes both officials' and ministers' work harder, and makes the state less able to work for the people it serves. It is not new for tensions to rise, but the strength of the relationship has usually waxed and waned, where today efforts to rebuild, or 'reset', it appear to be failing. There is plenty of frustration, but seemingly little resolution.

We believe this is because the people involved are talking at cross-purposes, using outdated and now unhelpful shorthands to try to describe what they are experiencing. A more accurate shared language is needed to properly diagnose the problem, and is a prerequisite to rebuilding ministerial trust in the civil service.

This discussion paper sets out what we think that language should be. It draws on our conversations with ministers, spads and civil servants to identify five traits of civil service behaviour and skills that are necessary for ministerial trust to be built and sustained today.

We want to know what you think of our analysis, and want your help with what we do next. We will be developing our work, embarking on next steps, and sharing our findings in this area over the coming months. To share your reflections please get in touch via the email below.

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Introduction

Over the past year the Institute for Government has been analysing the drivers and status of political trust in the civil service, interviewing ministers, special advisers and civil servants, past and present, and reviewing the existing literature.

We have concluded that there is clear evidence of a problem: ministerial* trust in the civil service has collapsed. We are also confident in saying that ministers and civil servants, although both willing to work on trusting relationships, are 'talking past' each other because they do not have a common language in which to think or talk about trust. This means problems with the relationship are not being addressed successfully, despite awareness of the problem on both sides.

A new way of talking about ministerial trust in the civil service is needed. This paper sets out a framework, grouped around five traits that we have pulled together from our research. We believe this will help us more accurately understand how ministers have lost trust in the civil service, and so better think, and talk, about it. Ultimately, we hope it can serve as a platform on which to rebuild it.

This discussion paper is a summary of our work and proposed framework. Its purpose is to test our headline findings. It should be read with the following parameters in mind:

- This paper does not contain all our research.
- This work focuses on relationships in government. The structures and organisations within which those relationships operate will, of course, have an impact on this, and are topics on which the Institute has worked extensively. But they are not the starting point for this paper.
- This work has gathered the perceptions and feelings of our interviewees; we have not attempted to validate these through observation.
- This initial piece of work is deliberately UK-, Whitehall- and policy-centric. Central government policy officials are the civil servants with whom ministers and spads most regularly interact. We are, however, interested in understanding how our thinking might resonate in other contexts – domestically and internationally – and would welcome reflections on this.
- Even within the narrow group on which we are focusing (around 35,000 policy officials and 250 ministers and spads interact at any given time), experiences will differ and we do not pretend to speak for every relationship.
- This paper makes some sweeping statements about 'the civil service', and some of our findings may seem obvious – we do not want to know if they are universal (they are almost certainly not); we want to know if they are accurate and if they echo your experience.

* We are specifically looking at ministerial and special adviser trust in the civil service. When we say 'ministers' we usually also include their special advisers. We do not use 'political' as we are not speaking about MPs, candidates or councillors.

Understanding the relationship between civil servants and ministers is the first important step in rebuilding it. We will be collating practices of how trust has been rebuilt in other contexts, and convening people to discuss them. Trust and leadership will be a core focus of the Institute’s work over the next years and we would like to hear from anyone who wants to contribute to, or take part in, that work.

Giving good advice	Getting things done	Speaking plainly	'Getting it'	Being comfortable with the politics
<p>David Laws (from the IfG Ministers Reflect archive):</p> <p>“What was missing were people who you felt were strong enough: that they were not only good civil servants and could give good advice on things they were asked for, but who could potentially lead policy debates”</p>	<p>Interviewee for this paper:</p> <p>“The centre goes into Barber-Land, but this is only an illusion of control”</p>	<p>Baroness Warsi (Ministers Reflect):</p> <p>“Civil servants find it really hard to say no... They’d just tell you, ‘Yes, of course’, or stay silent and not do anything”</p>	<p>Kitty Ussher (Ministers Reflect):</p> <p>“It is true that you are immediately plugged into a very well-resourced machine that has a very clear understanding of what its minister should do regardless of who that person actually is”</p>	<p>Baroness Stowell (Ministers Reflect):</p> <p>“I think some civil servants confuse impartiality with not giving a view on something”</p>

The problem

Ministers have lost trust in the civil service

The relationship between ministers and civil servants in Whitehall is in a poor state, and has been for well over a decade. Since 2010, events have put the relationship under immense strain, with serial flare-ups including ministerial suspicion over civil service impartiality in the Scottish independence and Brexit referendums, and more generalised critiques from Boris Johnson, Dominic Cummings and others at the tail end of the last set of Conservative governments who perceived a system that did not want to deliver for them.

Keir Starmer entered government on a promise to 'reset' the relationship after this difficult period, but that has not happened. Labour ministers, like their Conservative predecessors, are frustrated and even angry.

In any work place a culture of low trust delivers poor outcomes. This is arguably even more the case in government: a team of civil servants, ministers and special advisers working in harmony towards the same goal is magnitudes more effective than one in which ministers and spads are second-guessing officials' every move, and officials in turn approach ministers with caution. The frustrations of both can be self-perpetuating. But how this frustration is voiced determines whether it creates change, or simply antagonises the relationship.

We urgently need a better way to talk about trust inside government

Public discussion about the ministerial–civil service relationship usually falls into one of two approaches.

The first is to take a broad and generalised view of the civil service – views that range from resigned frustration to vitriolic attack. This is 'the blob': a staid, stifling institution unwilling or unable to deliver for politicians. For some this is the civil service that intentionally undermines democratically elected politicians to maintain a status quo that serves itself and its world view (however interpreted). For others, the civil service naturally and unintentionally expands and obstructs, simply by dint of being a vast bureaucratic institution. Both are caricatures. Nevertheless, they form a collective narrative of the state: an amorphous, unaccountable system of faceless bureaucrats.

The second approach is to hyper-focus on individual relationships – often a minister's relationship with their permanent secretary or private office. People who think of the civil service through this lens tend to believe governments succeed or fail on the basis of those relationships. It explains an 'only so-and-so can fix it' attitude and a culture in the centre of government of hero fixers* rather than sustained, collective endeavour. Those who make this mistake attribute too much to too few, and let the system as a whole off the hook.

* The 'policy hero' framing is captured expertly in Demos' paper 'The Human Handbrake': <https://demos.co.uk/research/the-human-handbrake-how-whitehall-culture-holds-back-public-service-reform>

Many, including the ministers the Institute has interviewed, take both approaches simultaneously – believing, for example, that their private office is excellent, but the civil service as a whole is an incomprehensible, incompetent and nebulous mess.

These approaches are heuristics: mental shortcuts that contain elements of truth but crowd out the space for nuance. Usually, such shortcuts are 'good enough' to describe and navigate the world around us. But talk of 'the blob' or of 'heroes and villains' is no longer good enough. It distorts real frustrations and results in inaccurate diagnoses. The solutions identified therefore try to address what is inaccurately expressed, rather than the reality underneath it.

This work aims to update our framework for how we understand, articulate and, ultimately, rebuild the crucial relationship between civil servants and the ministers they serve. Our traits are, we believe, more accurate mental models to express the current trouble with the ministerial–civil service relationship.

A two-way street?

In our research, we had many discussions over the importance of civil servants trusting ministers, as well as the other way around. Our conclusion, so far, is that this is positive but not essential in the same way as it is for ministers to trust the civil service. Ministers hold democratic legitimacy, are accountable to parliament and the electorate, and ultimately have more power in the relationship. It is for the civil service to re-legitimise itself, and to build trust, with each generation of politicians.

A framework for talking about trust inside government

Models of trust that focus on relationships tend to have three common building blocks:

- ability (competence or expertise)
- integrity (abiding by a set of acceptable principles)
- benevolence (putting the interests of an organisation or person above your own).*

Through a series of private interviews we have applied this model to the specific context of the civil service–ministerial relationship. What follows is a description of how ministerial trust in the civil service has been lost, grouped into a loose framework. The sections below do not describe the behaviours of all or even most civil servants, but capture what we believe are the real drivers of the collapse in trust.

Advisory competence: 'giving good advice'

We take this to mean: *The skills and expertise to give accurate advice with a full range of options, including radical ones. The practice of bringing real-world considerations into that advice, access to a network of experts to improve and test it, and the confidence and skills to present that advice.*

A damaging combination of lack of expertise and inadequate training have created an **underlying capability** issue in parts of the civil service. This has led to a situation where the quality of advice has not only failed to keep pace with the increasingly complex demands of modern government but is getting worse over time. Instances of ministers having to publicly unpick decisions made on the basis of poor advice are not common, but do happen. When they do, it is disastrous for trust.

Civil servants are **failing to recognise the moment of jeopardy** when advising ministers, especially verbally. By not approaching their interactions with ministers with the seriousness required, officials can find themselves caught off guard by questions they could have prepared for. Working from home exacerbates ministers' sense that civil servants are not putting the effort in: "the screen boots up and your heart sinks".

Ministers also perceive civil servants as too blinkered in their approach, giving formulaic 'painting by numbers' answers or being otherwise unable to step back to address the first-order questions underneath – or look outside the usual sources to find an answer. This **lack of professional curiosity** is compounded by the stifling of junior civil servants by their seniors. This too often results in advice that is narrow, **risk averse** and born out of a lack of **radical thinking**.

* Mayer R, Davis J and Schoorman D, 'An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust', *The Academy of Management Review*, 1995, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 709–734, www.jstor.org/stable/258792?seq=1

Outcome competence: 'getting things done'

We take this to mean: *The ability to build teams capable of translating decisions into actions, and to oversee projects of varying degrees of size and complexity, identifying problems and obstacles along the way. A focus on seeking outcomes over constructing and following process.*

There is a culture in the civil service where officials are neither hired from outside the institution nor promoted within it on the basis of delivering 'on the ground'. Along with a lack of training, this means large parts of the civil service do not know what it takes to translate decisions into real-world outcomes. So embedded a practice is this that it can be seen as a **foundational capability problem**.

The civil service has a **responsiveness problem**. That does not simply mean it moves slowly – though it often does, and ministers feel they need to personally keep pushing their priorities to see change. The civil service can also be overly responsive to the smallest, throwaway remarks of ministers. While sometimes helpful, it is more often a responsiveness geared around **process not outcomes**. Trackers, update meetings and dashboards spring up, and a classic delivery model – which still has its place – is duplicated and stretched so that these efforts all eat into capacity instead of driving outcomes: "The centre goes into Barber-Land, but this is only an illusion of control."^{*}

Even when that process is in service of real outcomes there is a belief that the process no longer delivers well. There is a sense that no central team – be that the Cabinet Office for the government as a whole, or a private office or strategy team for departments – is able to assert its authority and galvanise the relevant bits of the civil service into action. Civil servants developed a **survival mode** coping strategy during the intense periods of Brexit, Covid, and the ensuing political turmoil: heads down and wait for the latest ask to roll over, or at least exercise caution until it looks like this one will stick.

This environment encourages individual civil servants to promise to personally 'get things done' for their ministers. This is a tempting role, not only to try to deliver for ministers, but also because "there is a sugar rush to rendering yourself personally indispensable". But it is not conducive to a capable, confident civil service and if the individual official lets this tip into a denigration of 'the system' or other civil servants – often in a bid to win the trust of ministers – it exacerbates the problem.

* Sir Michael Barber established the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit in 2001, and is credited with creating a method (known as 'deliverology' after his book) for tracking and ensuring departmental delivery of prime minister's objectives with a small, empowered team at the centre of government.

Honesty and frankness: 'speaking plainly'

We take this to mean: *The courage and practice of speaking plain truths, and breaking norms where those obscure truths, following through on your work in good faith, and owning up to and correcting errors or delays.*

The civil service has lost the self-confidence it needs to engage with ministers productively, and has fallen out of the practice of doing so.

It is increasingly **conflict avoidant**. This starts with conversations between civil servants, where there is a cultural norm of seeking agreement and leaving disagreement ambiguous. That practice bleeds into how civil servants talk to ministers. This has gone beyond the standard practice of choosing carefully when and where to deliver bad news to become a learned behaviour of self-censoring. Ministers feel they are being spoken to in the 'briefing voice'.

There is a related culture of **over-compliance**: civil servants too readily say yes, even if the ask is not possible or won't achieve what the minister wants. Often this manifests in civil servants acquiescing then going off-radar. Ministers are left in the dark, frustrated not because their ask is not possible but because no one has told them so or argued against them in the first place. "It feels like you're being gaslit by the civil service."

It is not, as noted, a new phenomenon that delivering bad news gets ducked. However, the levels of anger around Brexit, what can be delicately termed a 'contested information environment', and public spats over impartiality have created an environment where delivering bad news has on occasion been seen as a values-driven or even consciously antagonistic act. This damaged the civil service's confidence in itself to speak frankly and openly to ministers.

Understanding: 'getting it'

We take this to mean: *The practice of working with ministers to achieve their aims, not simply what is asked for. The pursuit of the government's interest, not the civil service status quo.*

Ministers experience an **overwhelming inertia** in the civil service. It is not a commonly held belief that the civil service is out to obstruct ministers (although that view can be found), but that there is a strong bias towards the status quo built into the system.

The civil service can act in its own interests, more or less consciously. This ranges from a 'this is how we do it' mentality, and a corresponding belief that it would be simply too much work to do it differently, to something more like fiefdom-building, where civil servants bid for more money and more people, even when that might not be the most effective structure. The 'departmental view' that exists in some policy areas undermines trust as ministers feel the civil service has its own, technocratic, beliefs, and that civil servants don't want to hear ministerial views. Tensions also arise around discussions about the public interest, where ministers feel that civil servants have already made their assessment, and aren't able to have a good-faith, robust discussion.

Overcoming inertia is necessary but not sufficient to build trust. Ministers also need to feel that the civil service sees what they are aiming for, and is working alongside them to get there. When it works, civil servants step back from the immediate ask to figure out the objective underneath it, and work with ministers to deliver on that – political staff and officials feel as though they are working together as one team. But too often **the civil service leans back, not in**. This is not a capability problem but an environmental one that stems from, among other things, Brexit-era tensions.

The civil service no longer consistently tries to 'get' what ministers are after in the broadest sense, nor to see it as their responsibility to imaginatively pursue it. A **lack of agency** felt by the civil service is part of this problem. Officials and advisers describe mid-career and junior civil servants in particular as having lost, often through stifling line management, their agency to change things and play an active part with ministers.

Impartiality: 'being comfortable with the politics'

We take this to mean: *The ability to serve equally well governments of different political persuasions. The practice of interrogating advice and action, including cultural norms, for political bias.*

Civil servants who are politically partisan, or who fail to serve governments of different political parties with equal vigour, are in breach of the civil service code and should lose their jobs. While some people believe the UK has a partisan civil service, this is not where the breakdown in trust is currently happening, and the clarity in the civil service code provides some protection against this. The collapse happens in the grey areas around the values set out in the code.

The civil service **lacks political judgment**. Civil servants have begun to draw too wide a circle around what is 'political', and to hold all of that at arm's length: "It was almost seen as a point of pride not to get into the politics." But to show political judgment is not to 'be' political, and officials' current aversion to this can lead to their failing to understand and so properly advise ministers on navigating parliament, or even being unwilling to give their opinion.

That may be over-correction from a civil service that has been pulled close to the political line in recent years, or stem from a lack of respect for politics, but the result is the same: ministers feel civil servants **fear the political** and so cannot support them.

What next?

Being able to accurately talk about how trust is being lost between ministers and civil servants is critical to being able to do something about it. Getting this language right – the intention behind this framework – would mean there is much more we can do collectively to identify interventions that could help repair the relationship.

We have begun to draw together a list of possible interventions; some are long-term structural fixes, others will support the immediate relationship in the short run. This list is neither comprehensive nor concrete – we want to work in the open and expect our ideas to develop over time, building on your input. Nor do we envisage these interventions being delivered solely by the Institute; we welcome collaborators and are keen to support the work of others in this space. Interventions could look like:

- Getting people talking about and using new and better language around trust – this could be through workshops, panel events, or peer groups and communities of practice. These could include civil servants, ministers, special advisers and anyone else with an interest. The idea is that these could explore, iterate and use the framework above to talk about trust.
- Creating a library of case studies – drawing on examples from the Whitehall civil service but also other countries and contexts such as the devolved nations and local authorities – setting out the practices people have used to build and rebuild trust successfully. Here our aim would be to convene people to encourage them to understand the relevance of these case studies to the UK ministerial–civil service relationship, and give them ideas to improve it.
- Developing methods – such as facilitated counselling sessions – that support ministers and civil servants to jointly use the framework to explore, and identify ways to begin to repair, frustrations in the relationship.
- Creating targeted interventions to help civil servants to develop the skills and behaviours that earn the trust of ministers. These could explore how hiring and performance frameworks could be updated to recruit and reward these traits for the policy profession and others.

First, however, we must get the initial framework right, and that is where you come in. We want to hear from former and current ministers, special advisers, and MPs and civil servants at all grades. We also want to hear from anyone else in the public sector and local government, and from our international colleagues, who have lessons to share with the UK.

What do you recognise, what is missing, what is wrong, and where should we go next?

Please email us:

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