Bringing in and Bringing on Talent

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The Bringing In and Bringing On Talent reform (known as Bilbo) stands out in our case studies as the only one that attracted neither serious political attention nor outright hostility and resistance. It was driven by the centre to a much lesser extent than the others and emerged from what departments were doing anyway. As a result, it did not ‘hit’ Whitehall in the way the other reforms did and its impact is largely forgotten today. However, it contributed to changing the skills, diversity and experience of the Senior Civil Service within only five years.


Training, development and recruitment had been the focus of a number of civil service reforms in the run-up to Modernising Government (1999). In the 1980s, the Top Management Programme was established to identify and develop the most promising officials with a management focus. In 1993, the Oughton report on career management and succession planning recommended that civil servants should have experience outside their department by Grade 7 and introduced a norm that any senior post could be open to competition. It also made a commitment to furthering equal opportunities by appointing a high-level adviser to the Head of the Civil Service to help attract people from less well-represented groups and extend the use of scholarships for ethnic minority candidates planning a career in the Civil Service.

A few years later, in 1996, the White Paper on Training and Development recommended that more civil servants should have specialist expertise (especially ICT), and introduced a more flexible approach to recruitment (including increased open competition and external middle managers). Around the same time, the Senior Civil Service (SCS) was created, bringing together 3,000 staff formerly in Grades 2 to 5 into a single, service-wide group, with central personnel management.

By the late 1990s, there were increasing concerns that the Civil Service did not have a strong pipeline of senior leaders, or sufficient skills in communication, IT and project management lower down the ranks. Departments often found it difficult to recruit these skills as they were required to go via the Civil Service Commissioner for all permanent appointments. While sending officials on secondments was seen as a way for departments to broaden the skills and experience of their existing staff, they were often unable to bring these people back easily because of the federal, siloed nature of Whitehall.

More widely, changes in the wider world of work – such as a greater focus on family-friendly employment, lifelong learning, career management, diversity and flexibility around retirement ages – were making it difficult for the Civil Service to attract, motivate and retain the talent that was needed for the future. It was clear that, by 2005, the Civil Service would be operating in a very different context and therefore needed to adapt, if it was to address its capacity and skills gaps.

By 1998, there were competing agendas at play about how best to meet this challenge, including the production of a draft white paper on joined-up government, which was prematurely canned due to differences within the newly elected Labour Government. Sir Richard Wilson, who became Cabinet Office, Bringing In and Bringing On Talent, Civil Service Reform – a report to the meeting of Permanent Heads of Departments, Sunningdale, 30 September – 1 October 1999, 1999, p. 5.

1 CSR, interview 27.
2 Efficiency Unit, Career Management and Succession Planning Study (Oughton report), 1993.
5 CSR, interview 32.
6 CSR, interview 27.
8 CSR, interview 19; CSR, interview 27.
9 CSR, interview 23.
Secretary in January 1998, was keen to bring these different agendas together into one programme. He personally felt strongly about the need to improve the leadership of the Civil Service as well as diversity at the top. Although there was little political interest in the issue, Tony Blair wrote to his cabinet colleagues asking them to put some energy behind it, which signalled it was ‘important enough’ and gave it some traction in Whitehall.

Meanwhile, in March 1999, the Modernising Government White Paper was published, which made a commitment to joined-up government centred on the citizen. It focused on a range of issues, including the need to improve IT, public services and policy-making. On leadership, skills and recruitment, it advocated striking the ‘right balance between identifying and bringing on internal talent and recruiting skills and experience from outside’. It also drew attention to the need to ensure public services reflected ‘the full diversity of society’.

Soon after, Wilson launched a package of civil service reforms, which emerged in parallel and were included in Modernising Government, but became ‘a slightly separate, but much more powerful and organised agenda’. This focused on four specific areas: vision and common principles, bringing in and bringing on talent, performance management, and diversity.

Wilson was attuned to the fact that different departments were already pursuing these agendas in different ways, but were at different stages of evolution. Therefore, he wanted to give the agenda some structure and push, but understood that it could not be driven by the Cabinet Secretary alone and had to be ‘owned’ by permanent secretaries themselves. In April 1999, he organised the permanent secretaries into four working groups and delegated leadership of each strand to a permanent secretary from a major department.

Phase 1: The Bringing In and Bringing On Talent strand

The Bringing In and Bringing On Talent (known as Bilbo) strand was led by Sir David Omand, then Permanent Secretary at the Home Office, until around 2002. The primary purpose was ‘to strengthen leadership of the Civil Service across the board’ by cultivating talent and building the capability of staff, as well as accessing a wider range of talent from outside. The scope was limited to the SCS and changing the leadership capabilities of all departments in a relatively short space of time (by 2005). Opening up the Civil Service to outsiders was seen as very new and risky at the time, given the norm of a ‘career for life’ in one organisation.

The working groups met regularly to test and develop ideas. The explicit thinking behind this was that all permanent secretaries would be consulted at all stages of the process and that this would make the agenda more acceptable to them and, by extension, their departments.

The groups developed a vision of what ‘success’ would look like in 2005 and worked backwards to operationalise how exactly to get there. In this ideal future state, the senior leadership would contain as
many women as men, those from an ethnic minority or disabled background, those who had taken a career break, those who had worked in local government, the voluntary or private sector, and those who had a scientific or technological background.\textsuperscript{23}

Also envisioned was a ‘failure’ state: here, the senior leadership would still be too close to the image of ‘Sir Humphrey’ – largely male and almost entirely white. Traditional policy skills would appear the \emph{only} route to the top; few senior officials would have experience outside the Civil Service; levels of interchange would remain low; there would be a shortage of people with skills in contract management, customer services, IT or project management; and some groups – particularly ethnic minorities – would be conspicuously rare.\textsuperscript{24}

The groups used forcefield analysis\textsuperscript{25} to develop a strategic plan for getting to the desired future. This consisted of five objectives:

1. Provide the individuals for strategic leadership of the service with relevant experience.
2. Create a broader-based, more professional Civil Service.
3. Spot and develop talent by providing opportunities for people to gain experience in more than one department or outside Whitehall.
4. Recruit in mid-career to fill specific posts needing outside experience, such as service delivery or project management.
5. Attract a wider, more diverse group at entry level.\textsuperscript{26}

To help deliver each objective, the plan provided an associated basket of measures, which set out key outcomes, how they could be achieved, and an implementation plan including resources, obstacles/risks, timescales, roles and responsibility. For example, to achieve the third objective, the plan committed to tackling obstacles to interchange, with a target that, by 2005, 65% of the SCS should have experience outside the Civil Service. To achieve the fourth objective, the plan set a target for the proportion of senior vacancies that should be put to open competition and identified 100 prominent tasks across policy development, service delivery and project management for which high-quality secondees could be brought in.\textsuperscript{27}

The baskets were partly developed by the central team, but crucially built on what a number of departments were already doing, which meant that the programme was recognisable. As one of the architects explained, the idea was to share experience and best practice so that departments could overcome the recruitment obstacles they faced.\textsuperscript{28}

At the end of this iterative process, most permanent secretaries agreed with the rationale and principles underpinning the agenda.\textsuperscript{29} A crucial moment was the two-day Sunningdale meeting of permanent secretaries on 30 September 1999 facilitated by two outsiders – David Simon (chief executive of BP and appointed as an adviser to the Cabinet Office in 1999) and Geoff Armstrong (director general of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and appointed to the management board of the Cabinet Office as a non-executive member in 1999). It was attended by Wilson, all the permanent secretaries and Jeremy Heywood, then principal private secretary to Blair.\textsuperscript{30} The four working groups reported back to the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[(23)] Cabinet Office, \textit{Bringing In and Bringing On Talent}, op. cit., p. 5.
\item[(24)] Ibid., p. 6.
\item[(25)] This method, developed in the 1950s by psychologist Kurt Lewin, compares the forces helping and the forces hindering a desired outcome. One set of forces tries to change the status quo, and the other tries to keep it. Identifying these opposing forces helps people to plan ways of dealing with them.
\item[(26)] Cabinet Office, \textit{Bringing In and Bringing On Talent}, op. cit., p. 6.
\item[(27)] Cabinet Office, Report to the Prime Minister from Sir Richard Wilson, Head of the Home Civil Service, 1999, p. 5-6.
\item[(28)] CSR, interview 27.
\item[(29)] CSR, interview 19.
\item[(30)] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
wider group. On Bilbo, there was some argument around how radical the ambition would be, but eventually the permanent secretaries unanimously agreed a five-year programme of action to implement it.\textsuperscript{31} There was significant agreement about how well Sunningdale had worked and how positive the outcome was compared with other initiatives.\textsuperscript{32}

The programme was formally signed off by Blair in December 1999, but did not really engage him since it was considered to be largely a managerial issue. Extensive political support was not necessary and formal sign-off was sufficient to allow for follow-through.\textsuperscript{33}

There was, however, a more critical constituency: staff. There was a real danger that they would be cynical about yet another central initiative and have little appetite to get on board. It was therefore necessary for permanent secretaries to localise and personalise the initiatives such that each had their own narrative for why the reform was needed in their specific department. ‘You have to get local initiatives and local branding and local servants so people actually see this is relevant to me.’\textsuperscript{34} Soon after the Sunningdale meeting, heads of departments sent round notes to their staff on the initial proposals and likely next stages.\textsuperscript{35} The idea was to mobilise people around the vision of what the Civil Service would look like in 2005, but allow for a diversity of routes to get there, depending on departmental needs and circumstances.\textsuperscript{36}

After formal sign-off, Omand set up a project team led by John Barker, which brought together civil servants, people from the private and voluntary sector, and consultants Stanton Marris.\textsuperscript{37} They worked with Sam Mitha, head of the learning strategy division of the Cabinet Office, and Judith Lempriere, head of the fast-stream and European recruitment division.

The sheer detail of the plan was an attempt to dissociate Bilbo from previous central initiatives widely thought to be filled with empty slogans.\textsuperscript{38} However, Omand and his team understood that a balance had to be struck between central coordination and departmental ownership. Previous civil service reforms had taught them that instructing departments what to do rarely worked.\textsuperscript{39} As a result, they deliberately avoided the imposition of specific rules, targets and progress chasing (although they did track progress against objectives), and instead gave departments a menu of options, depending on local circumstances and priorities:

‘What you are trying to do is to align a whole lot of different factors so that you get some momentum going and you shift the thing in the direction that you have to move it, but without imagining that you can pre-plan exactly what you are doing.’\textsuperscript{40}

The rationale was that if departments did ‘at least some of them, the whole thing would move in the right direction’.\textsuperscript{41}

More generally, the role of the centre was limited to connecting people and sharing best practice between departments in order to accelerate trends already under way.\textsuperscript{42} For example, it established the High Potential Development Scheme, which gave officials the opportunity to spend four months working on real

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Haddon, C., Reforming the Civil Service: The Centre for Management and Policy Studies, 1999-2005, Institute for Government, July 2012, p. 11.
  \item \textsuperscript{33} CSR, interview 19.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Civil Service Management Committee, ‘Message to the Civil Service from the Civil Service Management Committee’, 4 October 1999.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} CSR, interview 19.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{39} CSR, interview 27.
  \item \textsuperscript{40} CSR, interview 19.
  \item \textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
case studies with staff from other organisations such as academia, local government and business, which had a real impact on making civil servants more open to outsiders.\textsuperscript{43}

Subtle incentives were, however, deployed to demonstrate the importance of outside experience. People started to see that those who had experience from outside were promoted, while those who didn’t were prevented from reaching the senior positions that they were seen to be natural successors to. This had a powerful effect and compelled people to get on board with the agenda of promoting secondments and interchange.\textsuperscript{44}

Within a couple of years, there were a number of ‘quick wins’. For example, the Public Service Leaders Scheme was launched in March 2001, which aimed to meet the individual development needs of 100 public service managers. It brought together people from Whitehall, the police, NHS and local government to learn about the leadership challenges in the public sector. It comprised mentoring, secondment projects, seminars and learning sets.\textsuperscript{45}

Solid progress was made against the diversity targets set for the SCS. There was also an increase in the number of appointments to the SCS following an open competition, from 107 in 1998-99 to 158 in 1999-2000.\textsuperscript{46} By 2002, two-thirds of vacancies were filled from outside, an increase of 88% from 2000.\textsuperscript{47} Nine out of 13 posts at permanent-secretary level had been put out to open competition, with five filled from other sectors.\textsuperscript{48} And 100 high-quality secondees had been brought in to undertake key tasks in areas such as IT and knowledge management, project management and resource accounting.\textsuperscript{49}

A new electronic marketplace – the Recruitment Gateway – was established in June 2000, allowing access through the internet to jobs in the Civil Service. A vacancies website was also set up on the Government Secure Intranet, advertising vacancies within the Civil Service, which made it easier for people to spot opportunities and move around Civil Service organisations.\textsuperscript{50}

\textit{Figure 1: Progress made against targets, 1998-2000}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Proportion in 1998 (%)</th>
<th>Proportion in 2000 (%)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women in the senior civil service</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women in the top 600 posts</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff from ethnic minority backgrounds in the senior civil service</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff with a disability in the senior civil service</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
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\textsuperscript{43} CSR, interview 27.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{46} Civil Service Commissioners, Annual Report 1999-2000, 2000, p. 10.


\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{50} Wilson, R., Report to the Prime Minister on Progress 1999-2000, Autumn 2000, London.
Transition and embedding

In 2002, Wilson retired from the Civil Service and was succeeded by Sir Andrew Turnbull, previously a permanent secretary at the Treasury. He had less interest in the issue of senior leadership than his predecessor but was keen to address the competence gap (for example, in areas such as project management and IT). Nonetheless, he actively supported bringing in talent from outside for central units, for example in the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit and the Office for Public Service Reform. At this point, Bilbo was no longer at the top of anyone’s agenda and a rush of new initiatives emerged. Turnbull, for his part, did not see Bilbo as a vehicle to achieve his ideas.

However, this did not lead to Bilbo tailing off. The agenda continued to be pursued in departments without it being formally recognised.

'I was pleased to see, most of the things we’d wanted done were actually being done – even though no one referred to it any more as a themed programme.'

'There came a time when they stopped referring to Bilbo even though they continued to do work against the objectives.'

Part of this continuation is attributed to the fact that the most powerful and functional part of civil service governance, the Senior Leadership Committee (normally chaired by the Cabinet Secretary), carried the torch for open competition:

'SLC in many ways was the governance process. When decisions were taken about which permanent secretary posts would go to open competition, it was at the SLC.'

Reflections on the reform lifecycle

The Bringing In and Bringing On Talent agenda emerged from what departments were already doing, built on the thrust of earlier reforms (including Next Steps and ‘continuity and change’), and later became subsumed within the broader, centrally driven programme of Modernising Government. A clear ambition was set for what the staffing mix and capability of the Civil Service should look like by 2005.

The agenda for implementation was intentionally adaptable to fit individual departmental needs. Within just a few years the diversity of the SCS was significantly changed, and the actions became embedded to the extent that they continued to be pursued in departments without being formally recognised, unaffected by the dismantling of the central project team. Yet the civil service leaders of today talk as though the reform never happened.

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51 CSR, interview 32.
52 CSR, interview 2.
53 CSR, interview 19.
54 Ibid.
55 CSR, interview 27.
56 CSR, interview 27.
Figure 2: The first and only phase of Bilbo

Phase 1: 1999-2003
This reform aimed to ‘open up’ the senior civil service to a more diverse range of people. Ambition was high, but went with the grain of what departments wanted and the wider context. This degree of challenge was sufficiently met by the leadership and reform design. David Omand, then permanent secretary at the Home Office, led a small working group to develop the vision and the operating model for achieving it. Engagement and consultation was integral to the approach and ensured that the final proposals fitted with departmental priorities. A small central team supported progress, but gave departments scope to flex the proposals. Promotion of those who had outside experience was a powerful incentive.

Legacy
The Bringing In and Bringing On Talent agenda built on the changes set in train by Next Steps and opened up the Civil Service to improve the diversity of the SCS in every dimension. It brought people in from other parts of government, agencies and the private sector; opened up the service to professions other than policy (such as in communications, IT and project management); and increased the number of women and ethnic minorities at the very top.

This has contributed to transforming the look, shape and feel of Whitehall, building on the momentum created by Next Steps. As a result, officials are now far more comfortable interacting with academics, think-tanks and consultancies to inform the policy development process.

‘That has all loosened up hugely. When I think back to the Civil Service in the 1990s, it was still quite closed. It was an unusual civil servant that went to conferences; even more unusual, who spoke at conferences. I think that all that has opened up.’ 57

Although the reform project team was wound up swiftly, the embedded reform actions continued to be pursued and were subsumed within new agendas. The High Potential Development Scheme, which focused on developing staff through secondments, 58 specifically emerged from Bilbo. In February 2004, Civil Service Reform: Delivery & Values was published, which recommended bringing in more people with specialist skills and providing opportunities for officials to work in other sectors. 59 Later that year, Professional Skills for Government was launched, which led to the development of seven centres of excellence, each with their own head, in areas such as IT, finance and communications. All the key themes are thoroughly embedded in the Civil Service Capability Plan, published in 2013. 60

57 CSR, interview 19.
58 CSR, interview 27.
Figure 3: The change in diversity in the Senior Civil Service

The number of senior civil service appointments subject to open competition and approval by the Commission more than doubled from 1997-98 to 2001-02. [NB: from 2002, PB1 and PB1A posts were no longer subject to commission approval, hence the reduction in number of candidates approved by the commission in 2002-03.]

The number of outside appointments into the senior civil service also doubled.

The proportion of all appointments that went to outsiders remained fairly stable at around 65 to 70%.

Gender of civil servants
The representation of women has been increasing. They have accounted for more than half of civil servants since 2001.

Women in senior grades
The proportion of women at senior grades in the civil service has grown steadily over the last decade and women now represent a third of the Senior Civil Service.

Ethnicity of civil servants
The percentage of ethnic minority civil servants has increased by almost half since 1997.

Disabled people in the Civil Service
The percentage of disabled people in the Civil Service has more than doubled since 2001.

Source: ACSES, ONS; SCS Database, Cabinet Office; QPSES, ONS