



The answers to Dominic Cummings's critique

10 essential reforms to government

Bronwen Maddox and Alex Thomas

Introduction

In his broadside against the Johnson government, Dominic Cummings rightly identified the need for reform – but was short on prescription. The government still shows appetite for reform – here are the changes it should make.

In his seven hours of testimony to a Commons committee, the prime minister's former chief adviser laid out a portrait of a chaotic government failing in its basic functions. Some of that is due to the government's newness when the pandemic hit; some to Boris Johnson's character and style of management, and some to failings deep in the structure and process of modern British government. Even after Cummings's exit, the Johnson team, particularly Michael Gove, have displayed commitment to changing the civil service. By learning from Cummings's mistakes – dialling down the antagonism and being clearer about remedies – ministers now have a better chance to make reforms stick. This – drawing on Cummings's evidence and longstanding IfG themes – is what they should do.

1. Clarify the responsibilities of ministers and civil servants

The problem that it is unclear when ministers should be held responsible and when senior officials has been fudged for decades. That may be because it suits both ministers and senior civil servants for responsibilities – and therefore accountability – to be slippery and hard to define. But much reform is futile until this old problem is tackled. There are many decisions, and some failings, that are clearly the responsibility of ministers and for which they should answer to parliament. But it is not reasonable to lay everything that goes wrong in a department at a politician's door. Some should be more clearly the responsibility of the permanent secretary, who should be responsible to parliament for more than the financial ("accounting officer") elements of the role. True, ministerial decisions cannot be cleanly separated from the administrative operation that implements those decisions. But the ambiguity over responsibilities undermines the incentive to pursue good government. The separate responsibilities of politicians and officials should be clearly laid out in a code describing how the civil service works.

2. Enable the head of the civil service to set standards and enforce them across government

Another longstanding fudge has been about which responsibilities sit with the Cabinet Office and Treasury, and which with Whitehall departments. Ministers and civil servants should know that core standards on all government business are set from the centre – such as on digital services, the writing of commercial contracts, hiring and promotion policies, and financial accounting. The head of the civil service should be able to direct departments (and permanent secretaries) to follow those principles, advised by the heads of the "functions".

3. Use pay to incentivise performance more effectively

There is performance-related pay in the civil service but it doesn't work well. The sums are too small in proportion to salary, and the discretion of managers too small as well. Bonuses too often are handed out after a negotiation between senior managers, not based on genuine recognition of performance, and there is no good principle for rewarding risk successfully taken. Those failing tend to be moved elsewhere within the civil service rather than out, undermining morale and performance. Good behaviour and valuable skills need to be recognised and poor practice penalised. So staff who develop their expertise should be rewarded, as should those who stay in post for long enough to deliver a major project. Promotion opportunities should not tilt towards those who move jobs rapidly, but to those with a proven record.

4. Reduce the frequency of switching between jobs to improve depth of subject knowledge

Lack of knowledge of relevant subjects and weak relationships outside central government bedevils the quality of policy making and advice to ministers – as Cummings and Gove have argued. That follows from the high turnover of staff, between jobs within departments as well as between departments. Pay and promotion opportunities should reward this expertise, and civil service leaders need to ensure that all project teams have real expertise embedded in them.

5. Recruit more specialists and use the existing ones better

The civil service needs more specialists to provide advice and delivery of projects in an increasingly complex environment. But its chronically poor data about the skills of existing civil servants means that it does not use the specialists it already employs as well as it should. They need to generate a creative, public service-oriented environment that will attract digital and project management specialists to the civil service. Barriers to moving in and out of the civil service – while strengthening appropriate ethical safeguards – should be reduced.

6. Locate or hire more civil servants outside London

The government is right to prioritise moving civil servants out of London. Lack of understanding of regions outside London and the UK's major cities is one reason the civil service failed to respond to the trends that produced Brexit, and hinders planning for "levelling up". Ministers and officials need to create government hubs outside the capital where people can build their careers for the long term, take advantage of technology to allow more genuinely flexible work patterns and location, and show commitment by moving some of the most senior officials and politicians outside London.

7. Recruit and promote more from socially disadvantaged backgrounds

The Social Mobility Commission survey last month revealed that the civil service overall – particularly departments such as the Treasury and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office – recruits heavily from those from higher socio-economic backgrounds. More senior civil servants are from a "privileged" background now than the last time this was properly examined, in 1967. The civil service's unwritten rules, codes of behaviour and informal use of elite jobs to identify talent also mean that people from lower socio-economic backgrounds find it harder to get promoted. The civil service needs to open up more routes to the top for people with an operational background and expertise, use its talent schemes to directly offer opportunities to

those with a variety of personal experiences, and take advantage of new opportunities to recruit people who cannot afford to live in London.

8. Strengthen the power of the Cabinet Office to set direction and hold departments to account

The Cabinet Office was one of Cummings's prime targets – rightly so for some reasons. It has grown its policy, corporate and operational teams over the last 10 years, but that has not made it a strong central co-ordinating unit. Its secretariats broker policy but can fail to set a clear direction, and the mechanisms for holding departments to account are too weak. The government needs to set out its policy agenda clearly, identify which high priority cross-cutting issues need central Cabinet Office direction and create strong units to work with departments to make changes happen. During crises, the Cabinet Office must rapidly create policy analysis teams to complement the civil contingencies arrangements and ensure that the prime minister gets the best possible combined advice from government experts.

9. Create ways of working with devolved administrations, local and regional government

Government arrangements for working with devolved administrations and local and regional government are too weak. The UK has not developed a framework where politicians with different mandates and responsibilities can disagree but effectively co-ordinate activity on behalf of citizens.

10. Make non-ministerial departments and arm's-length bodies more accountable

As Cummings suggested, the Department of Health and Social Care was unclear about its authority over its array of arm's-length bodies. The pandemic often created confusion and uncertainty over who was doing what. But reforms were announced with minimal consultation or justification and are so far limited to public health. The government should properly audit its arm's-length bodies across all departments, assessing whether remits are well-defined and responsibilities properly sit with chief executives, civil servants or ministers.

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 enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk

 +44 (0) 20 7747 0400  +44 (0) 20 7766 0700

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**Institute for Government, 2 Carlton Gardens
London SW1Y 5AA, United Kingdom**

June 2021

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