

Is the United Kingdom government fit for purpose?

Governance expert Professor Andrew Kakabadse, Henley Business School, University of Reading, interviewed current and former ministers and civil servants on whether the UK government is fit for purpose. Writer SHELLY FARR BISWELL talks with Professor Kakabadse about his findings.

Last year, the UK Government's Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) held an inquiry called the Work of the Civil Service. As the PACAC notes in the introduction of their final report: "Many have questioned whether the permanent and impartial Civil Service we have today is capable of dealing with modern challenges, whether it is sufficiently accountable, and even whether it is in fact impartial. The Civil Service is being tested, along with all its other burdens and tasks, by the process of leaving the EU."



Professor Andrew Kakabadse

As part of the inquiry, the PACAC commissioned Professor Kakabadse to conduct confidential research that focused on the effectiveness of the UK Civil Service. Kakabadse's study is thought to be the biggest of its kind since the 1854 Northcote-Trevelyan Report – a report that served as the basis for the establishment of the UK Civil Service.

For the study, nearly 160 interviews were conducted with current and former secretaries of state (cabinet ministers), junior ministers, special political advisors, permanent secretaries (a similar role to chief executives in the New Zealand system), director generals, and senior civil servants, as well as others with a working knowledge of the Civil Service.



The initial guiding question for the research was: Is the Civil Service fit for purpose?

"Early in the interview process we realised that this question was too restrictive," Kakabadse says. "What became clear is that the professional relationship or what many of those interviewed referred to as the 'chemistry' between secretaries of state and permanent secretaries is pivotal in policy development and delivery. In acknowledgment of this dynamic and other factors, such as how ministers contribute to policy delivery,

the guiding question was broadened to: Is *government* fit for purpose?"

To answer this question, Kakabadse considered numerous aspects of government, looking at both organisational roles and responsibilities, as well as influences, such as prioritisation and project management.

While there are significant differences in the political landscape in New Zealand and the UK, Kakabadse's research provides useful insights that can be applied here.

Chemistry factor

Professor Kakabadse says the central finding of his research is that the chemistry between secretaries of state and permanent secretaries is essential in policy delivery.

"A positive chemistry between secretaries of state and permanent secretaries is fundamental. It requires far more attention than it currently receives and needs to be considered at the systems level of government," he says.

"... if there's one single message, and it's perhaps even more relevant now, it's behave with courtesy, professionalism and respect towards all of those you are dealing with, and in particular your civil servants."

Kakabadse adds there is a natural tension between these two roles.

"Secretaries of state have an urgency to deliver on political imperatives, whereas permanent secretaries are concerned with providing an accurate assessment. Where there's a positive chemistry, this tension can support effective policy delivery. Unfortunately, my research found that between 10 and 53 percent of these relationships are dysfunctional and can have a negative impact on or completely derail policy delivery."

Kakabadse found that the qualities most often cited for constructive relationships between secretaries of state and permanent secretaries were courtesy, professionalism, collegiality, respect, and personal sensitivity.

As one interviewed secretary of state said, "... if there's one single message, and it's perhaps even more relevant now, it's behave with courtesy, professionalism and respect towards all of those you are dealing with, and in particular your civil servants. That absolutely does not mean that you need to accept any piece of advice that they give you, that you can't be critical, and indeed highly critical, if they deliver service, advice, delivery which is clearly not good enough."

Two elements in creating good chemistry are the ability to find commonalities and the ability to appreciate the other person's perspective.

"Civil servants – across the board – have an inherent understanding of this. They appreciate the demanding role secretaries of state are in as elected representatives. And as civil servants, they are fully committed to pursuing their secretary

of state's agenda with the aim of serving the public good," Kakabadse says.

As noted in the report, and emphasising the strained relationships caused by Brexit: "No evidence emerges that civil servants undermine or thwart their minister or derail the Brexit negotiations. In fact, civil servants emerge as dedicated to the Civil Service and their role in serving the public, leading naturally for a positive and productive relationship with their Secretary of State."

Kakabadse says there are two very distinct types of thought for secretaries of state and junior ministers when it comes to civil servants.

Professor Kakabadse found that civil servants understand the importance of speaking truth to power, but many are reluctant to do this as they fear the repercussions.

"The first type of thought is that civil servants, particularly permanent secretaries, are considered professional, thoughtful, experienced, and able to work through complex challenges," he says.

The other viewpoint, however, is a perception that civil servants are overly cautious or obstructive in carrying out the government's policy objectives.

"This second viewpoint is completely counter to what I found in my research. This made me look at what was the underlying cause for this belief," Kakabadse says.

What he found is that this negative viewpoint is grounded in the tension between political urgency (ministers) and accurate assessment (civil servants).

Even where ministers spoke highly of civil servants, he found few acknowledge the efforts required for policy delivery. As he notes in the report's conclusions, "Only two Secretaries of State in this sample highlighted that a fundamental part of their role is attention to policy delivery and execution. Many still view the civil servant as not sufficiently responsive. For that reason, the roles of Secretary of State and Permanent Secretary overlap to the detriment of policy delivery."

Speaking truth to power

An issue that compounds the viewpoint held by some ministers that civil servants can be obstructive is the difficulty civil servants may have in speaking truth to power. Professor Kakabadse found that civil servants understand the importance of speaking truth to power, but many are reluctant to do this as they fear the repercussions.

As he notes in the conclusions of his report, "This study confirms that speaking truth to power can be damaging where the relationship between the minister and civil servant is ill prepared for such an encounter."

The ability to speak truth to power requires a robust relationship between a secretary of state and permanent secretary. His inquiry found that, within the current system, building that robust relationship is based solely on the efforts of individual permanent secretaries and senior civil servants.

Acknowledging that this dynamic is not likely to change, he recommends that permanent secretaries and department leadership teams need to "prioritise building a culture that is accepting of speaking truth to power".

It starts with respect

It's no surprise that permanent secretaries with a track record of

positive relationships with ministers make those relationships a priority. As one interviewed permanent secretary said, "It requires a willingness to invest in relationships, particularly with ministers... it's about the relationships with ministers, the relationships with my team and the overall context. If you really invest heavily and upfront in that relationship [with the Secretary of State], and you do the things that you need to do, at the same time you make sure they're consistent with what it means to be a Permanent Secretary, then you are fulfilling the role."

In his recommendations, Kakabadse says that the relationship between secretaries of state and permanent secretaries needs to be given more respect. As part of this, both sides need to initiate sensitive conversations as soon as issues arise to avoid creating a blame culture.

Kakabadse also recommends training and professional development in dyadic and team relationships, including adding it to the UK's Civil Service Leadership Academy curriculum.

Improving transitions

As with any relationship, first impressions can have a lasting impact. As one permanent secretary said when interviewed, "It takes about three months to really know your minister, but during that time things can really go wrong and sometimes cannot be put right."

In the UK, frequent portfolio shuffles for secretaries of state and regular reassignments for permanent secretaries adds to the challenge of fostering strong relationships.

"Relationships are built on trust and knowing how another person works. These qualities take concerted effort. Regrettably, the turnover in these pivotal roles can have an extremely disruptive effect," Professor Kakabadse says.

To address this issue, Kakabadse says the critical three-month transition period can be condensed to three weeks through coaching and using evidence-based feedback. He says this needs to be an integral part of the induction of secretaries of state and permanent secretaries.

So, is the UK government fit for purpose?

While Professor Kakabadse found many encouraging aspects in how the current system works, in his report, he provides a range of recommendations to improve policy delivery.

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As he writes in the report's conclusion, "What started as an inquiry into Civil Service effectiveness has become a statement on how the Secretary of State can be better positioned to deliver policy for the public good. In one sense there has been no departure from the core responsibility of the civil servants to steadfastly serve the minister. The contribution of this study is to show how this can be better done."

You can read Professor Kakabadse's written evidence to the PACAC at <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/public-administration-and-constitutional-affairs-committee/civil-service-effectiveness/written/79751.html>

To read the PACAC's final report, go to <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmpublic/497/49702.htm>