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## Rewiring Whitehall: what 170 years of reform say about the civil service's next chapter

By Nada Kakabadse on 17/03/2026 | Updated on 17/03/2026



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**From Victorian meritocracy to mission-led government, UK civil service reform has never been a single event. Instead, it has evolved in waves, and the latest push to 'rewire the state' looks like the next turn in a long institutional cycle**

For over 170 years the British governments have wrestled with a deceptively simple question: How do we make the machinery of government work more effectively?

The answer has never arrived as a single grand redesign. Reform of the UK civil service has appeared in phases, each responding to the pressures of its era while leaving the constitutional core largely intact.

Over time, this story has been one of cautious adjustment. The state's self-image has shifted from neutral hierarchy, through to managerial organisation, then market-style performance, networked governance, and now leadership capability and central accountability.

The current ambition to, in prime minister Sir Keir Starmer's words, "completely rewire the state" fits squarely within this tradition. The rhetoric may sound dramatic, but structurally it looks like another recalibration rather than a rupture.

## **A meritocratic settlement**

The modern civil service began with the Northcote–Trevelyan reforms of 1854, which replaced patronage with open competition and merit-based promotion.

This was a constitutional turning point, embedding the idea that civil servants serve governments impartially, not parties, and that permanence and neutrality underpin the Westminster system.

The Haldane Report of 1918 further refined the model by organising departments around policy functions under ministerial responsibility, supported by expert officials.

Together, these reforms created a hierarchical, rule-bound and politically neutral bureaucracy. Those principles still define British governance today, and they also explain why reform rarely overturns the system outright.

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## **When management impacted the picture**

By the 1960s, the expanding post-war state revealed new weaknesses. The Fulton Report argued that Whitehall was dominated by capable generalists but lacked specialist and managerial expertise.

Its solution was professionalisation: Structured training, specialist career paths and stronger management capability. The Civil Service College was created to support this shift.

This marked a subtle but important transition. The civil service was no longer seen just as a constitutional guardian, but also as a complex organisation which needed modern management.

And yet the traditional culture proved resilient. Reform added new layers, rather than replacing old assumptions, a pattern which has persisted ever since.

## **The performance revolution**

The most dramatic reform wave came in the 1980s. The Next Steps programme separated policy from delivery, creating executive agencies with operational autonomy and performance targets.

The Citizen's Charter followed soon after, recasting citizens as customers who were entitled to measurable service standards. Efficiency, competition and results became the watchwords.

This era of New Public Management sharpened operational focus and clarified targets. But it also fragmented the state, dispersing responsibility across agencies and arm's-length bodies.

Efficiency improved, but coherence suffered.

## **From hierarchy to networks**

By the late 1990s, this fragmentation had become the problem to solve. Reform shifted towards coordination under the banner of 'joined-up government'.

Programmes emphasised shared services, digital delivery and cross-department collaboration. Government began to see itself less as a hierarchy and more as a network.

The system that emerged was hybrid in nature: part hierarchy, market, and network. Integration increased, but accountability became more complex, not simpler.

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## **Capability and relationships at the top**

After the financial crisis, reform discourse shifted again. Attention turned to skills shortages, digital capability, commercial expertise and project delivery.

At the same time, scrutiny of implementation intensified. Reviews highlighted resistance to external hires and exposed deeper cultural barriers.

Another key insight emerged: Effectiveness at the top often depends on the working relationship between ministers and permanent secretaries. Governance is not only about structures or skills, but also about trust and alignment.

## **A return to the architecture of authority**

Recent reviews suggest reform has entered a more constitutional phase. Attention has turned back to clarity of leadership, delegation and oversight at the centre of government.

Proposals for stronger prime ministerial authority, clearer civil service leadership and more unified governance structures reflect a renewed concern with accountability.

After decades of decentralisation and integration, the focus is shifting again towards the centre.

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## What the 'rewiring' agenda really means

The government's current reform programme reflects this mature stage of thinking, emphasising digital transformation, mission-led delivery teams, stronger performance management and streamlined approvals.

It additionally proposes renewed investment in training and leadership capability, alongside greater coherence at the centre.

Despite all this, none of these developments represent a clean break from the past. The agenda preserves neutrality, builds on the agency model, extends digital integration and deepens the capability reforms of the past decade.

In effect, it recombines existing reform ideas rather than inventing a new paradigm.

## Reform as a cycle

Across nearly two centuries, a recurring rhythm is now visible. Hierarchy gives way to managerial reform, then decentralisation, which ultimately produces fragmentation, integration, capability gaps, and eventually central clarification.

Each phase corrects the imbalances in the previous one. The constitutional core remains and this is why wholesale transformation is very rare. Institutional habits, cultural resistance, political short-termism and resource pressures continually reshape reform ambitions.

The same themes reappear because the tensions they address never fully disappear.

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## Why this matters now

The civil service today faces fiscal constraint, technological disruption and rising public expectations. The recent approval of a new [School of Government and Civil Service](#) and the government's '[AI Opportunities Action Plan](#)' are signals for a new direction.

The ongoing push to 'rewire the state' reflects a system that is trying to optimise itself under pressure.

History suggests the initiative will matter, but not because it overturns the system. Its significance lies in how it layers new mechanisms onto old foundations, refining, not replacing them.

The defining feature of British administrative reform is therefore not one of upheaval, but a process of endurance. Change happens, but the system adapts rather than collapses.

If the past is any guide, this latest rewiring will follow the same path: evolution within continuity, not revolution.

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