

# Civil Service and Human Connection

Citizens in the 21st century are subject to complex, abstract, and often dehumanising forces. Government is too often seen as one of these forces. Criticisms that government is 'out of touch' are not just about the substance of decisions, but also the feeling that citizens have no human connection to government. I therefore argue that a 21st century civil service can, and should, be reconfigured to create much-needed human connections between citizens and government.

To explore this idea, I focus on one practical proposal: linking civil servants to constituencies. I draw on my experiences as a former member and current researcher of the UK civil service, though the ideas I propose could be adapted by any government that wishes to be more in touch with the people it serves.

## What is a 21st century civil service for?

This question invites us to consider two topics: the nature of the 21st century, and the civil service. Let us address each in turn. Sociologists such as Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens have analysed modernity by describing a shift from *fortuna* to risk.<sup>1</sup> In a *fortuna* world, events are ascribed to God(s) and/or nature. In a risk society, events emerge from human decisions combining into much bigger global forces: 'the market', 'globalisation', 'automation', and suchlike. So, unlike *fortuna*, there is a sense that humans – though mostly a small group of elite humans – *can* shape events. Recent populist outcries claim that 'elites' make decisions which allow, even encourage, abstract forces to supersede the 'will of the people'. However other politicians, from Thatcher to Blair, have argued "there is no alternative" to riding macro-level trends.<sup>2</sup> With the rise of Covid and inflation, we may be seeing such language re-emerge. Recently Joe Biden, when asked how he could control fuel prices, replied "can't do much right now".<sup>3</sup>

The question of whether, and how, representative democracy can make effective decisions in a complex modern world has been much discussed elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> I focus on a different aspect of living amidst the abstract forces of the 21st century: maintaining genuine human connections. This question is inspired by Hilary Cottam's *Radical Help*, in which she argues

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<sup>1</sup> Ulrich Beck *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* and Anthony Giddens *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives*.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Astrid Séville 'From 'one right way' to 'one ruinous way'? Discursive shifts in "There is no alternative"' *European Political Science Review* (2017), 9:3, 449–470

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/08/remarks-by-president-biden-after-air-force-one-arrival-3/>

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, David Runciman *How Democracy Ends*. For a global empirical study see Roberto Foa et al. 'Youth and Satisfaction with Democracy: Reversing the Democratic Disconnect'. <https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/ageing/>.

that the welfare state “is at a loss when confronted with a range of modern challenges from loneliness to entrenched poverty”.<sup>5</sup> She advocates experiments in welfare, where “at the heart of this new way of working is human connection”. She focuses on welfare provision, but her approach can be used as a lens to consider national governance. One model is that representative democracy provides human connections, through which citizens express feelings to the government. But there are severe pragmatic issues here. The UK Parliament has fewer than one MP per 100,000 citizens, supported by very few staff. Their roles, and associated loyalties, are a mixture of local casework, national legislation, party roles, and (for around 20% of MPs) government responsibilities.<sup>6</sup> Those with direct access to government have to trade this work off against their capacity to focus on constituents. Other MPs have to go through several layers to get messages into and out of government - often in a way that encourages adversarial approaches (such as Parliamentary Questions) rather than candid collaboration.<sup>7</sup>

By contrast there are well over 400,000 civil servants in the UK, roughly one per 170 citizens. Many are motivated by a desire to improve citizens’ lives. Nonetheless, the civil service is not, at present, renowned for human connection. Consider the language used to describe it. At worst it is a ‘faceless bureaucracy’; more neutrally ‘the government machine’; at best, a ‘Rolls Royce’. The Institute for Government’s Director Bronwen Maddox has argued government shows a “widespread lack of knowledge and care, among civil servants as well as ministers”.<sup>8</sup> The 2021 Declaration on Government Reform refers to “updating the wiring of government”, and speaks of efficiency, innovation, and data.<sup>9</sup> These are not bad objectives *per se*; but align more closely with the idea of improving a machine than encouraging human connection.

Set against this, the Declaration does lay out broader efforts to make government seem less ‘out of touch’ and more representative of the whole country. Particularly high-profile – if not entirely new – have been promises to move civil servants out of London. These efforts are a step towards connecting with the whole country. But civil servants simply being in a place does not automatically mean voices in that place will shape government thinking. To enable human connections we need to change *how* work is done, to build on changes to *where* work is done and *who* does it. In the next section I lay out one possible approach to doing so.

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<sup>5</sup> In addition, Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* is an influential account of diminishing human connections in the USA.

<sup>6</sup> As of January 2022 there were 94 Ministers and 43 PPS (<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/payroll-vote> and <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/parliamentary-private-secretaries>).

<sup>7</sup> For MPs’ struggles with their hybrid roles, see Isabel Hardman *Why We Get The Wrong Politicians*.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/events/director-annual-lecture-2022>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/declaration-on-government-reform>

## Civil Servants & Constituencies

My proposal is to assign civil servants to every UK constituency. Their specific roles would not be dedicated to that constituency; they would still be a more general policy advisors, campaign strategists, and so on. They would not advocate for that constituency, or do case-work, in the manner of an elected representative or council worker. But they would have a set amount of time – perhaps 5 hours per week – during which they should be focused on engaging with the constituency. During this time they could, for example, attend MPs' surgeries and Town Halls, or run their own drop-ins. They could form links with prominent local organisations, attend public events, and find other methods for directly engaging with local citizens and organisations. This would greatly widen the opportunities for citizens to express ideas, wishes, and concerns, and for civil servants to hear them; and conversely, for civil servants to be able to communicate government work human-to-human.

Let me give a vignette as to how this might work. Imagine I had continued my past role in post-Brexit data protection policy, moved to the new DCMS Hub in Manchester, and been assigned the Tatton constituency (at my suggestion, given I grew up there). Data protection is a reasonably technical area, and our work was largely informed by expert stakeholders – data-intensive businesses, privacy activists, and industry representatives such as TechUK, for example. But now I would also be obliged to connect with citizens, small businesses, charities and more across the constituency. Most would probably be unconcerned with details of data protection policy; but they may have feelings about broader issues of technology and privacy. For instance, they might be excited by the idea of post-Brexit Britain as an innovative tech hub; or perhaps concerned about what such a future might hold for them. These views could corroborate the input of our previous stakeholders; or may diverge, prompting us to ask different questions and think in new ways.

But I would not just be directing conversations towards my policy area; I would also be in broader 'listening mode' for wider government. Many of the issues I heard from constituents would probably need to be redirected to the council or MP (though helping to do so could also be useful). But let's imagine I detected a recurring theme of people being confused - and increasingly concerned - about changes to Universal Credit and National Insurance. Speaking to other civil servants in the Manchester office, themselves connected to a range of constituencies, corroborated my impression. We directly informed Treasury colleagues; they had got some wind of this concern via Parliamentary Questions, but it was just one of many themes raised by MPs (and had been ascribed by some in the Treasury to 'political game-playing'). Candid conversations with civil service colleagues changed their view. This might not alter the policy itself, already shaped by a great many economic and political factors. But it could be an early warning, leading to fast clarificatory communication work. I could then efficiently feed these communications directly back to relevant constituency specialists, and use them in future conversations with constituents where appropriate.

Simply creating constituency links would not be the whole story. There would also need to be changes to 'the plumbing of government' (another mechanical metaphor familiar in discussions about the civil service). A first major issue would be internal communication. There is a risk that civil servants could accumulate insight but be unable to communicate with the relevant part of government. As a result, citizens' voices would be frustratingly lost in the system. Ensuring messages are passed to the relevant part of government should take part of the time allotted for their constituency; but systems should be in place to ensure it does not take *all* that time. Brexit has forced substantial innovation in cross-governmental coordination, which should be capitalised on.<sup>10</sup> Departmental Intranets, and interfaces such as People Finder, should be standardised and kept up-to-date to make locating relevant colleagues straightforward. Civil servants should also be encouraged to provide answers to consultations based upon their experiences with citizens.

The second change relates to individual training. Talking to people in a way that elicits helpful information, and then passing that on in an appropriately sensitive and synthesised manner, is a skill. The Declaration on Government Reform already talks of new training opportunities, including understanding evidence and data. To support my proposals, such training will need to include skills of eliciting and synthesising views from citizens. Training should also include personal resilience. Elected politicians, from councillors to MPs, speak of difficult experiences with constituents (in common with many other public servants, from nurses to immigration officials). Ongoing reviews into balancing the safety and accessibility of MPs should be expanded to consider other government representatives.<sup>11</sup>

## Further Questions

In this final section I consider two questions prompted by the proposal, which bring us back to the broader objective: the civil service providing human connections between citizens and government. The first question is a practical one of location. In order to be effective, civil servants would best be allocated a constituency in or near where they lived.<sup>12</sup> Doing so for *all* constituencies would be challenging, certainly initially. That would be a very visible sign of civil service concentration, and putting a timeframe on creating constituency links could be part of the levelling up agenda.

But if our broader aim is to create more human connections, there are alternative ways of building on existing civil service structures with fewer geographical difficulties. One would be to greatly extend volunteering. Some departments already offer 'volunteering days'. These could be widened to all departments and extended to 2-3 hours every week (as an average).

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/whitehall-monitor-2021>

<sup>11</sup> 'MPs confront need to find balance between accessibility and security', *Financial Times*, 17 Oct 2021.

<sup>12</sup> A related question is what number of civil servants should be assigned per constituency. This should be established through iteration and evaluation.

This would give civil servants regular contact with on-the-ground circumstances - whether of people in poverty, youth community groups, elderly citizens, or prisoners (to name just a few possibilities). In addition to volunteering, civil servants would also be supported to feed back their experiences into broader government work, in the manner outlined in my constituency proposal.

Another alternative would be to better integrate the Operational Delivery Profession (ODP) into central government decisionmaking. With over 170,000 staff the ODP is the largest of the civil service professions, so already provides many interactions between civil service and citizens across the country.<sup>13</sup> However as argued by Sandra Aston, Head of the ODP Central Team, “it has been one of the least recognised professions when compared to others such as Policy, Project and Legal.”<sup>14</sup> It has a remarkably low proportion of senior civil servants: 660, or ~0.3% of its total staff (compared to Policy, with 1,840 seniors or ~6% of total staff), and is not a common route to seniority in other professions.<sup>15</sup> Creating more senior roles within the ODP could give the profession more standing, and help ensure their staff’s experiences are incorporated into a range of higher-level discussions. Changes to internal communications and training, discussed in my constituency proposal, could also be first focused on the ODP.

These non-geographical approaches might over-represent the needs of specific groups, and/or citizens in areas where civil servants are more densely concentrated. But they might also serve as testing grounds for some of the administrative changes - ring-fencing time, training staff, internal communications - which would be necessary for the more complicated move towards constituency linkages.

Our second question is more philosophical. Some would argue that the machine nature of the civil service is, on balance, a good thing. It is the job of politicians to provide emotions; the civil service is meant to be a neutral, objective, rational entity, turning the wishes of politicians into realistic ideas.<sup>16</sup> I have two responses. Firstly multiple social scientists – myself included – argue that emotion and expertise should not be separated.<sup>17</sup> To change the world you first must understand it, and full understanding of people requires engaging with emotions. Government failure to understand how people *feel* was most visibly represented in the surprise result of the Brexit referendum.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Data from <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/summary-of-civil-servants-in-the-operational-delivery-profession-2021>. Note the professions of many staff are unknown (particularly for ODP) so there may be inaccuracies in reported numbers.

<sup>14</sup> <https://quarterly.blog.gov.uk/2018/07/05/top-things-to-know-about-the-operational-delivery-profession/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/civil-service-socio-economic-diversity>

<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of neutrality in modern civil services, see Dennis Grube *Megaphone Bureaucracy*

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, J.M. Barbalet *Emotion, Social Theory, and Social Structure*; or my work [details redacted for anonymity].

<sup>18</sup> Karin Forss & Lennea Magro, ‘Facts or Feelings, Facts and Feelings? The Post-Democracy Narrative in the Brexit Debate.’ *European Policy Analysis* (2016) 2(2).

My second response, which leads into my concluding point, is this. Neutrality is not meant to quash individuals' passion for change; rather, it means the institution of the civil service should serve whatever government is in power. In my model, political direction would still come from Ministers and Parliament; civil servants would still inform and deliver government policy. But to return to our starting point - in the 21st century, work is too easily informed by abstract quantification and delivered by automation. Good government needs to resist this trend. Alongside the economic impact assessments, large-scale comms campaigns, and GOV.UK-enabled services, government inputs and outputs should include directly speaking and listening to citizens. To do so effectively requires a large body of people, who are willing to improve citizens' lives and connected to levers of change. That body is the civil service; and forming human connections between citizens and government is what a 21st century civil service is for.

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