

‘GOD’s’ coming replacement with a civil service ‘Trinity’ is a further sign that policy making is becoming even more divorced from its implementation.

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Sir Gus O'Donnell was unique for his interest in the 'sharp end' of policy-making. As the outgoing Head of the Civil Service is set to be replaced by a triumvirate of a 'policy' man and two 'policy implementers,' [Colin Talbot](#) argues that the new arrangement reflects Whitehall's obsession with policy-making and is likely to backfire as policy continues to be made without considering the nuts and bolts of how to make policy work.



God is leaving the building – no, not *that* God but Sir Gus O'Donnell, Cabinet Secretary and head of the Civil Service, also known around Whitehall as GOD. Sir (undoubtedly soon to be Lord) Gus has been slightly unusual. Unlike most of his predecessors, he has shown a strong interest in the 'sharp end' of the civil service. He was just as likely to be seen visiting a job centre or tax office as in the corridors of Whitehall power. Indeed, GOD has been so good that he apparently needs to be replaced by not one but three people.

A few years back the UK's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), the e-spy-centre in Cheltenham, was gearing up for the move to their new 'doughnut' shaped building and trying to simultaneously change the culture of the organization. As part of a big change program they held a series of 'town-hall meetings' with staff, actually *in* the town-hall. As if such an event wasn't mould-breaking enough, at one of these large gatherings there was Sir Gus, in a GCHQ t-shirt, helping to marshal people to their tables.

Unfortunately not all of his predecessors have held the same unified vision 'from policy to action'. A good example in the opposite direction is the '[Next Steps](#)' report, published in 1988, that launched 150 'executive agencies' in government. 'Next Steps' was born out of frustration with attempts to change the civil service. Under Mrs Thatcher several strategies had been tried – the Rayner 'Efficiency Scrutinies' and the 'Financial Management Initiative' to devolve responsibility, among others. They only partially succeeded; for example, the National Audit Office estimated that only half the savings identified by Scrutinies were ever implemented.

In a Rayner-style scrutiny of change attempts, the 'Next Steps' team set out to identify what was wrong and make recommendations for change. Their central conclusion was that senior management spent too much time looking upwards to Ministers and policy-making, and not enough time looking downwards to the implementation of operational management. Their solution was to create specialised implementation agencies with a new breed of hands-on Chief Executives who would report directly to Ministers, going around the usual Whitehall lengthy chains of command. Some were even to be brought in from outside. Their diagnosis wasn't really anything new to those that knew Whitehall well – twenty years earlier the Fulton Report had identified similar problems: an obsession with policy-making and a lack of enthusiasm for the nuts and bolts of actually getting things done.



Gus O'Donnell - Credit: UK in Canada (Creative Commons BY NC ND)

Fast-forward two more decades and we find the same basic problem rearing its head again, in a slightly different form. Sir Gus is not to be replaced by one but effectively by three people. His role as Cabinet Secretary is being taken by [Jeremy Haywood](#), a long time policy specialist. But Haywood, by all reports, did not want to take responsibility for managing the civil service or the Cabinet Office. So Sir Robert (Bob)

Kerslake will become 'Head of the Civil Service' alongside his 'day job' as Permanent Secretary at the Department for Communities and Local Government. And Ian Watmore, head of the Efficiency and Reform group in the Cabinet Office, will become the Permanent Secretary for the Cabinet Office.

The division of labour here seems quite clear – Haywood does 'policy', Kerslake and Watmore do 'implementation'. Both the latter have considerable experience of actually running things; Haywood much less so. On one level this may seem like a sensible arrangement. But I, along with virtually all the other experts who recently [gave evidence](#) to the Public Administration Select Committee in parliament, disagree. The key to 'implementation' is getting the policy right in the first place.

As I said in my evidence, quoting the Canadian management expert Henry Mintzberg, there is no such thing as bad implementation, just bad strategy. You can't make good policy without knowing thoroughly what the implementation issues are going to be, and for that you need strong input from people with experience of actually doing it.

If, for example, Kerslake had been made Head of the Civil Service and Permanent Secretary at the Cabinet Office and he and Haywood were on more equal footing, such a system might just work. But the clear downgrading of the 'Head' role means a cementing of the secondary role of implementation.

Our political class is increasingly characterised by people who only have policy experience and have never run anything. This is true for all parties, not just the current government. In these circumstances we should be trying to balance that lack of experience of actually running anything with a senior civil service that does have such experience. With glacial slowness real managerial experience has crept into the upper ranks of Whitehall.

But the underlying culture of "its policy that really matters" still remains, and the latest changes starkly reinforce that reality. The politicians who have signed off these changes will almost certainly live to regret it, as policy-making becomes further divorced from making policy happen.

More from Colin Talbot can be found on the [Whitehall Watch](#) blog.

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