

Reforming Whitehall: bluff, bluster, brilliance and brains

Geoff Mulgan assesses *Dominic Cummings' proposals for reforming government* and argues that, while bringing new people and ideas into Number 10 can be welcome, there are several pitfalls, not least in failing to learn from past attempts at reform.



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Over the last few months there has been a frenzy of interest in the plans of Dominic Cummings, and his boss Boris Johnson, to reshape the British state. There's been talk of bringing in brilliant weirdos; radically reorganising Whitehall; and ditching deadbeat civil servants. Last year I wrote [a piece](#) lamenting that the new generation of populist political leaders seemed to have no ideas about what kind of government they wanted (unlike the Thatcherites, Blairites and others). So I've been pleasantly surprised to see attention turning not just to *what* government does but *how* it does things. I'd been waiting to see a bit more of the substance before commenting, but since very little has yet appeared I thought I might as well offer my take.

Nearly twenty years ago I was closely involved in similar attempts to bring in new ideas and energy to Whitehall. I helped set up the Social Exclusion Unit, and then ran the Performance and Innovation Unit and the Strategy Unit for four years. The SU at its peak had some 150 people, half from outside government, brought in to design smarter policies on everything from drugs to climate change, rough sleeping to local government finance. We deliberately aimed to bring in new skills (from modelling to futures) and new mindsets, as well as frontline experience, and since then I have worked with many of the world's most effective governments, from Singapore and Finland to Estonia and China. All grapple with the challenge of how to turn government – which is naturally cautious and conservative – into an effective force for change (if you're interested, my many writings on government covering everything from structures to data, strategy to people, can be found [here](#)).

This experience makes me less hostile than most to Cummings' call for weirdos and misfits. Government needs a constant influx of heretics to challenge the tendencies to cynical and world-weary fatalism that can overcome any bureaucracy. Cummings has many parallels with Steve Hilton in the first Cameron years, who was convinced he could reshape the system, and was hated by civil servants. He did bring in new ideas and energy for a time, before he flounced off to become a TV host (unfortunately as a former advertising man he lacked interest in how the system actually worked, and so had much less impact than he might have).

I'm also favourable to many of the ideas Cummings has floated, not least because all of them were used or explored in the past – from red teams to the use of outsiders, reducing numbers of ministers to deconstructing civil service roles (my main disappointment so far is that there don't seem to be any new ideas).

I also recognise that you need a certain arrogance to change any system, which is also why I'm not surprised by the bluster and bravado. So what can we conclude so far? How much of what we are seeing is brilliance and brains, and how much is the bluff and bluster of two Oxbridge classicists?

Let's start with the diagnosis. Doing a critique of British government isn't hard. Our civil service may pride itself on being a Rolls Royce, but like its counterparts it has struggled to adapt to new times and new roles. This is why very similar critiques have been made for over half a century bemoaning poor memory, the lack of key skills (such as procurement or IT), overly rapid movement from job to job and prioritising good prose over practical implementation skills. Here are problems which definitely still need fixing. The same is true of the longstanding question of how to create a more coherent centre of government (which I've [written on before](#)), and a less dominant Treasury. There are good reasons why no other country has adopted the UK model.

But there are four missing parts of the Cummings diagnosis and prescription. Whether these can be dealt with will determine whether this is just another flourish of a brainy, but not altogether serious, individual or something more significant.

The first is politics. A high proportion of the errors of government reflect the flaws of politics and party politics, not the government machine. These are just a few of them: there are far too many ministers with therefore far too many half-baked initiatives designed to get a promotion; there is zero training for politicians (this is about the only job where it's assumed you can do it on day one); and the political/media nexus puts little value on dull competence and implementation over long periods of time. The average tenure of many ministerial roles is barely a year now. Since it takes a year for even a smart minister to learn how to do the job, the result is that most ministers, most of the time, are incompetent. That's bad enough on its own. But the new government's predilection for briefing the media that ministers could be sacked at any moment and its use of the recent reshuffle to signal that loyalty and compliance matter more than effectiveness, makes it all the more likely that politicians could undermine good government rather than enhancing it.

The second is systems. It's good to see someone who has engaged with at least some of the literature on complexity and systems even if it's hard to tell how much has been digested. But the big lesson of all serious thinking about systems is that without buy-in from the bottom the top-down changes rarely stick, even in states with authoritarian powers far beyond what UK ministers could dream of. That is true within Whitehall (which is why the Strategy Unit worked hard to get its projects commissioned by ministers and not just No 10). And it is even more true of public services. If there is no strategy for engaging hearts and minds the programme is almost certain to fail.

The third is practicality. One of the big vices of Westminster and Whitehall is their valuing of words over deeds. Johnson is a classic, perhaps extreme case, whose entire career has rested on facility with words not things (one reason why no-one should hold their breath waiting for a bridge to be built between Scotland and northern Ireland). This was also the flaw of the new public management theories that so animated Conservatives a generation ago: they argued then for separating out a policy elite from the lower status cadres who would actually do the implementation. Yet that is often a recipe for bad policy, devoid of any sense of on the ground reality. No plans survive their first encounter with reality. The biggest risk of the Cummings approach is that it may be just yet another example of the 'clever chaps' theory of change: the belief that a small cadre of super smart people at the top can change the world. In his writings there is very little mention of including people with practical experience of big projects, running schools, policing, perhaps an echo of how little experience he himself has of actually running anything. All of my experience confirms that policy cannot be separated from implementation, and no amount of cleverness can make up for a lack of feel for how things really work.

Finally, the biggest flaw that besets governments is their failure to learn. The best ones invest heavily in learning from their failures and their successes, and one key argument for a permanent civil service is that it organises a collective memory. Yet ours is surprisingly bad at managing its memory, constantly reinvents wheels or forgets what worked and why (the subject of [this report](#) I commissioned in 2018 which addressed how new data tools could be used to help government remember, a topic also addressed a few years ago by Cummings himself with rather more traditional comments on [government's use of libraries](#)). This may be the final irony of the still amorphous plans for reform. There is no mention of the past. No mention of the many attempts in the past to inject new ideas, cognitive diversity and competence into the system. This failure to learn is what makes institutions full of clever people so capable of collective stupidity.

Other fields are wiser. If a business start-up came with a pitch but couldn't answer what they had learned from previous similar ventures, or current ones in the rest of the world, they'd be unlikely to get any investment. Similarly in the natural sciences it's taken for granted that you first have to understand the state of any field before you try to advance it. Yet for politics and government these rules don't seem to apply. Bluff and bluster can paper over the cracks and too much of the media who cover government have so little knowledge of history, let alone of the rest of the world, that bluffers can get away with murder.

A government with a big majority and an appetite for reform has a good opportunity to reshape a state better suited to the big tasks of the next decades, from cutting carbon to reducing inequality. Although the UK's civil service is full of clever people, there is lots that could be improved. But for now it remains unclear whether we'll instead get another burst of sound and fury that in the end signifies nothing.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of Democratic Audit. It was first published on Geoff Mulgan's [own blog](#) and is republished with permission.

About the author



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