

The requirement for civil servants to “promote” government policy has inevitably led to the perception of partisanship

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The civil service is meant to be independent, serving the government of the day as it would a government of any other political persuasion. However, according to **Dennis Grube**, events since the publication of the 1968 Fulton Committee report (which recommended a more public role for civil servants) show the difficulties in reconciling independence and neutrality with active promotion of often contentious policy decisions.*



In 1968, the Fulton Committee argued that British civil servants should take on a more public role in explaining the business of government.

‘[W]e think that administration suffers from the convention, which is still alive in many fields, that only the Minister should explain issues in public and what his department is or is not doing about them... the convention of anonymity should be modified and civil servants, as professional administrators, should be able to go further than now in explaining what their departments are doing...’

Fulton has got his wish. As Professor Rod Rhodes noted in his 2011 book [Everyday Life in British Government](#) ‘... nowadays, senior civil servants speak in public almost as often as ministers’. But this gradual emergence from anonymity has come at a cost. It has increasingly placed senior public servants in a range of Westminster jurisdictions in the position of having to defend themselves against accusations that they are becoming political mouthpieces for the government of the day. One Canadian academic, the late [Peter Aucoin](#), argued that it has in fact led to a form of ‘promiscuous partisanship’ that ‘substitutes partisan loyalty for impartial loyalty’.

So what are civil servants to do? Do they have a responsibility to be pro-actively enthusiastic in advocating for government policy, or is their responsibility to remain impartially aloof and refrain from public comment? One place

to search for an answer is the formal rules and guidelines that lay out what civil servants can say and do in public.

Formal guidelines matter. To the extent that a public servant can say 'no' to a ministerial request that they believe to be inappropriate, it is the ability to point to official guidelines that gives their case some formal authority. It is much easier to say 'no' to a minister if you can point to a specific guideline that the proposed instruction is breaching, rather than simply saying it doesn't sit well with one's own interpretation of how things should be done.

An examination of the rules in different Westminster system countries shows similarities but also key differences in what is expected of public servants. In New Zealand, the rules stop short of asking public servants to publicly demonstrate enthusiasm for government policy in a way that goes beyond the explanation of how policy works. This contrasts with both Australia and Canada where a degree of 'pro-activity' is encouraged in the way public servants engage with the media. [Under the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada](#), 'Institutions must cultivate proactive relations with the media to promote public awareness and understanding of government policies, programs, services and initiatives'. Similarly, the [Australian Guidelines on the Involvement of Public Servants in Public Information and Awareness Initiatives](#) stipulate a duty for public servants to 'effectively, professionally and pro-actively explain and implement Government policies'. The imperative of proactivity is significant because it suggests a level of enthusiasm is required in order to actively seek out opportunities to explain policies rather than waiting to be asked.

The United Kingdom approach seems to go even further. Especially in its language regarding the duties of press officers, it entrenches an expectation of full-throated support for the government of the day, regardless of how contentious a policy might be. The Civil Service [Propriety Guidance](#) refers specifically to supporting the 'ministerial line'.

It is the duty of press officers to present the policies of their department to the public through the media, and to try to ensure that they are understood. The press officer must always reflect the ministerial line clearly, even where policies are opposed by opposition parties. As part of the Government's duty to govern, it needs to explain its policies and decisions to the electorate. The Government has the right to expect the department to further its policies and objectives, regardless of how politically controversial they might be.

The incredibly fine judgement calls that this asks of civil servants are then highlighted by stating that press officers 'have a duty...to remain objective and impartial, especially when dealing with politically controversial issues'. The inherent tension between following a 'ministerial line' and remaining 'objective and impartial' is left to civil servants to manage.

This tension reaches a further pitch of difficulty in the list of 'press office dos and don'ts' that follows. Press officers are told that they should:

- Present, describe and justify the thinking behind the policies of the minister.
- Be ready to promote the policies of the department and the Government as a whole.
- Make as positive a case as the facts warrant.

The inclusion of the word 'promotion' rather than the more traditional 'explanation' is a significant raising of the bar in terms of the level of enthusiastic support being asked of civil service press officers. Even more significant perhaps is the expectation that civil servants will seek to 'justify the thinking behind the policies of the minister.' This goes far beyond explanation and even promotion because it asks civil servants to defend the thought processes of ministers – an activity that is self-evidently not an impartial one. The third point underlines this requirement by effectively institutionalising a responsibility to spin by making 'as positive a case as the facts warrant.' It's not just about

objectively presenting facts, but doing so in the most 'positive' light that the facts will allow. It would be hard to think of a clearer definition of spin in modern politics.

With civil service leaders increasingly becoming part of the public face of government, the propensity for perceptions of politicisation to grow becomes almost unavoidable. If public servants are asked to toe the 'ministerial line', provide as 'positive' a view of things as they can and 'justify' the thinking of ministers in the face of criticism, it would be incredible if perceptions of their politicisation did not follow. It places public servants in the invidious position that they can be professionally and impartially doing their job and yet become publicly tainted as partisan supporters of the government of the day. That is why the wording of codes, values and guidelines remains so important. They can provide a formal restraint that can slow down any informal push by political leaders for their public service to be more partisan in their support.

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