

32/84

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The Position of Head of the
Civil Service.

CIVIL SERVICE

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June 1987.

Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date
25.6.87.							

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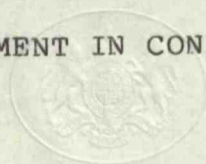
PRIME MINISTER

The Position of Head of the Home Civil Service

I am putting to you separately a submission on organisation at the centre. This minute deals with the separate but related question whether the position of Head of the Home Civil Service should continue to be combined with that of Secretary of the Cabinet.

2. The position of Head of the Home Civil Service carries with it certain duties - notably those of advising you on senior appointments, other public appointments, the award of honours, questions of machinery of government, and issues of security in the public service. There are also certain rarely activated disciplinary responsibilities in relation to senior civil servants, and the Head of the Home Civil Service now has a kind of appellate function (not so far invoked) in respect of civil servants who are faced with problems of conscience which they cannot resolve to their satisfaction within their own Departments. He is looked to by his fellow Permanent Secretaries as a source of guidance, wisdom and leadership; and (in a shadowy kind of way) by civil servants as the head of their profession.

3. By no stretch of imagination do those duties and responsibilities amount to a full-time job. The position has therefore to be combined with some other Permanent Secretary post at the centre of government. In practice this means a choice between four posts:

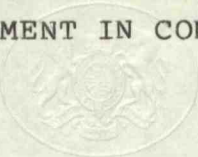


the Secretary of the Cabinet;
the Permanent Secretary, Treasury;
the Permanent Secretary, Civil Service Department (if there is one);
the Permanent Secretary of a major Department (eg the Ministry of Defence or the Home Office).

4. When you decided to wind up the Civil Service Department (CSD) in 1981, you asked me to succeed Sir Ian Bancroft as Head of the Home Civil Service (jointly with Sir Douglas Wass until his retirement from the public service) in addition to being Secretary of the Cabinet. I had no doubt then that you were right to do so; and I have not changed that view. Indeed, I am if anything surer now than I was in 1981.

5. Some external pundits - the Treasury and Civil Service Committee (TCSC), some journalistic commentators, two of your predecessors (Mr Heath and Sir James Callaghan) and the leaders of the Alliance parties, for instance - have argued that the two posts should be separated again. The TCSC want to recreate a Civil Service Department, and make its Permanent Secretary the Head of the Home Civil Service. Others believe that there is an incompatibility between the positions of Secretary of the Cabinet and that of Head of the Home Civil Service: that the Secretary of the Cabinet is too close to the Prime Minister of the day to give dispassionate advice on Civil Service management issues or in a wider sense to act as a spokesman for the interests of the Civil Service.

6. If you were to recreate the Civil Service Department, its Permanent Secretary should no doubt become the Head of the Home Civil Service. I have stated in my submission on organisation at the centre why I consider that you should not recreate a Civil Service Department. The rest of this minute is based on the assumption that you will agree with that view.



7. If you do not recreate a Civil Service Department, the only posts other than the Cabinet Secretary to which the position of Head of the Home Civil Service can be attached are the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury or a senior departmental Permanent Secretary. The critics of the present arrangement would be no better pleased with attachment to the Treasury. They would rightly believe him to be no less heavily burdened than the Cabinet Secretary, (particularly true of Sir Peter Middleton, who involves himself very closely and actively in the business of financial and economic management) and they would suspect that he would always put financial considerations first. A Permanent Secretary in charge of a major Department would have no base of wider responsibility from which to act and no natural relationship with the Prime Minister.

8. As regards "incompatibility", the Secretary of the Cabinet is, in my judgment, no less able than other Permanent Secretaries to reach dispassionate conclusions or give the Prime Minister dispassionate advice on Civil Service management issues, or less able to take proper account of the interests of the Civil Service in giving that advice. I certainly have not felt inhibited in giving you advice on management issues, when I thought it right to do so.

9. If what is required is that the Head of the Home Civil Service should in some way represent Civil Service interests by standing up and being counted, in public if necessary, against Government policies on (for example) public service pay, no Permanent Secretary, from whatever Department he came, could do that with propriety. All of them are equally inhibited by the same confidential relationship to Ministers. Any Permanent Secretary acting as Head of the Home Civil Service would have to convey his "representations" without publicity; and the Secretary of the Cabinet is no less well, if not better, placed to do so than any of his colleagues.

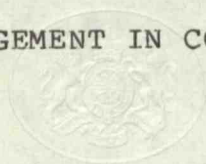


10. Sir Kenneth Stowe goes to the heart of this problem in paragraph 18 of his report, a copy of which is attached to my minute on organisation at the centre. At the top of no other organisation, public or private sector, would one suggest that top level responsibility for management should be divorced from top level responsibility for the main streams of policy formulation and advice. It palpably did not make sense (and was eventually felt by those concerned not to make sense) when we tried it, with the Permanent Secretary of the Civil Service Department as Head of the Home Civil Service. It would make no better sense now. The Secretary of the Cabinet is the Prime Minister's principal official adviser. As I have found, in a variety of different ways the Secretary of the Cabinet's responsibilities complement and cross-fertilise those of the Head of the Home Civil Service and vice versa. I am strengthened in that view by the agreement with it of both my predecessors as Secretary of the Cabinet (Lord Trend and Lord Hunt of Tanworth), of the Second Permanent Secretary in charge of the Cabinet Office (MPO) (Miss Anne Mueller) and of at least two of my successors as Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister (Sir Kenneth Stowe and Sir Clive Whitmore) - all of whom have been close enough to this particular coalface to know what is involved.

3 because I am in agreement as well

11. I therefore conclude that the present arrangement, whereby the Secretary of the Cabinet is the Head of the Home Civil Service, should continue; and my separate submission on organisation at the centre assumes and is consistent with that conclusion.

12. In certain circumstances it might be appropriate to revert to the 1981-83 arrangement, whereby the Secretary of the Cabinet and the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury were formally designated joint Heads of the Home Civil Service, though in practice the duties described in paragraph 2 above would all have to be discharged by one of them, as they were discharged by



the Secretary of the Cabinet in 1981-83. In general it is better for such positions not to be held jointly by two people; but considerations of status and seniority could on occasion (as in 1981-83) provide sufficient justification for it.

RA

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

25 June 1987



IT8.7/2-1993
2009:02

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