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## HOME NEWS

# Mrs Thatcher keeps close eye on top Civil Service postings

By David Black and Peter Hennessy

Mrs Margaret Thatcher has begun to take a close personal interest in Civil Service appointments at permanent secretary and deputy secretary level. Any ideas of a "political witch hunt" are discounted in Whitehall, but it is clear that a senior official with "notoriously Keynesian" views stands scant chance of promotion to the two highest grades in any of the economic ministries.

What has emerged strongly from the 17 appointments (four at permanent secretary and 13 at deputy secretary level) Mrs Thatcher has made since becoming Prime Minister last May is her unwillingness to rubber stamp the recommendations made by the Senior Appointments Selection Committee, which considers senior appointments under the chairmanship of Sir Ian Bancroft, head of the Home Civil Service.

Its members include Sir Robert Armstrong, Secretary of the Cabinet, Sir Douglas Wass, Permanent Secretary to the Treasury, Sir Frank Cooper, Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Defence, Sir Patrick Nairne, Permanent Secretary to the Department of Health and Social Security, Sir Peter Carey, Permanent Secretary to the Department of Industry and Sir Kenneth Berrill, Director of the Central Policy Review Staff.

Several of the committee's recommendations have been sent back by the Prime Minister with instructions for them to think again. Mrs Thatcher has developed the practice of setting the committee's recommendation beside advice received from her private network of contacts and the views of the minister in whose department the promotion is to be made.

The calibre of the candidate, his temperamental strength or "wetness" is often as much concern to the Prime Minister as his economic or political views, which can be difficult to define given that few senior civil servants are in the habit of parading their convictions.

As one Whitehall insider put it: "There has been no change in SASC procedure, but there is a much sharper questioning from the Prime Minister on whether a man is good, bad or indifferent. There is no question of a political witch hunt, but a 59-year-old Keynesian



Sir Ian Bancroft: Appointments committee chairman.

would not stand much chance of promotion."

Some heads of department have welcomed the increased prime ministerial interest in top appointments and the extra rigour it has introduced into the system. Permanent secretaries have to be ready to argue the merits of their candidates for promotion to deputy secretary posts in detail and with vigour.

In other Whitehall quarters, however, there are fears that the nineteenth-century principle, the ark of the covenant for some men, of the senior Civil Service as a permanent corps of impartial public servants free from political patronage could be endangered by the creeping introduction of the American "spoils system" whereby top civil servants in Washington change with a new administration.

As an insider said: "Making the distinction between any kind of ministerial intervention and political intervention is very difficult. The horror of the American system is deep rooted in Whitehall. For generations permanent secretaries have set their face against it."

In the past, prime ministers have always had the last word on top appointments, but the initiative for producing a shortlist of candidates, with a single preferred name, has lain very firmly with the permanent secretaries sitting on the selection committee. At the summit of Whitehall there are 54 permanent secretaries and 193 deputy secretaries.