



House of Commons
Public Administration Select
Committee

**Strategic thinking in
Government: without
National Strategy, can
viable Government
strategy emerge?**

**Government Response to the
Committee's Twenty Fourth
Report of Session 2010–12**

**Third Special Report of Session 2012–
13**

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The Public Administration Select Committee (PASC)

The Public Administration Select Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the reports of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and the Health Service Commissioner for England, which are laid before this House, and matters in connection therewith, and to consider matters relating to the quality and standards of administration provided by civil service departments, and other matters relating to the civil service.

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Third Special Report

The Public Administration Select Committee reported to the House on *Strategic thinking in Government: without National Strategy, can viable Government strategy emerge?* in its Twenty Fourth Report of Session 2010-12 published on 24 April 2012. The Government Response was received on 25 July 2012 and is published below:

Government response

The Government welcomes the Committee's second report of the session on strategic thinking. The Committee has produced another detailed report, and the Government thanks the Committee for the time and consideration that has gone into developing its recommendations. The inquiry heard a range of evidence, which raised interesting questions and discussion on how Government makes strategy, and how we ensure our strategy is both long-term, and is genuinely in the national interest.

The Government's response to the Committee's Report addresses each of the recommendations in turn. However, in reflecting on the Committee's recommendations, the Government felt there was a degree of contradiction, and misunderstanding of the principles on which Government strategy must be developed.

Principally, the Committee's report repeatedly raised two key issues – 1) is strategy being developed with enough long-term foresight? and 2) the UK should have a “National Strategy” – a form of Grand Strategy which endures changes of administration.

With regard to the first of these, the Government agrees that it is of critical importance that Ministers are fully equipped with as much information as possible on long-term implications of their decisions, and possible changes outside the Government's control which might affect strategy in the longer term. As the Cabinet Secretary said in his recent evidence to this Committee, for this reason, Jon Day, Chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee, alongside Robert Devereux, DWP Permanent Secretary, as Head of the Civil Service Policy Profession, has been asked to review horizon scanning capability in Whitehall. We await the outcome of this review, and will report back to the Committee in due course.

With regard to the second key issue raised by the Committee's report, the Government is against the idea which is alluded to throughout the report of a form of doctrine of national interest. The Committee has repeatedly asserted the importance of a “National Strategy”, which is referred to as “pre-eminently concerned with matters beyond the power of any government to control.” As indicated in the Government's written evidence, the Programme for Government represents the Government's strategic assessment of the actions needed to secure the UK's national interest, and our strategy for doing so. The Programme captures the six strategic aims articulated by the Minister for Government Policy in his evidence, and the Government believes these aims are supported across the UK political spectrum. So as far as they can be, these aims are our enduring national strategy. The Devolved Administrations also publish their own Programmes for Government, which sets out their assessment of the actions needed in devolved areas. The

idea of a fixed national strategy, driven by Civil Servants, not elected Ministers, and determining policy during administration after administration without change by democratically elected representatives is not an idea the Government supports.

The Government's response to the Committee's specific recommendations outlines in greater detail the actions the Government is taking to ensure strategy making is as informed, consultative and forward looking as possible. The Government welcomes the Committee's inquiry into this important issue, and has carefully considered its recommendations as below.

National Strategy

We urge the Government to acknowledge in their response the importance of National Strategy and why it is so vital. We can see no purpose in defining national strategic aims unless they are part of a coherent National Strategy which is regarded by the whole of Government in the same way. (Paragraph 20)

The Programme for Government sets out a coherent strategy for the Parliament, which has subsequently been detailed further in a number of separate strategic documents, for example, the fiscal deficit plan, the growth plan, the National Security Strategy and the social mobility plan. The policies which are set out in the Programme for Government set out the steps to achieve our aims, and it is supported by departmental Business Plans, which outline the more detailed actions required. Permanent Secretaries have recently responded to the Committee giving a high level outline of their key strategic aims and capabilities required to achieve those aims. Through their own published Programmes for Government, the Devolved Administrations articulate their ability to determine their strategies and priorities in devolved areas.

There is therefore a very good system in place already to define strategic and policy aims across a complex constitutional landscape, and the Government does not agree with the Committee that there is a gap which needs to be filled with another articulation of aims.

Emergent strategy...requires a coherent directing mind, individual or collective, to drive the process. The driving force of emergent strategy is what will determine whether the momentum generated results in a virtuous or vicious circle. (Paragraph 25)

In addition to the clear articulation of strategic and policy aims that the Government has in its strategic aims and Programme for Government, there is also a strong Cabinet Committee system at the heart of Government which enables adaptation of policies and approaches, ensuring Government is able to achieve its overarching aims in a rapidly changing environment.

Departments can bring complex issues to Cabinet and its Committees more than once – consulting Ministers at different points in the policy development process. Involving Committees right from the initial discussions through to final, formal sign-off ensures that Ministers can make substantive and strategic interventions to influence the final outcomes.

To support National Strategy, strategic aims should be defined which identify and reinforce national identity and national capability, which includes the identities and

capabilities of the UK's component parts, and give a clear indication of the overall direction of policy. (Paragraph 31)

As indicated in the answer to paragraph 20, the Government has strategic aims and a Programme for Government which give a very clear indication of the direction of policy.

The Government's inability to express coherent and relevant strategic aims is one of the factors leading to mistakes. (Paragraph 34)

As indicated in previous answers, the Government has in place and has expressed publically its strategic aims, and policy direction through the Programme for Government.

Public opinion/public interest

The process of emergent strategy demonstrates how public opinion, policies and strategic aims can work together in a "virtuous" or "vicious circle". This is not to abdicate the role of leadership to public opinion, which is what tends to occur without effective National Strategy. Indeed, strong leadership is all the more vital to make rational choices when reconciling public opinion and long-term goals. (Paragraph 42)

The Government agrees that public opinion has an important role to play in developing strategy. There is already a range of measures in place to ensure effective and ongoing engagement with the public in shaping policy, and this Government is going further still to gain a deeper understanding of a wider range of views in the development of policy. (See answer to the next recommendation).

Government, and Parliament as a whole, need a deeper understanding both of how the public perceives our national interests and of what sort of country the public aspires for the UK to be. This must take place on a much longer and continuous timescale than the once-every-five-years allotted to a Parliamentary term. (Paragraph 44)

Government has a strong existing system for consultation to make policy making as open and effective as possible through taking into account the views of the public and interested groups. All consultations will follow the Cabinet Office consultation principles which ensure a common approach for consulting the public exists across government.

In addition to the existing system of consultation, the Government is going further than ever before to engage the public in policymaking – including through proactively releasing much of the underlying, objective data used by the public sector to arrive at policy recommendations and in supporting policy decisions. In doing so, the Government becomes increasingly accountable to the public for the decisions that we take.

To enable more direct input from the public, the Government has appointed Jimmy Wales as an unpaid adviser on developing innovative new ways technology can be used to give the public a greater say in the policy-making process. The Government has also recently published a guide to using social media for Civil Servants, which encourages and supports the use of new vehicles of public engagement, including social media.

The recently published Civil Service Reform Plan includes actions to address how the Civil Service will improve policy making capability and how it will establish a clear model of open policy making. Opening the policy development process to competition from

external sources has the benefit of bringing in expertise on specific subject areas when it does not exist in the Civil Service. A centrally resourced match fund worth up to £1 million per year will be established to enable departments to bid for money to put this new approach into practice.

Advancing national interests

We view the role of Government in supporting strategic assets, without “picking winners” in the form of individual companies or technologies, as a vital part of our strategic framework. We therefore welcomed the Minister’s evidence on this point, commend the Government’s commitment to sustain the science budget and endorse the support for the sectors of industry in which Britain is competitive. (Paragraph 52)

The Government welcomes the Committee’s support for its commitment to the nation’s strategic assets.

National Security Strategy

We urge the government to take note of the conclusions of the report by the Joint Committee on National Security which advocated an “overarching strategy”. We share the concerns raised by our witnesses about the poor quality of National Strategy in Government. The evidence from the Minister and the Cabinet Office did not allay or address our concerns. We have little confidence that policies are informed by a clear, coherent strategic approach, informed by an assessment of the public’s aspirations and their perceptions of national interest. (Paragraph 58)

The Government has responded separately to the Joint Committee on National Security regarding security strategy. The clear and over-arching vision and strategy set out in the National Security Strategy have been at the heart of all national security decisions taken by this Government. They are shown in the major thematic priorities for delivering a safe and secure UK and for shaping a stable world. These provide the basis for the adaptable posture, underpinned by the comprehensive and cross-cutting national security tasks with more detailed planning guidelines set out in the Strategic Defence and Security Review.

The Government has made clear that it is committed to producing a new National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review every five years. This is a significant innovation and one which will allow us on a regular basis to take stock of the evolving global strategic context, from a national security perspective, and to adjust our response as necessary. Looking ahead to 2015, initial work is under way to prepare for the next Strategic Defence and Security Review. This ranges from Cabinet Office work to refresh the National Security Risk Assessment to analytical work to test plans for Future Force 2020 against possible future scenarios. The predictability of a quinquennial cycle has helped Departments to structure and focus their strategy work programmes, ensuring that strategic thinking in Government is both dynamic and current.

Promoting the capability of the Civil Service

We reiterate our recommendation for a capability review of strategic thinking capacity in Whitehall, the objective being not that Ministers should give up their strategic role

(which seems to be their fear), but that Ministers' deliberations and decisions should be better informed. (Paragraph 66)

The Civil Service Reform Plan sets out the Government's ambition to create a smaller, more strategic Civil Service which can respond and quickly adapt to changing events. As indicated in the plan, the Government believes there is a need to continue to strengthen its strategic thinking and horizon scanning activity, given the current environment of change and uncertainty. Jon Day's review of this capability will be completed by Autumn 2012.

The Civil Service Reform Plan sets out a programme of change to strengthen the Civil Service, and enable civil servants across the country to do their jobs better – supporting Ministers, providing vital services to the public, and maximising value for money for the taxpayer.

One of the major themes in the Reform Plan is building capability - by strengthening skills, deploying talent and improving organisational performance across the Civil Service. Without the right skills and capabilities the Civil Service will struggle to deliver the Government's priorities effectively. Actions under the Capabilities theme include a new five year capabilities plan, for the whole Civil Service, to identify which skills and capabilities are in deficit, and to set out how gaps will be filled. The first Capabilities Plan will be delivered by Autumn 2012.

Some skills gaps are identified in the Plan, such as leading and managing change, commercial, financial, programme and project management, digital skills, skills in managing risk and the ability to drive continuous improvement. The Capabilities Plan will take account of the new environment the Civil Service is operating in and identify what skills it needs over the next five years and how those gaps will be filled - both through external recruitment and internal development. The Capabilities Plan will be developed and delivered by the Civil Service corporately, will highlight Departmental priorities and deficits, and will enable a cost effective and strategic strengthening of Civil Service capability.

We are also concerned that the abolition of the National School for Government (NSG) will remove the last remaining elements of training in strategic thinking for the Civil Service. To ensure that this capacity is better valued and promoted in the future, we invite the Government to set out how Civil Service Learning (which takes over from the NSG) will promote the training and embedding of effective strategic thinking skills. (Paragraph 67)

A new Civil Service Learning (CSL) core curriculum and learning and development offer for all staff is currently being rolled out, and will be kept under review. CSL will provide flexible, quality and value for money training and development for all staff; work with a range of world class providers; provide the opportunity for staff to undertake learning and development alongside peers in private and other sectors; and seek to accredit the majority of its programmes to provide qualifications portable outside the Civil Service. Strategic thinking is a key skill area that features prominently in the CSL common curriculum.

Role of the Civil Service

The Government's response to this Report must address the question of whether there should be a stronger, perhaps constitutional, role for the Civil Service in promoting the long-term national interest, to help counteract the negative, short-term pressures on Ministers. (Paragraph 69)

The Government agrees that policy must be developed in a way that can be sustained throughout its intended lifespan. It should also be resilient to changing economic, environmental and social conditions.

It has long been a principle of good policymaking that all initiatives should be reviewed from time to time to check that they remain effective, efficient and can continue to deliver the intended results. This is woven through the fabric of *Managing Public Money*, which advises that best practice is to plan such reviews at launch. *Managing Public Money* was extended in April 2011 to place a specific duty on Accounting Officers (AOs) to establish that new policies are sustainable. This means, as a minimum, that the AO should be satisfied that there will be adequate provision for Government support through its intended lifetime, including any period beyond the agreed budgets. It also demands that the AO consider whether the design of the policy is likely to be resilient to foreseeable developments and shocks.

With regard to any change in role for the Civil Service, it is a principle of our democracy that the country's elected leaders take the decisions on governing the affairs of the nation. Determining "the national interest" and setting the policy direction is therefore the responsibility of Ministers, who are accountable to Parliament (and ultimately the electorate), and not Civil Servants.

Strengthening the centre and addressing the longer-term context

We reiterate our recommendation for the Cabinet Office to be given the means and influence to act as an effective headquarters of Government, on behalf of the Prime Minister and Cabinet as a whole, or to explain how else the Government will address the endemic problem of failed cross departmental working. (Paragraph 74)

In Coalition Government, there is greater need than ever for a strong direction at the centre of Government, and this is already in place. The offices of the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, the Treasury and the Cabinet Office play a crucial role in reconciling priorities and ensuring the Government's overarching aims are met.

The Cabinet Committee system provides the formal structures for cross-Government working. Where an issue touches upon the policy responsibilities of more than one department, or affects departments other than the lead department, the Cabinet Committee system provides the mechanisms for reaching cross-Government agreement. In addition, informal ministerial groups can be convened to focus on particular issues and this approach is helpful to drive progress on issues that cross departmental boundaries or are significant Cabinet priorities. For example, informal ministerial groups exist to focus on payment by results, on carers, on social mobility and on shared parenting.

Cabinet Committees, informal ministerial groups and ministerial taskforces receive secretariat support from the Cabinet Office. The National Security Council is supported in the development of major strategic reviews by the National Security Strategy Network, which comprises the heads of the Strategy Units of those Departments with defence and security interests, and which is chaired by the Cabinet Office. This Network is overseeing strategic work across individual Departments looking ahead to the 2015 National Security Strategy and the Strategic Defence and Security Review.

The Coalition also established the Efficiency and Reform Group (ERG) in May 2010, as the only part of central Government explicitly structured to work across departments on shared opportunities. ERG has many tools that drive cross departmental working, including the Management Information agenda which aims to produce comparative MI across departments, as well as various committees and working groups (Procurement Executive Board, the Efficiency and Reform Board, the Taskforce on Fraud, Error and Debt) which draw together Ministers, officials and experts to solve problems impacting multiple departments. This cross-departmental working saved Government more than £3.7 billion in its first 10 months in office.

In this way, the centre of Government acts as an ‘effective headquarters’, promoting cross departmental working and driving forward the priorities of the PM, DPM and Cabinet.

We remain concerned that, in practice, decisions are made for short-term reasons, little reflecting the interests of the nation. The clearer expression of the nation’s strategic aims would help to ensure that short-term decisions are made in the context of the long term national strategic framework. This would also improve the ability of the government to communicate a coherent narrative. (Paragraph 78)

As indicated in the Government’s response to paragraph 66, Jon Day will be conducting a review of horizon scanning, which will look at how Government can ensure that Ministers take decisions with the best possible information on the longer-term environment. The review will look at horizon scanning capability and use, and will report by Autumn this year.

In terms of an expression of the nation’s strategic aims, the Government has already articulated its aims and policy direction, as outlined in answer to paragraph 20.

There remains a critical unfulfilled role at the centre of Government in coordinating and reconciling priorities, to ensure that long-term and short-term goals are coherent across departments. Only a clear national strategic framework can place day-to-day decisions in the long-term context... (Paragraph 81)

As outlined in response to paragraph 74, the Government has a strong strategic centre, which fulfils the role to which the Committee refers, reconciling priorities and ensuring long and short-term goals are coherent wherever necessary.

Scenario Planning in managing uncertainty

We recommend a review of the use of horizon scanning and its purpose. This should be undertaken on the grounds that speculative study of alternative futures is necessary but on the understanding that strategic assessment must also consider unknown future

challenges and be prepared to respond to uncertainty. (Paragraph 90)

Please see response to paragraph 66.

We very much welcome the Minister's advocacy of analysis and policy which takes account of risks and uncertainties. However this must be reflected in the Government's emergent National Strategy and in the policy-making process, and to do so requires the Government to have the skills and capacity for such assessment and analysis across Whitehall. This underlines the need for a capability review of strategic thinking capacity. (Paragraph 91)

Please see response to paragraph 66.

There are limits on the use of scientific knowledge in strategic thinking and the management of uncertainty must be embedded into the strategy process. The Government should not be afraid to acknowledge that this uncertainty exists and to promote an open discussion about risk and uncertainty in policy-making and development of National Strategy. (Paragraph 99)

As outlined in previous answers, Jon Day will be looking at horizon scanning in government, and will report by Autumn 2012. This review will look at horizon scanning capability and use.

Unless National Strategy involves the whole of government and is embedded in thinking and operations of all departments it is not strategic. The Whitehall silos act as a roadblock to National Strategy. To break down these silos we recommend the introduction of thematic committees of Permanent Secretaries for the purpose as in the Canadian public service, to underpin the combined work of their Ministers. (Paragraph 104)

Please refer to the response to paragraph 78.

Aligning financial resources with strategic thinking

Attempts to work strategically without considering tax and spending considerations cannot be properly termed "strategic thinking." The strategic goals and ambitions of the country, informed by the public's perceptions of the national interest and by their values and aspirations, should be the basis of the Spending Review and Budget processes. It should be possible to see how key strategic aims are reflected in business plans and spending estimates for each department, and also in policy decisions. (Paragraph 110)

The Government agrees that tax and spending considerations are central to strategic thinking, and that the strategic goals and ambitions of the country should be the basis of the Spending Review and Budget processes.

Reducing the deficit is an urgent priority to secure economic stability at a time of continuing uncertainty in the global economy. The Government established the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) in 2010 to provide independent economic and fiscal forecasts, and set a forward-looking fiscal mandate which underpins fiscal decision-making.

The four-year budgets set out in Spending Review 2010 give Departments plenty of time to plan ahead. The budgeting framework allows for in-SR adjustments – such as the Autumn Statement 2011 capital package, where the Government announced that it would use additional savings over the Spending Review period to fund £6.3 billion of additional infrastructure investment to support growth and social mobility.

The Government is already starting to look beyond the current Spending Review period, in response to the OBR's forecasts that the trend level of economic output will be lower. Annex A of Budget 2012 sets out clearly the scale of the challenge. Spending restraint will continue to 2016-17 in line with total spending reductions over the Spending Review 2010 period.

Budget 2012 maintained the Government's strategy for the economy and public finances and set out the further action the Government will take in three areas: promoting a stable economy; delivering a fairer, more efficient and simpler tax system; and reforms to support growth. Chapter 1 of the Budget sets out the Government's overall strategy and the key policy announcements to support it.

Through establishment of the OBR, the Spending Review and Budget process, the UK has created a robust system for aligning financial resources with strategic thinking.

In Canada, the Fall Statement sets out a framework for departments to make spending decisions. The decisions are in line with political priorities and long-term considerations, as defined by the Cabinet and informed by independent fiscal forecasting. Specific departmental proposals are then subject to a public consultation on how spending should be allocated. We recommend that the Government, in its response to this report, considers the benefits of opening up the Budget process in this way and drawing clearer links between long-term objectives and specific budgetary measures. (Paragraph 114).

As set out in the response to paragraph 110, the UK already has a system comparable to the Canadian Fall Statement through the Spending Review process, which includes independent fiscal forecasting by the OBR and political priority-setting by Cabinet.

The Spending Review 2010 process invited members of the public to suggest areas in which savings could be made, and drew on the expertise of an Independent Challenge Group (ICG), with membership drawn from across Whitehall and industry. Spending Review 2010 took an innovative approach to allocating capital expenditure, identifying the areas likely to achieve the highest economic returns and allocating spending accordingly.

The Treasury also seeks input from a wide range of stakeholders into the annual Budget policy development process. The Chancellor formally seeks Budget proposals from Cabinet colleagues and for Budget 2011 and Budget 2012 the Government also launched an online portal for businesses, interest groups and members of the public to submit their proposals. In addition, the Treasury receives a large number of detailed written representations from representative bodies and businesses. All representations are carefully considered as part of the policy development process. Effective ongoing consultation is also a key part of the Budget policy-making process. Responses to consultations help the Treasury's policy development during Budget and throughout the year.

In light of the measures detailed above, we do not consider that adoption of the Canadian Fall Statement and public consultation on departmental spending proposals is necessary.

The role of Cabinet

Greater demand for the essential task of National Strategy should be promoted through, for example, the use of quarterly Cabinet meetings to focus solely on long-term strategic issues. Clearer National Strategy will help give direction to the whole administration. (Paragraph 118)

Cabinet meetings have focussed on specific strategic issues on a thematic basis and will no doubt continue to do so. Consideration of longer term strategic issues is therefore already a feature of Cabinet discussions.

There are other moments in the Cabinet schedule which particularly lend themselves to discussion of longer term strategic issues – for example, discussion of the legislative programme ahead of the Queen’s Speech is a natural opportunity for Governments to reflect on progress during the course of the Parliament towards meeting their strategic priorities and to consider what their future, long term strategic priorities are.

It is not only in Cabinet discussions that long-term priorities are considered at Cabinet level. There are very frequent other opportunities for such engagement, including through less formal meetings, other Cabinet level Committees and via correspondence.

Statement of National Strategy

We invite the Government to publish an annual “Statement of National Strategy” in Parliament which reflects the interests of all parts of the UK and the devolved policy agendas. (Paragraph 121)

As indicated in the response to paragraphs 20, 25, 31 and 34, the Government has already clearly articulated its strategic aims and how it intends to achieve these aims through the Programme for Government. The Devolved Administrations have also articulated their strategic aims in devolved areas, in their own Programmes for Government. Parliament is able to hold Ministers to account on these aims or policies through a whole range of measures as part of the Parliamentary process. The Government does not therefore consider it necessary to create another document to articulate the already clearly outlined aims it is pursuing.

Role of the National Security Council

The work of the National Security Council (NSC) demonstrates unfulfilled potential for driving strategic thinking across Government. It needs to avail itself of greater capacity of the analysis and assessment of departmental papers in the light of its own independent research, so NSC members are better able to challenge orthodoxy and think outside their departmental brief. We also recommend again that the NSC and its secretariat should take a wider view than just the security issues facing this country and should oversee National Strategy: the UK’s long term security is dependent on far more than simply military and terror issues. (Paragraph 125)

The concept of security in the National Security Strategy is very clearly both risk-based and broad in scope: it embraces energy security, cyber security, civil emergencies, building stability overseas, and space as well as conventional military / terrorism-related threats. In other words, it is about a wide range of risks to our society and way of life. Judgements on risk, and the part played by economic factors in them, also underpin to an extent the emphasis of the National Security Strategy on the mutually reinforcing relationships between economic security and national security, and the need for strong alliances and partnerships as a fundamental element in our approach to defence and security. Departments and sources of external expertise frequently feed material into National Security Council discussions. Government's response to the recent JCNSS report reflects this point. Issues which are not security related are addressed in other Cabinet Committees and related fora, so the Government would not support duplication through the National Security Council.