The impact and effectiveness of ministerial reshuffles


Volume I: Report, together with formal minutes and oral evidence

Written evidence is contained in Volume II, available on the Committee website at www.parliament.uk/pcrc

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The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Joanna Dodd (Clerk), Adele Brown (Senior Committee Specialist), Emma Fitzsimons (Legal Specialist), Tony Catinella (Senior Committee Assistant), Jim Lawford, (Committee Assistant) and Jessica Bridges-Palmer (Media Officer).

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, House of Commons, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA. The telephone number for general enquiries is 020 7219 6287; the Committee’s email address is pcc@parliament.uk.
# Contents

## Report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 Introduction</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background to the inquiry</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background on reshuffles</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons for reshuffles</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2 Impact of reshuffles</strong></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy making and delivery</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness of Government and Parliament</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speculation</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusting to a new brief</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with the civil service</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International relationship-building</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long is long enough?</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3 Improvements to the reshuffle process</strong></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handovers</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback and appraisal</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The role of Secretaries of State in selecting a ministerial team</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Ministers</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliament’s role in reshuffles</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusions and recommendations</strong></td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Annex A: Terms of reference</strong></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal Minutes</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witnesses</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of written evidence</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some reshuffling of Ministers is inevitable: there will always be occasional resignations, illnesses and even deaths. However, reshuffles have become a habit in UK politics: we have a reshuffle culture. There should always be a good reason for a reshuffle. No reshuffle should ever take place simply because it is assumed that there should be one. We commend the current Prime Minister for the comparative restraint he has shown in reshuffling his Ministers and urge his successors to follow his example in this regard.

Reshuffles have a negative impact on the effectiveness of the Government. Even the most able Minister needs time to become familiar with a new brief. Whenever someone is moved to a new post, there will be an inevitable delay before they are fully effective. This is particularly the case when the new Minister has no previous experience of the subject area. There will be occasions when a fresh perspective is useful, but we believe that most major Government policies will benefit from having continuity of Ministers within the responsible Department. This also enables Parliament more effectively to perform its function of holding the Government to account: it is difficult to hold Ministers to account for policies they oversaw if they have moved to new posts, and it also takes time before a new Minister is in a position to respond to detailed scrutiny from parliamentarians.

Ministers should be left in post long enough to make a difference. Secretaries of State should be left in post for the length of the Parliament and more junior Ministers for a minimum of two years. This will not always be possible, but we would like it to become the norm.

In addition to our main recommendation that there should be fewer reshuffles, we draw attention to several areas where we think there could be improvements to the reshuffle process. In particular, we recommend that there should be a specific Minister within the Cabinet Office who is given responsibility for ministerial development. This Minister should oversee improved training and appraisal for Ministers, as well as regularly reviewing the human resources the Government has at its disposal, and should become a source of advice to a Prime Minister who is contemplating a reshuffle.

In this report, conclusions are printed in bold, and recommendations (calling for action) in bold italics.
1 Introduction

Background to the inquiry

1. Reshuffles are accepted as part of political life in the United Kingdom, but in other contexts, and particularly in the world of business, regularly moving groups of key people to new posts would be regarded as extraordinary. Steve Richards, chief political commentator at *The Independent*, stated: “I cannot think of any other area where you would have a Transport Secretary every six months. Virgin Trains does not get rid of its chief executive every six months, for instance.” There were six Secretaries of State for Transport between 2001 and 2010, and there have already been three Secretaries of State for Transport since the 2010 general election. Of the nine post-holders over the past 12 years, four were in post for less than a year. The Rt Hon Charles Clarke told us that when Tony Blair was Prime Minister he “reshuffled Transport almost incessantly”. By contrast, between 2001 and 2013, there have been only two chief executives of Virgin Trains.

2. The Department for Transport has seen a particularly high number of ministerial moves, but other Departments have also been subject to frequent changes. In May 2011, the Institute for Government published a report that noted that, while some posts, such as Chancellor of the Exchequer and Foreign Secretary, tended to be relatively stable, “during the 13 Labour years in office, there were six defence secretaries, eight trade and industry secretaries, eight business secretaries, and six home secretaries (including three in four years).” A briefing paper by the think-tank Demos, published in June 2009, stated that since 2005 the average tenure for a Minister had been 1.3 years.

3. Reshuffles are not uncommon in political life in other European and Commonwealth countries, but in some of these countries they take place significantly less frequently than in the UK. For example, Germany had only six mid-term reshuffles between 1949 and 2006. The Rt Hon Peter Riddell, Director of the Institute for Government, told us that Germany had had 15 business Ministers since 1949, whereas the UK had had 35. He stated that when the Institute for Government wanted to discuss reshuffles with a visiting delegation from Germany, they found it “very difficult to get the concept over to them” because the German delegation simply “did not understand what on earth we were talking about.”

4. Comparisons such as those outlined above encouraged us to explore why reshuffles are used in UK politics, their impact and whether there are any ways in which the reshuffle process could be improved. We launched our inquiry on 18 May 2012 with a call for written evidence. The inquiry’s terms of reference can be found in Annex A. We held

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1 Q 322
2 Q 184
3 Chris Green, 1999 to 2004, and Tony Collins, 2004 to present
5 Demos, “The ‘culture of churn’ for UK Ministers and the price we all pay”, 12 June 2009
6 “The Challenge of Being a Minister”, p 42
7 Q 8
8 Q 7
seven oral evidence sessions with witnesses including former Secretaries of State and former and current senior civil servants. We also received written evidence from a former Prime Minister: the Rt Hon Sir John Major. We are grateful to all who contributed to the inquiry.

**Background on reshuffles**

5. The power to appoint and dismiss Ministers, and to move existing Ministers to new posts, is a prerogative power exercised by the Prime Minister. We are exploring prerogative powers as part of our inquiry into the role and powers of the Prime Minister.

6. There are some legislative constraints on the appointment of Ministers. The maximum numbers of paid ministerial posts is laid down in schedule 1 of the Ministerial and Other Salaries Act 1975 and is 109. In addition, section 2 of the House of Commons Disqualification Act 1975 provides that not more than 95 holders of ministerial posts may sit and vote in the House of Commons at any one time. In this case, the limit applies regardless of whether the posts are paid. There is also a statutory definition, under section 8 of the Ministers of the Crown Act 1975, of what constitutes a Minister: “the holder of an office in Her Majesty’s Government in the United Kingdom, [including] the Treasury, the Board of Trade and the Defence Council.”

7. There are no restrictions on how often ministerial reshuffles can take place. Nor is there established guidance on how and when they are best undertaken. *The Cabinet Manual* is largely silent on the subject of reshuffles, stating only:

> The Prime Minister has certain prerogatives, for example recommending the appointment of ministers and determining the membership of Cabinet and Cabinet committees. However, in some circumstances the Prime Minister may agree to consult others before exercising those prerogatives. The *Ministerial Code* states: ‘the Prime Minister is responsible for the overall organisation of the Executive and the allocation of functions between Ministers in charge of departments.’

8. Reshuffles under the Coalition Government are constrained by the terms of *The Coalition Agreement for Stability and Reform*, published in May 2010. Under this arrangement, the Prime Minister agreed that a number of prerogative powers, including the appointment of Ministers, would be exercised only after consultation with the Deputy Prime Minister. The Institute for Government commented on the “new rules of the game” for coalition reshuffles, as set out in the Coalition Agreement, in its paper “Shuffling the pack”:

> First, the balance of ministers between[the] two parties must remain ‘approximately in proportion to the size of the two parliamentary parties.’ Second, it [the Coalition Agreement] is explicit that it is the DPM who nominates Lib Dem ministers. Third, the DPM is entitled to ‘full consultation’ over any dismissals of Lib Dem ministers.

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and any further appointments to cabinet. And fourth, any reallocation of portfolios between the two parties must be agreed between the two party leaders.10

9. Coalition government undoubtedly makes reshuffles more difficult, which is one reason why Germany has far fewer of them than the UK. Since the 2010 general election, there has been only one major reshuffle in the UK, which took place on 4 September 2012, approximately mid-way through the Parliament. Seven members of the Cabinet were moved to new Cabinet posts and there were five new appointments to the Cabinet. There were also a series of moves among non-Cabinet Ministers.

10. The fact that there has been only one major reshuffle since 2010 can be attributed not only to the constraints of coalition government, but to the Prime Minister’s own determination to keep the number of reshuffles to a minimum. He has made his views on the subject clear. In an interview with The Sun, at the end of his first year as Prime Minister, David Cameron commented: “I’m not a great believer in endlessly moving people between different jobs...We had 12 energy ministers in nine years. And the tourism minister changed more often than people got off planes at Heathrow. It was hopeless. I think you’ve got to try to appoint good people and keep them”.11

Reasons for reshuffles

11. Reshuffles take place for a variety of reasons, some of which are inescapable. Sir Jeremy Heywood, the Cabinet Secretary, commented: “some reshuffles are prompted by an accident or an emergency or a sudden resignation, so to some extent it is inevitable.”12 Reshuffles prompted by death, illness and resignations will always be part of political life.

12. It might be thought that one other major reason for reshuffles would be the desire to change Government policy, but our witnesses were unanimous in believing that reshuffles were rarely motivated by policy changes. Lord Turnbull, the former Cabinet Secretary, commented:

In the last reshuffle, the Prime Minister, aided by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, was trying to make a statement about green policy and renewables coming a bit lower down in the priority and more about the development of infrastructure and more about a more business-friendly energy policy. But in general I do not think policy is the main thing...13

Akash Paun, Senior Researcher at the Institute for Government, commented: “the reshuffles that actually make a big difference to policy direction are very much the exception.”14

13. Far more significant, in terms of the reasons for reshuffles, is what Peter Riddell broadly termed “party management”.15 The Rt Hon Ben Bradshaw MP commented:

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11 “PM’s 1yr vow: I’ll get Britain back on track”, The Sun, 10 May 2011
12 Q 235
13 Q 126
14 Q 12
The main reason for reshuffles is to allow Prime Ministers to try to ensure they have the best possible team of ministers. Ideally, they should be about rewarding ability and performance. In reality other factors come into play such as the need to balance governments politically and give ‘big beasts’ jobs. Reshuffles allow Prime Ministers to: test and bring on young talent by giving them experience in different departments; resolve problems when ministers get into difficulty and are forced to resign or are sacked; refresh governments or departments that appear tired or underperforming; reward loyalty.\(^\text{16}\)

He also noted that the reasons for reshuffles can differ according to the lifecycle of a Government, commenting that in the early years of a Government, reshuffles could take place because “people who perform well as shadow ministers in opposition may not necessarily do so in government so it may take several reshuffles once in government for a PM to have the most effective team and the team he or she really wants.”\(^\text{17}\)

14. The former Prime Minister, Sir John Major, told us:

> There were a number of objectives in any reshuffle. The first was to promote able Members to replace Ministers who were under performing. I was also keen to bring a regional and political balance to the Government, in order to fairly reflect opinion within Parliament. A third objective was to bring on young Members, and give them a breadth of experience, if I judged that they were likely to make it to the Cabinet.\(^\text{18}\)

He added that, as he looked back, he realised “this may not always have been the right decision in the interests of good management of a portfolio and the best service by Ministers to the public.” He commented: “Few Members reach Cabinet, and I should, perhaps, have given greater priority to matching abilities and portfolios.”\(^\text{19}\)

15. We were told that another significant reason why reshuffles take place is habit. Lord Turnbull, talking about the most recent reshuffle, told us:

> It is just assumed that after about two years there should be one. When President Obama appointed his team when he was first elected, he appointed Hilary Clinton as the Secretary of State. I do not think there was any assumption that Hilary Clinton would do anything other than serve the term, and Tim Geithner as Treasury Secretary likewise, whereas here it is just assumed that governments need to be refreshed.\(^\text{20}\)

16. As part of our inquiry, we explored the extent to which the media encourage the expectation that there will be regular reshuffles. Professor Keith Dowding, of the Australian National University, Canberra, commented: “It has been suggested that media speculation has caused the timing of if not a reshuffle itself. We might bemoan this aspect

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\(^\text{15}\) Q 12  
\(^\text{16}\) Ev w4  
\(^\text{17}\) Ev w5  
\(^\text{18}\) Ev w12  
\(^\text{19}\) Ev w12  
\(^\text{20}\) Q 127
but there is no clear way of overcoming such pressures.”

Peter Riddell told us the media were “part of it in the sense of being part of the gossip mechanism”, but stated that he did not think that Prime Ministers were particularly influenced by media speculation.

Sir Bob Kerslake, the Head of the Civil Service, also stated that he did not think that reshuffles were driven by the media. We received no evidence to suggest that media speculation about reshuffles had an impact on who was moved where. Media speculation clearly does play some part in creating an expectation that there will be a reshuffle, although this speculation is both a cause and a symptom of the wider acceptance that reshuffles are a regular part of political life in the UK. We consider the impact of media speculation about reshuffles on Ministers themselves in chapter 2.

17. Sir John Major told us: “Reshuffles should be driven by necessity, not by public or political pressure.” We agree. Some reshuffling of Ministers is inevitable: there will always be occasional resignations, illnesses and even deaths. However, there should always be a good reason for a reshuffle. No reshuffle should ever take place simply because it is assumed that there should be one. Reshuffles have become a habit in the UK and altering this will require a change of mindset.

18. We commend the Prime Minister for the restraint he has shown in reshuffling Ministers and urge his successors to follow his example in this regard.
2 Impact of reshuffles

19. While accepting that some reshuffling of Ministers is inevitable, we wanted to explore the impact that reshuffles have on the overall effectiveness of the Government.

Policy making and delivery

20. As we discussed in the previous chapter, reshuffles rarely take place because a Prime Minister wishes to change Government policy. However, this does not mean reshuffles have no impact on policy making and delivery. Lord Turnbull, a former Cabinet Secretary, commented that frequent moves “cannot be good for continuity of policy and making sure that, firstly, the policy is thought through and, secondly, there is a consistent delivery.”

21. Sir Bob Kerslake, the Head of the Civil Service, suggested that the publication of a programme for Government had helped to ensure continuity:

I think one of the interesting developments with this Government is having the Programme for Government. The departmental plans to deliver the Programme for Government does give you a very clear structure for the tasks of the Department and the priorities, which forms part of the context of their role for any new Minister coming in.

However, he also stated: “The real challenge you have if you have too regular movement is trying to balance the short-term desire to make an impact with some issues that inevitably are long-game issues that require sustained focus”. He also commented that implementation “will vary enormously with Ministers”.

22. When we asked Sir Jeremy Heywood, the Cabinet Secretary, what impact reshuffles had on policy making and delivery, he replied: “I don’t think they generally make that much difference because usually the policy of the Government is pretty settled.” He added: “It can make a difference to the way policy is presented and...at the margin it can change particular priorities...I would say the role of reshuffles on the drift of policy can be exaggerated.”

23. There will be times when a fresh perspective is useful, but we believe that most major Government policies will benefit from having continuity of Ministers within the responsible Department.
Effectiveness of Government and Parliament

Speculation

24. In the previous chapter, we discussed whether media speculation about reshuffles creates an expectation that a reshuffle will take place and concluded that such speculation is both a cause and a symptom of the UK’s reshuffle culture. As part of our inquiry, we also explored the extent to which the very expectation that there will be a reshuffle, and in particular media speculation about reshuffles, has an impact on the effectiveness of the Government. Chris Mullin, who held three different ministerial posts in Tony Blair’s Government, commented:

Reshuffles can be massively destabilising. They trigger weeks, sometimes months of speculation, thereby affording endless opportunities for media mischief. They undermine the confidence of those whose fate is the subject of such speculation. They also undermine official confidence in those individuals, inducing paralysis in parts of the Government.31

Peter Riddell, Director of the Institute for Government, described this as a “planning blight problem.”32

25. Speculation about reshuffles is in itself distracting. Stability of tenure is not necessarily a guarantee of effective working, but there is a danger that weeks, if not months, of uncertainty, fuelled by the public airing of views about who might be moved where, is damaging, both to the individuals who are directly the subject of such speculation and to the overall effectiveness of the Government. For this reason alone, it would be beneficial to end the reshuffle culture.

Adjusting to a new brief

26. The reshuffle itself has a further destabilising effect in that, almost inevitably, a Minister moving to a new Department is likely to require time to become familiar with his or her brief, which in turn has an impact on the effectiveness of the Government.

27. The time Ministers take to adjust to a new Department depends partly on their previous familiarity with the subject area. The Rt Hon Lord Reid, who held nine different ministerial posts over 10 years, told us: “there are some positions that I took that I felt reasonably well qualified to move into and be effective from a very early stage.”33 He stated:

For my first post, as Armed Forces Minister, I had spent seven years reading military history, meeting the troops, discussing with people...In other cases, such as transport, I had no particular knowledge, no particular interest...The first day I was at Transport, I remember, they were doing the roads review in Parliament, which consisted of me at the despatch box and Glenda Jackson, the Under-Secretary,

31 Ev w7
32 Q 39
33 Q 214
tearing pages out of a large briefing book to put in front of me when somebody asked me, ‘What were the latest plans for the A373 going through somewhere or other?’

28. Even the most able Minister needs time to become familiar with a new brief. Whenever someone is moved to a new post, there will be an inevitable delay before they are fully effective. This is particularly the case when the new Minister has no previous experience of the subject area.

Relationships with the civil service

29. We also explored the impact reshuffles have on the relationship between Ministers and civil servants. Steve Richards, chief political commentator at *The Independent,* stated:

> I think that the power of relative job security, and the fact that they [civil servants] are there for so long, gives them incredible authority over a Minister who is permanently worried they will not be there for very long and might actually not be. I think that is an imbalance.

Lord Reid’s view was similar, although more qualified: “I think that there are exceptions, but all other things being equal, what you are saying about your [a Minister’s] strength vis-à-vis the civil service being weakened if there are continual changes must be right because there is not that continuity.”

30. However, while the frequent movement of Ministers and the relative stability of senior civil servants may lead at times to an imbalance in the relationship between the two, it should not be assumed that civil servants welcome this imbalance any more than Ministers. Sir Bob Kerslake emphasised that for two reasons—“the disruptive effect and the difficulty of balancing the long-range issues and the short-term impact issues”—it was “absolutely in the interests of senior civil servants to see continuity.”

31. It must also be borne in mind that the permanent civil service is itself less permanent than it once was, and that stability within Departments is related not just to the movement of Ministers but to the movement of civil servants themselves. An Institute for Government blog, “Permanent Secretaries?” noted that since the 2010 general election, 18 out of 20 Departments have experienced at least one change of Permanent Secretary, with some Permanent Secretaries moving Department and others leaving the civil service. The Ministry of Defence, the Cabinet Office and the Department for Transport have each had four Permanent Secretaries (including acting heads of department) since the election. The blog noted that the departmental average is two Permanent Secretaries since May 2010 and commented: “This compares with the same average of two permanent secretaries per department over the entire period from 1997 to May 2010.” Peter Riddell told us: “the turnover of permanent secretaries since the election has been far greater than that of

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34 Q 214
35 Q 339
36 Q 224
37 Q 66
38 Katie Dash, “Permanent Secretaries?”, Institute for Government blog, 20 November 2012
Secretaries of State”.39 When we put this point to Sir Bob Kerslake he stated that he did not see the recent level of turnover among Permanent Secretaries “as either desirable or the norm”. He commented that he wanted to aim for “more stability in the Permanent Secretary leadership at the top.”40

32. Continuity in the senior civil service is an important factor in departmental stability, along with continuity of Ministers. We are concerned by the recent high turnover among Permanent Secretaries. We were pleased to hear that the Head of the Civil Service aims to achieve more stability in future.

International relationship-building

33. Moving Ministers to new posts also has an impact on the relationships they are able to build up with their counterparts and officials in other countries. Lord Turnbull, a former Cabinet Secretary, commented that “a lot of businesses are conducted in international fora” and stated: “If you are constantly changing, you never get the more influential posts.” He told us:

If you go to, for example, the Agriculture Council, you will find yourself dealing with an Agriculture Minister from the Netherlands who has probably been there for years and it makes a difference in where you are in this pecking order.41

Chris Mullin commented:

from memory, I was the sixth Africa Minister (there were nine in the 13 years of the previous administration). There were 13 Europe Ministers...In briefs such as these, which involve diplomacy, establishing a good relationship with one’s opposite numbers—who are often sophisticated people with long experience of their brief—is an important part of the job.42

He described how, after a couple of years as Africa Minister, he reached a point at which he felt that he was known to the relevant people:

If I hovered in the atrium of the African Union Conference at Addis Ababa or somewhere, Heads of State would come up and initiate conversations with me without my officials having to go and search them out. At that point you are useful. If you ring them up then, they know who they are talking to. But at exactly that point the man in No. 10 raised his little finger by that much and you are gone.43

34. Continuity of Ministers is particularly important in Departments which conduct a significant proportion of their business in an international arena. It takes time to build relationships with colleagues in other countries and Ministers who are not given enough time to do so cannot function to the best of their ability.
Accountability

35. As part of our inquiry we explored whether frequent changes of Minister make it more difficult for Parliament to hold the Government to account. Chris Mullin commented:

As regards parliament holding a minister to account, this is obviously difficult if the minister is changing all the time. To be sure, a bright new minister—lawyers are particularly good at this—can learn the answers off pat and may be able to busk his or her way through the supplementaries, but it is too much to expect any depth let alone sufficient understanding to make any serious impact on the conduct of government.44

Joan Walley MP, Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, stated:

As a general proposition, it must be right that administrative efficiency would be enhanced by ensuring that ministers serve a sufficient time in post to allow Parliament and its select committees to be able to hold them accountable for the policies they introduce.45

36. Reshuffles have an impact not only on the effectiveness of the Government, but on Parliament’s ability to hold the Government to account. It will take time before a new Minister can respond to detailed questions about policy, whether in the Chamber, or in Select Committee evidence sessions. It is also more difficult for Parliament to hold the responsible Minister to account for policy failures when he or she has subsequently moved to a new post. Likewise, it is difficult to hold an incoming Minister to account for decisions made by his or her predecessors.

How long is long enough?

37. Our witnesses were unanimous in agreeing that Ministers should be left in post long enough to make a difference. Sir John Major stated: “Able Ministers should be left in place for a sufficient length of time to know the brief in every detail, and be in a position to offer policy suggestions for the future based on experience”.46 Lord O’Donnell, a former Cabinet Secretary, commented: “whatever the form of the Government—single party or coalition—keeping Ministers in post for a longer time really works for the effectiveness of government.”47

38. There is clearly no definitive answer to the question of how long is “long enough”, because it will vary for individual Ministers. We wanted, however, to get our witnesses’ views about what length of tenure would enable Secretaries of State and more junior Ministers to function most effectively.

39. Opinions varied. Charles Clarke, who was moved between five different ministerial posts over a period of eight years, gave the shortest estimate. He commented:

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44 Ev w8
45 Ev w1
46 Ev w12
47 Q 383
My fundamental view is that, for the major Departments of State, the big complicated ones, a year is an absolute minimum to get up to speed with what is going on and to grasp the issues. That applies to about five or six of the major Government Departments. It does not apply to all the Cabinet posts; some are less pressing.48

40. There was some consensus around the two year mark, particularly for junior Ministers. Chris Mullin stated: “No minister can hope to achieve very much in a tenure of less than two years.”49 Peter Riddell commented: “any period short of two years, certainly for a junior Minister, is undesirable.”50 Lord O’Donnell told us: “You would want your junior ministers to be there at least two years, I would say, and I would like to see Secretaries to stay for a Parliament, if at all possible, but they are aspirations, really.”51 Lord Turnbull thought that “someone who is moved into a major post” should be given “the run of most of that Parliament” and moved only if there was an “overwhelming need” to do so.52 Steve Richards stated that Cabinet Ministers should remain in position for a full term and commented: “if you look at the areas where reform has taken place, and to some extent endured, it is when they were there for four years.”53 When we asked him for examples, he cited David Blunkett, who was Secretary of State for Education and Employment from January 1997 to June 2001, and Gordon Brown, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer from May 1997 to June 2007. He commented: “Blunkett went in with a set of reforms that he wanted to introduce and, on the whole, he introduced them...and whether you agree or disagree with Gordon Brown, he introduced some substantial reform at the Treasury.”54

41. There should be an expectation that Secretaries of State are left in post for the length of a Parliament and more junior Ministers for a minimum of two years. This will not always be possible in practice, but it should become the norm. Taken together with the advent of fixed-term Parliaments, this should allow Ministers to plan their work with a degree of certainty that they will still be in office to see it through.

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48 Q 181
49 Ev w7
50 Q 10
51 Q 393
52 Q 138
53 Q 340
54 Q 341
3 Improvements to the reshuffle process

42. Aside from our main recommendation that there should be fewer reshuffles, we want to draw attention to several areas where we think that there could be improvements to the reshuffle process. We make these further recommendations in the consciousness that it is important that the Prime Minister retains the untrammelled power to move Ministers as he or she thinks fit, and that, at their heart, reshuffles are political events. Jonathan Powell, in his book *The New Machiavelli*, wrote: "The process of ministerial appointment ought, of course, to be more rational, but it is politics and it will never be smooth."55 We believe, however, that there are some respects in which the reshuffle process could be made more rational, without impinging on the Prime Minister’s power to choose the Government he or she thinks will be most effective.

43. We accept also the point made to us by Lord O’Donnell, a former Cabinet Secretary, who commented of improvements to the reshuffle process: “I do not think, in a sense, any Prime Minister has ever been anti them; it is just a question of it is not their first priority.”56 It is in the interests of Prime Ministers to have well performing Ministers and a reshuffle process that runs as smoothly as possible, but, understandably, such considerations are always likely to come second to more pressing prime ministerial concerns. Lord Turnbull, also a former Cabinet Secretary, suggested “setting aside someone, one of the Ministers in the Cabinet Office...who is looking at the development of the Government and its talents.”57 *Not all of us were convinced that there was a need for a specific Minister in the Cabinet Office to be responsible for ministerial development. Some thought, based on their own experience, that this was a task for the Prime Minister and the departmental Secretaries of State sitting in Cabinet. However, the majority of us believe that there should be a specific Minister in the Cabinet Office—who themselves attends Cabinet—who is responsible for ministerial development. Ideally, this should be an experienced Minister, who is in a position to oversee the development of his or her colleagues without being open to the charge of self-interest. We set out below some of the tasks we believe this Minister should perform. The recommendations that follow come with the qualification that, as stated above, we are not unanimous in our view that there is a need for a Minister in the Cabinet Office to perform these tasks.*

Handovers

44. Writing 20 years ago, the academics R. K. Alderman and Neil Carter, noted the fact that there was “perhaps surprisingly, no formal process by which ministers ‘hand over’ to their successors.”58 This is still the case today. The civil service conducts its own handover, but there is no formalised process by which the outgoing Minister hands over directly to

56 Q 363
57 Q 133
the incoming Minister. Chris Mullin told us that he had handed over directly to his successors, but that this was unusual. Charles Clarke stated:

> there might be a case for institutionalising more of a dialogue between the incoming Minister and the outgoing Minister to see what was on the political agenda in that area. I think that happens fairly little...and I think that would be a good thing to do but is probably quite difficult for various sensitivities and so on.

45. As Charles Clarke’s remarks suggest, ministerial handovers are not straightforward: a Minister who has been sacked is unlikely to be in the right frame of mind to brief his or her successor, and a Minister who has moved to another position is likely to be occupied in getting to grips with the demands of that new post. However, comments made by Ben Bradshaw emphasise the impact of a lack of handover between Ministers:

> Ministers who’ve been moved out into new jobs are often so busy getting to grips with those that they have little chance to brief their successors properly and important political and institutional knowledge can be lost. This is also the time when the civil service often sees an opportunity to try to delay or even thwart policies they don’t like or try to persuade an incoming minister to reach a different conclusion from their predecessor.

We have no more than anecdotal evidence to support the claim that some civil servants use the opportunity of a change of Minister to promote or suppress certain policies. However, there will be aspects of ministerial life—for example, how to handle a particular colleague, or tackle a particular recurring problem—that can form part of an exchange between Ministers, but would not be appropriate, or possible, in an exchange between a Minister and his or her civil servants.

46. **Outgoing Ministers should hand over directly to their successors. This handover could take the form of a written note, an informal meeting, or both. There are times when this will not be possible, or when it will be awkward, but relying exclusively on the civil service to conduct handovers should be the exception rather than the rule.**

**Training**

47. Several of our witnesses called for better training for prospective, new and existing Ministers. Sir Jeremy Heywood, the Cabinet Secretary, commented that “the process by which new Ministers get training and induction could probably be improved.” He noted that some work in this regard was already being carried out by the Institute for Government and said that he gathered “that process is going well.” He stated:

> There is still a slight stigma attaching to the whole notion of ministerial training. I think that is going away over time, but there is nothing at all difficult about people
wanting to learn a little bit from their peer group and from former Ministers, for example about how to be good Ministers. We could do a better job of that.  

Sir Jeremy also thought that training for Members of Parliament who might later become Ministers was “a very good idea.” Lord O’Donnell also suggested “pre-training”, and particularly “training of MPs in opposition so that they can be ready to come in”, as well as “training for ministers while in post.” Sir Bob Kerslake, the Head of the Civil Service, emphasised that “the initial drive” for training “must come from the Minister.”

48. The Minister with responsibility for ministerial development should oversee training. He or she should work with the Institute for Government to devise a programme of training that should be compulsory for all new Ministers. The training should be focused on the experience of former Ministers and should build on the work already being done by the Institute for Government. The Minister should also work with the Institute for Government to provide continuous professional development sessions for experienced Ministers, and basic ministerial training for shadow Ministers in the 12 months before the expected date of a general election.

Feedback and appraisal

49. In most jobs, people’s career prospects, and specifically their chances of promotion or dismissal, are based partly on regular, objective assessments of their skills and how well they are performing in their current role. People are given feedback on their performance and the opportunity to develop. Several of our witnesses emphasised that this was rarely the case for Ministers. The Rt Hon Lord Boateng stated: “The decisions made are necessarily... highly subjective, not always entirely capable of being justified by reasoned explanation and in some instances are quite inexplicable.” Ben Bradshaw MP commented:

Ideally there should be much more transparent reshuffle criteria than the PM’s or whips’ whim. Promotion appears too often related to political networks or whoever shouts or stamps their feet loudest rather than objective performance by a minister...Reshuffles themselves are often chaotic with little or no constructive feedback to a minister as to why they haven’t been promoted, or worse still, sacked.

50. Peter Riddell suggested that one way in which reshuffles could be made more rational would be to institute a “rounded assessment” of the performance of Ministers. A recent report by the think-tank Reform also recommended annual performance reviews for Ministers.

62 Q 236
63 Q 272
64 Q 361
65 Q 104
66 Ev w4
67 Ev w5
68 Q 26
69 Reform, Whitehall reform: the view from the inside, February 2013, p 5
51. Sir Jeremy Heywood, the Cabinet Secretary, commented: “There is not an appraisal system for Ministers at the moment. I doubt we will ever see one introduced, because it is not clear who would do the appraising.”70 Lord O’Donnell drew attention to another difficulty. He commented: “I had a fairly elaborate appraisal system for myself to get 360 degree feedback. That is very normal, yes, but in a political world people would find it very hard. They would be very nervous about having appraisals out there in public.”71 We accept that these are real difficulties, but we do not believe they are insurmountable.

52. A more systematic approach to feedback on the skills and performance of Ministers would be useful not just for the Ministers themselves, but for the Prime Minister in deciding which Ministers to move where. Sir John Major told us: “It is desirable to match life experience and skills to portfolios to a much greater extent than has happened thus far.”72 The Prime Minister already has a number of sources of advice on the skills and performance of Ministers. Professor Dowding commented: “The prime minister decides as advised by senior civil servants, politicians and her private office.”73 Lord Turnbull told us that a Prime Minister’s principal sources of advice were “the inner group of the Chief Whip and the Leader of the House.”74 He described the Whips Office as “the nearest Government gets to an HR department”, but commented that it was “not a very close analogy at all.”75 There is clearly scope for more advice, from a source that has been specifically charged with overseeing ministerial skills and performance. Lord O’Donnell stated: “If you had more feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of different individuals, you might get the right pegs in the right holes.”76 A more systematic approach to feedback and appraisal would not remove the element of seeming arbitrariness from reshuffles altogether—reshuffles are about politics, not just about performance—but it would ensure that this element was balanced with a stronger performance-based element.

53. Every Minister should have a yearly appraisal conversation to provide feedback on their performance. Not all of us were convinced that this was appropriate, but, again, it was the view of the majority that such feedback would be useful. The Minister with responsibility for ministerial development, using feedback from the relevant Secretary of State, should conduct these conversations. The Prime Minister should seek feedback from the Minister with responsibility for ministerial development when contemplating a reshuffle.

Planning

54. Lord Turnbull and Lord O’Donnell both emphasised the scope to improve the planning process for reshuffles. Lord Turnbull compared what happened when people are moved in a managerial organisation with what happens when Ministers are reshuffled. In the case of a managerial organisation, he commented:

70 Q 252
71 Q 367
72 Ew12
73 Ew6
74 Q 124
75 Q 131
76 Q 371
People retire, people are promoted, people are moved sideways, but you ask yourself the question: where do we move this person next to broaden their experience, to develop their career? You also ask the question—does it make sense to move this person now or would they benefit from staying and would the organisation benefit from their staying? All the time, this is devoted to two things; one is developing the professional skills of the people who work for you and the other is developing the capacity of the organisation to succeed in whatever it is doing.77

Politics, he commented, “is a completely different kettle of fish”, but he still thought that there was the potential to learn from the kind of planning that takes place elsewhere. He stated that, when thinking about how reshuffles could be improved, “the answer is to think more in terms of what will make this organisation function better and a bit less about giving weight to political parties and the distribution of rewards.”78 He recommended that “either the Whips Office or someone working for the Prime Minister in the Cabinet Office” should “conduct a regular audit of what [human] resources the Government has available” so that when a reshuffle next takes place there is a “pool of information to draw on.”79

55. Lord O’Donnell emphasised the need to consider what combination of people would form the best teams. He stated:

Quite often when reshuffles are done, you have gone through the Secretaries of State and sorted them out, and then you go to the next layer and the next layer. You do it by layer, and I think we should be thinking, ‘Well, with the strengths and weaknesses of these different people, let’s get a team that really works for Department for Work and Pensions or the Ministry of Defence.’ If their strengths and weaknesses are such that, as a team, there are synergies, they are more effective.80

He also commented on the importance of being “clear with that team what you wanted them to achieve”. He explained:

for that team of ministers, you should be saying, ‘Right, here is what you are trying to achieve.’ You would agree on the top line, and then you would allocate out among the ministers the areas they were going to concentrate on particularly. You would have some milestones about reviewing progress as we go along.81

56. The Minister with responsibility for ministerial development should conduct a regular assessment of the human resources the Government has at its disposal and how best they might be deployed. The selection of Ministers is a matter for the Prime Minister, but we encourage the Prime Minister to draw on the advice of the Minister with responsibility for ministerial development not only when considering the performance of individual Ministers, but in deciding the best overall combination of people to form effective teams within a Department and an effective Government.
57. The introduction of fixed-term Parliaments, together with our recommendation that Secretaries of State should expect to be left in post for the length of a Parliament, should make it easier for a Prime Minister to plan objectives for teams of Ministers within a Department. We are exploring the wider impact of fixed-term Parliaments as part of our inquiry into the role and powers of the Prime Minister.

*The role of Secretaries of State in selecting a ministerial team*

58. Lord O’Donnell’s point about the importance of selecting teams brings us on to the question of the extent to which Secretaries of State should have an input into the appointment of other Ministers in their Department. On the one hand, it would seem to make sense that the Minister who heads a department should be consulted about the junior colleagues with whom he or she will be required to work. Peter Riddell commented on the lack of involvement of Secretaries of State in selecting their ministerial teams:

> One of the most interesting things that comes across in our broader work on Ministers is that it is a very curious set-up that when someone is the boss of something often they only have an indirect say in who is appointed; the junior Ministers are kind of imposed on them.82

59. In some cases, a junior Minister may be appointed specifically because their views are different from those of the Secretary of State. Charles Clarke spoke against the practice of “putting somebody in as a number two or number three to mark, in the football sense, the Secretary of State.” He commented that this practice “institutionalises conflict.”83 He described how, when he was a Secretary of State, the Prime Minister talked to him about planned ministerial changes in his Department. He regarded this as “normal good managerial practice.”84 Lord Turnbull pointed to the dangers of “a coven” being established if Secretaries of State were given a greater opportunity to select their own teams. He thought that, on balance, the disadvantages of allowing a Secretary of State to select his or her own team would outweigh the advantages.85

60. The opinion of the relevant Secretary of State should be taken into account when appointing junior Ministers, but the final decision is for the Prime Minister.

*Number of Ministers*

61. Among our terms of reference was the question of what consideration was given in the reshuffle process to the appropriate number of ministerial posts relative to the size of the House of Commons and to the work that needs to be undertaken by the Government. Lord Turnbull commented: “No one has ever said, ‘How many Ministers do we need?’ They say, ‘Here is this number of jobs.’” He drew attention to two reasons why it would be timely to consider how many Ministers are needed to do the work of government and one reason why a review was unlikely to happen. Firstly, he commented that “a vast cadre of

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82 Q 14
83 Q 186
84 Q 186
85 Q 144
jobs” had been created in the devolved Administrations, without a corresponding reduction in posts in the UK Government. Secondly, he noted that the proposal to reduce the size of the House of Commons without a reduction in the size of the Government would have an impact on their relative strengths. He stated that, while some people thought reducing the number of Members of Parliament was a good idea, “I do not think it is a good idea to retain the payroll vote at the same size with a House that is 50 smaller because that 50 all comes off the Back-Bench quota.” The redrawing of constituency boundaries will not now take place until 2018 at the earliest, which allows more time to consider how such proposals should affect the size of the Government. We are not, however, optimistic about the prospects of a review of the appropriate number of Ministers taking place in the near future. Lord Turnbull stated that “the Ministerial Salaries Act is the Prime Minister’s bag of patronage and he does not want to cut that down.”

62. We have seen no evidence that serious consideration has been given to the number of Ministers needed to carry out the work of the UK Government, particularly in the light of the devolution of responsibilities to the Governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland over the past 15 years. We note also that a reduction in the number of Members of Parliament without a corresponding reduction in the number of Ministers would raise concerns about Parliament’s ability to hold the Government to account effectively.

Parliament’s role in reshuffles

63. Another question we set out to address in our terms of reference was whether Parliament should have any role in endorsing the appointment of senior Ministers. In the United States of America, a Minister needs to be confirmed in his or her new post by the Senate. The nomination is subject to a review by the relevant Senate Committee. There is subsequently a decision by the full Senate to confirm the appointment. A recent Congressional Research Service paper on the appointments process commented:

Critics believe that the executive branch vetting, and/or the confirmation process in the Senate, is too long and difficult and discourages people from seeking government office. Others, however, contend that most nominations are successful, suggesting that the process is functioning as it should, and that careful scrutiny of candidates is appropriate.

However, the United States has a different system of politics to the United Kingdom.

64. Joan Walley MP, the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, saw a role for Select Committees in scrutinising ministerial appointments:

While committees can already seek to take evidence from a newly appointed minister on their priorities and strategy, the more formal scrutiny of the appointment itself (being examined in your inquiry) could put the focus on the Prime Minister rather than just the minister involved. It would be this feature of

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86 Q 135
87 Maeve P. Carey, Congressional Research Service, “Presidential Appointments, the Senate’s Confirmation Process and Changes made in the 112th Congress”, 9 October 2012, p 1
such a system, I suspect, that would make a real difference in how well reshuffles are managed to deliver good sustainability and environment outcomes.\textsuperscript{88}

65. The majority of our witnesses, however, were opposed to the idea of Parliament or its Committees having a direct role in the scrutiny of ministerial appointments. Lord Boateng stated:

I don’t see how an oversight committee would be capable of improving on the quality of the eventual outcomes much if at all. And it could in fact make things worse. The PM needs to be the ultimate arbiter because on him/her falls the ultimate responsibility in our system.\textsuperscript{89}

Professor Dowding commented: “The ability of the prime minister to shuffle at will (subject to political and practical constraints) enhances her authority. To have constitutional constraints on that ability would hamper both prime ministerial authority and parliamentary accountability.”\textsuperscript{90} Akash Paun, Senior Research at the Institute for Government, emphasised that any Committee with appointment or confirmation powers for Ministers would not be appropriate. However, he agreed “that it would be a sensible convention and a courtesy...for there to be a very early occasion after someone’s appointment to meet the Committee.”\textsuperscript{91} Sir Bob Kerslake stated: “the accountability must be with the Prime Minister, not an approval process through the Select Committees. I think that would be problematic.” However, he also commented: “In terms of informing them, that is obviously a matter for the Prime Minister, but I think you can see the logic of a process of simply letting Parliament know.”\textsuperscript{92}

66. \textit{As a matter of courtesy, when Parliament is sitting the Prime Minister should inform it of the results of a reshuffle in the form of a written ministerial statement. We acknowledge that this will not be possible during recesses. Select Committees currently have the discretion to invite Ministers to appear before them. This includes new Ministers and we encourage our fellow Committees to invite the relevant new Minister to give oral evidence at an early opportunity. Detailed knowledge of the subject area cannot be expected at this point, but a short evidence session provides an opportunity for Committees to become acquainted with their new Ministers and to question them about their priorities in their new posts.}

\textsuperscript{88} Ev w1
\textsuperscript{89} Ev w4
\textsuperscript{90} Ev w6
\textsuperscript{91} Qq 58-61
\textsuperscript{92} Q 122
Conclusions and recommendations

Introduction

1. Some reshuffling of Ministers is inevitable: there will always be occasional resignations, illnesses and even deaths. However, there should always be a good reason for a reshuffle. No reshuffle should ever take place simply because it is assumed that there should be one. Reshuffles have become a habit in the UK and altering this will require a change of mindset. (Paragraph 17)

2. We commend the Prime Minister for the restraint he has shown in reshuffling Ministers and urge his successors to follow his example in this regard. (Paragraph 18)

Impact of reshuffles

3. There will be times when a fresh perspective is useful, but we believe that most major Government policies will benefit from having continuity of Ministers within the responsible Department. (Paragraph 23)

4. Even the most able Minister needs time to become familiar with a new brief. Whenever someone is moved to a new post, there will be an inevitable delay before they are fully effective. This is particularly the case when the new Minister has no previous experience of the subject area. (Paragraph 28)

5. Continuity in the senior civil service is an important factor in departmental stability, along with continuity of Ministers. We are concerned by the recent high turnover among Permanent Secretaries. We were pleased to hear that the Head of the Civil Service aims to achieve more stability in future. (Paragraph 32)

6. Continuity of Ministers is particularly important in Departments which conduct a significant proportion of their business in an international arena. It takes time to build relationships with colleagues in other countries and Ministers who are not given enough time to do so cannot function to the best of their ability. (Paragraph 34)

7. Reshuffles have an impact not only on the effectiveness of the Government, but on Parliament’s ability to hold the Government to account. It will take time before a new Minister can respond to detailed questions about policy, whether in the Chamber, or in Select Committee evidence sessions. It is also more difficult for Parliament to hold the responsible Minister to account for policy failures when he or she has subsequently moved to a new post. Likewise, it is difficult to hold an incoming Minister to account for decisions made by his or her predecessors. (Paragraph 36)

8. There should be an expectation that Secretaries of State are left in post for the length of a Parliament and more junior Ministers for a minimum of two years. This will not always be possible in practice, but it should become the norm. Taken together with the advent of fixed-term Parliaments, this should allow Ministers to plan their
work with a degree of certainty that they will still be in office to see it through. (Paragraph 41)

**Improvements to the reshuffle process**

9. Not all of us were convinced that there was a need for a specific Minister in the Cabinet Office to be responsible for ministerial development. Some thought, based on their own experience, that this was a task for the Prime Minister and the departmental Secretaries of State sitting in Cabinet. However, the majority of us believe that there should be a specific Minister in the Cabinet Office—who themselves attends Cabinet—who is responsible for ministerial development. Ideally, this should be an experienced Minister, who is in a position to oversee the development of his or her colleagues without being open to the charge of self-interest. We set out below some of the tasks we believe this Minister should perform. The recommendations that follow come with the qualification that, as stated above, we are not unanimous in our view that there is a need for a Minister in the Cabinet Office to perform these tasks. (Paragraph 43)

10. Outgoing Ministers should hand over directly to their successors. This handover could take the form of a written note, an informal meeting, or both. There are times when this will not be possible, or when it will be awkward, but relying exclusively on the civil service to conduct handovers should be the exception rather than the rule. (Paragraph 46)

11. The Minister with responsibility for ministerial development should oversee training. He or she should work with the Institute for Government to devise a programme of training that should be compulsory for all new Ministers. The training should be focused on the experience of former Ministers and should build on the work already being done by the Institute for Government. The Minister should also work with the Institute for Government to provide continuous professional development sessions for experienced Ministers, and basic ministerial training for shadow Ministers in the 12 months before the expected date of a general election. (Paragraph 48)

12. Every Minister should have a yearly appraisal conversation to provide feedback on their performance. Not all of us were convinced that this was appropriate, but, again, it was the view of the majority that such feedback would be useful. The Minister with responsibility for ministerial development, using feedback from the relevant Secretary of State, should conduct these conversations. The Prime Minister should seek feedback from the Minister with responsibility for ministerial development when contemplating a reshuffle. (Paragraph 53)

13. The Minister with responsibility for ministerial development should conduct a regular assessment of the human resources the Government has at its disposal and how best they might be deployed. The selection of Ministers is a matter for the Prime Minister, but we encourage the Prime Minister to draw on the advice of the Minister with responsibility for ministerial development not only when considering the performance of individual Ministers, but in deciding the best overall
combination of people to form effective teams within a Department and an effective Government. (Paragraph 56)

14. The introduction of fixed-term Parliaments, together with our recommendation that Secretaries of State should expect to be left in post for the length of a Parliament, should make it easier for a Prime Minister to plan objectives for teams of Ministers within a Department. (Paragraph 57)

15. The opinion of the relevant Secretary of State should be taken into account when appointing junior Ministers, but the final decision is for the Prime Minister. (Paragraph 60)

16. We have seen no evidence that serious consideration has been given to the number of Ministers needed to carry out the work of the UK Government, particularly in the light of the devolution of responsibilities to the Governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland over the past 15 years. We note also that a reduction in the number of Members of Parliament without a corresponding reduction in the number of Ministers would raise concerns about Parliament’s ability to hold the Government to account effectively. (Paragraph 62)

17. As a matter of courtesy, when Parliament is sitting the Prime Minister should inform it of the results of a reshuffle in the form of a written ministerial statement. We acknowledge that this will not be possible during recesses. Select Committees currently have the discretion to invite Ministers to appear before them. This includes new Ministers and we encourage our fellow Committees to invite the relevant new Minister to give oral evidence at an early opportunity. Detailed knowledge of the subject area cannot be expected at this point, but a short evidence session provides an opportunity for Committees to become acquainted with their new Ministers and to question them about their priorities in their new posts. (Paragraph 66)
Annex A: Terms of reference

Witnesses to this inquiry were invited to submit evidence on the following points:

The impact of ministerial reshuffles
1. What are the main reasons for reshuffles?
2. What impact do reshuffles have on:
   a) policy making and delivery
   b) the ability of Parliament to hold Government to account
   c) the authority of the Prime Minister
   d) the effectiveness of the Government
   e) the civil service

The reshuffle process
3. What is the process involved when a Prime Minister decides to undertake a reshuffle? Who advises him/her? What are the timescales involved? How could the process be improved?
4. Does the prerogative power to hire and fire Ministers need to be placed on a statutory footing?
5. Should Parliament have any role in endorsing the appointment of senior Ministers?
6. What effect does a coalition Government have on reshuffles?
7. What consideration is given in the reshuffle process to the appropriate number of ministerial posts relative to the size of the House of Commons, and to the work that needs to be undertaken?
8. How is the performance of MPs and their suitability for ministerial office, or promotion to a more senior ministerial post, assessed? What is the role of the Whips in this process? How could this process be improved?
Formal Minutes

Thursday 13 June 2013

Members present:

Mr Graham Allen, in the Chair
Mr Christopher Chope
Paul Flynn
Sheila Gilmore
Fabian Hamilton
Mrs Eleanor Laing
Mr Andrew Turner
Mr Stephen Williams

Draft Report (The impact and effectiveness of ministerial reshuffles), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 66 read and agreed to.

Annex and Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Second Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Thursday 20 June at 9.45 am]
Witnesses

Thursday 22 November 2012
Rt Hon Peter Riddell CBE, Director and Akash Paun, Senior Researcher, Institute for Government

Thursday 29 November 2012
Sir Bob Kerslake, Head of the Civil Service

Thursday 6 December 2012
Lord Turnbull KCB CVO, former Cabinet Secretary
Chris Mullin

Thursday 13 December 2012
Rt Hon Charles Clarke
Rt Hon Lord Heseltine CH
Rt Hon Lord Reid of Cardowan

Thursday 24 January 2013
Sir Jeremy Heywood KCB CVO, Cabinet Secretary

Thursday 31 January 2013
Chris Moncrieff CBE, Press Association and Steve Richards, The Independent

Thursday 28 February 2013
Lord O’Donnell GCB, former Cabinet Secretary
List of written evidence

(published in Volume II on the Committee’s website www.parliament.uk/p_crc)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Nic Dakin MP</td>
<td>Ev w1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Joan Walley MP</td>
<td>Ev w1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Peter Allen</td>
<td>Ev w1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Rt Hon The Lord Boateng of Akyem and Wembley</td>
<td>Ev w4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Rt Hon Mr Ben Bradshaw MP</td>
<td>Ev w4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Keith Dowding</td>
<td>Ev w5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Chris Mullin (MP for Sunderland South, 1987-2010)</td>
<td>Ev w7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Rt Hon Alan Johnson MP</td>
<td>Ev w9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Rt Hon Mr Nick Raynsford MP</td>
<td>Ev w9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Baroness Hilary Armstrong, Chief Whip 2001-2006</td>
<td>Ev w10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Rt Hon Mr Francis Maude MP, Minister for the Cabinet Office</td>
<td>Ev w11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Sir Jeremy Heywood KCB CVO, Cabinet Secretary</td>
<td>Ev w12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Rt Hon Sir John Major KG CH</td>
<td>Ev w12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

The reference number of the Government’s response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

### Session 2010–12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Report</th>
<th>Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill</th>
<th>HC 422</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Second Report</td>
<td>Fixed-term Parliaments Bill</td>
<td>HC 436 (Cm 7951)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Report</td>
<td>Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill</td>
<td>HC 437 (Cm 7997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth Report</td>
<td>Lessons from the process of Government formation after the 2010 General Election</td>
<td>HC 528 (HC 866)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth Report</td>
<td>Voting by convicted prisoners: Summary of evidence</td>
<td>HC 776</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth Report</td>
<td>Constitutional implications of the Cabinet Manual</td>
<td>HC 734 (Cm 8213)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh Report</td>
<td>Seminar on the House of Lords: Outcomes</td>
<td>HC 961</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eighth Report</td>
<td>Parliament’s role in conflict decisions</td>
<td>HC 923 (HC 1477)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ninth Report</td>
<td>Parliament’s role in conflict decisions: Government Response to the Committee’s Eighth Report of Session 2010-12</td>
<td>HC 1477 (HC 1673)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenth Report</td>
<td>Individual Electoral Registration and Electoral Administration</td>
<td>HC 1463 (Cm 8177)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eleventh Report</td>
<td>Rules of Royal Succession</td>
<td>HC 1615 (HC 586)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twelfth Report</td>
<td>Parliament’s role in conflict decisions—further Government Response: Government Response to the Committee’s Ninth Report of Session 2010-12</td>
<td>HC 1673</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thirteenth Report</td>
<td>Political party finance</td>
<td>HC 1763</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Session 2012–13

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Report</th>
<th>Recall of MPs</th>
<th>HC 373 (HC 646)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Second Report</td>
<td>Introducing a statutory register of lobbyists</td>
<td>HC 153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Report</td>
<td>Prospects for codifying the relationship between central and local government</td>
<td>HC 656(Cm 8623)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth Report</td>
<td>Do we need a constitutional convention for the UK?</td>
<td>HC 371</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Session 2013–14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Report</th>
<th>Ensuring standards in the quality of legislation</th>
<th>HC 85</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Oral evidence

Taken before the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee

on Thursday 22 November 2012

Members present:
Mr Graham Allen (Chair)
Mr Christopher Chope
Paul Flynn
Sheila Gilmore
Simon Hart

Tristram Hunt
Mrs Eleanor Laing
Mr Andrew Turner

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Peter Riddell CBE, Director, Institute for Government, and Akash Paun, Senior Researcher, Institute for Government, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Peter, welcome. Akash, welcome. As you know, we are doing a little inquiry into reshuffles. We started in June of this year probably even before the first rumour of a shuffle. I think we were in the field already, so this is not a reactive inquiry, nor is it an inquiry into the last reshuffle. It is an inquiry about the concept of shuffles and the culture of shuffles in this country. I think, because of your history, you will know better than anyone that, particularly in the last Government, reshuffles felt on occasions as if they had become a way of life—a way of governing almost. It is probably based more on that than anything that happened over the summer, although of course now we will take that into account. Would you like to kick off by an opening statement or do you want to dive straight in?

Peter Riddell: Just a very few remarks, if I might, about what gives us legitimate authority to be here. You received the paper Akash did at the time of the reshuffle. We had more or less the same motives as you. This was a peg to hang some reflections, but also we have done a lot of work. We did a report last year on the challenge of being a Minister—about ministerial effectiveness. One of my colleagues, Katie Dash, produced a blog this week on reshuffles among permanent secretaries. It is very important to link Ministers and officials in this in terms of effectiveness. Our perspective at the Institute for Government is very much on effectiveness of government, and many of the remarks we wish to make would be about what the impact of the rapid turnover of Ministers can be on the effectiveness of government. As I said, we have done a lot of research and have many thoughts on that, which go back a long way and they are particularly current. That is our background on that.

Akash Paun: Having done the research for the paper, what really struck me was that although the previous Government, as you said, Chairman, was very fond, famously, of very frequent reshuffles, I think it goes back a lot longer than that. You can read some of the earlier studies of reshuffles in the 1970s and 1980s and then read accounts of how things worked in the last Government, and actually very little seems to have changed in that period. There are the same problems, the same challenges and the same sense of chaos often surrounding them, but there is still the same ultimate decision by most Prime Ministers that a reshuffle can be a useful weapon for them, whether or not they are right ultimately about that.

Q2 Chair: Before we get into questioning, could you tell us the contractual position? This is a rather odd way to run a sweetshop. Probably only Roman Abramovich runs his business in the way that the Prime Minister runs his. Why is there no contractual relationship? Why is there not a right to unfair dismissal? Why aren’t there proper terms and conditions that govern an appointment for a Minister of the Crown, and that the PM can just dispose this?

Peter Riddell: I think that is what they say is a leading question, Mr Chairman. As you well know, the system originates out of advisers to the monarch. That is the whole basis of it—Ministers advising the monarch. I think it would be inadvisable to get into an interesting discussion of history, but those are the origins of it all. The one caveat I have, which does not apply to the appointment and dismissal, where it is a prerogative power recommending to the Queen, as happens certainly with Secretaries of State, is that we have had a growth of codes and so on that govern ministerial behaviour, not appointment but behaviour.

Q3 Chair: Are you leading me, Peter, to a conclusion about a code for appointment and dismissal?

Peter Riddell: No, I am not, actually. There are two distinct things. One is that two and a half years ago this Committee explored the formation of the Government. Akash and I did a lot of work on all the circumstances of the formation of the Coalition. I think there is an argument for an investiture vote at the beginning of the Government that would pick the whole team. However, I believe that after that it is up to the Prime Minister who they appoint as Ministers. You may want to explore this, and Akash has done a lot of work on it and may want to say more about it: with the Coalition, for the first time we have on paper a definition of how certain Ministers are appointed. That has never been done on paper. It is on the Cabinet Office website—how Lib Dem Ministers were appointed and how the consultation procedure worked, which is very interesting.
Q4 Chair: Hopefully in the questioning this will come out, but traditionally it was always the political classes who had a life expectancy of whatever it was—13 months, as a junior Minister under the Blair Government—but of course good old Sir Humphrey went on and on, so there was stability. Now we are, are we not, in a different position with the permanent secretaries being almost as random and helter-skelter in terms of being replaced as Ministers themselves? 

Peter Riddell: Well, you say almost.

Chair: Worse, perhaps.

Peter Riddell: As I said, we had a briefing paper done and published earlier this week, which is coincidental, by one of our staff, Katie Dash, which shows that the turnover of permanent secretaries since the election has been far greater than that of Secretaries of State, for a variety of reasons. You might want to explore that later. It has actually been a much less permanent job than the title implies.

Akash Paun: I think the figures were that out of 19 departments (not counting HMRC, which has no ministers), 17 had seen at least one change of permanent secretary since the election, whereas for Secretaries of State I believe it was 11 out of 19, but we could check the figures.

Q5 Chair: So both the political and administrative classes who lie at the heart of government are in a state of almost permanent flux?

Peter Riddell: Flux? We may just have gone through a period of enormous turbulence, but the results are certainly—from our point of view, which looks at the effects for departments, and at a time of very large cuts in departments, in manpower and staffing, and big internal change programmes—very destabilising.

Q6 Chair: And bad for government?

Peter Riddell: Yes.

Q7 Chair: A final one that, again, colleagues may wish to pick up is the five-year Parliament. There is now a beginning and an end and a degree of certainty about how long a Parliament will last. Should this find its echo in the way in which people are appointed and sustained in office and that, using business principles, people are only fired because of scandal, deaths and so on?

Akash Paun: We did a different piece of work earlier this year on the mid-term challenges of coalition in which we recommended that the halfway point—roughly around now, this autumn—would be a sensible point to review the policy programme. Equally, as indeed happened, if you are going to have a point at which you can reconsider the top team and carry out a reshuffle it would make sense maybe to move to some kind of convention of having a fixed point in the cycle, whether that is exactly around the halfway mark or maybe a little longer. Maybe you would look to go three years, say, out of the five, with most Ministers in place, of course subject to the fact that scandals and events will always come up nonetheless.

Peter Riddell: In various discussions we have had at the Institute we talk to people from other countries. I remember we had a visiting German delegation that we wanted to talk to about reshuffles. It was very difficult to get the concept over to them. They did not understand what on earth we were talking about. For them it is four years—of course again it is coalition politics that affect it—and they just did not get what we were talking about and we had to spell it out. We had to come at it in a different way. All right, they have four years, not quite fixed-term but almost. The other thing is that what we seeing now in the States, quite interestingly, is the recognition of a four-year term and then, as President Obama is doing now, all the top posts are going to change—it looks like that from reading the papers. Certainly we know that State is, Treasury almost certainly will, and Defence may after a time. That is regarded as the point to do it. There have been a few changes in between but not many. It is all to do with expectation in that way, but I agree with Akash that the Prime Minister seems—apart from when he was forced to; that is what Akash’s paper illustrates very well—to have thought, “Right, we’ll give it two and a quarter years, two and a half years”. I think that does make a lot of sense. You can argue about the scale of it, but we do not want to get into this particular reshuffle.

Akash Paun: As far as the international comparison is concerned, one big difference between UK and Westminster systems and, say, Germany, the US and France is in those systems if one Minister resigns due to a scandal and so on, the appointment will be made from outside Parliament. They have a much bigger pool of people from which to make ministerial appointments in the first place, so you do not get into the kind of cascade effect that you see here where Prime Ministers often get pushed into reshuffles maybe against their judgment because of unavoidable resignations and so on. That is quite an important constitutional difference.

Q8 Chair: In terms of international examples, we are way off one end of the spectrum in terms of instability and levels of shuffle and you have stability, or at least known points of change, when you look at Germany or the USA or whatever. We are actually quite on the outer limits here.

Peter Riddell: Can I give you a very long-term illustration, which is not necessarily in terms of mid-term reshuffle? We looked at Germany since 1949, and the same point would apply post-unification. During that period they had 15 Economic Ministers. That is separate from Finance Ministers. It is much more akin to a Business Minister in Germany. Over the same period we have had 35. I do not want to get into discussions of comparative economic performance. In some periods—as you say, at the end of the last Government—it is an interesting Trivial Pursuit question of who was Work and Pensions Minister and who was doing Trade and Industry at various times, and only the real anoraks can get those right. It is very unhelpful for government.

Akash Paun: There is pretty good evidence from academic literature that coalitions generally are more stable in terms of ministerial line-up than single-party governments. We have seen an increase in stability post 2010. It is no doubt partly due to personal conviction of the Prime Minister and a reflection of
problems under the past Government, but I think it is also a structural thing: there are two veto players, two people whose consent has to be found to make those changes.

**Q9 Mr Chope:** You say that your organisation is committed to trying to improve the effectiveness of government?

**Peter Riddell:** Yes.

**Q10 Mr Chope:** Have you decided on an optimum length of term for a Minister in order to maximise the effectiveness of government?

**Peter Riddell:** That is a very interesting question. We would not be so presumptuous as to do that. We did explore that a lot. You can’t lay down a rule because some Ministers fail and should be removed. Like everything in life, some things do not work out. People who you predict are good do not turn out to be. Accidents happen. What we would say is that really any period short of two years, certainly for a junior Minister, is undesirable. It is quite interesting. How do Ministers come into office? At elections some of them come in after they have shadowed the job for a long time so they have had some preparation. It does not always work out well, but sometimes it does. In the case of reshuffles or shuffles, whatever you like to call them, in most cases they have no necessary knowledge of the area so there is a learning curve just to get up to speed on it all. The evidence we got when we were doing the ministerial effectiveness report 18 months ago—we can let you have copies of that; there is just a small section on reshuffles in there—was that it takes about a year to get fully up to speed with everything. You are an ex-Minister, you know that. It is inevitable; that’s life. Then you have a period, maybe another 18 months, two years, of maximum effectiveness. It also very much depends on the parliamentary cycle. We would say for junior Ministers probably at least two years in post—actually this reasonably fits what has happened now—and for Secretaries of State perhaps a bit longer. On the whole, Chancellors of the Exchequer much longer, Foreign Secretaries much longer, and then further down the Cabinet is when you get the churn, so averages can be misleading. I would say at least two years for a junior Minister, preferably two and a half, and that is where with a fixed-term Parliament you may be able to get it right. But I would not want to be too prescriptive because you have to fit it to human beings and, while we do look at management and effectiveness, I do not want to be too managerial in that way because I think it is misleading for the diverse personalities and interests of people.

**Q11 Mr Chope:** Have you looked at the relative benefits of having large-scale reshuffles as against having lots of smaller reshuffles?

**Peter Riddell:** That is very interesting because this is, in a sense, the flipside of what happened in September. You might have thought in the past that the Prime Minister might have done a reshuffle perhaps in September 2011, and then would have done one again, so what was a kind of big bang this time would have been split a bit. Not wanting to get into details of it, I, along with a lot of your colleagues, was slightly surprised at the scale of the reshuffle and what happened. I think there are arguments for some continuity. I did raise my eyebrows a bit about some departments where there was often very little continuity at all. Ironically, in one department I think the only continuity was the Lords Minister. I think that there is a danger of slightly doing it for the sake of doing it, for all kinds of motives. I am hesitant on ones that remove all but one Minister in a department. I do not think that produces good government, but again one has to look at the individual cases, as you understand, Mr Chope.

**Q12 Mr Chope:** What do you think was the motive of the last reshuffle? Do you think it was in order to change policy direction or for some other reason, or just to improve the effectiveness of the Government or what?

**Akash Paun:** I think all reshuffles inevitably have a mixture of motives. With this one it did seem that the Coalition was at a pretty low ebb and there was a sense that there was a need for relaunch and revival. Often there is a sense that change brings a sense of renewal and that a Government is struggling. In the event often the Government may get positive coverage, or may not, for a few days, but the reshuffles that actually make a big difference to policy direction are very much the exception.

**Peter Riddell:** There are very few. Akash and I went through it when he was doing his paper and we had an interesting exercise with those that were significant in policy terms and there were very, very few—really few. Party management, as you well know, is a prime motive, but it is a balance. You can argue the balance is that if you change, say, all but one Minister in a department you query effectiveness. One of the interesting things is that two out of the last three Prime Ministers have never carried a post other than Prime Minister. That is quite an important factor and not to be underrated in the reshuffles. If you have been a Prime Minister who has come up through ministerial ranks you may have a different attitude.

**Q13 Chair:** Indeed, you may have a different attitude if you have served in local government, which again applies to the last three Prime Ministers.

**Peter Riddell:** Indeed. Absolutely.

**Q14 Chair:** I am going to be cheeky and ask the only former serving Minister on the Committee to be our witness. Chris, what was your experience and what was your view on reshuffles, if I may? Or would you like notice of that question?

**Mr Chope:** I was fortunate in the sense that I was never sacked other than by the electorate. I lost my seat in 1992 and with it went my ministerial job. I had five and a half years as a Minister and I moved around a bit but not that much. My feeling was that what was most important was whether or not the ministerial team were working cohesively together or whether you had a marking system. I think the difference at the time I was a Minister with Margaret Thatcher was
that she decided she wanted effectiveness by having a Secretary of State who had a lot of fellow spirits in his ministerial team. When we moved to John Major, his idea was to have a Secretary of State who would then be marked by a couple of Ministers of State who had different views and then some Parliamentary Under-Secretaries from different persuasions. The result was that I think under Margaret Thatcher you had a much more effective Government because it was more decisive. Under John Major it played into the hands of the civil service who wanted to put the brake on everything.

Akash Paun: Yes. That is an important distinction. I think that points to the fact that the strength of the Prime Minister will, to a large extent, define the nature of the reshuffle. Looking at some of the cases we examined, with the second 1981 reshuffle under Margaret Thatcher it is very clear—when you read her memoirs and other accounts of it—that there was a clear desire to purify the Cabinet, to remove her “wet” opponents and to, therefore, be able to move very strongly in the direction of economic strategy that she desired. Other Prime Ministers are probably in a far weaker position and have to strike those balances. I think that sense of having junior Ministers marking the Secretary of State you saw to some extent with Brown and Blair as well.

Peter Riddell: The team aspect is very clear. One of the most interesting things that comes across in our broader work on Ministers is that it is a very curious set-up that when someone is the boss of something often they only have an indirect say in who is appointed; the junior Ministers are kind of imposed on them. Towards the end of the last Government—this was not a particularly ideological thing, it was a competence issue—I remember talking to one Secretary of State and I said, “How are you getting on with your team?” He said, “Well, one of them is completely useless so I just sideline him, and one is quite good. Of course I didn’t have any say on it,” which exactly illustrates your point. One of the things I felt when I read in some of the coverage of the September reshuffle that X had been put in to mark Y, was that that is a recipe for completely ineffective government, and will not happen.

Q15 Tristram Hunt: You can see that play itself out in the Energy Department.

Chair: Now, now.

Peter Riddell: There are further wrinkles there.

Q16 Tristram Hunt: Among the slightly more extraordinary evidence we received was from a man called Professor Keith Dowding of the Australian National University, who suggested that, “Another reason for a Prime Minister to shuffle the Cabinet is precisely to ensure Ministers do not learn too much about their departments. Prime Ministers like to be in control; shuffling Ministers ensures that they do not gain too much command of their portfolio.” Has any of the research that you have done suggested that there is any truth to that statement at all?

Akash Paun: I am not sure about prime ministerial motivation. I can’t imagine that that is something they would admit to in their memoirs, which is our source of information on their thought process. We did speak to a former senior official from the Major era who told us that when considering the expertise of people who may be promoted into Government it was very rare for someone’s policy expertise or background to be taken into account. In fact, he suggested that sometimes if someone had been a little bit too active as a back bencher in, say, health policy and had too clear a position and grasp of the subject maybe that would count against them if you wanted someone who would just, to a greater extent, do what they were told. I do not know how extensive that kind of thinking was, but it was suggested to us.

Peter Riddell: It is a producer capture argument, that in the old days of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries you had to have a farmer there and so on. It may account for one or two agricultural policies. I do not want to get into Australian politics, which are far more colourful and lively and make ours rather boring, but I have never heard that—that they move around quickly for that reason; not at all. There are plenty of other reasons, some of which are not great, but never that. I do think, on Akash’s point, there is a slight wariness—it is understandable, it is more to do with producer capture—that if you put a particular expert in an area they can become too close and are not sufficiently detached, particularly if you are trying to push through reform in areas. It certainly would not apply to the current Education Department, but in the distant past, quite some way past, you could say the Department for Education or whatever its title might have been at the time, would have someone who had been close to the teaching unions and so on and so forth—or particularly farming, that is a classic—but I do not think it is a motive to move someone around: “Oh, he is good at his job”.

Q17 Tristram Hunt: Do you think that scepticism about either academic or professional interest in the policy area is particular to our culture of politics? The contrast with the American Cabinet where a Professor of Energy is going to become Energy Secretary is rather stark.

Peter Riddell: I think it is a balance. One of the most expert Ministers in the current Government is Steve Webb, who knows more about pensions than any of us in the room and, from what one observes, he is quite effective in that respect. It is a balance between, as I said, the producer capture thing, and Steve Webb is a very sceptical guy. Of course, in the systems you are describing, as Akash was saying earlier, they recruit from outside the legislature. That is the key difference on that score, which gets you on to an area that you looked at—GOATs and all that area. There was very mixed experience of GOATs and bringing in the expert. We have examined that, and our view is that it works when it is a specific task. For example, like Lord Darzi on Health, it worked for a short period looking at a specific area, but it is very difficult to transplant more generally.

Akash Paun: Especially at Cabinet level I think it is inevitable, and probably sensible, that it is more the generic political skills that can be transferred from department to department that are going to determine career trajectory. At a more junior level, maybe in
certain technocratic areas, there may be more scope. I think that is what the Institute’s report concluded. You have seen it, of course, with Health to some extent, and Trade and Investment often brought in outsiders with business background.

**Peter Riddell:** Some of that worked quite well. Prime Ministers never realise what a Lords Minister has to do and they do not realise there is a parliamentary aspect to it. There is a long record of Prime Ministers saying, “You are a frightfully clever chap who knows all about this and, by the way, there’s a peerage.” They do not tell them about wet Monday evenings doing the Committee stages of Bills, which is what Parliament is about.

Q18 Tristram Hunt: In terms of the timing of reshuffles, when is the best time to do a reshuffle? Is it during summer recess so Ministers can bed themselves in for six weeks? Do you have views on the moment?

**Akash Paun:** The most obvious answer to that question is that, especially if reshuffles are done in the traditional way—you are sacked or you are moved, and you take up the new job straight away that day—it makes a huge amount of sense not to do that while Parliament is sitting. Summer recess or some other recess would be the obvious point, I think, to do that.

Q19 Tristram Hunt: In terms of time line, the evidence we have had, which is very convincing, is we have had these reshuffles that go on over one or two weeks as they play themselves out, which is rather nice, but in the modern media world that is just not credible any more, is it?

**Peter Riddell:** They don’t on the whole play the performance out. The formation of Government did and I would say there is nothing wrong with taking a few days. I think it was actually a virtue it took a few days. Following Akash’s paper, we had a very interesting event at the Institute with Hilary Armstrong and Andrew Turnbull. Hilary was Chief Whip and Andrew was Cabinet Secretary, and they described the kind of shambolic nature at the fringe of the board getting the names in the right places. We have anecdotes. In Mr Chope’s era I think one of his friends managed to avoid being sacked for 12 months by going AWOL. I think he was in Norway before the friends managed to avoid being sacked for 12 months by going AWOL. I think he was in Norway before the news came, “Don’t touch anything until the Olympics are out of the way”. I agree with Akash on that; normally they are going to take two or three days because if you are doing a big bang one it is inevitably going to take that long. Actually, it was quite rapidly done this time.

Q20 Simon Hart: If you left to one side the desire to make a political impact, to make a public impact, then why do we have to have a set piece event at all? Occasionally, there are mini reshuffles when somebody drops dead or does something awful, but in any institution other than Parliament if you have somebody who is performing very badly you shift them and if they are performing very well you promote them. You do not have to wait until a certain day in the annual calendar to do that, you just do it as you go along. Surely that would lend itself towards more consistent and unruffled government, notwithstanding the desire to command a headline for the Government. It seems to me ludicrous to have this great big build-up, followed by rather an anticlimax.

**Akash Paun:** Yes, I think that is quite a convincing argument. The problem often will be that if you are removing one Minister who is seen as underperforming then it automatically becomes at least a mini reshuffle because you are moving someone in and then there is a cascade of changes through the system. There is no natural reason why governments have to have a big set piece reshuffle at all, but when they are in particular trouble there is that political desire to relaunch and change the narrative and so on.

Q21 Simon Hart: Yet if we take the reshuffle that has just happened, how much does it really resonate in the public psyche outside this building? Almost not at all. If you ask people, hardly anybody knows who all these junior Ministers are. I do not know who half of them are. There are a few headline ones that might be quite eye-catching but the rest is all just nonsense.

**Peter Riddell:** I agree with you 100%. As a former journalist, I entirely agree that we lived in an obsessive world of X and Y, which is reinforced by Twitter and the internet. Following it, as I was in my office on the day, was absurd, “X has got promoted. That is frightfully important”. I am going back to what Mr Chope was saying, that X is going to mark Y in the department, which is rubbish. The real problem is that reshuffles occur from a small pool; that is why they have to occur at one time, because of the knock-on effects. What you say is logical and, of course, Prime Ministers try to do that, but it is very difficult when there is an emergency one. When someone has to resign they try to isolate it. We saw the classic of that. I can’t remember what George Young’s award was from the Spectator Awards, resilience of the year or recovery of the year or whatever, which was a perfect example of there is someone available, bring him back when the Chief Whip resigns. But in general it is the knock-on effects. There are bound to be knock-on effects because you are talking about a very small pool. I agree with you entirely that apart from some policy areas, and pretty limited ones, they are entirely a Westminster phenomenon. There is no evidence in opinion polling or anything. If you traced opinion polls, you would not think a reshuffle had happened.

Q22 Sheila Gilmore: The whole notion that there is a down time is arguably less now, partly because of the 24-hour media, and even recess periods are probably shorter. Certainly for the September sittings, they are shorter. You do not have that very long period. A lot of politics get played out, not just here but in the media, so a new Minister coming in at the end of July could still slip on a banana skin in the second week in August.
Akash Paun: There is always going to be that risk. I think naturally it would minimise the risk to reshuffle during recess. Interestingly, Margaret Thatcher apparently used to prefer to wait until the end of the summer recess, supposedly so that people she was going to sack still got a holiday on their ministerial salary, but I am not sure that is the most sensible basis to determine the timing.

Q23 Chair: Before I ask Sheila to come in again for her own questions, I want to pick up something that Tristram alluded to, which is about whether capable people are quite frightening to No. 10. I would take it slightly further and say No. 10 wants safe pairs of hands, people who are not necessarily talented, are not going to rock the boat and are going to toe the media line that is so important to No. 10. Doesn’t that militate against people with very strong political views or strong ideology getting preferment? Don’t we have to go back to the Thatcher era, with a very strong conviction politician who actually wanted to employ talented but ideological people rather than safe pairs of hands? That is nothing personal, may I say, Chris. You are both, of course.

Peter Riddell: Someone who is seen as very independent minded may well not get prefered. It is a balance. It is dependent on prime ministerial preference and obviously the Whips play a very important part in it, as you well know as a former Whip. It is a mixture. There can be a danger of safe sameness, yes, I agree with that. That is true of all organisations. Prime Ministers, understandably, want to have people who are part of the team, and I understand that, but I think it can work against them. We can all think of people, going back 20 or 30 years, who you thought, “Why didn’t X become a Minister?” My counter to that might well be, certainly in the current era of elected Select Committee Chairs and members, that there are all kinds of alternative routes to achieve political influence. On the Government side you might say of two or three current Committee Chairs, “Why on earth weren’t they Ministers?” I would say they are far more influential on public policy in their current roles than they would be as the Under-Secretary for Widgets. As we all know, the heavy culture of this place is a front bench culture on both sides.

Q24 Chair: Just to challenge that, Peter, not all organisations go for people who replicate the boss and are the same. There is a different organisational culture, which is that you get talented people and if you are the senior manager it is your job to manage them effectively, which I think is probably an alternative to the way the shuffle mentality seems to operate.

Peter Riddell: In my mature years learning how to be chief executive, as I am now, having not been for 40 years, I am strongly in favour of having independent-minded people working with me.

Q25 Sheila Gilmore: The contrast with local government can sometimes be greater, in that people often stay in jobs for a long, long time in local government, subject to electoral change. There is a downside to that as well, which is people becoming stale, people becoming too embedded there. I was the chair of housing in my council for eight years, which is quite a long time. The strength is that you really get to know your subject, but is the downside that you lose independence and political edge?

Peter Riddell: I do not think there is a mechanistic one. Going back to Mr Chope’s question about is there an ideal period, I do not think there is. All I can say is that there is probably a minimum for effectiveness. I think people do go stale. You can think of people who remain too long in certain posts, absolutely. I do not think you should do it rigidly, but I think there is a danger of staleness. Equally, some people who are in long term can be very effective. Arguably, one of the most effective councils in Britain is Manchester, which has had the same chief executive and the same leader for—I can’t remember whether it is a dozen or 15 years. Mr Hunt will be able to tell us that from his background. That is an example. In other cases you think after three or four years it is time to move on. I think probably the thing one should say is a minimum for effectiveness; beyond that, look at it after three or four years just to reach a judgment.

Akash Paun: As far as junior Minister positions are concerned, the average did dip to something like not much over a year in post, certainly in the last Government. I think there is a kind of cultural problem of thinking about that first appointment as being just a first step on this ministerial ladder and that the objective is to move up as fast as possible rather than people being appointed for what is often a very important job, certainly if you are a Minister of State of a big department. There is not a sense that people are brought in to manage a particular big project or take a policy through to completion. There is not that approach to those kinds of jobs, which I think is problematic.

Peter Riddell: Could I tie it in with the civil service problem, too? At the Institute for Government we are as worried about the high turnover of civil servants. If you look at the report on the West Coast Main Line—we had the first report on it and I think the second one is due at the end of next week, from Sam Laidlaw—there were three responsible officers for the franchise at official level. That turnover is daunting. When you look at it, you can’t just look at the ministerial. I look at it as I do with the Institute for Government. I do not think there is a single person, if I go back to when I was a senior fellow before I became Director, who I was dealing with in 2010 who is doing the same job now and frequently jobs changed twice, and not just at permanent secretary level, immediately below that level. There are problems with that. You get Ministers saying, “Hold on, there has been a turnover of officials working for me. That undermines it”. You have to look at the two together in terms of the effectiveness of Government. It is a combination of the two.

I think there is a problem when a Minister is changed midway through. Looking at any kind of big project, it is probably going to take two to three years devising the ideas and thinking it out, talking to the Select Committee. Then you get legislation, one hopes sometimes pre-legislative scrutiny, sometimes not,
Jonathan Powell said that the cycle. There are not many Ministers who are around for all that cycle.

Q26 Sheila Gilmore: Jonathan Powell said that the process of ministerial appointment ought to be more rational. How could it be made more rational?

Peter Riddell: This goes back to Mr Hunt’s point about the period. It is not going to be entirely rational because it is about politics, it is about people, it is about faction, and balance of various kinds, regional, which was classically true I think more in the past than now, and now, of course, you have the coalition factor. It is never going to be entirely rational.

What I think is true, which should be true, and it is fair to Ministers, is that there ought to be a rounded assessment of them. One of the most striking things when we were doing this ministerial effectiveness work—this also applies to some of the work Akash has been doing—is that when somebody is going to be sacked as a Minister they are the last people to know they are going to be sacked. It may be a lack of self-awareness, but there is no sense of appraisal, as there is in any other organisation. I am not trying to be managerialist in the heavy sense, but just a casual conversation to say, “Look, things aren’t going very well. You should look at this aspect or that aspect”. I am not talking about it as if you were working for BP or anything like that, or indeed the civil service itself, or even the Institute for Government, it is almost a tap on the shoulder. People get a shock when they are dropped, particularly this time with the big bang, and I would say you almost want to have an annual system saying, “Hold on, you are doing quite well” or, “Perhaps your time is coming to an end” or, “What are your interests? You have been two years Widget Minister. Where else would you like to work?” just so it is fed in.

The Whips do much of the appraisal below Cabinet level. Permanent secretaries do a bit, looking at the other aspect of it, and certainly there is often a submission of views. I do not know whether it happened under Jeremy Heywood this time, but certainly it did in the past. When Gus O’Donnell was Cabinet Secretary he would ask the permanent secretaries for their views on various Ministers, and they would be fed into the Prime Minister. That could arguably be done on a more systematic basis, but the real thing is before then, so that people are treated as they would be in any other organisation, given a little bit of counselling and support, not in a heavy managerial sense but just given a sense of how they are doing. Nothing is more isolated than a Minister. Virtually every Minister we talked to for this study, which was about 40, said no one had ever talked to them about how they were performing.

Q27 Sheila Gilmore: Isn’t this partly because it is very different from any other job? Even being an MP is in that sense very different. Normally in a job you go into you will get some training, you will get some sort of targets—not really targets but a view of what you are trying to achieve; this is your job for the next such and such, this is how it fits into the wider picture—on which you can then appraise. It is very hard to appraise something that is so amorphous.

Peter Riddell: Yes, I am not arguing for the type of appraisal you get in a large corporation. What I am saying is there should be a bit of advice. There is a mixture between, “You are on your own. Tough”, which is what happens now essentially, and being terribly corporate. I accept absolutely that it is not a corporate structure. I am very opposed to people transferring the two, but there is scope for giving someone a bit of advice.

Q28 Sheila Gilmore: Secrecy seems to be an inherent part of all of this as far as Prime Ministers are concerned. That really does make it difficult to give people any advance warning, doesn’t it?

Akash Paun: Yes, I think that makes it very difficult. As Peter described, normally there are information-gathering processes on ministerial performance and so on through the civil service, through the Whips, but the decision-making is almost always kept within a very tight group of advisers, many of whom will not necessarily have firsthand information on how people have been performing. The degree to which you can rationalise that is limited. The consequence is that people have no warning, both the individuals themselves and the civil service. We had a very interesting session recently on how ministerial private offices work, and some quite interesting anecdotes came out of that about a past reshuffle where the private secretary in an unmanned department had been given hints and nods and winks that their Minister was not going to change. At the end of the day—I guess it was a Friday—he went down to the pub and had a few drinks, and then later that night he got a phone call, “Oh, actually your Minister has changed. You have to get back to the department quickly to be ready to brief him.” He was not sure if he was entirely in the best state to do that. I think the process is rather unsatisfactory in some ways.

Peter Riddell: It will always be to some extent, but it can be improved. That is what we say. There is no rationality in the total sense but it can be improved. I think some of the advice can be improved; Ministers can be advised how they are coming on. At present, the only advice seems to be Gerald Kaufman’s book, which is now 33 years old, or Chris Mullin’s diaries. I think one needs to do a bit more than that. At the Institute for Government, we have been doing some work on a bit of help with some induction in various ways and we are keen to do more. I think there is a keenness, which again is not adopting a managerialist model but just some helpful pointers.

Q29 Chair: Just as I turned Chris into a witness, I should myself bear witness. As a Whip I was never properly consulted about any movements up or down in the teams that I was whipping. It was very much a No. 10 operation and other than gossip, as we all do in this place, there was never a proper assessment, never proper advice given. Working with three Chief Whips, that was never the case.

The second thing is that the idea of being nice to people when you are firing them is a good one, but of course it is often incredibly arbitrary. It is when on
the day you need to fit somebody in, and somebody has to go. It is quite difficult to prepare people when you did not even know that morning you were going to do the dirty deed. That probably tells us more about the level of professionalism in our business than it does about anything else. That is me bearing witness.

Q30 Mr Chope: Arising from that, do you see any trend among Ministers to be more obstinate when asked by the Prime Minister, for example, to move to a different position? It seems that in this most recent reshuffle some refused to do that. In the old days, if they had refused to do that they would have been out on their ear.

Peter Riddell: We know publicly that one was in a recent reshuffle—Nick Herbert. He was apparently offered another post and turned it down and he is now on the back benches as a result. He publicly said that.

Q31 Mr Chope: But on the other hand, we heard that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions was asked to go somewhere else and he refused but he kept his position. We also heard that during the course of the reshuffle there was a back bencher who did not look as though he was going to be preferred who threatened to take the Chiltern Hundreds and then was rapidly incorporated within the ministerial team.

Peter Riddell: I had not picked up that bit of gossip, but I think there has always been a bit of bargaining on that score.

Akash Paun: I do not see any evidence that that has changed. I think it is just a universal fact of politics. It comes down to the power of the Prime Minister and the power of the Minister or individual in question. The Prime Minister has to make a judgment whether the Government’s interests would be best served by letting the person go to the back benches or not. I think that has always happened.

Q32 Mr Turner: I was about to ask the same question, so well done on that. Can I ask something else that is not on the paper in front of me? What about the politics, and particularly this last reshuffle? There seems to have been a clear change of Conservative Ministers, where there used to be a comfortable relationship, with a more prickly relationship with the Liberals. I am thinking in particular, of course, of Mr Hayes. Mr Hayes is there, as far as I can see, to make people like me happy, whereas before I would have asked for the—well, let us not worry—

Paul Flynn: The rest of us are unhappy.

Mr Turner: Well, perhaps. I think there are other Ministers in the same picture, perhaps not as clearly as Mr Hayes is. Do you notice a change, or am I just imagining it?

Peter Riddell: I do not want to particularly go down the route of this reshuffle. It goes back to Mr Chope’s point earlier that even if you have a single-party government you have different flavours and different balances, and some of the tensions, from my long experience, were certainly there in the Thatcher and Major years, but of course coalition does shift it absolutely and brings out tensions more openly in that respect. I mentioned in my opening remarks if you look at the guidance on the Programme for Government on the Cabinet Office website, there is now explicit reference as to how Lib Dem Ministers are appointed and how the structure works. That is explicit now.

Q33 Mr Turner: Can you tell me what?

Peter Riddell: While the Prime Minister retains the prerogative of appointment, in so far as it is Lib Dem Ministers he consults the Deputy Prime Minister. Therefore, the DPM will make a recommendation for X job—“This is the person”—and obviously if they have a disagreement they have to sort it out. The prerogative power still runs through the Prime Minister recommending to the Queen and all that stuff, but it is explicitly written down. Akash is pointing it out to me, “the Coalition Agreement for Stability and Reform...sets out the new rules of the game. First, the balance of ministers...must remain ‘approximately in proportion to the size of the two parliamentary parties.’ Second...explicit...it is the DPM who nominates Lib Dem ministers. Third, the DPM is entitled to ‘full consultation over any dismissals of Lib Dem ministers and any further appointments to cabinet’...reallocation of portfolios must be agreed between the two party leaders.” That is absolutely explicit for the first time, which goes back to Mr Allen’s point at the beginning. That obviously implies a check. As far as I understand it, the Lib Dem Ministers who were sacked this time were nominated by the DPM, not particularly by the Prime Minister. He decided who came in and who went out among the Lib Dems and then presumably he discussed it with the Prime Minister. That implies a check. On your underlying point, I am inclined to say, ‘T was ever so; there are balances of personalities and so on. I think it is the Coalition that has changed that rather than anything else.

Akash Paun: The only thing I would add is that from our other research into the formation of the Coalition, what was quite unusual about that compared to international equivalents was that all the focus in the negotiations was on policy—getting the policy agreement right—and allocation of portfolios was a bit of an afterthought. In lots of countries it would have been much more integrated. I think to some extent, with two and a half years’ experience, on both sides there is recognition that maybe they wanted a bit more voice in certain areas. Some of the interesting changes on the Lib Dem side were getting a more senior figure in the Home Office, getting someone in Defra, which are big, important policy departments for their supporters in various ways. On the Conservative side, arguably some of the appointments in the Business Department—the taking in of Paul Deighton1, for example—reflected a view that you needed to strengthen one side or another.

Q34 Mr Turner: In what way do you think reshuffles are driven by the media and how can we prevent it?

1 Note from witness: Paul Deighton has been appointed to the Treasury. The BIS reference was to other appointments (Fallon and Hancock to be specific).
Peter Riddell: As an ex-political journalist myself, the media are part of it in the sense of being part of the gossip mechanism. In the run-up to reshuffles, going back to when I was political editor of the Financial Times in the 1980s, in the kind of high Thatcher period, I would talk to the Whips, I would talk to people close to Margaret Thatcher and I would talk to most of the Secretaries of State. We would all write our speculative pieces with more or less accuracy as the results indicated. Did they influence Margaret Thatcher? I very much doubt they had the slightest influence at all, but what I was doing was being part of the—I am inclined to say sounding chamber. I think a strong Prime Minister and strong leaders and Whips make up their own minds on things. I do not think they are particularly influenced. When you get something that is written, or now on the internet, it does not mean a Prime Minister is going to be influenced by it. They are as likely to say, “Damn it, I am going to do something different”. I notice that not a single person predicted George Young as Chief Whip in the 10 days leading up to Andrew Mitchell’s resignation. Plenty of other names were mentioned. I think one can overdo the media side of it. There is a danger—the fact is that now I am an ex-journalist I have more humility—of exaggerating the influence.

Akash Paun: A famous case of a reshuffle going badly wrong—going back quite a way, of course—is the ‘night of the long knives’ in 1962. When you read the accounts, that was seen as driven, in terms of the timing at least, by leaks to the media. There was a plan being developed to change the Chancellor and make some other changes, but it got leaked. Then Harold Macmillan just rushed ahead and tried to do the whole thing too quickly, and it was seen as bungled and having been disrespectful to colleagues and so on.

Peter Riddell: Yes, but the interesting point there is the malicious leak by the Number 2 in the Government, Rab Butler, who leaked it partly intending to undermine the Prime Minister. The media were the vehicle rather than anything else.

Q35 Mr Turner: What about the effect that Parliament can have? Does Parliament, particularly obviously the majority party, have an effect on reshuffles?

Peter Riddell: Yes. I think it has an effect not so much on promotion but, particularly in emergency cases, on resignation. When someone is in trouble, invariably what dooms them is the collapse in support from their own party. I was around during the Westland period 26 years ago. What did for Leon Brittan was basically a lack of support in the 1922 Committee. He resigned on a Friday. On the Thursday—there were different timetables then—it was quite evident there was big opposition to him. You could argue that the same applied to Andrew Mitchell a couple of months ago. You get that pattern occurring. Therefore, what happens in the House, not necessarily on the Floor of the House but within the parliamentary grouping, can be very significant in that kind of emergency resignation.

The other thing is performance in the House. I can think of Ministers who turned out to be absolutely awful in the House and that got fed back, mainly via the Whips. There was one particular one during the Thatcher era who was completely useless taking a Bill through Committee and was dropped within a year and never quite forgave the Whip concerned. Quite rightly so, because he just was not up to it. It was just a matter of competence; it was not about political views. They were just useless at it. It happens slightly more often in the Lords but no one covers it. I think that is where the opinion within the House can matter.

Q36 Chair: Just before I ask Paul to come in, nipping back to the Cabinet Manual where there is a passing reference to reshuffles but that is all, is that a place where we should be looking, should we so decide, to add a little more formality to the very laissez-faire process at the moment? Without some written bulwarks, there is no inhibition to Prime Ministers on reshuffles. You may argue there should be none. However, even on this last occasion there was a sense that people got a taste for what was going to be quite a limited reshuffle and suddenly you have quite an enormous reshuffle, which probably was not intended in the first place.

Peter Riddell: That is is a very interesting issue. I think there is a distinction between good practice and what could be put in the Cabinet Manual. That is the distinction. In your inquiry into the Cabinet Manual you produced some very interesting evidence and interesting conclusions on that and I think, if I might say so, you should return to it at some stage. What you actually identified was a distinction between something basic and behavioural, and I think the Cabinet Manual should be about some fundamentals. It is quite difficult to recommend, “This is good behaviour”. I think you can do it in your report, if you reach those conclusions, that it is desirable to avoid X and Y and Z traps and do it however firmly. It is quite difficult to write that in a Cabinet Manual in practice. It is that distinction. Your role could be to highlight and say, “This is something entirely desirable”. But it is very difficult to write down.

Akash Paun: In terms of whether the unfettered power of the Prime Minister could be constrained in some way, I think what is interesting in reading accounts of almost all reshuffles is how constrained Prime Ministers already feel. They are often unable to make the moves they want. As we have discussed, people refuse to take the job offered or threaten to move to the back benches and so on. I would not characterise it as a process where at the moment Prime Ministers just get exactly what they want, because that rarely happens. Ultimately, they are constrained by those factors and they are constrained by the fact that reshuffles can be quite damaging for them if they go wrong.

Q37 Chair: That is a very interesting take from the other end of the telescope compared to those who are shuffled-not shuffled, appointed-not appointed, who I think form the vast majority of people in politics who look upon this as an incredibly arbitrary and non-transparent process, so I am interested that you say that.
Akash Paun: I would not challenge that it is arbitrary and non-transparent. I only wanted to challenge the idea that it is a matter of entire control by the Prime Minister.

Q38 Chair: Decency prohibits public beheading these days, of course, so there have been some improvements but—

Peter Riddell: I think you can say things about what is good practice. As I say, it is very difficult to write those things, to say, ‘This is part of the rulebook’.

Q39 Chair: Akash, you were talking about the time in which junior Ministers in particular have had a very short lifespan. Of course, you need to add that if it was, whatever it was, 13 months, there is a period of learning the brief when you are not going to be at your fullest capability and then there is also this period of paralysis. We have talked about how long the actual shuffle takes—is it a week or is it a little longer—but the period of paralysis leading into that where there is speculation and uncertainty and your civil servants look at you and think, ‘This guy is probably not even going to be here’ can last many months. As I mentioned when I opened, Peter, the first straw in the wind on this reshuffle I think was in June—I may be corrected. At that point I can guarantee you that every Minister saw that little first whiff and thought, ‘Oh, where am I going to be next month?’ or, as it turned out, four months later.

Peter Riddell: There is a planning blight problem. The other point is that we are discussing averages. The real problem is you are talking about a much greater spread. You get some Ministers who are there for very short periods, and that is very destabilising and very unhealthy. You get some there for much longer periods. One should not just focus on the average; you should look at the distribution as well. It is a really interesting point on the planning blight problem, when it produces paralysis, worry, looking over the shoulder. It tends to be, as you say, about three months or so beforehand. We underrate its impact, I think.

Q40 Chair: But what if a Prime Minister stated at the beginning of their term, ‘I am picking my 1st XV and, barring scandal, death or failure, I will reshuffle my team as and when I win the next general election’?

Peter Riddell: The problem with that is that as long as you have five-year Parliaments it is too long a period for quite a few Ministers. I do not necessarily disagree. You can argue about the scale of what happened in September, but I would accept that that was on the whole a sensible point to do it. Akash was making the point earlier that it is mid-term renewal and it just got caught up in lots of other political things, nothing to do with this inquiry. You can argue about the scale of it, but it is not unreasonable to say, ‘Two and a quarter years is not a bad point’. To be fair to David Cameron, he had said that for quite some time. The timing, certainly from the people I talked to, was always going to be early September. Well, there was one big extraneous factor, which is obviously to do with Leveson, but apart from that it was always going to be then, for a very long time. Actually, David Cameron has changed track and equally not changed the machinery of government, which is something we have not talked about. It was always likely to be then.

Akash Paun: In terms of getting the top team in place for the full Parliament, often for the very big jobs that happens more often. It was notable that the top five jobs or so were not changed in this reshuffle.

Peter Riddell: That will apply. If you look through the top jobs, Chancellor, Foreign Secretary, Home Secretary, Education, they are quite likely to be there for the full five years. I do not think anyone would necessarily predict a change in any of those absolutely crucial jobs. And Work and Pensions, as we have heard.

Q41 Paul Flynn: I am in danger of overdosing on the wisdom of Peter Riddell, Mr Chairman, because this is the third day in succession I have asked him questions. Do you think that with all the negative stuff we have heard about the reshuffles there is a possible advantage to Parliament to have unleashed into the Chamber a whole group of people who have been sacked who are well informed as former Ministers but are generally embittered about the injustice of their sacking and are wonderful irritants to the process of government but beneficial to the work of Parliament?

Peter Riddell: Without quite taking your analysis, which I don’t disagree with, there are very few ex-Ministers I have ever met who believed that their departure was just or fair and they should not have had another year or two, very few indeed, so most of them fit into your category. Can I put a bit more positive spin on it? I know you do not like the word ‘spin’. Certainly, I think Parliament benefits from the experience of ex-Ministers. You and I heard yesterday a couple of ex-Ministers reshuffled who can add a lot of interesting thoughts and experience to discussion. I look around over a long period and you get two patterns of ex-Ministers. There are those who say, ‘Oh, my career is over. I’m off. Next election I’ll go and do something completely different’, and those who have a—I hesitate to use the word ‘career’ because I think it is completely wrong in relation to Parliament—second emphasis in their lives. There are some very successful Members of Parliament, particularly in the scrutiny role, who have been Ministers but now say, ‘That period of my life is over. I am going off to do something else’. Whether you take the particular way you phrased it, I think that they can make a real impact because they have seen the inside.

Q42 Paul Flynn: Without revealing the identity of the two involved, I was quite shocked yesterday to hear two people that I have long thought to be boring party hacks, mannequins, speak your weight machines, party apparatchiks, having been relieved of their ministerial duties, presenting themselves as highly intelligent and creative people. They have undergone a metamorphosis now they have slipped the shackles of responsibility.

Peter Riddell: Well, either that or you underrated them before, but we will not go into that. I would certainly agree, but your underlying point is that I felt one of the great dangers of Parliament, observing it as
I did for 30 years and now seeing it in a rather different light, is that people say there is a ministerial route or there is a back bench route. That is extraordinarily unhealthy. I think people move between the two. I agree with your implicit point absolutely that some ex-Ministers can do an awful lot in their scrutiny role and other roles. One of the most depressing things I find is the people who arrive in Parliament and within six months they are on the front bench or PPSs or something, rather than saying there is a transition, it moves. I think it can enrich the place, yes.

**Q43 Paul Flynn:** I think we would all agree it is a truly awful system. One of the dangers is that we have people who are able, who have been good Ministers and have not done a thing wrong, being told by the Prime Minister, “You have done nothing wrong. You have done a wonderful job, but I need your job” because some game that no one else understands is invisibly going on in the background between power groups. They remain people who either leave politics or feel themselves as having failed for life. Think of the curious behaviour of Prime Ministers. Margaret Thatcher would never appoint anyone with a beard. Tony Blair told Rhodri Morgan that he was too old to be a Minister, yet he went on to have a brilliant career in the Welsh Assembly. Tony Wright was not appointed to ministerial office because he was known to read books, which was thought to be a—

**Peter Riddell:** And write them.

**Paul Flynn:** And write them, which was even worse—a curse—which is a terribly dangerous trait to have in your ministerial team. I think we have benefited greatly from the evidence you submitted but would you say strongly that the whole disruptive churning that goes on creates imbalance, and is irrational and damaging to the effectiveness of government, and feeds the power of the Prime Minister and the civil service?

**Peter Riddell:** I would not put it in such strong terms. All I am saying is that reshuffles should be done in a more measured way. You have to have reshuffles, as Akash said earlier, but they should be done in a more measured way. The Prime Minister is always going to take a kind of party advantage. One point you made, which is one I feel strongly about, is that it should not be final. There is a tendency when someone has been sacked that that is it. One of the most interesting things is when people are brought back. There are a number of cases of that, and George Young is a living example. He was sacked from being a junior Health Minister by Margaret Thatcher because he was too anti-smoking. He then turned out to be a poll tax rebel, and then was brought back and had a big career and he has been brought back a second time. There are other cases too of people who have had second comings and on the whole quite successfully so, but people don’t think of it that way.

**Q44 Paul Flynn:** But that was done by Prime Ministers, possibly partly for the reasons you suggest, but certainly in the last Government it was done because there was a whole phalanx of sacked Ministers, and in order to make sure they did not all rebel there was a little hope put out. Three or four of them were brought back so the others realised they might have their own second coming again. I think it was done in that way by the Prime Minister.

**Peter Riddell:** That is party management. One shouldn’t be shocked at it. That is life.

**Paul Flynn:** Yes, indeed, as we are discovering.

**Q45 Chair:** Also, Peter, many of the bigger beasts were close friends of the Prime Minister, and they had one or two reprieves. We don’t need to go through the names, but they were not necessarily the capable middle-ranking people. In the last shuffle, I can name 12 Conservative Ministers who I personally had the highest regard for, each of whom said, “I was told it was nothing personal”. A great phalanx of people who added gravitas and bottom to a Government seem to be moved aside. The earlier example is the number of people who had transgressed and were given a second chance, in a sense, because of who they knew and the influence they had.

**Peter Riddell:** That is true, but there is a downside too. As long as you have a parliamentary system, if you annoy people there are consequences. You would have to talk to Philip Cowley on this; I am sure he could tell you all the statistics. I think you would find in one or two Divisions in the last few weeks that one or two former ministers have been willing to vote against the Government. There are downsides to annoying people. As I say, it is party management; that is always going to be there. You can’t really say party management is going to go away, of course it is not. That is the essence of here. As long as you do not have a separation of powers—a different argument to get into—as long as you have the executive powers of legislature, that is always going to happen. It is going to happen under whatever party is in power but there are consequences. There are consequences, as Paul Flynn is pointing out, in terms of people’s attitudes and subsequent behaviour. If you get it wrong, it is not painless.

**Q46 Paul Flynn:** Would you like to develop this idea about those who are back benchers by choice? There are a number of them—Bruce Grocott was one of them and there are a number of other people—who decided at a point in Parliament that they had no interest in and resigned from front bench positions, or they refused to take them up. Do you see healthy signs with the strengthening of Committees and other paths, and the fact that Tony Wright has a legacy here greater than most Ministers who served in Parliament? Can you see this developing and being worthwhile?

**Akash Paun:** Peter mentioned before this sense of Select Committees, and particularly of course Select Committee Chairs, as an alternative career path. That seems to have been strengthened in recent years. The new selection system for Committee Chairs reinforces that of course, and the additional salary previously agreed. I think that is very healthy for the strength of Parliament and its role in scrutiny and holding Government to account. I have no idea of the numbers on the back benches who would be happy or prefer a career as a back bencher through the Committee system and so on. From the Government perspective,
the larger that group is, and also the larger the group of sacked Ministers grows, that means that the talent pool for appointments to the front bench shrinks accordingly. That was a big problem faced by Labour by the end, by many people’s accounts. It was described as a ‘talent puddle’ rather than a talent pool as there were so few appointable people, at least from a leadership perspective. Our interest, at the Institute for Government, is also in the effectiveness of government so I think those things can be problematic.

Peter Riddell: The more the Select Committees make an impact, the more someone would say—as you say with Tony Wright, unquestionably he will be remembered longer than I should think virtually all the Ministers, let alone Under-Secretaries, in the last Government. So would those who worked on the Committee. They had much more impact, much greater than I expected. Similarly, we will have to see at the end of this Parliament how it works out with directly elected Chairs. It has had more impact than I expected. Therefore, even that conditions people’s behaviour and expectation and attitude. Particularly on the Government side, Tory or Lib Dem Chairs of Select Committees, it will be very interesting to see what their attitudes will be at the end of the Parliament. Two or three might have thought they might have been Ministers, I would certainly say they are making much greater impact with what they are doing now.

Q47 Paul Flynn: Mr Paun spoke with such authority on what happened in 1962 that I assume he is at least 62 himself, so he can answer this question too. If you look at someone like Leo Abse as a back bencher, again a back bencher by choice, who got through a huge amount of legislation, daring, adventurous legislation that was seen to be very courageous in his time, do you see the future producing more Leo Abses?

Peter Riddell: There is a separate issue on Private Members’ Bills and the hurdles there, which is not appropriate to go into now. What I would see is a possibility is that if the changes in Select Committees do make an impact people will turn their attention from being so Executive minded. It is not just Government minded, people will be less front bench minded and say, “Actually you can make an impact without just being a front bencher”, and people will see that. We may well see that. I would hope so.

Q48 Simon Hart: A couple of things not on the list. Do you think it was wise to sack all but one of the Secretary of State is appointed, they should have the flexibility to build a team of Ministers around them of their choice?

Akash Paun: I think it is very important that ministerial teams within departments can work together well for the good administration of that department so Secretaries of State quite rightly should have some influence over it. Their appointment by the Prime Minister is a natural point to enter into a discussion over it, and I know that happens.

Q50 Simon Hart: It doesn’t even seem to happen with PPSs. People just get assigned a PPS, and even the PPSs appear to be a No. 10 decision. People are ringing up and saying, “I hear you are my PPS”, and people don’t know who the hell they are.

Akash Paun: It is interesting because there are other cases, supposedly, of Secretaries of State blocking the appointment of junior Ministers; supposedly is what happened to Norman Lamb’s proposed appointment back in 2010 to the Department of Health. In some of the conversations we had with officials and people who observed the process, one thing that was said to us—I think it is in the paper—is that Ministers being appointed to Cabinet vary hugely in how much they seize that opportunity to shape their team. It was described to us that some of them are very rational and thoughtful about it and ask for the proposed names of people that are being put in their department and then maybe even come back and renegotiate if they feel they are in a strong enough position. It was suggested to us that others were just so excited about being promoted that they “run out to phone their Mum”. I am not sure how literal that was. I think the point is that they do have a degree of influence but they are never going to have the final choice.

Q51 Simon Hart: I wonder if that is sensible really. If you want them to have a sense of ownership and accountability about the performance of their department, then there is surely no greater way of achieving that, if you look at outside comparisons, than by them being responsible for the appointments that are made, as far as possible, to the department.

Akash Paun: I think it is sensible for exactly those reasons. In coalition it becomes more complex, of course, where more naturally you get into that sense of having junior Ministers man-marking the Cabinet Minister. Maybe that is what happened to an extent, as we discussed before, between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown in some departments. In an ideal case, of course you would want the Secretary of State to have a team around him or her that they trusted and worked well with and there was a sense of a leadership team, not competing individuals within the department.

Peter Riddell: I agree with what Akash said. The Coalition is a complicating factor. What is interesting is that in some of the departments there was a sense of coherence across party lines. I can think of a number where there was perfect harmony between a Lib Dem Minister of State and a Tory Secretary of State, no problems at all. But certainly for effectiveness, to give the Secretary of State a greater say in the choice of Ministers is vital, otherwise you
do get to the stage where some junior Ministers are completely ignored. That is a sideline of what I described earlier, when I talked to a Secretary of State who regarded one of his junior Ministers as useless, just going to umpтрен adjournment debates, Westminster Hall debates, without any real power within the department. It happens all the time, but that is not very satisfactory for effectiveness. Tony Blair experimented with this but did not really follow it through—that on appointment there was one phase when people were sent a letter, “These are your objectives”. That has kind of fallen away. You could do exactly the same with junior Ministers, “This team is going to be here for a couple of years. I want you to work together harmoniously.”

Q52 Chair: Can I follow up on that? You mentioned, Peter, a particular Minister way back when who was regarded by his colleagues as incompetent and after a year or so fell by the wayside. There was also a phenomenon—again I am not at liberty to name names—when I was at the Whip’s Office that certain bigger beasts could pick their own people or get their own people put into other departments. Those were the people who were in the category you described earlier, people that just could not hack it but they had been a pal of that person for a while, they had run their campaign for their own ambition or whatever it was, and therefore they were owed, but when they got up to the dispatch box everybody was deeply embarrassed about the way they performed, and on Bills they were deeply embarrassed. I only put that side as a counterweight; they are not always necessarily right with you in terms of talent, capability and ideology.

Peter Riddell: There is a barony feudal barony aspect to this. I think we are thinking of the same person, who is now in the House of Lords. That did happen—that X would be protected even though the widespread view was that X was useless but he was part of the patronage system. In the last Government, during the whole 13 years there were two big baronies who looked after their people in that way. That is not a very practical way, but that is an example of where prime ministerial power is constrained.

Q53 Simon Hart: Earlier you made an interesting comment about the fact that opinion polls don’t appear to reflect reshuffles at all. A former Minister, Edward Garnier, said to me about the first day I was elected, “Don’t forget promotion is nothing to do with talent but it is to do with all sorts of other factors”, some of which we have talked about, some of which we haven’t. There is gender balance, there is age balance, there is geographical spread, there are all sorts of other features. Why are we so obsessed with those aspects of reshuffles being significant, when it clearly doesn’t have any impact on public opinion anyway?

Peter Riddell: Every small group of people wants to know who is up and who is down. They love personalities because you identify with personalities. It is much harder to look at performance. Here you see the tip of the iceberg of performance, the public aspect of it. You know the people and you can reach other assessments of them because you know them, but the journalists see one aspect. Personalities are more interesting to all of us than the more elusive thing of effectiveness. That is why; it is a small group world of who is up and who is down. It is true whether you are trying to pick who should play in Mumbai tomorrow for England—although there I hope effectiveness is a key factor. That is inevitably so, and it is magnified by the internet and all that world, and the impact is enormously exaggerated. I entirely agree with what you said earlier about it. I have never seen, with very rare exceptions, its having any impact.

Q54 Mr Turner: In a way, I suppose, the election is just a larger scale reshuffle with either the hope to get in or not at the end of it. Do you feel that these five years will be served now and do you feel that it would be served in the future?

Peter Riddell: I am not quite clear what you meant by will the five years be served. Do you mean will we have the full five-year Parliament?

Mr Turner: Yes.

Peter Riddell: It is a different topic. There are some traps, that you all know about far more than I do—the Bill currently in the Lords on the boundaries, Europe and so on. My hunch is that the full five years will be served.

Akash Paun: I wouldn’t disagree. I would only say that in comparison to coalitions overseas they would do quite well to. If you look at the statistics, five years is quite a long time to survive, but they have just passed the Fixed-term Parliament Bill. There is clearly commitment at the top to see out the full term so there are good reasons to think they would last until 2015.

Peter Riddell: That is where opinion polls do matter.

Q55 Chair: If I may digress, because we do have a little time. Just seeing the five years in terms of survival, we are trying, as a Committee, to also look at this in terms of five years as a planning horizon, as a book end where you can do some strategic thinking, rather than have paralysis where after two years we are worrying that there may be an election next year, the civil servants are backing off you a little bit because you may not be there to see through the things you are proposing. But if you have a five-year term, and perhaps another five-year term—didn’t Prime Minister Blair say, “If I had known I would have been here this long I would have been bolder, or I would have done stuff earlier”? It is like the jazz player, Horace Silver, who said on his 95th birthday, “If I hadn known I was going to live this long, I would have taken better care of myself”. There is the possibility of a serious, professional, long-term plan in Government that has not existed before because of our framework of having elections possibly next week.

Peter Riddell: That was the argument for the Fixed-term Parliament Act. I still think, going back to the earlier point you made about the uncertainty of reshuffles ahead, the final year of the Parliament will be very difficult for all the reasons of the two partners wanting to do—Akash has looked at this extensively in his work on coalitions. While it provides certainty, perhaps it pushes back the beginning of the period of uncertainty, possibly from—

Chair: Year three to year five.
Peter Riddell: Exactly.

Q56 Chair: In terms of planning government, planning enormous policy changes, reforms and so on, that has to be better news than in two years’ time we might throw all the bits in the air again on health or pensions and benefits or whatever.

Peter Riddell: I still think there will be caution on legislation as opposed to implementation, but it gives the Government more scope on its implementation of existing legislation. As we have seen with two Bills—one has been dropped and one was significantly changed in the Lords last night—the difficulties of legislation are not altered in that respect.

Akash Paun: The interesting thing with this Government in terms of having a long-term plan is less to do with it being a fixed term. It was because it was a coalition that they had to develop a joint programme for government after the election. That was something that was new. And constitutionally it is quite interesting how that programme—not manifestos—that was the central guiding document. If you talk to people across Whitehall, it was very much seen as the reference document, at least in the early months. The question is, whether, in the five days or two weeks after the election in which the programme is drawn up, you can really plan for everything you are going to do. That is what we have looked at in our work on mid-term renewal—from where they are up to now, going into year three to year four, do they have enough that they have argued for, is there enough of a joint agenda there any more, and how do you revive it when at the same time you are looking to the next election as two separate parties? That is the challenge. Five years does then seem like quite a long time. I am in favour of fixed terms in principle, for the reasons you have said, and removing it from prime ministerial prerogative, but if you look around the world five years is a long time for that. Four years is much more common.

Q57 Chair: To go back to a couple of points, firstly, the question that Simon raised about teams and team building and effective teams. Peter you said, rightly, we don’t want to just be a corporate management structure, of course we don’t, but we are a heck of a long way from that being a danger. Do you think there is space for some standards along those lines? I remember being in Chris Smith’s team in opposition when there were very open discussions, minutes were taken, action points were made and we followed up weekly, and that was the best organised group of people I have ever been involved with in the House. It is the only example I can quote, having been in six different front bench opposition teams. I have to be rather careful, but looking at ministerial meetings that I was present at as a Government Whip, one would not have wanted them quoted in a business presentation about effective decision-making. They lasted an hour, and on one occasion it was standard practice for the most senior Minister present to speak for 50 minutes about something the person was deeply offended about that may have appeared in the papers over the last two or three days. Is there a role for some more corporate guidance—basics?

Peter Riddell: It is distinctly tempting to speculate on the nature of that Minister. Yes, there is. Without being heavy-handed, I think there is absolutely, mainly because most MPs, and therefore most prospective Ministers, have not worked in big organisations. Most MPs have small-unit experience. That is how they function as MPs, that is how the three of you function outside the Committee context. Therefore, some familiarisation with working in a more organised way—you quite rightly say the practice is a million miles away from big companies, but I think there is best practice. The Institute for Government is doing work on that, and did before the last election—trying to work with politicians, both in Government and outside Government, on exactly these issues. The details are totally confidential for obvious reasons, but we are working both with Ministers and with opposition groups on some of exactly those points. It is not to do with policy; it is nothing to do with policy. It is purely, “You would work more effectively together if you listened to each other, had more structured meetings”, and so on. It is very difficult to measure the impact of this work, but some of our most interesting work has been along those lines, and it doesn’t absorb massive resources in the Institute. There is a danger of being patronising, but I have people among my colleagues who understand some of these things, have experience talking to people. What we have found from quite a few Ministers and opposition spokesmen is a real willingness to do it because it has been done in a low key way. It is not seen as a great public thing. People are willing to listen and say, “Actually, you have a point there. It might be an idea if we did this or that”. We have also done some appraisals of Ministers privately.

Q58 Chair: I am going to warn you of my last question, which is to ask you for your crunchy real things that we could consider doing, practically, around the reshuffle question. I know some answers are in the paper, but before I get there should there be something in terms of a proper hearing within Parliament when a Minister is appointed or reappointed? I don’t necessarily want to jump the idea of going to the US level of endorsement and formal agreement but none the less, if you have a brand new Secretary of State, wouldn’t it be appropriate to officially notify, even on the agenda of the House of Commons, that a change has taken place, and wouldn’t it be just a matter of courtesy that that person would come immediately after appointment to meet, let’s say, the relevant Select Committee?

Akash Paun: Certainly we wouldn’t back a confirmation power for Parliament.

Q59 Chair: You would or you would not?

Akash Paun: We would not. I don’t think that would be appropriate. We did a previous report at the Institute on parliamentary scrutiny of appointments. We said that there is clearly a role that should be extended in Select Committees having a role, and sometimes a veto, over public appointments, but that is for the very reason that they are supposed to be independent of party politics if you are talking...
about things like the OBR or Information Commissioner and so on. With Ministers that is clearly not the case and I don’t think it would be a very productive use of Select Committee time, when it would inevitably just divide Committees on party lines.

**Q60 Chair:** May I say we have never done that in two years.

**Akash Paun:** Done what?

**Chair:** Divided along party lines on anything that is—

**Akash Paun:** I meant that I think it would raise those risks if you were to go down the line of saying a Committee has an appointment or confirmation power for Ministers.

**Q61 Chair:** Rather like Her Majesty, we could receive the person into our midst rather than say yes or no.

**Akash Paun:** That is what I was going to go on to say. I agree with you that it would be a sensible convention and a courtesy, as you said, for there to be a very early occasion after someone’s appointment to meet the Committee.

**Peter Riddell:** I agree with that 100%. In a lot of cases that happens in practice. It is an interesting issue with junior Ministers, it is more complicated there, but certainly with Secretaries of State, absolutely, rather like what happens with new permanent secretaries. On the whole, they will come and see the Secretary, and so they should once they have their feet under the table, within two or three weeks, say. I think that is absolutely right. It is part of the scrutiny process of keeping in touch, setting out their thinking and plans, and I regard that as entirely desirable.

**Q62 Chair:** One minute on the crunchy proposals that you would love the Committee to consider on reshuffles.

**Akash Paun:** A few of them are things we have touched on. I think there is space for a more systematic, maybe more formalised approach to gathering performance information on Ministers. Maybe there ought to be some kind of standardised approach to some extent. Of course, other factors are always going to come into play as well. It might be worth thinking about how you would develop that capacity, and whether the Prime Minister can, realistically, be more of a line manager in a corporate sense and have those kind of discussions with Ministers during their time in office about how they are doing and where they might seek to improve and so on. Maybe that could be something the Prime Minister might delegate to another senior figure with a roving brief, a Ken Clarke type figure, just thinking off the top of my head. I think Secretaries of State having influence over the junior ministerial team—for the reasons we have discussed—is quite an important issue to consider and perhaps there should be a clearer convention there. Those would be the main areas, I think.

**Peter Riddell:** I agree with all the things Akash has said. The key is bearing in mind ministerial effectiveness—when it should be done. They should think about what impact it will have on departments—in other words if you take away all but one Minister what effect will that have—and the degree to which Prime Ministers should look at the development over time, giving advice to people, a proper induction. The effectiveness of Ministers within departments should have a much greater role than it does now. That is not only the assessment of who should go where but also that they may need some help and support.

**Q63 Chair:** Peter, Akash, thank you so much. It has been a pleasure as always. I am sorry the Select Committee structure has run you ragged over the last three days, Peter. You can have a well-deserved rest over the weekend.

**Peter Riddell:** It has been a pleasure. My exchanges with Mr Flynn have been a pleasure as always.
Thursday 29 November 2012

Members present:

Mr Graham Allen (Chair)
Paul Flynn
Sheila Gilmore
Fabian Hamilton
Simon Hart
Mrs Eleanor Laing
Stephen Williams

Examination of Witness

Witness: Sir Bob Kerslake, Head of the Civil Service, gave evidence.

Q64 Chair: You are very welcome to the Committee. We are doing a little inquiry into the impact of reshuffles. We are, as you know, the baby of the Select Committee structure; we have been going a couple of years. We think we have been doing some good work in the interim. We are very pleased to see you here, although we are sorry that Sir Jeremy cannot make it. We understand the reasons entirely, and he kindly phoned me to let me know that he would not be here today. I think we are going to see him in January. Today, Sir Bob, is about the impact of reshuffles. Would you care to make some sort of opening statement, or do you want to jump straight into questions?

Sir Bob Kerslake: I will make a few very brief points, really. The first thing to say is that I am a relative newcomer to this, having only been a Permanent Secretary for two years and only been Head of Civil Service for just under a year of that. I have only experienced one reshuffle, so my personal knowledge of this is fairly small. That said, I will, if possible, make a few general points.

The first point to make is that we have a system that is geared up to managing reshuffles. This is part of the web and web of what good Departments do and they would pride themselves on handling reshuffles well. This is not something that is an inconvenience that people do not know about. They are aware of it coming, and they organise to handle it. The second point to make is that we tend to focus on the movement at the top, whether it is Secretaries of State and Ministers or Permanent Secretaries, and lose sight of the fact that there are other key parts of the system that actually do not necessarily change. Private offices are absolutely critical in this, as indeed are Directors General and policy teams. When we talk about continuity and change, we have to see it in the round for the whole of the Department. This is really quite an important point.

The third point I would make is that I think one of the interesting developments with this Government is having the Programme for Government. The departmental plans to deliver the Programme for Government does give you a very clear structure for the tasks of the Department and the priorities, which forms part of the context of their role for any new Minister coming in. You do not start with a clean sheet. They will clearly have differences of style, emphasis and particular priorities, but they do it within the context of a very structured programme for government for their Department. I think that does influence the issue for them. So I would make those three general points and then come on to your questions.

Q65 Chair: Very helpful, Sir Bob. You were, of course, well known before you came to the civil service as a chief executive, and I would not wish to overly flatter you, but known as a very capable, competent and strong chief executive, and also known for working effectively with your political colleagues, too. With that sort of background—this is quite a personal question, really—weren’t you rather surprised at the way things are done in Whitehall? I cannot recall ever in Sheffield that a large chunk of the leading players were both moved out and spent six months worrying about being moved out. There was a little more continuity, if I remember correctly, up the motorway from Nottingham.

Sir Bob Kerslake: There is, but it is not absolutely intrinsic to the local government system that you have that continuity. Obviously, you have elections. In many parts of the country those elections are in thirds and so it is perfectly possible to see, at regular intervals, shifts in control of a local authority and, consequently, very big shifts in the people who are leading it. If I take my personal example in Sheffield, I started with a Labour-run council. It then went to a Liberal Democrat council. It then went, I think, to hung and then back to Labour again. There may have been another stage I have missed out, but it went through an awful lot of changes during that period, often influenced by what happened on that year’s election. So we should not assume it is a model of stability there.

Secondly, of course, most councils—even where you have a leading party in power—have annual elections within the party group structure about who gets roles and responsibilities and then, depending on the way it works in their local authority, the leader of the council will decide who takes on what role. You can see movement on an annual basis, even if you do not have changes in political control through the decisions of the leader and/or the particular ruling group. Change does happen, actually, in local authorities perhaps more often than people recognise. What you can see, though, is a pattern of stability sometimes building up that people become experts and, therefore, carry on being in the role, but what I would say is that it is not intrinsic to the system.

Q66 Mrs Laing: Can we begin by examining the truth or otherwise of what you might call the popular perception of the relationship between civil servants
and Ministers? Do senior civil servants welcome frequent change of Ministers because the more Ministers who pass through a Department and the shorter the term a Minister serves in a Department, the greater is the power of the civil servant compared with the power of the Minister because the Minister is only temporary?

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** No, I do not think civil servants look at it that way generally. I know this is often a perceived myth and it was sometimes a view in local government as well, but I just do not think it is that way. There are a number of reasons why it is absolutely the case that senior civil servants want continuity. First of all, in a way that perhaps is not often recognised by politicians, the staff in a Department look to the Minister very strongly in terms of the atmosphere and style of the Department, or the ways of working. If that constantly chops and changes, it is quite disruptive to the running of the Department.

Secondly, I think all Ministers are Ministers in a hurry. This is quite an important point. I remember talking to David Miliband when I was a non-executive in ODPM, as it was then, and saying he would have to think he only has three years to do what he wants to do. He said, “That is probably a lot longer than I will get”, and he was right and I was wrong on this point. The real challenge you have if you have too regular movement is trying to balance the short-term desire to make an impact with some issues that inevitably are long-game issues that require sustained focus and are going to have an impact well beyond when the Minister might move on.

For those two reasons alone, the disruptive effect and the difficulty of balancing the long-range issues and the short-term impact issues means it is absolutely in the interests of senior civil servants to see continuity. What I suppose I am saying is that we want continuity but we are realistic about the fact that there are political and other reasons why change is going to happen and happen with a reasonable frequency.

**Q67 Mrs Laing:** I think that debunks the myth very well. Thank you very much. Glad to hear what you say. Do you think there is an optimum length of time for Ministers to stay in office to help a Department function?

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** I thought that would be a question you would ask. It is hard to put your finger on an optimum length of time, because it depends hugely on the task that you are working on in the Department. We are talking here about both Secretaries of State and junior Ministers. Clearly, if you look at things like universal credit, this is a very long-game, big-ticket project where there has clearly been huge benefit in having a Secretary of State who has stuck with the task. We can all see that. In other Departments, there may be less of that driving imperative of one big change, so it is hard to put an optimum period on how long a Minister should be in a role, because it so much depends on the task.

**Q68 Mrs Laing:** I suppose there are so few instances of it being more than five or six years that it is quite difficult to compare.

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** Yes, that is right. There have been some but it is very rare, as you rightly say. You can see that if you have very rapid change, within a year or even two years—that is problematic—but it is hard to say whether it should be three, four or five.

**Q69 Mrs Laing:** Perhaps more than two would be better than less than two?

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** I guess that has to be right, but there is no absolute figure.

**Q70 Mrs Laing:** I do not want to lead you, because I am not trying to reach a figure. As a matter of practicality, is there a set process of which Permanent Secretaries are aware by which a Permanent Secretary is informed that their Secretary of State is going to be moved in a reshuffle?

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** Yes, there is. The first point to say is that it is extremely unlikely that you will have any idea, other than the rumours going around in the press, until the day. The point I would make is even when the rumours are going around, everybody knows that this shifts around. What might have been the thinking two weeks before might shift a week before, might even shift, as we know, on the day.

**Mrs Laing:** On the day, indeed.

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** Frankly, anybody who hears a story should think, “Oh, that is interesting, I will wait and see what happens”. So the first point is you wait until you hear on the day.

In terms of the process, the normal process of communication is through to the private offices, so in this case to the Secretary of State’s private office, and they will then communicate through to the Permanent Secretary. That is the normal and typical way.

**Mrs Laing:** Oh, that is interesting. The Permanent Secretary’s communication comes from the Minister, not—

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** It comes through the private office.

**Mrs Laing:** Yes, through the private office; that is what I mean, but, therefore—

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** That is the most likely point.

**Q71 Mrs Laing:** Through the private office to the Minister; so, the Minister is informed first, or the Secretary of State?

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** Well, the Minister will clearly find out first, because they are going to see the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister will tell them. We will not hear before that. It usually works, as it did this time, in a series of changes, the most senior post coming at the beginning and more junior posts subsequently. What I am saying is; how do we get officially told? We will probably hear from the Minister if they have spoken to the Prime Minister. That will happen very quickly, but in terms of the official communications it is usually through to the private office from No. 10.

**Q72 Mrs Laing:** All right. That is what I am getting at and I suppose it is rather different. The case of junior Ministers changing where the Secretary of State is still in place is a rather different situation. But let me get this clear: where the Secretary of State is actually moving, the way in which the Permanent
Secretary discovers that this is happening is not that the Head of the Civil Service speaks to the Permanent Secretary’s private office at the same time as the Prime Minister is speaking to the Secretary of State?

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** No.

**Q73 Mrs Laing:** It comes entirely through the Secretary of State, so the Secretary of State—

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** Well, it comes, as I say, through—

**Mrs Laing:** Yes, through the private office.

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** The Secretary of State will know, again, through the Prime Minister. That makes absolute sense—

**Mrs Laing:** Yes, it does.

**Sir Bob Kerslake:**—because the first group of people who need to be ready to receive the new Minister is the private office, so there is an absolute logic in that. Typically, it happens almost instantaneously and the Permanent Secretary will want to be there on the door welcoming the new Minister, Secretary of State or, indeed, junior Ministers as they arrive into the Department.

**Mrs Laing:** Thank you very much.

**Q74 Chair:** Just following on from Eleanor’s line of thought there, once you have completed a reshuffle, is there a debrief? Do people sit down—youself, Sir Jeremy and a number of others—and say, “Was that a good one? What can we learn from this? Are there things we can do better?”

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** Yes, absolutely. I think there is a debrief in each Department about, “How well did we handle that? Did we get it right? Did we give the Ministers the right information?” That is critical, and there is obviously a civil service-wide debrief—“How well did that process go? What can we learn from it?” There is a constant review and refresh about how we can support the process better. That is built into the system.

It is also worth saying, and I think this is a critical point, that I do this in CLG, and I know a number of other Permanent Secretaries do. I have regular meetings with both the Secretary of State, of course, but also with the junior Ministers. I try to follow up very quickly after they are in their new role to make sure that things are working well. There is often a perception that a change is about simply the change of Minister, whereas very often it is not just a change of Minister, it is a change around portfolio and around the balance of other Ministers in the team and so on. It is really important not just to debrief how the process went, but also to follow up pretty soon after and say, “How are you finding it?” to the Minister, Secretary of State and junior Ministers. I try to do it with the whole team, and I know other Permanent Secretaries do the same. If there is something that is not quite right, there is a portfolio issue that has not quite been sorted or their support in their private office is not quite working or they are worried about the policy teams, catching that early and sorting it is critical.

**Q75 Chair:** As part of that, is there any tender loving care lavished on the fallen? Is there an effort by anyone to explain to them, either at official level or within a political level, why they are no longer on the team? Obviously, there are political reasons to do that effectively because you do not want bruised people rattling around the system.

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** No, it would be fair to say that the communication on the reason for the change is for the Prime Minister to do when he meets the relevant outgoing Minister. It is, in fact and by reputation, a pretty short, sharp, and some might even say brutal, process when people go. You are literally clearing your office the afternoon you have been told. That is the way it works in this country. We are not in a position to brief, and nor would we even try. We clearly express some sympathy and actually feel a sense of sadness and loss because you work very closely with Ministers, but the reason is a matter for the Prime Minister to deal with.

**Q76 Stephen Williams:** You have confirmed, if I have understood it correctly, that there is no formal advance notice of a departure or arrival of a Secretary of State, or a junior Minister for that matter. Civil servants obviously read newspapers, study the body language and whatever, and can see who might be on the upward escalator or heading for the exit door. Is there any informal preparation done for changes?

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** I suppose you do informal preparation since you know a reshuffle is coming.

**Q77 Stephen Williams:** Do you know a reshuffle is coming?

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** Well, if you know—clearly, there are at least some signals in the media that something is going to happen, and as it gets nearer the date it becomes even more certain it is going to happen on a given day—you are clearly ready for the impact of a reshuffle. You will pick up, as I said earlier, stories, rumours and thoughts about who might take what job, but, also as I said earlier, you would be very unwise to assume that what you hear two weeks before a potential reshuffle is going to be the end product of it, because it is like three-dimensional chess, isn’t it, particularly in a coalition environment. There are whole sets of consequential changes that may happen if the planned move does not happen in the way that the planned move was intended. So you might hear all that. You might do some preliminary preparations on what you read in the paper, but the key thing is agility and responsiveness once you know what the outcome is. I put a lot more emphasis on that than second-guessing who is going to get what job. It is being ready for whoever might take the job on, crucially getting on their wavelength and understanding how they see the job. What brief they have been given by the Prime Minister is an important point. What the Prime Minister has asked them to do in taking on this job is critical. That is where you put the time and effort.

**Q78 Stephen Williams:** As part of that preparation, is it contemplated that the personnel around the new Minister might change from the civil service in the private office?

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** Yes, absolutely right. I think the private office has to work for the new Minister.
Invariably, if they are a good private office, they can work with many different Ministers and have adapted over time, but I do not make that assumption that it is going to be the same kind of support and the same way of working. I think it is a really first-order mistake if you assume that what worked for one Minister is going to be right for another. We are all individuals. Ministers are very singular in the way they want to do the job, and the first thing is to find out what they want. If that means changing the nature of support, changing actually the way you organise and deploy your policy resource to support them, that is what you have to do, and it has to happen quickly.

Q79 Stephen Williams: On the question of policy, would you say from your experience that reshuffles are destructive to the seamless implementation of policy and decision making, or are they enormously constructive?

Sir Bob Kerslake: It is hard for me to judge in the generality, because I have not done more than this one, but, as I was touching on earlier in my introduction, the fact that you have a clear Programme for Government and that you have clear business plans agreed for the year ahead reduces the scale of disruption because there is a clear Government priority and programme that is already signed up to. Of course, the emphasis, the priorities and the approach will change, but I do not think it is intrinsically disruptive if there is a clear expectation of a programme to be delivered. If I take CLG as an example, there are clear plans around boosting housing supply and changing things around the planning system. Those are built into our business plan for the year ahead, signed up for with the Cabinet Office and the Prime Minister. Those are in line with what was in the Programme for Government, and therefore you have a sense of quite a lot of fixed points of reference that are not going to change overnight from a new Minister coming in, but they will want to put their own stamp on the specific priorities, what happens first and how it is done.

Q80 Stephen Williams: How long would you think—this is quite a broad question and maybe not fair—would be the optimum time for a Minister to decide, “I am going to do something”, and for the policy to actually be implemented including all the processes like legislation, drafting and the parliamentary process? Do you think that matches the average length of service of a Minister, given what you said about David Miliband?

Sir Bob Kerslake: Well, I think it hugely depends on what you are trying to do. Some things you—

Stephen Williams: Suppose you wanted to change the way children learn maths or something?

Sir Bob Kerslake: Well, some of the big changes take years. We are all trying to do things at a faster pace and get things through more speedily and more effectively. What I was talking to David Miliband about was local government change, which was one of the things that was being contemplated. That was not going to happen in a year. It is a two or three-year task at least. You cannot give a single answer to that question. There are some things you can do very fast, within weeks, and if you can do it quickly, you know what you need to do and you can properly engage the right stakeholders, then that is fine, but there are other things that genuinely will take years. Actually, some of the things—if we take major infrastructure projects, they are going to outlast a single Government. Announcements on energy supply today are things that are long-game issues. So it varies enormously on the policy issue, I think.

Q81 Stephen Williams: On a discrete policy, then, like changing how children learn maths—just an example plucked out of the air—in your critical path that the civil service will do, from ministerial light bulb to Act of Parliament signed off by the Queen and implementation in schools, do you come up with a timetable and in that timetable is there something about the fact that the Minister will probably change two thirds of the way through this and somebody else, whose idea it wasn’t, might pilot this through Parliament?

Sir Bob Kerslake: Honestly, the answer is no. We try to do the timetable on what the task requires, and we try to ensure that we have continuity to follow the issue and the project through. As I say, if it is a project that is signed up to by the Government, there is a level of clarity that is not going to change overnight with a change of Minister. To that extent, it is very similar to local government. When I was in Sheffield, quite a few of the big change programmes we were doing outlasted all the changes of political control I spoke about. That is the reality of it. There is always going to be a mix of things that are very particular to a Minister, happening quickly, moving on, and things that are actually enduring and will continue beyond one ministerial change. But we do not plan in a ministerial change or a possible ministerial change in our thinking. We focus on the tasks we have to do.

Q82 Stephen Williams: As long as Government objectives are clear, whether it is coalition agreement or Queen’s Speech, and the civil service is still there, actually the Minister does not really matter very much.

Sir Bob Kerslake: No, I certainly did not say that. Ministers are critically important, because there will be changes around some of the priorities. There will be issues of how the implementation is taken forward, which will vary enormously with Ministers, and there will be the task across the whole of the Department of leading the Department and where the Department goes. Ministers are absolutely critical in all of that. I am just saying it is not a blank sheet of paper when a Minister comes in. One point I perhaps should have mentioned, which I missed and I think is a really important point about the tasks when a new Minister comes in, is the effort you put into ensuring Ministers have connected with key partners for that Department. Often in Government these days we are delivering through others, so it is really important to recognise that often that is the bit that you really have to work at. In other words, the civil service is geared up to shift quickly. Partners do not see things that way, whether it is business or community organisations, and they find it
29 November 2012  Sir Bob Kerslake

…a lot harder. In fact, they are more disincentivised by change. I think, than perhaps we are, because we are geared up to deal with it. Sustaining that relationship with partners is a critical thing that we have to focus on in reshuffles, as well as how we get the Government machinery to work.

Q83 Stephen Williams: That was about policy making. What about delivery of policy? Is it more likely—this is a slightly leading question I know—that policy is likely to be implemented more successfully if the Minister who introduced the legislation or even thought of it is actually still there when roll-out takes place?

Sir Bob Kerslake: I think that has to be right. I also have to say—and we should put our hands up on this—that is true for civil servants as well. We have not been brilliant at keeping continuity on some projects over time.

Q84 Stephen Williams: What matters more, the continuity of the permanent civil service or the temporary Minister?

Sir Bob Kerslake: It is a hard question to answer, but I think you absolutely need continuity in the person taking responsibility for delivery, the civil servant. It helps enormously if you have ministerial continuity, but if you do not have continuity on the project and someone to hold to account, then that is more of a problem, to be honest, which is not to say the Minister is not important. They are crucially important, but as Head of the Civil Service, and as Permanent Secretaries, we need members of staff who own the project, take a grip on it and are going to deliver it come what may. I would say that has been more contributory to problems than the change of Ministers has been.

Stephen Williams: This is not the Public Accounts Committee, Chairman, but I think your counterpart on that Committee might be interested in that answer.

Q85 Chair: Is it true to say, Sir Bob, that those people who come into Government at a change of Government, at a general election, who have been thinking hard about policies, have been working hard perhaps with think-tanks and others and have a strong ideological drive around the policies, very often end up being appointed to see through as Secretary of State and Ministers, whereas those who benefit from a reshuffle will by definition be more of a blank sheet of paper? They are going to come without that experience, and they are going to come in because they are the recipients of a good deal out of the reshuffle rather than because they have policy expertise. Does that mean that they are a bit easier to handle for the civil service?

Sir Bob Kerslake: I do not think so. I am genuinely trying to give you an honest answer. There are issues that work in both directions. Clearly, someone coming in who has been in opposition for a good while and has done a lot of thinking on the issue comes ready with their view about it, but equally if there is a concern, or if that developed view about how to do it has some key weaknesses in it, it may be quite hard to get them to shift off of that, being blunt about it.

You can find yourself with someone who has a fixed view that simply is not going to work, and then there is quite a tussle to say, “Hang on, let us be clear what you are trying to achieve and let us try to rework the thinking”. That is one side of it. The trade-off is with a Minister, as you say, who will come in with quite a steep learning curve to get on top of the issue that they are trying to deliver. I think there are trade-offs, to be frank with you. I do not think it is obvious that one is easier to handle than the other.

Q86 Chair: The traditional mythology for those of us who have been around for some time is that it is the Yes, Minister syndrome, where politicians come and go but actually the civil service goes on for ever and the politicians are footprints in the sand, and, yes, we know the job can be done and the country can be run effectively by the civil service come what may. That seems to have been blown away by the fact that Permanent Secretaries are moving around as much as Secretaries of State now. Do we now have the worst of all worlds? Rather than aiming for Permanent Secretary-like stability at political level, do we not now have political instability at Permanent Secretary level? Are we not in a state of real confusion? You would not run your own sweet shop like this.

Sir Bob Kerslake: I will make two or three points. One is that I never bought and do not buy the Yes, Minister stereotype. I can say that as somebody who has come in from outside only over the last two years. The truth is that civil servants are absolutely geared up to deliver the wishes of Ministers. They do not come in thinking, “We will outlast this Minister”. I have not experienced that view of the world from civil servants at any point in my conversations with them. It is really important to say that that perception of it is simply not correct. Civil servants are geared up to deliver the wishes of the Government and of their Ministers, and that is what they single-mindedly focus on.

The second point I would make, though, is yes, we have had a lot of turnover at Permanent Secretary level; too much, actually. I would not have wanted this much turnover. There is a whole raft of reasons why it has happened, and, of course, you often have a situation when you change Government that some Permanent Secretaries will consciously stay on to see in the transition and then go, and that was partly what happened. That is one of the reasons for the turnover. Then we had the very sad instance of Lesley Strathie getting a serious illness. Others have moved on to other jobs and so on. I think we have had a lot of turnover in this period, but I do not see that as either desirable or the norm. What I would want to aim for is more stability in the Permanent Secretary leadership at the top.

Q87 Chair: But not more Permanent Secretary in the political leadership; you are content to live with whatever reshuffles bring you?

Sir Bob Kerslake: Well, look, as I said—Chair: Doesn’t that irritate you, Sir Bob? You are a very effective manager. Come on, you cannot really be happy when the alleged boss keeps rotating, surely?
**Q88 Chair:** You are constantly telling Ministers through the codes and whatever what their behaviour should be on the most trivial thing, and yet how we run the Government you feel is a little bit too precious to have a view on.

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** No, what I am trying to say is I think if you are coming in my shoes there might be an argument that says, “Don’t ever reshuffle, because it is inconvenient, and I would rather have continuity”. I am saying that is an unrealistic wish as a counsel of perfection. We would like to keep the amount of movement down, and that is what the Prime Minister is committed to, but there are going to be reasons why the Prime Minister will want to change people, and we should just know that and live with it. I just do not buy this argument that the only successful organisations are ones that do not change people at the top. You can have, frankly, the wrong people at the top, and they act as complete drag anchors to a place that needs changing. I am not in the camp that says it is always right to keep people indefinitely in roles because it gives you continuity. Some change is actually a good thing as well.

**Q90 Fabian Hamilton:** I am from the other great Yorkshire city, Leeds, and I remember your tenure in Sheffield, obviously. I was a councillor for 10 years before becoming an MP. The Institute for Government has said in its paper *Shuffling the Pack* that it might be possible to carry out a phased reshuffle with a handover period of a week or so between the appointment decisions being made and the new team taking up that post. What do you think about that? In your opinion, could it work? Would it be possible?

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** Yes, I have seen that. Bluntly, I am not convinced. I think the pace and the rapid movement is the right thing. What is amazing, depending on when the reshuffle is done, is how quickly a Minister has to get in to do their job. In the case of CLG, our Ministers were on the floor the following day to handle business. Now, if you have a Minister who you know is going but you have to wait a week for him to go, I think that is a horrible position to put them in. I am not sure it is helpful either. Somewhat brutal though it is, I think the way it is done now is better and we just get on with the new arrangement, I really do. I am not convinced about it. I do not think it is necessary.

What I do think is good, and I should have mentioned earlier, is something the Minister for the Cabinet Office has developed, which is a much more organised induction programme involving the Head of Propriety and Ethics, Sue Gray, and myself to brief those new Ministers very soon after they are given their role. I personally would prefer to keep with the rapid change and then build in some intensive induction support in the way that is now being done.

**Q91 Fabian Hamilton:** Presumably, there would be absolutely no impetus for a Minister who has been told that he or she is moving but not for another week to actually do anything in that week?

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** That is the problem. I think it would be very unfortunate for them, and then they would be going into Parliament and trying to deal with things with everybody knowing that they are off in a week’s time. It is not practical, I do not think, or realistic, if I am honest with you.

**Q92 Fabian Hamilton:** My thought exactly. Moving on slightly, often when we know that a reshuffle is going to take place the media is full of speculation, and it is all about who is going to be doing what job and who is in and who is out. How far do you think reshuffles are driven by the media both in terms of the timing and the decisions that are made about who has moved where, and how much is it really in the hands of the Prime Minister?

**Sir Bob Kerslake:** It is hard for me to answer, because these are all matters for the Prime Minister and his Chief of Staff. They do the principal legwork on this. I do not personally think it is driven by the media, I think the Prime Minister knows what he wants to do, and it is about much more to do with the balance of the teams, the consequential impacts if you move one person and then another, what the tasks are and how then it is for the Prime Minister and his team to say what he might do about that.
the working relationships are going. These seem to be much more important factors than what is in the press.

Q93 Fabian Hamilton: But media speculation is often frighteningly accurate, isn’t it? I know you said that sometimes you do not know until the actual day, but I have always been amazed at how accurate the media can be days before a reshuffle. Aren’t you?

Sir Bob Kerslake: They can be accurate. They can also be spectacularly inaccurate as well. They will have their sources, and who knows how they get the information they do, but if you are asking me if that influences the process, I am not convinced it does, really.

Q94 Chair: Sir Bob, just to go back to this necessity for reshuffle, normally if an organisation has someone—if there is a scandal, a death or some other unfortunate incident, people are replaced as and when needed. No one is saying there should not be change at the top levels of Government, but I think the fact that it is not done on an as-needed basis, that there is almost a ritual element to this and it builds up and there is quite a big set of changes, cannot be good for effective Government.

Sir Bob Kerslake: That is obviously a matter for the Prime Minister to reflect on how he wants to deliver change. There are pros and cons. There is a value in knowing you are going to go for an organised single change, and I could see your argument for saying a staggered change might be more manageable. The difficulty with the staggered change approach is the point I was making earlier about consequential: that you always have to think through what happens if you move X to one post and then what flows for the place they were in and the place that they are going. It sounds okay in theory, but very quickly you would find yourself having to do quite a lot of changes around it. Therefore, I suspect you would end up back with doing something quite substantial because of these knock-on effects that are there in the system. What you are trying to get is not just, “I want to change this particular post” but, “I want to get the right team in this Department, and I want to balance that team in that Department against what I have in another Department.”

Q95 Chair: Shouldn’t you get that right if you have just had 13 years in opposition? Shouldn’t you have already made some of those judgments?

Sir Bob Kerslake: I am not saying you cannot get it right; I am just saying it would argue it is not as simple, often, as saying, “I will just move one person”. Sometimes you can do that, and obviously it has happened for reasons you have described, but if it is anything more than an individual move, what I am saying is the consequential effects mean you end up with quite a big set of changes.

Q96 Chair: I am on the record and very happy to repeat my commendation of the Prime Minister for resisting the temptation to shuffle for two-and-a-half years. I know there were particular things around the coalition that might have made shuffling a little more difficult, but nonetheless I think there has been an element of stability. As backbenchers we have all got to know the names of all the Ministers, for example, and who is good and who is not, whereas if again I can go back to something that is on the record, under the previous Administration, when you were not a part of the civil service, I think we heard the other week that junior Ministers had a life expectancy of 13 months. Of course, many of those months were either learning the job or being in a state of semi-paralysis because of a reshuffle coming up. It appeared that this prime ministerial snacking on an almost permanent basis led to a sense of unease and instability throughout the whole Government.

Sir Bob Kerslake: That is another reason why you would not want it. As you say, it would be better to have a full meal rather than lots of snacks, wouldn’t it, on this occasion. That is another reason why fewer, more substantial changes are easier in one sense to manage, aren’t they?

Q97 Chair: Picking up Simon’s point earlier, did I hear correctly that if senior civil servants, Permanent Secretaries, feel that a Minister for one reason or another is not quite up to the job, they have an avenue to yourself or Sir Jeremy to make their views known, and that that is fed in at some point in this process of reshuffle?

Sir Bob Kerslake: It is possible to give a view in the way you have described, yes, but it is more likely that if there is a concern for a junior Minister it is going to be raised with the Secretary of State and hopefully sorted out at that point, really.

Q98 Chair: That really brings us to the definition of what an underachieving or difficult Minister is. I have a view about trying to get the most talented people working for the cause. Sometimes they are the most difficult personalities, but nonetheless there is a managerial aspect here where you get the best out of people and you manage them. They are not necessarily the safest pairs of hands or the people who cause least waves. However, I can see a civil servant saying, “This person is a very difficult person to deal with. They are always demanding. They are always asking. They are a pain in the neck. That is not the sort of Minister we like”. How do you stop that sort of thing happening?

Sir Bob Kerslake: We are very clear, as I said earlier, that all Ministers are a Minister in a hurry. All Ministers are going to be demanding. They will all want to achieve big things and achieve them as quickly as possible, and they all will expect and have the right to challenge if we are not moving things forward in the way they want to see them happen. That goes with the territory, if you see what I mean. So if anybody comes and says that, that is not really the conversation we are talking about at all. It would be much more to do with how they were conducting themselves as a Minister and whether there were issues flowing from that than whether they are a demanding Minister. That is a different point, I think.

Q99 Chair: Now, just help me on the terminology, Sir Bob. There is something that a civil servant can write to the Minister where they feel their advice has
been ignored, and they ask for a direction from the Minister. Could you just help me out on that?

Sir Bob Kerslake: Yes. This relates principally to the accounting officer role. You will be aware that the current model in this country is a ministerial responsibility to Parliament, but Permanent Secretaries have a very specific accounting officer role laid down very clearly in the rules where on this occasion they are accountable directly through, as you know, the Public Accounts Committee for the exercise of those responsibilities. If a Permanent Secretary has a concern about the feasibility or the propriety or the legality or the value for money of a proposed action by a Minister, then they have the ability to say, “I would like a direction from you, Minister, before I will do this.” That is a clear, well-established principle. It is not exercised very often. You will know there were a number in the latter years of the last Government, but I do not think there have been any at all in this Government so far.

Q100 Chair: The fact there have not been any of any political description, let us say—I am not trying to make it a point about this Government, but let us imagine a Government had issued no directives of that sort—would that indicate that you had a bunch of Ministers doing what the civil service tells them to do most of the time?

Sir Bob Kerslake: No, not at all. Very robust debate goes on, and Ministers push very firmly what they want to achieve. It is much more often that through that process of debate you find a way of delivering what the Minister is seeking that actually does not create a problem in the territory that I am talking about. That goes on all the time, and that is just good Government, actually. You want robust debate. It happens internally. You have to have protections that policy advice is not able to be seen by everybody at that point. You reach a position where the Minister is happy that their objective has been secured, and the Permanent Secretary is happy that they are meeting their accounting officer responsibilities. That happens in most cases, as I say.

Q101 Chair: You believe that political primacy exists in this country?

Sir Bob Kerslake: Absolutely; it is absolutely clear.

Q102 Chair: Is there anything we should do to strengthen that?

Sir Bob Kerslake: The thing we are doing, and it is very clear in the civil service reform plan, is sharpening that accountability at the top for Permanent Secretaries and, indeed, lower down. For example, we will be publishing the objectives of Permanent Secretaries. We now have a much more structured way in which when I do mid-year reviews for Permanent Secretaries and, indeed, for end-year reviews I speak to the Minister and say, “How is it going?” That was not absolutely the model before. Not just, “How is it going generally?” but, “How do you think they are delivering against their objectives?” I think we have built a sharper accountability model for Permanent Secretaries between them and their Minister, and that has come directly out of the civil service reform plan.

Q103 Chair: The civil service, of course, is run very professionally, and you are in charge of things like in-service training and making sure that people have an effective personnel policy and that they are developed both personally and professionally. When you look across the aisle at the political classes, do you feel that in order to work with even more effective bosses, chief executives or whatever phrase you want to use—the ministerial political level—without telling people the way they should run their affairs, because you said obviously the politicians must be in control here, do you feel that there could be stronger help to ensure that, with a very small gene pool of 650 individuals in the House of Commons holding down over 100 jobs at ministerial and PPS level, there could be a more rigorous and systematic effort to train the people who will ultimately feed through the system and become Ministers and Secretaries of State? Isn’t a little help called for at the moment, Sir Bob, using your expertise?

Sir Bob Kerslake: No, I think firstly supporting Ministers and investing in them to enable them to do their jobs to the best possible effect is good. I mentioned earlier the work that has been done to strengthen the induction for new Ministers. Departments put a huge amount into briefing and supporting Ministers to develop their role, and none of us come as the finished article. We all need development and training. One thing I do think that has been valuable is the introduction of the non-executives, who do often bring expertise both in the field but also commercial and managerial expertise. They are a resource both to the Minister and to the officials as well. There is a whole range of ways that we can support and develop Ministers and officials and it is not about necessarily going on courses. It is having access to people who have been there and have done this sort of thing themselves.

Q104 Chair: I want to press you on this, because I certainly, and I am sure I speak for colleagues around the table, have never had any induction or in-service training worth the name as a Member of Parliament. That in itself is a problem, but also we are all potential Ministers going to run Departments. You would not expect that of the lowest-level civil servant coming under your wing, Sir Bob. You would have a set of training ready. You would have all sorts of assistance to make sure that if they ultimately were to become the Head of the Civil Service, they would be ready for that job. Don’t you think, in a sense, that due diligence in the work that you do requires looking across the aisle and making sure that the capabilities are there in greater measure than they may be?

Sir Bob Kerslake: I just have to be a little bit careful about this; two things, really. One is we are not expecting Ministers to be experts in their role that they are taking on for a particular area. It is helpful if they have an inside knowledge, and indeed many Ministers do come with that, but it is not a requirement that you are an expert in the area you take responsibility for.
The second point I would make is that we absolutely should make available resources and support for Ministers if they want it in order to develop them in their role, but it is not for me to judge what they need per se. The Ministers themselves have to make the running in what they would require. I was very clear about this when I was in local government. It is a career-limiting thing for a chief executive of a local authority to go to the councillors and say, “You guys need a bit of training and development”; I certainly would not do it. What I would say is all of us need training and development. If you were yourselves to find out where you think you need more, then it is my responsibility as chief exec to ensure you have the support and resources to do that. But the initial drive for it must come from the Minister.

Sir Bob Kerslake: In the time that exists between reshuffles?

Simon Hart: How do you want your reshuffles over the last couple of Parliaments, to what extent does that enable a Prime Minister to be a little more generous on the year fixed-term Parliament contributes to that? Does it enable them, does it give more stable context?

Sir Bob Kerslake: It clearly gives more stable context to the Prime Minister, yes. That must be right. It gives them more of a sense of the time period in which they are working and, therefore, how long they might see Ministers playing their role, yes.

Sir Bob Kerslake: You see the potential benefit of that. I just question its realism. As I mentioned earlier, the Ministers themselves have to make the transition, but in the end the nature of a special adviser job is that it goes—it is very particular to the Minister and what they want. Anybody going into a special adviser role will know that it is not a permanent job. Of course, it is possible that that adviser could be moved around within the adviser group. We now have an arrangement where Ed Llewellyn as chief of staff is in effect the PA. They would not be allowed to do that and they could not cold cock a chief executive in the company, they could not legally hoof out the door as the new Secretary of State arrived, which seems to me quite a brutal treatment of them just because their faces did not fit. What after-care is there for people like that?

Q109 Simon Hart: My last question, if I may, is a HR-related point. We were talking about the after-care for Ministers who are here today and gone tomorrow. In the recent reshuffle, there were a couple of special advisers who were unceremoniously hoofed out the door as the new Secretary of State arrived, which seems to me quite a brutal treatment of them just because their faces did not fit. What after-care is there for people like that?

Sir Bob Kerslake: Clearly we will give them support as individuals if they need it to make the transition, but in the end the nature of a special adviser job is that it goes—it is very particular to the Minister and what they want. Anybody going into a special adviser role will know that it is not a permanent job. Of course, it is possible that that adviser could be moved around within the adviser group. We now have an arrangement where Ed Llewellyn as chief of staff takes an overseeing role for the Conservatives, and similarly, Jonny Oates on the Lib Dem side. There are arrangements that work across Whitehall on this now, but fundamentally the job is, as its name suggests, a special adviser to a Minister. It has to be their personal call that it is someone they think they can work with. If they want a change, then we have to make a change, it seems to me. The difference on, say, a personal assistant is that there is much more scope within a Department to redeploy someone if it does not work in the private office than there is with...
a special adviser. By definition, the special adviser is working with the Minister. You cannot simply redeploy them.

Sir Bob Kerslake: No, and I am not making any comment about their employment position. I am happy to come back and follow up with the detail of that if you want. I am just saying that the nature of the job is one where the Minister must have the right adviser that they want to have. We will look for redeployment but it is much less likely there is going to be a redeployment opportunity for a special adviser and, therefore, they are more likely to be in a position where they are going to leave fairly quickly. But it is our job as an employer to make sure we handle that properly.

Q113 Sheila Gilmore: It is a political role that Ministers have, and I rather suspect—you do not have to agree or not agree, but you might want to—that one reason a Prime Minister might not want a Secretary of State picking his team is that you create different power bases, which become quite powerful, and that might not be entirely popular. Going back to the contrast with local government, even in local government I have seen, as an incoming committee chair, after an election or mid-term, situations where council officers come out with, “Here is the policy we had previously” or, “Here is the idea”. Are you suggesting that does not happen at all? It is the classic Yes, Minister scenario: “Here, we will dig out the policy that we tried with the last Minister and we are going to try again.”

Sir Bob Kerslake: I cannot guarantee that has never happened, but what I observe does not look like that. What I observe is that officials work very hard to understand what the priorities are of the incoming Minister, and how they want to deliver those. They work very hard to ensure the Minister is aware of what has already been signed up to by the Department by way of the commitment in the Programme for Government and so on and try to reach an accommodation between those. That is very much the process that goes on. It certainly is not, “We have a set of policies we are going to foist on you as a new unsuspecting Minister”. It does not look and feel that way at all from what I have seen. That is a genuine view—I am not saying that because it is convenient. It does not feel that way.

Q114 Chair: Sir Bob, to pick up one question that Simon raised, if it is a fixed-term Parliament, it is a five-year planning horizon. Two five-year planning horizons make a 10-year plan. To some, that is a definition of at least greater stability than we have now. You will be able to lay out a course if you are a Government that wins two terms, which could be quite significant. Even under the old regime, where it was likely there would be an election after three and a half, possibly four years, there would be a run-in to that, and there would be a lot of speculation in the media about when an election might be. In effect, you were having a two-and-a-half-year solid known term and then a lot of speculation. At one level, this Committee is looking for stability, not least because of the way we want Government to interact with the House and with Select Committees, but the point I think Simon was making was that there is almost a contradiction between the shuffle and a big turnaround and yet something that I would personally be very welcoming of, which is a longer-term planning horizon.

Sir Bob Kerslake: I guess what I was trying to say was that you can have stability in the Government objectives, in the priorities for a Department, in the way in which you are going to deliver big complex projects, and much of that can and does survive a reshuffle. It has to, basically. You are not going to take a big infrastructure project that the Government have signed up to and committed to and stop it the instant a new Minister comes in. You can, in my view, combine continuity with the fact that you have reshuffles. The two things are not in contradiction to each other necessarily.

Q115 Chair: I know you will be delighted to hear that just before you came in, the Committee agreed to write to all Permanent Secretaries individually to ask them what impact fixed-term Parliaments are having on their departmental planning.

Sir Bob Kerslake: Yes. As I said earlier, I think it is helpful. There is no question that having a sense of a five-year period and what you can achieve is helpful in the way you do things, definitely.

Q116 Paul Flynn: In one episode, Sir Humphrey gave an explanation of the mysteries of secretaries in Government, explaining what a Secretary of State, an Under-Secretary of State and a Permanent Secretary of State did, until he got down to Mrs Brown and said, “She is the secretary, because she writes letters”. Now, the secretaries in Government are not secretaries in any way that the public would understand the role, and neither are they permanent, because since the last election two-and-a-half years ago 18 of the secretaries have changed; the Permanent Secretaries. How disruptive is this? Is it a problem, and do frequent changes of so-called Permanent Secretaries increase the instability in Government?

Sir Bob Kerslake: I agree with you about the title. I can remember recently going into an estate agent and him asking me what my job was. I said I was a Permanent Secretary, and they said, “Secretary? Now, that is a good job, and isn’t it great that they made it permanent for you?”

Paul Flynn: They thought your career had stuck in the mud a bit.

Sir Bob Kerslake: True. So you are right to say explaining this to the wider public is quite hard. Of course it helps to have stability in the Permanent Secretaries. I said earlier we have had more movement and more change than I ideally would have wanted. There are particular points where you do see change—typically, at elections. In terms of career planning, Leigh Lewis and David Normington, for example,
took it past the date of the election, and then went. That is not unusual; indeed, very helpful. But by and large I would like to see more continuity, and I am hoping we will get this having been through a period of a lot of change.

Q117 Paul Flynn: What happens if there is a change of Permanent Secretary and Secretary of State that coincide? Does that not have a devastating effect on the Department?

Sir Bob Kerslake: Not necessarily, actually. As I said earlier, we tend to think of this from the top, but think of it as a Department, and actually there is a whole lot of stability that is potentially still there both from the private offices and others. It is not necessarily a problem. Indeed, many Permanent Secretaries who go speak very fondly of their first Minister, and it was often the case that they came in alongside a new Minister. While in theory it could be a big problem, I am not personally convinced that it is.

Q118 Paul Flynn: We have this view of Government that Ministers are here today and gone tomorrow and that the role of the civil service is to provide the continuity, the stability, to provide the memory of the Department, but if they are changing, that does not apply.

Sir Bob Kerslake: No, I agree that in an ideal world you would not want to see as much change as we have seen recently. I am quite clear about that, but I am also saying there is a lot of continuity and corporate memory within Departments that you can draw on. I came into the job not having worked as a civil servant at all, and I relied hugely on people inside the Department who had worked in the area that I am responsible for for quite a long time, knew the field and were immensely helpful and supportive to me in the job. The fact that there is discontinuity at the top does not mean the whole thing is a problem. You actually have a lot of stability and continuity within Departments that you can draw on.

Q119 Paul Flynn: On the question of diversity in the civil service, have the recent changes reduced the percentage of women as Permanent Secretaries? Can I raise another point with you on this? I saw a report that of the 20,000 applicants for the fast-track entry to the civil service last year—I think about 600 actually get through—one of them were black.

Sir Bob Kerslake: On the first point, about the reduction in women, the short answer is yes. A doubled over the last decade. Over a third now are women, but we should be on 50%, and that is where I would like to get to. I would like to over time return to the point that fleetingly Gus got to, which was 50:50 at Permanent Secretary level. Hopefully, that answers your first question. The second question on the fast stream is a more complex one, and I did a lot of work on this. The specific issue was actually the number of black Africans that we recruited. The number of people from ethnic minorities, in fact, is quite high and representative of the population, but we have done less well on a particular group within that. That is the thing we have to focus on improving. We have a lot of work being done with outreach groups to improve that particular representation. I am happy to send you a note on that if it would help.

Paul Flynn: What I quoted to you was reported at a private seminar recently.

Sir Bob Kerslake: I am very aware of the issue, but we have to distinguish between the proportion who are from ethnic minority and the proportion who are from a particular ethnic minority where we did not do as well.

Paul Flynn: Okay; thank you.

Q120 Chair: Sir Bob, that has been very helpful. Obviously, you are telling us that the reshuffle process, while it is no doubt painful, it is necessary and that by and large from the civil service perspective it is run in an effective way?

Sir Bob Kerslake: Yes.

Q121 Chair: We will not tell anyone—it will just be in the public transcripts so no one will know—but are there things that you think we ought to be addressing, and making sure that the reshuffle process is even better than it clearly already is?

Sir Bob Kerslake: What would I say could improve on this? I think the follow-up after a reshuffle is quite important. That ought to be built into the system. I think most Departments do it. I think it is really important that you follow up and check. Don’t assume that it is all working okay with the Minister; that they are asked that question I think is really quite important. Ensuring that the support for a Minister is available and that it is not too difficult for them to ask for additional assistance in the way you described I think is really important as well. We have to retain the thing we tried this time round that I thought really worked, which is an immediate induction programme or induction event for new Ministers where they can ask the questions of other Ministers about, “What is it like?”, the practical things about being a Minister and what works and what does not. I think those are all things that happen after the reshuffle that are really important. I would focus on that territory as being the area I think we could do better on.

Q122 Chair: Finally, on the interaction with Parliament, it seems that reshuffles are at the media gossip level, there is a flurry of activity and then it is all over. We often hear from witnesses that we live in a parliamentary democracy and that parliamentary sovereignty is the key to that. We all have our own views about that particular issue, but if that is true should there not be some process of report at the very
least so that when many top executive positions in the Government have changed, Parliament is at least given the courtesy of being informed? Secondly, could that take the form of new Ministers coming to Select Committees, for example, and actually presenting their credentials?

Sir Bob Kerslake: In terms of informing them, that is obviously a matter for the Prime Minister, but I think you can see the logic of a process of simply letting Parliament know. But I think it should be clear that the accountability is with the Prime Minister to make the decisions and to be held to account for what he has done in a reshuffle. That is the Government view, and it would be the clear view that we would put forward here.

On your second question, it is perfectly possible to invite Ministers to Select Committees to talk about how they see their role going forward. That can happen now. What you are not having is some scrutiny committee to confirm the appointment. As I say, the accountability must be with the Prime Minister for the appointment, not an approval process through the Select Committees. I think that would be problematic. Chair: Okay. Sir Bob, thank you very much for your time this morning. We appreciate you coming to see us. If there are further things that come to mind once you have left us, please drop us a note.

Sir Bob Kerslake: I will follow up with a note, yes. Thank you very much.

Chair: Thank you.
Thursday 6 December 2012

Members present:
Mr Graham Allen (Chair)
Mr Christopher Chope
Paul Flynn
Fabian Hamilton
Simon Hart
Tristram Hunt
Mrs Eleanor Laing
Mr Andrew Turner

Examination of Witness

Witness: Rt Hon Lord Turnbull KCB CVO, Former Cabinet Secretary, gave evidence.

Q123 Chair: Welcome, it is a very great pleasure to see you. I think you know what we are about here today, Andrew. We are the baby of the Select Committees, but we hope we are beginning to punch our weight on one or two issues. The one we are looking at today is about reshuffles and whether they are done well, whether they are a good thing or a bad thing, so just a general run round the course on that. We started this inquiry, incidentally, before the last reshuffle rather than as a reaction to it, so it is a free-ranging debate on reshuffles rather than anything critical or commending the way in which the last one was done in particular. In fact, probably the best question is how we are going to do this in the future if we want to do it better. Would you like to make some sort of opening statement?

Lord Turnbull: Yes, let me set the scene. It is a pleasure to sit on this side. I have spent a few days grilling people sitting over on that side in this very room. To set the scene, let me draw a contrast between managerial organisations, or what Max Weber would have called bureaucratic—and that can be in the public sector or in the private sector, civil service, health service, big companies—and politics. In a managerial organisation, people are moved around and reshuffled regularly. People retire, people are promoted, people are moved sideways, but you ask yourself the question: where do we move this person now or would they benefit from staying and would the organisation benefit from their staying? All the time, this is devoted to two things: one is developing the professional skills of the people who work for you and the other is developing the capacity of the organisation to succeed in whatever it is doing.

Politics is a completely different kettle of fish. Hilary Armstrong pointed out at the seminar that the IIG held, which Peter Riddell chaired, that there is no employer. You get elected by the people and you join the legislature, but most people—and you, Mr Chairman, are probably the exception to this—don’t want to be in the legislature. They are getting there because they want to get into the Executive. When they have got into the Executive, they want to get a better job than the one they have already got. That is the reward. There is no performance pay or anything in this system; all the time people want to get a better job than the one they have already. A reshuffle is not really, in my view, about helping an organisation, the Government department, deliver better. It is about coping with this pressure of competing ambition in the political system. It is also used by Prime Ministers to adjust the party balance—Blairites, Brownites, Eurosceptics, one-nation Tories or whatever—and making the organisation function better comes pretty low down in the scheme of things. I chaired SASC, Senior Appointments Selection Committee, in the Civil Service—it would be called a nominations committee in a company—and in a private company there is succession planning to say who is in the present job, how long have they been there, how well are they performing, what is the pipeline of possible successors and what do we need to develop them, but all that seems to be pretty weak, if it exists at all in the political system. You come down to how it could be done better and the answer is to think more in terms of what will make this organisation function better and a bit less about giving weight to the political politics and the distribution of rewards.

Chair: Very helpful.

Q124 Mr Chope: Those opening remarks raise a whole host of questions, but can I start by asking who advises the Prime Minister on reshuffles, in the Civil Service obviously?

Lord Turnbull: I would say I think it is principally the inner group of the Chief Whip and the Leader of the House.

Q125 Mr Chope: But what about within the Civil Service, is there anybody?

Lord Turnbull: I do not think there is any systematic way in which the Civil Service comes into this. When a reshuffle is being planned, you might have been asked, “What is the buzz in the Department about so and so? Are they successful? Are they working well with civil servants?” but there is no systematic way of capturing that information. Occasionally, I have had a situation where a Prime Minister says, “I am thinking of moving X” and I say, “Really?” That is on the basis of what my colleagues would have told me about how someone is working in a Department, but it is not a systematic process. In a good reshuffle, there is a degree of planning beforehand, usually a matter of days, and you start by listing who is where, who you want to move out, who you want to move up, and then gradually work out all the consequences. I would have said the Chief Whip was the principal adviser in that process.
Q126 Mr Chope: When there is a reshuffle, do you think it makes any difference to delivery of policy?

Lord Turnbull: It can do. In the last reshuffle, the Prime Minister, aided by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, was trying to make a statement about green policy and renewables coming a bit lower down in the priority and more about the development of infrastructure and more about a more business-friendly energy policy. But in general I do not think policy is the main thing, I think it is about building the team and getting a Cabinet that is loyal and cohesive and works to the Prime Minister’s wishes.

Q127 Mr Chope: Do we assume from that that in the most recent reshuffle the Prime Minister did not think that that was working and that is why he had a reshuffle or was there some other reason for it?

Lord Turnbull: Why was there a reshuffle? It is just assumed that after about two years there should be one. When President Obama appointed his team when he was first elected, he appointed Hilary Clinton as the Secretary of State. I do not think there was any assumption that Hilary Clinton would do anything other than serve the term, and Tim Geithner as Treasury Secretary likewise, whereas here it is just assumed that governments need to be refreshed. It was actually quite commendable that at the last reshuffle there was less arbitrary movement and the big beasts of the Government mostly stayed where they were. You could say it was one of the better reshuffles, but the question is why it was needed at all, and that is because there are people competing to take these places.

Q128 Mr Chope: Where would ministerial competence stand in the pecking order of reasons for reshuffling?

Lord Turnbull: I think ministerial competence does get judged, but what are the criteria of it? Is it are you a good manager? Do you think strategically? Do you have a consistent pattern of delegation? How much you delegate is a matter of choice, but do you behave consistently? Or are you good on television or, what used to be the case, because he is very good in the House? I think that counts a lot less but clearly if you are not good in the House it counts against you. Running your Department really effectively comes quite low down because I do not think there is any systematic way in which it gets reported.

Q129 Mr Chope: We have heard evidence before that there are different styles. Sometimes Prime Ministers want to have a reshuffle that results in ministerial marking, so you have a strong Secretary of State and then some Ministers of State who have a different view, and sometimes you want to have a Secretary of State who has a whole lot of junior and middle-ranking Ministers who share the same ideological outlook and really want to get on and push things forward.

Lord Turnbull: Under the previous Government, no ministerial team lasted more than a year. You had Defence, four Ministers in five years, the Home Office roughly the same. Absolutely crucial major Departments with massive rotation and sometimes there were five or six Ministers, and then in a reshuffle you’d find that four of them had moved and after two reshuffles they had all moved. This cannot be good for continuity of policy and making sure that, firstly, the policy is thought through and, secondly, there is a consistent delivery. Now, I have come across one or two exceptions of people who have stayed a long time in the job and really got to know it and got respected by the Department, learnt what the subject was all about, got to know all the players, all the stakeholders in it, but too often people have moved too fast for no particular purpose.

Q130 Mr Chope: Even against the wishes of their Secretary of State?

Lord Turnbull: Sometimes. If someone is getting promoted from Parliamentary Under-Secretary to Minister of State, the Secretary of State would say, “Welcome, it is a promotion. I am not going to stand in the way of someone’s promotion”. But the idea of a ministerial team that meets as, say, the executive group in a plc is not really there. They may meet on a Monday morning to catch up on what is happening, but I have not really seen them operating as a consistent group where you are really planning the work in the Department, and moreover planning the development of people in that team, the younger members in that team. You have an apprenticeship system but, first of all, the master does not choose his apprentices and then does not spend a lot of time developing the apprentices.

Q131 Chair: Given that the biggest Department of state is the Whips Office, shouldn’t that be one of the functions of the Whips Office to do more on the personnel and the development side?

Lord Turnbull: The Whips Office is the nearest Government gets to an HR department but it is not a very close analogy at all. The whips are there to transact the Government business, fight fires, deal with personal conflicts. It is quite a short-term stuff, but that would be the place where you would say, “Who do we have and who of the younger ones is looking promising? What would be a sensible next move for them?” including when it would not be a sensible next move for them, and then planning this development. I have not seen Whips Offices working that way, often because even with big majorities, the day-to-day pressures are great. With big majorities you have almost the opposite, because you are dealing with the fact that there are a very large number of people who would like to be in Government who aren’t, or who have been and felt that they were prematurely cut off in their prime. Dealing with the personalities of politics takes up an enormous amount of time. If one of them at least, the Deputy Chief Whip or something, said, “I will stand aside from this fray and look at our talent, what we have, what they really need to do next and then start to plan it” it would be a great improvement, but it is very difficult to do given all the other things that the whips have to do.

Q132 Chair: It is very countercultural, and I am speaking personally as a whip in the first Blair
Government, where we had 100 majority. It was seen as a weakness that colleagues could or should have some training or some personal development or be nurtured in any way. That was seen as “not what we do here”, even with that large majority where you would have thought there would be a lot more slack, there would be a lot more play, to get 70 people out of the House, for example, and be ambassadors for this Government policy or that.

Lord Turnbull: I do not know whether you have taken evidence from Anthony King. If you haven’t, it may well be worth your while. He sent round a questionnaire a few months ago and the main question was, “How long do you think you need to be in a job in order to get on top of it?” I said at least three years. He told me, “Well, you are a bit of an outlier here. Most people thought it was more like three months”.

He then wrote about this. One of the reasons why I think three years is important is a lot of businesses are transacted in international fora. If you go to, for example, the Agricultural Council, you will find yourself dealing with an Agriculture Minister from the Netherlands who has probably been there for years and it makes a difference in where you are in this pecking order. If you are the new boy or girl in that, this business of all these negotiations and doing deals here and there is that much more difficult. Do you want to then get elected as the doyen of that group? It would be someone who is probably quite influential posts. Football managers don’t last long, constantly changing, you never get the more pecking order. If you are the new boy or girl in that, and it makes a difference in where you are in this G7, the IMF, something or other committee, if you have been there a while. If you are constantly changing, you never get the more influential posts. Football managers don’t last long, but some Ministers last even less.

Q133 Chair: Given that the Whips Office is not the location of a personnel function or a function that can do the job that I think you are alluding to, Andrew, where would that lie? Is this within No. 10? Is it a good old George Wigg sort of function that he used to do for Wilson? Is it a Cabinet Office function? Should there be a separate and defined post to actually look at some of this personnel issue stuff?

Lord Turnbull: I think that George Wigg was probably looking for dissenters and defectors and people with dodgy pasts and things. I don’t think he was an example of positive development. I do not think it is the job of the Civil Service and the Cabinet Office. They have their own system to look after, and it is not perfect but it has a great deal more rationality to it. But setting aside someone, one of the Ministers in the Cabinet Office, say the Oliver Letwin figure, he is working quintessentially on policy, but is there someone who is looking at the development of the Government and its talents? You could assign someone, one of those Cabinet Office Ministers—and there are usually quite a lot of them—to take this on. It would be someone who is probably quite experienced but is not seeking further advancement themselves but is prepared to do a job that requires a certain amount of application. It is not very glamorous but it would pay off, I think.

Q134 Paul Flynn: Taking the point you made about somebody standing slightly aside from the political fray, which is this Committee’s role, I think, as we are all above the petty party politics and ambition that we see about us, the last reshuffle—without naming any names and taking what you said—there was one Minister who is mature, greatly experienced, a reformer, very good on television, brilliant in the House, who was replaced by someone who is none of those things. It was suggested that old lace had been replaced by arsenic, which is probably an accurate reflection in that it was. It was not about talent being replaced by even greater talent. It was a question of priorities, in a Department where there is huge scope for tackling problems that have not been solved for 40 years. It did seem to be this reshuffle is a tool for extending and enlarging prime ministerial power so that Ministers are kept in a state of perpetual terror of losing their job. Do you think there is a case for a rational way of assessing the work of Ministers and the ability of Ministers?

Lord Turnbull: I think it could be more systematic. It is not easy because there are no financial metrics that you can use, but some process where once a year you go through your performers and say who is doing well, who needs to stay longer, who needs to move on would help. The other problem is you get accidents, Liam Fox, for example. Because you rarely bring in people from outside, once someone at the top leaves unscheduled, it then creates a whole cascade of jobs down below. You have Philip Hammond in Opposition training himself to be the Chief Secretary, actually was doing a lot of work learning about public expenditure. Because of the Coalition, he then ends up at Transport, and then he ends up at Defence before he has even really got to grips with the Transport portfolio. I am not sure how you deal with that given the problem that you have to choose Ministers principally from this one group, the ruling party. You cannot go out as Obama could do or even what the French President can do, which is go and choose someone like Christine Lagarde who you think would do the job well. If the French Finance Minister resigns, you do not have to disturb the whole of the rest of Government in order to find a replacement.

Q135 Paul Flynn: Part of the telling evidence we have had, and perhaps surprising evidence to this Committee, is that reshuffles are peculiarly a British phenomenon. It does occur elsewhere, but we heard evidence that it was necessary to explain to a group of German civil servants what a reshuffle was because they have only had half a dozen since 1947. Do you think, in your experience as Permanent Secretary, that reshuffles were beneficial? What sort of rational ideal system should we have?

Lord Turnbull: I think you may get some benefits from them, but they do a lot of damage as well. One of the reasons reshuffles are more common is, jokingly probably, it is said Britain has 80% of all the junior Ministers in the world. Under the Ministerial Salaries Act you have this number of jobs. No one has ever said, “How many Ministers do we need?” They say, “Here is this number of jobs”. The Executive is contracting like mad, but we still have whatever it is, the 110 jobs in the Ministerial Salaries Act, despite creating a vast cadre of jobs in the devolved
Administrations. When the Scottish Ministers in a sense moved out, we did not say that means there will be 10 or 20 fewer Ministers. The same number of Ministers were retained. We also found that there are unpaid Ministers and Ministers with rather strange assignments. That is because the Ministerial Salaries Act is the Prime Minister’s bag of patronage and he does not want to cut that down. In terms of reducing the number of MPs, some people say, “I think this is a jolly good idea” but I do not think it is a good idea to retain the payroll vote at the same size with a House that is 50 smaller because that 50 all comes off the Back-Bench quota. That is one of the most controversial aspects of the proposal. There are two reasons for reducing the number of Ministers.

Now, there is a second reason—why do the Germans not understand this? They have a concept that we do not have. It is called the State Secretary. The State Secretary is often a senior civil servant in the Department who is then recruited to become the Minister’s deputy. They become a kind of unelected Minister and these are the people who do a lot of the work, someone like Horst Köhler. I first knew him when he was head of the Ministry of Finance in Germany. He then became the State Secretary and then went into politics and even became the President of the Republic. You have not just one but two layers of Ministers and when other organisations all round the world are basically reducing hierarchy, the one hierarchy that has not been reduced at all is this pecking order between Cabinet Ministers, Ministers of State, Parliamentary Under-Secretaries. Why do we need this distinction at all? It is a completely meaningless and unnecessary distinction.

Q136 Paul Flynn: You mentioned the case of Liam Fox, which is interesting for another reason, because it was not referred to the ministerial code that was set up by Gordon Brown. One Minister was referred under Gordon Brown’s Government and, in fact, the person responsible who should have conducted the investigation resigned, which was not well known. His replacement was universally rejected in a pre-appointment hearing by a Select Committee, though he actually took the job in spite of that. In fact, nobody has been referred to the ministerial code, I think Baroness Warsi was the only one, who confessed that she had committed some minor offence anyway, but those who were accused of much more egregious possible offences were not referred. The code seemed to have withered and disappeared with what the Committee decided was a patsy, a puddle in charge of it rather than a Rottweiler, and this is regrettable. Is this going to further degrade the quality of Ministers and the effectiveness of an objective system of measuring the worth of Ministers?

Lord Turnbull: I think in the Liam Fox case, he was bang to rights, really. He had been running an unaudited special adviser, that was the first charge against him. The second charge was that, in my view, he had been trespassing on the policies of the Foreign Secretary and was freelancing on policy, particularly on Israel. I do not know that you needed an investigation because once this was all revealed, his position became untenable. Likewise David Blunkett.

Q137 Paul Flynn: I am curious about when you were Permanent Secretary and whether there was any written assessment made of the effectiveness of previous reshuffles. We see the case now, and I think you have rightly referred to it, of Ministers being in the job for two years and suddenly, often inexplicably, they are branded as failures for life. The way that the present Prime Minister deals with this is to offer them a consolation knighthood in many cases. Do you think this is something that is a sensible use of the honours system and an effective way of running the country?

Lord Turnbull: Well, if you have served as an MP for 40 years or something, relative to the other things that people get honours for, I do not begrudge that myself. Using the honours system as a consolation or giving people an ambassadorship or a high commissioner post, is a bad idea. There are also cases where people are given jobs that do not really exist, like you are ambassador for this subject. I think the answer is that when people leave, they should leave and come and work in committees of this kind.

Q138 Paul Flynn: If I could just ask finally, it is questionable whether anyone would want to have the same honour as Sir James Savile or Sir Cyril Smith or to be rewarded. This Prime Minister has uniquely set up a special committee, because it has not existed before, to give honours to MPs. Again, the value of honours for MPs I am afraid is greatly degraded now. Could you tell us how we could improve the reshuffle system in your view? What should be done?

Lord Turnbull: I was talking to the Chairman briefly when I came in, and one of the things that has changed is we have fixed-term Parliaments so there is some framework in which to plan. Secondly, you should assume that someone who is moved into a major post, means you are going to give them the run of most of that Parliament and you only move them if there is an overwhelming need to do so. Thirdly, as we have discussed earlier, either the Whips Office or someone working for the Prime Minister in the Cabinet Office should sit down at a time when there is not a reshuffle planned—you are not doing this to deal with what you are going to announce next Monday—and conduct a regular audit of what resources the Government has...
available, who is particularly promising, who is possibly quite good, has some good qualities as a Minister but they are in the wrong job. You can then think, okay, when a reshuffle next takes place, I have then have this pool of information to draw on. It is all less ad hoc.

Q139 Tristram Hunt: You mentioned Philip Hammond’s work before the election seeking to become Chief Secretary and the work he did before that and the preparations for that job. Now that we have fixed-term Parliaments and understand the political cycle, do you think there is any space for having a much more codified timeline and relationship for when Civil Service briefing begins for potentially incoming Ministers?

Lord Turnbull: I think it is probably there now. When you had this doubt as to whether a Parliament was going to be a four-year one or a five-year one, the undertaking that you would start at least a year before the end of the Parliament, of course, did not mean anything because you might get a week or you might get a whole year. The assumption that it could start a year before the end of the Parliament would be very helpful.

The question then is: do people take it up. Some Ministers are quite diligent and make use of this, and some do not really bother. Then you have a situation where the Minister that the Civil Service has been working with does not actually get the job. I had a case when I was a Permanent Secretary at the Department of the Environment. I was informed that Transport was going to be reintegrated to turn it into DETR and that John Prescott would be the Secretary of State for DETR, but the shadow Cabinet Ministers were Frank Dobson and Joan Ruddock. We went to all sorts of lengths and I talked to John Prescott but in a way that did not “diss” the incumbents. So that sometimes happens. On the other hand, when Gordon Brown came in in 1997, I do not think he talked to the Treasury about the fact that he was going to do it. He had a very well briefed team and that team came into place. If you are going to make use of this system, there is no point in someone becoming an expert on Social Security and then ending up at Education.

Q140 Tristram Hunt: Is it written down anywhere, that 12-month period? Is it just a nice custom?

Lord Turnbull: It was extended. I think John Major gave an undertaking to Neil Kinnock that this process could start earlier, but I am not sure whether the letter—you might ask the Cabinet Office if this letter, this undertaking, has been renewed specifically in the context of now having a fixed-term Parliament. I think people are just assuming that it would start a year before the end of the Parliament would be very helpful.

The question then is: do people take it up. Some Ministers are quite diligent and make use of this, and some do not really bother. Then you have a situation where the Minister that the Civil Service has been working with does not actually get the job. I had a case when I was a Permanent Secretary at the Department of the Environment. I was informed that Transport was going to be reintegrated to turn it into DETR and that John Prescott would be the Secretary of State for DETR, but the shadow Cabinet Ministers were Frank Dobson and Joan Ruddock. We went to all sorts of lengths and I talked to John Prescott but in a way that did not “diss” the incumbents. So that sometimes happens. On the other hand, when Gordon Brown came in in 1997, I do not think he talked to the Treasury about the fact that he was going to do it. He had a very well briefed team and that team came into place. If you are going to make use of this system, there is no point in someone becoming an expert on Social Security and then ending up at Education.

Q141 Chair: We are just about to write to every Permanent Secretary to ask them what the five-year time horizon has now done for their planning, which we hope is a very beneficial thing from their point of view. I think we should include in that the apprenticeship period but also the purdah period might be useful just to add that into that letter. Just very quickly, Andrew, you mentioned this thinning out of the political classes at the top of Ministries. Of course, if you look at the American example, they may only appoint the Secretary of State but, of course, they sweep out the top three tiers of the public service. Is that something you think might be applicable in the UK?

Lord Turnbull: You have a spectrum. On the one hand you have China where you cannot even sweep the floors at the Ministry of Health if you are not a party member, right the way through to Britain where all the way up to the Permanent Secretary and to the Cabinet Secretary you have tenure. The truth is we are actually right at one end of the spectrum. We tend to think that that is the norm. It is not the norm at all. Even Australia has a mixing of political careers and official careers. You could have a different system. What you cannot do, however, is pick one element of the American system, which is the Prime Minister’s ability to make appointments, without picking the whole system, which is the separation of Executive and Legislature, and the confirmation process. Because a Prime Minister with a 100-seat majority—if we ever have that again—with complete freedom and none of the American constraints, is probably over-mighty. I prefer and quite like the system we have. The last Bill passed in the old Parliament finally enshrined that understanding in legislation that the Civil Service serve the Government of the day and will serve the next Government of the day and that people are chosen and promoted and rewarded on merit overseen by Civil Service commissioners. I think if you are going to change it, you cannot just change one little bit of it. You have to have a completely different system. I would start with, as happens in some countries, once you become a Minister, if you are a National Assembly member you resign. That system exists. But you cannot just choose a little bit and graft it on.

Chair: A very strong argument for a proper separation of powers, but we probably will not be able to go there today.

Q142 Fabian Hamilton: Lord Turnbull, obviously one example of that, of course, which I do not expect you to comment on, is police and crime commissioners where you have an executive function dropped into our existing system. But anyway, we will not go there. You mentioned earlier the large numbers of ministerial ranks under the Secretary of State, the Minister of State, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State and, I suppose unofficially, parliamentary private secretaries as well because they are MPs who are neither backbenchers nor in the Executive but form part of at least the Opposition teams. Do you think that there are any advantages or disadvantages in a Secretary of State being able to choose his or her own team? Because so often they are random groups of Members of Parliament, usually from the same party, all thrown together and in, of course, the Coalition case, from different parties all thrown together, and they may or may not get on.
Lord Turnbull: The alternative, though, is you get a coven developing. I am thinking of the days of Wedgwood Benn, who was a very exciting character, and the people around him. They are meant to function as a Government. There is meant to be collective responsibility. The US system, the US Cabinet, does not have that same presumption. They are all bilaterally accountable to the President. You could have that system, but this is a difference and I do not think we have collective responsibility with Ministers who could choose people from their particular bit of the political spectrum.

Q143 Fabian Hamilton: Well, might they not want to choose people who may not be from their political spectrum but somebody that they have worked with and they know is able or capable of doing the job? Shouldn’t we give a Secretary of State more credit than perhaps you have given them?

Lord Turnbull: What happens when that Secretary of State moves? We know they move quite often. The new Secretary of State will say, “He could choose his team. I want to choose my team” and you magnify the instability.

Q144 Fabian Hamilton: So really there are more disadvantages to advantages?

Lord Turnbull: I think there are more disadvantages. Clearly, Ministers have their preferences, but I have seen these preferences misused, “Please find a job for X” or, “I want to hang on to X” even when the general perception was that X is not really performing enough to justify it.

Q145 Fabian Hamilton: How significantly does a change of Minister, or indeed Secretary of State, affect the way in which a department works?

Lord Turnbull: It can do quite a lot because it may be that it signals a change of policy and that may have been one of the objectives of the reshuffle. But it could simply be a change of style, someone who wants to be, in effect, the chairman of the departmental management board and other Ministers say, “Over to you, Permanent Secretary. I do not want to get involved in that. That is your job”. Michael Heseltine, with his famous MINIS, was a very interventionist Minister. Others have said, “I will set the sense of direction and we have to work together on that, but who you put in what job and how they are resourced and so on and getting performance out of them, that is your job”. That bit of it can be as disruptive as anything else. Simply, some people are great workers of boxes and like doing the paperwork, and others work almost entirely by word of mouth. It is these style things that cause as much problem as anything.

Q146 Fabian Hamilton: That is interesting. In terms of handover, though, when a new Secretary of State or Minister is appointed, how formal do you think the procedure should be? Should it be more formal than it is at the moment? It is quite brutal at the moment, isn’t it? You are there one day and then you clear your desk by five o’clock and you are out.

Lord Turnbull: Five o’clock is generous. You are walking down Downing Street and you are out.

Fabian Hamilton: Exactly, so that is pretty brutal. Should there not be a more formal handover process so there is a smoother transition? Because if, as you say, there is a change of style as well as a change of Minister, that is going to have profound implications for the department.

Lord Turnbull: You could start with what happens immediately after the election. There is no handover. There is no formal time to thank your staff because they are all then rushing around trying to attend to the new Secretary of State, nor time to prepare or read anything. Whether the Americans need from the first week of November until 21 January is questionable. You have to change expectations. In a company, you say so-and-so is standing down as chief executive or chairman or something and will be succeeded by such and such on some date. The new person often comes in and is working in a kind of deputy capacity, but I think we work on the theory that there is one Secretary of State, they are responsible for this, and once people know they are going to move off to something else, they just want to get on with it. There are advantages to that, although I think the one exception I would make is I do not see any reason why the Government has to announce who the Ministers are by 6.00pm on the Friday after the election. That is just completely unnecessary.

Q147 Fabian Hamilton: Would not a more formal handover make for smoother Government, more efficient Government, or is it okay as it is?

Lord Turnbull: In a world where I am leaving the job and you are coming into it, it would make sense to say, “Come and talk to me and I will tell you what is going on” and so on. Instead of spending time briefing your successor, you have also moved into some other job and you are being expected to do media in that new job. It is that expectation that you are not allowed time because you are wanted in the new place, so you skimp on the amount of time you devote to your successor.

Q148 Chair: What would be your key reforms to the reshuffle process? If that is dropping a tough question on you, feel free to drop us a line if you prefer.

Lord Turnbull: I think build on the advantages that fixed-term Parliaments give. Create a presumption of longer service. Recognise that experience in the job is an advantage and, in particular, as I have illustrated, it is an advantage in doing business outside the Department, whether it is with the stakeholders. Set up an audit of who you have in Government and a general feeling of how well they are doing and try to look at it a bit more managerially. Sometimes, someone could be doing a brilliant job but you want them out because you are jealous of them. This is like male lions killing the young cubs. There was a whole cadre in the 1997 Government of people coming in as Ministers of State in 1997. How many of them were trained on to become major Secretaries of State? I think there was little incentive of the two guys at the top to develop their natural successors.
Chair: Andrew, that was fascinating. Thank you so much for your time this morning. We appreciate your coming in and giving evidence. If you feel that there is something when you walk out of that door you wish you had said, please drop us a note.

Examination of Witness

Witness: Chris Mullin, Former Member of Parliament for Sunderland South, gave evidence.

Q149 Chair: How are you? Chris, really nice to see you again. It is as if you had never been away.

Chris Mullin: The pleasure is mutual.

Chair: Welcome, Chris. You know what we are doing and you have heard some of the questioning to Lord Turnbull. Would you like to make an opening statement or jump straight into questions?

Chris Mullin: Just to say a couple of things. Firstly, I was the sixth Africa Minister at the Foreign Office in the New Labour Government and in the end there were nine. There were 13 Europe Ministers in 13 years, one of whom, Geoff Hoon, came round twice, the second time for three months. There were eight Secretaries of State for Work and Pensions between 2000 and 2010, 2000 being when that Department was set up. A very complex area, Pensions. Education and Health were turned inside out on an almost annual or biannual basis. On one occasion someone came to see me who had run a small environmental agency for which I had once had responsibility and I said to him, “How many Ministers have you worked to since you assumed your post?” He said, “13” and added, “Between you and me, from the Government’s point of view, it is totally counterproductive”. I have heard the same sentiments expressed by heads of the Prison Service, who do not get to know their Minister very well before they have been moved on, and indeed people in relation to immigration policy.

I will, if I may, just quote you a passage from Andrew Adonis’ book, Education, Education, Education, which I came across since I provided you with my evidence. This is from page 72. Andrew Adonis was in many ways a quite exceptional figure because he had responsibility for roughly the same area of policy for 10 years—I would say that is probably unique in Government, unless you count Gordon Brown as Chancellor—both as a special adviser in No. 10 and then as an Education Minister. His longevity, as I say, is very unusual indeed. He had a policy that he wished to drive forward, academies. We do not need to get into whether it was a good thing or a bad thing, but he had a policy and he wanted to drive it forward and he really focused on that. This is what he has to say. When he became a Minister in the Education Department, having come from Downing Street as a special adviser, he had a policy that he wished to drive forward, academies. Over my decade in No. 10 and as Schools Minister it was subject to six Secretaries of State, three Permanent Secretaries and four Directors General in charge of the department’s schools directorate. In the five years before I became Minister for Schools in 2005, there were four successive Ministers for Schools responsible for academies and there were no fewer than seven Education Department officials in charge of the academies programme during its first eight years, although the figure could be put at 10 for at several points more than one official was in charge within the department’s complex and ever-shifting hierarchy. One of my main challenges was to keep the team of officials responsible for academies energised and focused as the world around them kept disintegrating and reshaping”. He uses the expression “constant flux”. I think that gives a flavour of the problem.

Q150 Tristram Hunt: Can I begin with Lord Turnbull’s last remarks, which were about whether—and we have had this in some of the academic work—there is actually a sort of Darwinian hostility towards growing talent within Government by those at the top. Did you see any evidence of that or was it more the chaos theory?

Chris Mullin: I cannot say I did really see evidence of that. I think as far as Tony Blair was concerned when he was Prime Minister, he did not attach much weight to the junior jobs, and that was part of the problem. One junior Minister remarked to me she thought he used them as sweeties to hand out to the boys and girls in return for good behaviour and so there was this constant throughput. A lot depended as a junior Minister on who you worked for. If you worked for a Secretary of State who was willing to delegate and, indeed, who was in the same office for a long time, then it was really very rewarding and fulfilling. They would leave you to get on with it. Jack Straw is a good example of that. It was a pleasure working for him in my two years at the Foreign Office. He just left you to get on with it, but in one or two other departments I was associated with it was a bit of a white knuckle ride, I put it no higher than that.

Q151 Tristram Hunt: The problem with this is that in a sense it is not a corporation and you are not dealing with an HR team who can manage it. There are 650 sole traders in Parliament and it is a matter of managing that. How do you marry that? Because in your own memoirs, your period in and out of office was partly, it seemed from my reading of them, about your own inability to communicate what you actually wanted. Having lost your job, noises up, there was a suggestion that you wanted to go out of Government and then back in Government. The nature of politics is such that these things are altogether more fluid than a traditional management structure.

Chris Mullin: I think that is right and I do not think there is much you can do about it. You can do a few things to make it more sensible. I think if you have come to office right at the beginning of the term of Government and you have followed that post as the shadow spokesman, it is much easier because you...
have presumably worked up a policy and it is now your job to implement it. The problem arises, as Andrew Turnbull said a moment or two ago, when, like Philip Hammond, you suddenly find, having worked on the Treasury team, you are the Minister of Transport. That must be a bit scary.

In my case, I never went into Parliament with an idea of becoming a Minister because it did not seem very likely at the time. I never let that sort of thing trouble me and I never sucked up to people in the hope of preferment. When the time came, it was two years into the Government and I was put into John Prescott’s vast Department of Environment Transport and the Regions. Up to that time, what little bit of respectability I had acquired had been gained from only opening my mouth on things I knew about. Now I found myself obliged to opine every day on things about which I knew absolutely nothing. That was a bit scary. I remember on a Thursday seeing Helen Liddell, the Transport Minister, announcing the Government’s plans for air traffic control, which was a controversial policy, indeed it appeared to enjoy no support on any side of the House. She stood at the despatch box and she read it out without her head moving either to left or right and without any trace of humour, although actually your Chairman was the whip at the time and he thought she had done it exactly right. I thought to myself, “Well, thank God I am not in charge of that”, and by the Monday I was.

Q152 Tristram Hunt: Do you think the Blair Government was particularly bad in terms of “reshufflingitis” and was that partly connected to Tony Blair’s own absence from a prehistory in Government?

Chris Mullin: I think it probably was particularly bad, but I do not think it was necessarily because of the Prime Minister’s lack of previous experience. I think that New Labour suffered from hyperactivity and they just liked throwing all the pieces into the air and seeing where they landed, annually as it happened. When I went to see him after I had been got rid of as Africa Minister, I gave him the figures that I gave you at the beginning, “I am the sixth, there will be another Africa Minister, I gave him the figures that I gave you at the beginning. He said, “Yes, we do not do this sort of thing.” I was not sure whether I should say that I had been got rid of.” He said, “Yes, we do not do this very well, do we?” and I thought to myself, “Who’s we?”

Q153 Tristram Hunt: Is the solution that it seems this Government is following in terms of its management of reshuffles—you do all the sensible things, you have your shadow Ministers in place, when they come into Government you appoint them to the jobs that they should get, if you get a majority Government you keep them in place for two to three years plus and then refresh as you head in the second half of the Parliament towards the general election? Is that basically what everyone tries and in the middle of that you are going to obviously have your Werrittys and all the rest of it to try to balance it?

Chris Mullin: Yes, I think the present Prime Minister tried to learn from New Labour’s experience, because I have only run into him once since I left Parliament and that was six months after the election. I said, “With all due respect, the only piece of advice I have to offer you is abandon annual reshuffles”. I think he had already grasped the point without any help from me. I think thus far he has handled it quite sensibly, though someone in a position to know said he is lining up another one for a year’s time, so he may be slipping into the old bad habits.

I should just say, going back to your previous question, Mr Hunt, that I do not think hyperactivity was solely confined to the previous Government. If you go and visit a Secretary of State in a Department like the Home Office, you will find that the photographs of his predecessors go down the corridor on one side, round the bend and come back round the other side. If you count them all up, you will find that it is an illustration of the impermanence of office but also a suggestion that other Governments have suffered from the same disease.

Q154 Tristram Hunt: Did you get a sense during your time in Government that that political culture had then moved to the Civil Service as well? Certainly, someone like Andrew Adonis always used to make the point, “Well, all right, we are criticised as politicians for our flux in terms of political appointments, but I have been through four Permanent Secretaries in five years”.

Chris Mullin: Certainly, I quoted Andrew Adonis and he has given the figures there in relation to just one policy. Personally, in the three Departments I was in there was not much of a problem, but I only dealt at a fairly junior level. I dealt with the Permanent Secretaries and they were the same as far as I recall most of the way through, so that was not really a problem. The real problem arises—and I think Andrew Turnbull referred to this just now—in ministerial posts that involve interacting with foreigners or diplomacy. As the Africa Minister, I dealt at Head of State level or Head of Government level and, at the lowest, Foreign Minister level. They do like to see the same face twice, and I think they found it very bemusing that they rarely saw the same face twice. I remember when I had been there a short time an important African came through my office and remarked to me that he had been to Britain four times and he had met a different Africa Minister on each occasion. You are dealing, as Andrew Turnbull said, with foreigners who are usually in office for the whole period, and some of them are very sophisticated. They speak several languages and they know their subject inside out. If you want to engage with them and be taken seriously by them, you need to have some experience in order to be credible.

After a couple of years, I had just got to the point where I really felt I was useful. If I hovered in the atrium of the African Union Conference at Addis Ababa or somewhere, Heads of State would come up and initiate conversations with me without my officials having to go and search them out. At that point you are useful. If you ring them up then, they know who they are talking to. But at exactly that point the man in No. 10 raised his little finger by that much and you are gone. In answer to one of the questions, Andrew Turnbull a moment ago was saying how sudden it can be and that five o’clock may be an exaggeration. Well, in my case, this was the Monday
after the Government changed. I thought I was safe because he had already appeared to have done most of the junior Ministers and I was on the phone at 3.40 pm to my opposite number in the American State Department discussing what we were going to do about the Liberian war lord Charles Taylor and by four o’clock I was no longer the Minister.

Q155 Tristram Hunt: Finally, it was a issue Chris Chope points to, which is that in the Thatcher years basically Mrs Thatcher ran a system whereby—this was Christopher’s analysis—you had ministerial teams essentially of the same ideological strand and you would have a Secretary of State supported by his people on the same wavelength, and then in the Major Administration, because you were managing internal Conservative Party politics, you would almost have man-marking within ministerial teams, so you would have a lack of ideological conviction. Do you have any thoughts on that relationship between Secretaries of State and their Ministers? Are Ministers of State there to blunt the edges of a Secretary of State or to give more power to their elbow?

Chris Mullin: The first thing I would say about Mrs Thatcher’s Administration is that, actually, in her first term she did not have people with whom she was in ideological sympathy in many departments. It was only when she got to her second term that she had sufficient confidence to make the changes that she wanted to make. People like Sir Ian Gilmour were in her first Government and he certainly was not on her wavelength. Your question is should Prime Ministers try to achieve a balance between the different ideological strands contending for recognition.

Q156 Tristram Hunt: In order to make departments function effectively. Do you basically have gridlock if you are trying to balance things out or do you have more effectiveness within the Department if everyone is on the same wavelength?

Chris Mullin: I think it would need to be broadly but not entirely. You need people of a questioning frame of mind, people who do not accept necessarily whatever officials put in front of them. That is one of the main useful qualifications. I do not think their ideology really does matter so much because actually, and certainly I speak of the three Departments I was in, ideologically I did not really have any great problem. Even on air traffic control, I had no ideological objection to what the Government was trying to do. I did wonder about the practicality of it, but it has actually worked quite well.

Q157 Fabian Hamilton: Just very briefly on something you said, I think you are absolutely right about the continuity and the huge number of changes, especially in Africa Minister and so many other Ministers as well, Europe Minister being a classic example. How else do you ensure that talent that comes through the back benches, that people who are certainly able to do the job ever get the chance to do it? I guess you are not arguing for the same Minister to hold the job for the whole of that Parliament, but are you arguing for just less frequent reshuffles or no reshuffles at all?

Q158 Fabian Hamilton: Chris, you said earlier that after two years in post as the Africa Minister you were just beginning to get recognised by Heads of State and other senior officials. Surely two years is not really long enough, is it?

Chris Mullin: As far as that is concerned, no, it was not. Once you were satisfied you had someone in the job who was capable, I would have left them there. There was an Overseas Development Minister, Lynda Chalker, under a previous Administration, who was in for about seven years, something like that. She is highly regarded in Africa even to this day. Actually, if you look at who the most successful Ministers in the last Administration were, they were people who were left long enough to get a grip—Jack Straw, four years Home Secretary, five years Foreign Secretary; Clare Short, six years International Development; Michael Meacher, six years Environment Minister. Those last two were left six years by accident. It was because New Labour, the central command, did not really have confidence in them and, therefore, did not feel able to reshuffle them anywhere else. Plus, of course, they eventually worked out that they were both doing a good job. I regard those as two of the most successful members of the last Administration.

Q159 Mrs Laing: Chris, it is interesting you mention Lynda Chalker because it just occurs to me that that is the perfect example of a Prime Minister using the system to improve the system because wasn’t it the case that Lynda Chalker was a very successful Minister doing what she was doing? She lost her seat in the general election. She was put straight into the House of Lords and continued being a Minister. That is the flexibility that both you and Lord Turnbull have been talking about, the apparent inability of a Prime Minister in the UK to bring in someone from outside. Do you think that that is a pattern that ought to be followed in future?
Chris Mullin: I think Tony Blair actually had a quite low opinion of the pool of talent—I do not necessarily share it but this was his opinion I think—available to him within the parliamentary Labour Party. He was always casting his eye around for bright, intelligent people who he would bust the system to promote. That is why there became this inside track, for example, of people who went from being special advisers into safe parliamentary seats without ever having knocked on a door on behalf of anybody but themselves and then seamlessly became Ministers without even having asked a question from the Back Benches even mildly critical of the official point of view. You can see why he did it, because they were very talented. He did have a good eye for who the talented people were, and they were pretty good, most of them. Some of them were a bit managerialist. He was faced with that problem, and then he looked for people outside for specific tasks—the surgeon Ara Darzi who conducted a review—but that was for a specific task. I think that was quite successful. Historically, of course, there have been examples of people brought in by Prime Ministers from outside supposed to bring more expertise to bear. John Davies, the ex CBI man, and Frank Cousins, the former Transport and General Workers General Secretary, both of whom were persuaded to stand for Parliament in order to become Ministers and it did not really work out. One thinks also of Archie Norman, a very good man, a very capable man, would have been a very good Minister but, of course, given that they were in Opposition for so long he never got the chance. But he was not a very good politician, as I think he would probably concede, so that does not always work.

Q160 Mrs Laing: Thank you. That is an interesting aspect to examine. It occurred to me while you were talking about the length of time that people are Ministers, and so on, to recall Robin Day in his very well documented Panorama interview with Sir John Nott when he said—and I am doing this merely from memory because it has only just occurred to me so I might not have the words absolutely right—“But isn’t it important to look at the opinions of such and such a person because you, after all, are only a ‘here today and gone tomorrow’ Minister?” If there is any justification in that, does that mean that too many reshuffles undermine the stature of Government?

Chris Mullin: I think it undoubtedly does, yes. One of the things I was asked to do quite frequently when I became a junior Minister in John Prescott’s vast Department was to go and address conferences of experts on such interesting subjects—important subjects, no doubt—as coastal erosion or sustainable drainage. Now, I could, of course, like any of you read out a speech that was provided for me, typed out, double spaced and, I might say, jargon ridden, often at very short notice because these were invitations that would start with the Secretary of State and then work their way down until they came to the humble Under-Secretary. I could read out the speech all right, but then the terrifying moment came when the chairman would say, “The Minister has time to answer a few questions”. Now, you do not really command a lot of respect. I felt it was humiliating because the things I knew about I was quite good at, but I was under no illusions that I knew very much about these subjects and neither were the people in the audience. So, yes, credibility does count. You gain credibility, of course, from being in office long enough to master your brief, and that is why I think the most successful Ministers, if you look around, have on the whole been those who have held office for a significant period of time.

Q161 Mrs Laing: Would it be helpful, although I am not sure how I could imagine this occurring, if new Ministers had official training in being a Minister?

Chris Mullin: I think they did. It may not have been adequate, I do not know, but I was not part of it because nobody in their wildest dreams imagined I would ever become a Minister. But I think that immediately before 1997 those who were on the front bench went off to some course at Oxford, it may only have been a weekend school; it may have been a bit more than that. Yes, that would be helpful. You could only do that with your first tranche, as it were, because the others are obviously come a bit later and are plucked from the back benches as you go along. But with your first tranche, an incoming Government should, certainly run some training. I think incoming Governments do. I would be surprised if the present Government did not have some sort of training for its front benchers.

Q162 Mrs Laing: I know I am not meant to answer questions but can I make the point that the present Government did do some work with the Institute for Government, which was actually very useful. Or it would have been useful if we had not been in Coalition, but that is another matter.

Chris Mullin: One thing if I might with your indulgence, Mr Chairman, just add, the question was put to the previous witness about continuity and handover notes when you suddenly found yourself out—I personally always tried to do that. I tapped out a little note about half a dozen key issues and handed it over to my successor and I took them out to lunch usually as well. I remember one of them remarking, who had been in and around Government for a long time, that this was the only time he had ever come across this. It just seemed to me a matter of professionalism, even though sometimes I was bit sad at having left Government, but I did feel obliged to do that. I remember, too, when I left the DETR, which I was very glad to leave, there had been the previous week a very large submission and one of the things I did have a bit of a beef about was aircraft noise over London, which was quite a serious issue. The officials were extremely keen on aircraft noise over London and they put to me this massive survey, which was going to cost I think the best part of a million pounds, and which ostensibly pretended to be checking out what public opinion thought but never asked the question, the key one, about what you thought of aircraft starting at 4.30 in the morning and coming all the way over central London. I rejected it. I said, “This is a complete waste of time because you have already made up your minds what the answer is and it will not matter what the public say—and we can
save some public money here”. Then in my handover note I left a note to my successor saying, “This will be back in your in-tray within the first week after my departure. Look at it sceptically” and it was. He told me afterwards that he cut some of it out, but I think probably they got more or less their way in the end.

**Q163 Mrs Laing:** But that is an example of your personally doing the decent thing because, as you just said, that is a note of professionalism. That is the professional way to do it. It does not always happen, does it?

**Chris Mullin:** Oh, no. I am sure it does not especially when people are very disappointed to have suddenly and surprisingly lost office and they are very sore. They do not really want to talk about it anymore.

**Q164 Mrs Laing:** Exactly, which brings me to what is probably the crux of this whole matter, that actually is it the case that usually reshuffles are not about ministerial competence and putting a competent person in to follow from another competent person or putting a potentially competent person in where the previous Minister has been seen not to be very competent, but in most cases it is for political reasons because it is the patronage and the power of the Prime Minister being exercised?

**Chris Mullin:** I am sure it is a mixture of motives. I do not think it is any one and I think competence is certainly a factor. To be fair to Tony Blair, I think he gave greater credit to competence over whether people agreed with him ideologically. I think Gordon Brown, on the other hand, probably erred on the side of people who were on his team ideologically. About the present Prime Minister, I do not know.

**Q165 Mr Turner:** You said the good Ministers were the Ministers who are good at asking questions or words to that effect. What proportion were or are capable of asking questions?

**Chris Mullin:** I never carried out a survey. I just think mild scepticism of the official point of view is useful in public life. Of course, as I say, if you become a Minister within months of being elected to Parliament, without ever having asked a sceptical question, you may be very bright but you may not ask the right questions. Of course, the most junior Ministers are not expected to ask too many questions. They are expected to do the donkey work in the hope of preferment. Certainly, the nearer the top you get it would have been very useful if you had people in the Cabinet willing to ask some more sceptical questions about, say, policy on Iraq or perhaps question the Chancellor more rigorously on his love affair with the City.

**Q166 Mr Turner:** I am not sure this is particularly to do with what you have been asked so far, but could I ask you about the number of Ministers? We are talking about reducing the number of MPs and that would mean a reduction in Ministers, or at least there seems to be that assumption. Of course, we never reduced the number of Ministers because of Scotland and Northern Ireland and Wales having Ministers. How big or how small should the number of Ministers be, both because of our reducing the number of Members and as the result of devolution?

**Chris Mullin:** That is a good question. Actually, another Select Committee, the one chaired by Bernard Jenkin—

**Chair:** Public Admin.

**Chris Mullin:** I gave evidence to them on precisely this issue. They had a small inquiry on the subject about a year ago. I think the point that Andrew Turnbull made this morning is an important one. If you are going to reduce the number of Members of Parliament, you have to reduce the number of Ministers. If you are going to reduce the number of Ministers, then you need to reduce their function. It is no good saying that the same number of Ministers must carry out all the same functions. For example, if you are in a Department like the Home Office or Environment, Transport and the Regions, which had a lot of legislation going through, at least in the time I was associated with them, then you need a supply of junior Ministers to do the donkey work on committees. That, too, is not very satisfactory in my view because the experts are usually the officials, so the notes come scurrying backwards and forwards and the hapless Minister attempts to read the dodgy handwriting without looking too incompetent. I would be looking at giving officials a right of audience at standing committees, on Bill standing committees. That is the way round that. They are the experts. They know the answers. You would still have a Minister of State on the committee, of course. It is terrifying if it is a Bill that you have not been associated with until about the week before—at one time I was on three simultaneously. I cannot say I lacked things to do. I could have opened the door of any room off the committee room corridor and been made welcome. They were big Bills and the terrifying thing that happens to you is when somebody opposite gets up and says, “Could the Minister just explain clause 9(c)(i)?” Well, your jaw just drops. There are people in the room who probably could, but they are not allowed to speak, so I think that needs resolving. When you have done that, you can then reduce the number of junior Ministers, in my view. Also, of course, I think devolution was an opportunity to have one Secretary of State for the regions. If you want to save a couple of Cabinet Ministers, that is a pretty good way of doing it. Of course, the regions themselves would kick up at that point and say you are abandoning Scotland or Wales or Northern Ireland, but I think that nettle needs to be grasped fairly soon because I do not think those Secretaries of State have an enormous amount to do. It would be a good idea to slim those down. You could have one junior Minister who is specific to each region. So there are a couple of areas where you could.

**Q167 Mr Turner:** Of course, also the previous Government got a lot of Bills through. Our Government does not seem to be doing much at all of that sort of thing now.

**Chris Mullin:** I am not sure about that. The present Government does seem to be doing some fairly dramatic reforms. There are certain Departments that have always been legislatively incontinent. The Home
Office is famous, of course, and it may have been true of Environment, Transport and the Regions at one time. Yes, you could reduce the amount of legislation. I am sure far too much legislation goes through, but that would require a finer mind than mine to advise on that.

Q168 Simon Hart: We have talked to other witnesses in previous sessions—and I must admit there has not been much agreement on this point—about Secretaries of State having a greater say in the choosing of their ministerial team. Although it seems on the face of it the sort of thing that you would do in any other business than politics, there seems to be reticence about welcoming that suggestion. What would you think?

Chris Mullin: I do not know how it is in this Government, but I would think it is probably the same. Prime Ministers do actually ask their top people. They do not ask every Secretary of State, “Who would you like to have in your team?” necessarily, I think, but it was my impression that people like Jack Straw and certainly Gordon Brown were consulted about who they would like on their team. The Prime Minister has many fish to fry, and especially now with the Coalition he has even more fish to fry, so he cannot necessarily do what they want him to do. But he can take some notice of that and I am sure he does. It certainly makes sense for the Secretary of State to have some people on his team in whom he or she has confidence, though as Lord Turnbull said, you do not want a coven developing whom he or she has confidence, though as Lord Turnbull said, you do not want a coven developing with its own separate policy from the Government’s.

Q169 Simon Hart: In a similar vein really, we have talked about talent, promotion, demotion, aspiration, all of these other things, as if they are unique to politics. Of course, they are not unique to politics, and yet we seem to be the only institution in Britain that goes about its promotions and demotions as part of a set-piece event. In any other world, if somebody is doing well, you do not wait until September next year to recognise that. Indeed, if somebody is doing badly you do not do the same either. It seems to me from a purely business perspective to be a remarkably inefficient way of running a Department because it seems the emphasis is on how it looks, not how it is. Would it not just be better that if there is a problem or if there is somebody who is shining very brightly you simply deal with them then? Wouldn’t that make sense?

Chris Mullin: Rather than have a big bang every year or two?

Simon Hart: Exactly.

Chris Mullin: Yes, that might well make sense. Prime Ministers get opportunities for mini reshuffles. As I say, when somebody burns out or there is a minor scandal, then there is an opportunity to bring in exceptionally talented people who you might have overlooked first time round. Those opportunities do arise. Yes, you could do it that way.

Q170 Simon Hart: In a way what I am saying is going further than that. Should the whole notion of a reshuffle be abandoned? We are simply in this organisation, we are in this institution, and at various moments in our career we might get reshuffled just as we would in any other world. One could argue the whole concept of a reshuffle is negative because we discussed last week that it is only a topic of a conversation within the confines of the parliamentary estate and it is not the subject of any conversation outside the parliamentary estate. In a sense it is a great effort to try to make some big public statement generally. Certainly if you are in west Wales, it tends to be a bit lost on the general public to be honest.

Chris Mullin: Yes, but there are things a Prime Minister has to do. For example, looking at the last reshuffle, he could not have left Jeremy Hunt as Secretary for Culture, Media and Sport. At the same time, Jeremy Hunt is a talented, capable man, he did not want to lose him and he did not want to be intimidated by the press into having to sack him at any particular time. He bided his time, he knew he had a reshuffle coming up and then he put him in another Department rather seamlessly. That is quite a good solution to the political difficulty that arose. There is something to be said for a reshuffle but I would have said personally once during every parliament, certainly not more than once every two years. I am not necessarily against a big bang, although the bang last time seemed to be rather bigger than usual. I saw some figures, how many out of 19? Twelve out of 19 Secretaries of State. I am speaking off the top of my head here, so correct me if I have it wrong. I saw another remarkable figure in the evidence of a previous witness, Sir Bob Kerslake, citing 18 of the 19 Permanent Secretaries had changed over the same period. That is a truly remarkable figure and I do not understand why. Maybe the change of Government, however, brought some of that about.

Q171 Chair: Just to say, Chris, the traditional view looking at the Civil Service was always that the politicians came and went but Sir Humphrey stayed put. That has been blown out of the water in the last couple of years. The turnover there is more significant than among the political classes. Do you read anything into that other than—not least the Coalition Government, change of Government—there is bound to be a little bit more instability at Civil Service level?

Chris Mullin: It may have been that after the change of Government that the Government wanted officials in place who were more in line with what it wanted to do. That may be part of the explanation. I do not know. I have not studied the phenomenon. It may be that some Permanent Secretaries were not in sympathy with whatever the Government was doing and decided to go and do something else.

Another difficulty in modern politics is that we live in the age of the feeding frenzy now that we have 24/7 news. There is a PhD thesis to be written on great feeding frenzies I have known and those sometimes result in wholly unfair and unlikely casualties from minor oversights. I thought Charles Clarke was very unlucky to be moved as Home Secretary, he would have been a very good Home Secretary, after only three months, and Beverley Hughes was a very good Immigration Minister. Again, that is a brief in which we do require some stability and some depth of
knowledge and she was unceremoniously removed after some minor oversight. That is all down to feeding frenzies, which I have noticed can be organised at the flick of the switch and turned off at the flick of a switch. My favourite feeding frenzy was when it was suggested that Tony Blair had attempted to manoeuvre himself a better seat at the Queen Mother’s funeral and hysteria reigned for three days. Then it stopped as though someone had flicked a switch, which I happen to know is what happened. Word came from the Palace that Her Majesty, or at least the Prince of Wales, was not happy with this misuse of her mother’s funeral and it stopped immediately.

Q172 Chair: In terms of stability, which is one of things that underlines your evidence and the desire for more stability or less instability, we now live in the era of the five year fixed-term Parliament. If we are to make it to the given date in May 2015 it will be pretty difficult, if not impossible, for a Government to somehow reverse that. There is this planning horizon now, a five year planning horizon. In terms of what you are saying, Chris, do you think that it would be helpful and sensible halfway through a term to have a look at everybody but probably not to do it on a more regular basis than that?

Chris Mullin: Yes, but I am not sure I share your confidence that we are entering permanent fixed-term five-year Governments. A lot will depend on the outcome of the general election. You may find that a party forms a Government, as we did in 1974, with just a tiny majority, and chooses to cling on by its fingertips for a year or two in the hope of having another general election and improving. I do not think you can guarantee that we have now entered that new phase. If we have, it is probably quite a good thing in terms of stable Government.

We may be entering an era of permanent coalition of one sort or another and that too will require some adjustment. Again, that might be quite a sensible way to govern. It certainly confers a great advantage on the present Prime Minister that he is not—and it would do on any Prime Minister—at the mercy of one of the left or right wings of his party because he always has the excuse that he has got other interests that have to be satisfied.

Q173 Paul Flynn: Just one thing that derives from what Andrew asked you and it is the question of the enquiring mind that you say is an asset for Ministers. It seems to be the opposite of that. What we have are these submissive minds, partly because they have not been in office for very long, but partly because they have absolutely no qualifications for the job, which disables them in a way that makes them open to the prejudices that they may inherit. You may find that a party forms a Government, as we did in 1974, with just a tiny majority, and chooses to cling on by its fingertips for a year or two in the hope of having another general election and improving. I do not think you can guarantee that we have now entered that new phase. If we have, it is probably quite a good thing in terms of stable Government.

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Q174 Chair: Just before we trespass on the Defence Select Committee, if I could just bring you back to a very specific issue, Chris, which is did you ever as a Member of Parliament—no, I’m sorry, I meant as a Minister—issue a Direction to officials? In other words, they had given you advice but in your own wisdom you said, “Thank you for the advice but I don’t agree with you and I hereby send you my little note which is a Direction”?

Chris Mullin: Yes. I don’t think I thought of it as a Direction but I suppose, this was over night flights, when I became a Minister in the DETR I realised there were only a few minor things that I might be able to effect in the short time that I would be there. One of the ones I thought was resolvable was the fact that the 16 night flights come in over central London between 4am and 6am—and I was laughingly known as the Aviation Minister as far the House of Commons were concerned—so I thought, “Well, surely we can just get them rescheduled”. We had a lever and the lever was that the aviation industry was after the fifth terminal. What I wanted to do was persuade the Secretary of State, who was about to make a judgment on the fifth terminal, to attach a condition. It would certainly have worked because they were so desperate
6 December 2012  Chris Mullin

Q175 Chair: Do you read anything into the fact that there had been no Directions issued to civil servants since the last election?

Chris Mullin: Do you know, I am not sure how many, certainly junior Ministers know there is something as formal as a Direction. You are talking about a certain number of conditions attached. I said, “Well I’d like to meet the representatives of the airlines.” “Oh, Minister, they won’t come.” The reason, of course, they would not come is because the officials were quietly telling them, “This is only a junior Minister away on a trip of his own. You don’t need to take any notice.”

I drafted a note for Lord MacDonald who was the Transport Minister and my immediate superior, and he put his thumb print under it and they all trooped in very sulky. I have never heard such a load of reasons why nothing could be done about anything. The best was wind speeds over China. That was my favourite. It was at that point I said, “Right, now would you draft me a note for the Secretary of State saying he should attach a condition to the...” They came as close as they could to absolute blank refusal. I cannot remember if they did but it was very close to that. In the end I got in touch with the Secretary of State’s office, Gus MacDonald and I arranged to meet him. On the day the meeting was due to take place, and it had been in the diary a very long time, advice suddenly appeared saying the Secretary of State was acting in a judicial capacity and could not meet his other Ministers in the same Department to discuss this policy. More legal advice had to be sought but by the time it came in saying there was no reason why he should not, I had been reshuffled.

Q176 Chair: Two quick confessions. Firstly, I was the person who organised all the briefings before 1997 at Brookes Oxford. Sorry we left you off the list, Chris, it was nothing personal. Secondly, you talked about the idiot who was boning up on coastal erosion and civil aviation before the 1997 election, that was me. The day after the Government was formed, I sat and had to be in complete silence as the Whip to the DETR while I listened to a number of colleagues who were doing coastal erosion, were doing civil aviation, were doing the re-regulation of the bus industry and I was unable to say a single word because I was there as the Whip. That is a minor anecdote for your next book.

Chris Mullin: Could I address one question that I have not been asked but was asked of the previous witness, whether there was any reporting system about the capabilities of Ministers. I never detected that the civil servants, certainly not in my case, had some upward report, although there may well have been some unseen hand by the Permanent Secretary. But I do think the previous Prime Minister did have an informal way of monitoring the performance of his Ministers. Whoever was the Political Secretary in No. 10, it was Pat McFadden I think in my time, you had better ask him, it was one of his roles and when I expressed an interest in becoming a Minister, he was sent to interview me months before. There was some informal system.

The Whips of course, when reshuffles come round, put in a bad word for those who they do not approve of. You have been there and you may know that. I do know that when I was appointed Africa Minister in defiance of the Whips, who did their level best—the Chief Whip—to stop that because I had just voted against the Iraq war, they carried on throughout most of my two years as Africa Minister putting in a bad word for me. How do I know that? Because I remember the Secretary of State coming back from Downing Street and saying, “Just so you’re aware, you ought to know this is still going on.” I have no doubt they said how incompetent and useless I was and that I needed to go. That must have been a factor.

Q177 Chair: Again, I should not be giving evidence at my own Committee but as a Whip, maybe it was because I was a rather countercultural Whip, I was never asked to rate or grade Ministers in my department.

Chris Mullin: That is interesting. I guess it was up to the Chief Whip and if he or she felt strongly, they would put in a good word or a bad word. I have no objection to the Chief Whip putting in a bad word for me because the Prime Minister should consult him or her.

Q178 Chair: That brings me to my very last question, which is the one I asked to Lord Turnbull, and we have obviously read your evidence, Chris, but what are your key reforms? You have mentioned the two-year time span but what is your view on a more effective personnel policy, a more effective and standardised assessment, and any other issues that you think are key as we look at writing our report on reshuffles?

Chris Mullin: A degree of informality is inevitable. The Prime Minister has got so many fish to fry. He needs to take advice, as I am sure any sensible Prime Minister does. Or advice from the Whips, and maybe in the case of certain individuals who he is not sure about—advice from the Civil Service. When the Civil Service think a Minister is behaving inappropriately in some way, and I can think of a couple of examples, I know they do have a mechanism for reporting that to No.10. The key reform is undoubtedly, without any doubt at all, an end to annual reshuffles. That is the
key thing. It is almost the only thing that you need to do. Perhaps there should be more training of Ministers when you are in Opposition or coming up to Government but both the main parties have probably been doing something like that and there needs to be a bit more of that. There were occasional, I will not say they were training sessions for Ministers, but there were, in my time, regular lunches at Admiralty House where we were addressed by either a senior civil servant, you probably attended some of them, and I remember Jonathan Powell, the Prime Minister’s Chief of Staff, once addressing one. They gave you some idea of what was going on outside your particular silo and that was very useful. The key one without any doubt, and it is so simple, it is not rocket science, is stop chucking all the pieces into the air every year and seeing where they land.

Chair: Chris, thank you very much indeed. A really enjoyable session.

Chris Mullin: Thank you, me too.

Chair: If you think of anything else do not hesitate to let us know.

Chris Mullin: Thank you for having me. Nice to be remembered.
Thursday 13 December 2012

Members present:
Mr Graham Allen (Chair)
Mr Christopher Chope
Paul Flynn
Fabian Hamilton
Simon Hart
Tristram Hunt
Mrs Eleanor Laing
Mr Andrew Turner

Examination of Witness

Witness: Rt Hon Charles Clarke, gave evidence.

Q179 Chair: We are going to move straight on to our next inquiry, which is about reshuffles and the first witness we are going to hear from is the Rt Hon Charles Clarke. Good to see you. Welcome. It is good to see you back in the House.
Charles Clarke: Pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.

Q180 Chair: You know our inquiry is about the concept of reshuffles and what we should be doing about that. Would you like to start off with an opening statement?
Charles Clarke: I do not have an opening statement, Mr Chairman, I am happy to answer any questions the Committee have.

Q181 Fabian Hamilton: Charles, great to see you here. We have been taking quite a bit of evidence on this subject and it has been entertaining, to say the least at times. One of the best bits of evidence we received was from Chris Mullin last week who told us that he thought that two years was the minimum amount of time that a Minister needed to be left in the post to be effective and get to know the job that he or she was supposed to be doing. From your own experiences as a Minister, I know you had sometimes less than two years in a particular post, would you agree with Chris?
Charles Clarke: Basically, yes. My fundamental view is that, for the major Departments of State, the big complicated ones, a year is an absolute minimum to get up to speed with what is going on and to grasp the issues. That applies to about five or six of the major Government Departments. It does not apply to all the Cabinet posts; some are less pressing. The point that I think is often not appreciated is there are two types of Cabinet Ministers, the Cabinet Ministers who are essentially the political jobs—Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Chief Whip, Leader of the House, Chair of the Party, and so on. Then there are the Cabinet posts that are running Government Departments and they require different types of skills, and the considerations, which I am sure Chris was referring to there, and which I would agree with, extend to the big Department jobs as opposed to the political jobs, if I can put it like that. I think you need at least a year to get hold of a department, like Education or Home when I was there.

Q182 Fabian Hamilton: Thanks for that. Do you think though there should be better methods by which the performance and effectiveness of Ministers is assessed? I am not quite sure who would do that of course.
Charles Clarke: There are all kinds of rumours, and I do not know to what extent they are true, that the Prime Minister received briefings on ministerial quality from the Permanent Secretaries of the Departments concerned from the Whip's Office, the Chief Whip in particular, referring obviously to parliamentary performance, and probably also would take into account media performance, as that is also an important part of a Minister’s job these days. I do not know to what extent that is true, in the sense that they were formal reports because I was never in a position to see them, but I certainly think it is credible and I have heard too many anecdotes not to believe them—of Ministers being appointed even to senior Cabinet posts against the view of the Cabinet Secretary, based on the view of how that individual had performed in office in a different area. I think it is likely there is such a kind of reporting system in place.
A big issue for any party leader is whether they are going to promote on the basis of talent or of political balance. Classically, if you think back to the Harold Wilson days, for example, there was a constant issue of balance between the left and right in the party, and I do not think that is ignoble. I do not think politics is a purely managerial task, and as the job of the Cabinet is to maintain the confidence of the whole of the parliamentary party to carry its legislation, that requires having people in Government who, broadly speaking, have the confidence of elements of the parliamentary party. You cannot do it on a pure talent base approach.
I think a Prime Minister is bound to take into account all of these considerations, but I certainly think performance is one of them and an important one, and one that is sometimes undervalued.

Q183 Fabian Hamilton: Given that, should it not be more transparent if those assessments are made of the Minister in office or the Secretary of State? Should it be clearer?
Charles Clarke: I do not think so. I know that this Committee is leading the way in the battle for transparency in Government, but I am not myself a tremendous advocate of transparency in these things. I think that people have to be able to make candid judgments. We were told when we passed the Freedom of Information Act that this would guarantee the possibility of private policy assessments being
made and that people could discuss their situation in confidence, but that proved not to be the case. You add to that the villainies done by the diarists of various descriptions who tell their own version of truth to history, and the collapse of the Cabinet Office control of ministerial memoirs and so on, so that there no longer exists, effectively, a system which is a constraint. I do not think any of this has benefited good Government, and I do not think making transparent, for example, the Chief Whip’s assessment of the Secretary of State’s performance in the House of Commons would do any good in any direction.

Q184 Tristram Hunt: Charles, looking back at your time both within the last Labour Government and your broader political career, do you think Tony Blair was particularly bad at reshuffles in terms of frequency and chaos?

Charles Clarke: Basically yes, I do think that. I think his Government could have gone on longer if he had been better at it, and it would have been better Government and better for the country and also better for Tony Blair. All these things are very personal. They are all prime ministerial judgments and I think one of the difficulties for your Committee in making this assessment is to try to generalise across a series of very different circumstances and personalities.

One of Tony’s weaknesses was that he thought that most of what was done in Government came from No. 10 and No. 1 Downing Street and that essentially he could make things happen by his own strength of will and his own leadership. I think that was partly a consequence of his not having held Cabinet Office before being Prime Minister and he believed he could drive it forward, and that therefore it was not absolutely essential to be sure that he had the Cabinet that he wanted in all respects. I think that meant he thought it was okay to reshuffle relatively quickly.

In the case of some very important portfolios, he was basically a fatalist. He reshuffled Transport almost incessantly and I remember him saying to me at one point that he thought there was nothing you could do about transport and Ministers could not do anything, and therefore there was not much point. His big subjects were Education, Health and Crime; he thought they were the issues where you could make a difference. So if he did not think you could make much difference, then it did not matter who was the Minister at any given time. I thought he had too grand a view, in that sense.

On the other hand, of course, politics has changed dramatically since Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister and has moved much more to the centre, so his outlook was not irrational or silly, if I can put it like that. But I think he changed Ministers far too much and more than he need have done so.

Q185 Tristram Hunt: Do you think there is any way to institutionalise a more considered programme of reshuffles or ultimately are you dependent on the character of the individual? We assume that our current Prime Minister, who has clearly learnt the lessons from the past, is slightly more considered about when this happens in terms of the fixed-term Parliament. Or are you simply dependent on the personality of the Prime Minister and their own inclination?

Charles Clarke: You are a historian so you would have gone back through history and seen how this has operated, but fundamentally reshuffles happen because of political change and the desire of the Prime Minister to reshape his or her team in a way that can better meet what the country is looking for and boost the parties’ lateral prospects at the next general election. I do not see how that ever changes. You have events that come along, obviously sadly sometimes death; you have scandals and you decide whether you are going to resist or not, but at the end of the day somebody may decide to resign and just go “out of the blue”. I do not see how you legislate for that. You may have to have a state of mind that says reshuffles are not that good a thing.

There is an additional sub-Cabinet level reshuffle problem, which is that many Permanent Secretaries, indeed the whole civil service, focus entirely on the Cabinet Member and the junior Ministers are seen as rather marginal figures. They would probably deny what I am saying, but I believe it to be true from my own time as a junior Minister as well. So the junior Ministers become, relatively speaking, adornments to the body politic rather than decision takers in that area. I think that is a very bad thing because, particularly with large Government Departments, you need Ministers of immigration, policing or whatever it may be, secondary education or higher education, who are big figures. David Willetts is a good example in this Government as the Minister for Higher Education. He is well respected in the sector because he has been there for a while, he stayed through the reshuffle and even if he does not agree with everybody at least people think he is listening to and understands what they are about.

I think for a stable Government more generally there are a whole range of those Minister of State roles, which are quite important for a wide range of stakeholders; permanence is very important.

I read Chris Mullin’s diaries. Chris, of course, has that additional factor, if you are talking about anything in the foreign policy field, or indeed anything that requires significant EU activity. There is massive benefit in knowing your counterparts in other countries and other Governments—enormous. I was very struck in all our EU business when I was Home Secretary during our presidency of the EU that personally knowing the other Home Office Ministers and being able to talk to them and deal with them is a very substantial asset if you are trying to pursue British Government interests in those areas. Obviously, if you have never met them before you cannot know them, so I think you should try to institutionalise permanence as far as you can down through the system. But it requires some changes of attitude.

I admired David Cameron’s decision to try not to make changes. I thought that was good. He just had problems with the quality of his Cabinet Ministers, which led to problems for him to deal with.

Q186 Tristram Hunt: In terms of the autonomy of Secretaries of State, should there be a role for...
Secretaries of State in choosing their team? My colleague, Mr Chope, spoke very interestingly about how Mrs Thatcher allowed an ideological caucus in different ministries because she thought that was the best way to achieve change, rather than having the kind of man-marking and the yin and the yang of left and right within each Department.

Charles Clarke: Certainly, when I was Secretary of State the Prime Minister did talk to me about the changes he was going to make in the Department before he did so, and I regard that as normal good managerial practice. It sounds a rather bureaucratic description, but I think that is what one should do. I dislike intensely the practice that some Governments have had, Tony Blair’s less than most, but even his in some cases, of putting somebody in as a number two or number three to mark, in the football sense, the Secretary of State. I think that takes you down; it just institutionalises conflict. The civil service does not know where it stands, the public does not know what is going on, and I think that is a very bad state of affairs.

You will always have differences in Government, rightly so. It is ridiculous for people under the cloak of collective responsibility to suggest that differences of opinion on practice do not exist; they do. But the thing is to be reasonably open about that. I think it is perfectly reasonable for people to have different views about the size of the prison population or whatever, and that is a perfectly reasonable discussion to have. I think if you institutionalise conflict, that makes it very difficult.

In Tony’s case the most famous example, I suppose, was that of Frank Field in the Department of Welfare and Pensions, and that was an experiment that did not succeed. He either should have made Frank Secretary of State to carry through what he thought and believed or he should have not had him in the Department. He should not have had a position where it was a kind of institutionalised conflict. There are enough institutionalised conflicts in Government anyway. I mean the departmental issues, Treasury versus the rest, whatever it might happen to be, and I think we should be minimising that rather than maximising it.

Q187 Tristram Hunt: Finally, just in terms of the processes of Government and the machinery of Government, how disruptive was it to have strong individuals who are able to carry political authority in their own right, earn respect in their own right, not simply for their parliamentary performances but because of their beliefs and positions. What was the book about Abraham Lincoln’s Cabinet, Team of Rivals, where he took the rivals in the Republican Party and brought them together into the Cabinet. I know David Putnam gave a copy of that to Gordon Brown when he became Prime Minister, in the hope that it would inspire his own approach to leadership as Prime Minister at that time.

Chair: Unread to this day.

Charles Clarke: Unsuccessfully, I have to say, I think. But I do agree with you profoundly, and if the presidential Prime Minister is allegedly responsible for everything, it is absolutely not the right way to go. It is very difficult for a Prime Minister in the modern era because the 24/7 media makes it almost impossible for you to behave in that way. For example, my own observation of general election campaigns through my political life has just steadily moved towards the role of the Prime Minister or the party leader. Obviously, in the last general election, the leaders’ debates were a major symptom of that. I do not think that is all the fault of the party leaders. It is very difficult for them to avoid a situation where they scratch their nose and that is seen as a comment on Mr Allen’s chairmanship of the Committee, it all gets written out in a ridiculous, absurd way. That is the way it has gone, but I do not think that reflects the reality of Government. You cannot possibly run a major Government Department if you think you can do everything.

In all my ministerial roles, including junior roles, I used to identify 10 to 15 issues which mattered to me, either because I thought they were important in our manifesto or to the party or what I was personally trying to achieve, and focus on those. For the other, say, 100 issues that would come up, I would normally go with officials’ advice unless I thought it was clearly wrong, if you see what I mean. But you have to pick
and choose which are the things you are going to try to develop; or I would ask one of my junior Ministers to take responsibility.

I remember asking Stephen Twigg to take responsibility in Education for the London Challenge, which was trying to change the performance of secondary schools in London and he did it extremely well, with a very talented official who unfortunately has now left. But you have to prioritise in that way and you have to give responsibility to others. If you have a concept of elected presidency, that leads to a state of affairs where you cannot run anything. You have to give responsibility out.

Q189 Chair: We tend to view this permanent merry-go-round of reshuffles as standard; we all suffer or benefit from it, and it is in the papers. But the Committee has had the chance to look across the globe at other systems. We are the odd person out here, in that virtually every other western democracy has a much more stable structure in terms of its political appointments. Do you think we have a perception problem or do you think we are the only people getting it right?

Charles Clarke: Firstly, I think you are completely correct. Secondly, I think a major reason for that is our adversarial system, unlike the different electoral systems, sometimes proportional, that exist in other countries, about which there is a separate set of arguments. I personally was in favour of the AV change, which was defeated in the national referendum a year or so ago. Other countries therefore have more stable parliamentary situations and can have a more stable governmental situation. That obviously does not deal with big political crises; it does not deal with deaths, if they occur, or major resignations. We probably have a culture of more resignations—I have not compared it, but I suspect that there are more resignations than other European countries, for example. That is mainly because the media are engaged in the process in a much more substantial way than happens in other countries. But I do think we are out of step, and I do not think it is good that we are out of step. I think we should move in the other direction.

Q190 Chair: Since you were a Secretary of State, Charles, a phenomenon has arisen—which I am sure you are across—which is the assumption that Ministers go on the roundabout has been joined with an assumption that Permanent Secretaries now are on this roundabout and, contrary to the mythology of Sir Humphrey always being there and the Ministers come and go, we now have a situation since the last election where Ministers are in post longer than a typical Permanent Secretary. Charles Clarke: That was happening before the last election. I did not know the figure you have just given me—obviously I accept it, but I was not aware of it—but the phenomenon you describe I was extremely well aware of and it became the case that it was seen as good at senior levels of the civil service, not simply at Permanent Secretary level, to have relatively short rotation in key jobs. I thought that was a terrible mistake because there is such a thing as institutional wisdom, institutional knowledge, institutional memory, and you need it. Any Government needs it, needs to understand what has been going on, what the arguments are, how it goes. I did not check carefully enough the evidence you have already taken from Bob Kerslake on this, but I think that the civil service would acknowledge that it almost encourages a culture of rotation and sharing of jobs so people have a wider range of responsibility than used to be the case. I simply think that is not what should be the case.

My father was a Permanent Secretary. I was brought up knowing about the way the civil service operated and there was a sense of relative permanence in key areas. In some cases, it is personal. There was a very rapid transfer of civil servants at the Treasury in the first part of our Government for a variety of different reasons. At the moment, people are leaving the Department of Education in droves for various reasons, and the person I mentioned who ran London Challenge, Jon Coles, would have been a very excellent senior official at Education, but has moved on to work in the not-for-profit sector. Why has all this happened? It is a very good question. I think you need to bolster the authority of Permanent Secretaries in the constitutional system of the country and you need to encourage relative permanence in the senior official levels.

I always say that the key relationship is that between the Secretary of State and the Permanent Secretary and they have to have a good relationship. If it goes wrong for any reason then that is what leads to further problems down the line, but that requires a good solid relationship and a degree of experience in the Permanent Secretary and senior civil service. I have not done the figures, as you have obviously, but I think it is very important to maintain.

Q191 Mrs Laing: We have been taking some evidence on the actual mechanics of reshuffles and you have seen a few of these from various angles. Do you have any recommendation as to how things could be done better as far as handover is concerned, and timing?

Charles Clarke: I saw this in your call for evidence and I thought about it and I do not have anything very helpful to say. As far as the learning in, the reading in, of the new Minister is concerned, I think it is an efficient system. There is an effective set of files that are produced, there is a process that works reasonably well. As long as the incoming Minister is fairly assiduous and fairly intelligent, they can get on top of the issues quite well. The quality of the briefing is normally good, so I do not have a great deal to say in terms of the Minister coming in. I think there is a great deal of benefit in our system with it being so quick, literally less than a day for it to happen. I think that makes it easier to take place rather than the reverse.

I think there might be a case for institutionalising more of a dialogue between the incoming Minister and the outgoing Minister to see what was on the political agenda in that area. I think that happens fairly little—it happened fairly little in my case—and I think...
that would be a good thing to do but is probably quite difficult for various sensitivities and so on. As far as the actual process is concerned, I watched it in Opposition when I worked for Neil Kinnock, which was a different state of affairs, and I saw it in Government as a victim of it in a variety of different ways. It is very difficult to see how you could do it. Obviously everybody would agree it needs to be done more quickly than it often is. Obviously everybody would agree it is well not to forget people, which some Prime Ministers have done; they left them out completely by accident. Obviously it would be better for conversations to take place properly. There are a number of people who feel very bitter and angry that they were not properly spoken to by the party leader as they left. In defence of the party leaders, I think it is quite difficult to have these conversations, particularly in the media world where people can literally go out of the office and talk immediately to a wide variety of people. That is very difficult to operate with. I thought about it, before you asked the question, in the sense that I looked at your call for evidence, but I do not have anything very creative to say about it.

Q192 Mrs Laing: We are prodding around to see what is happening and how it could be done better and how we could be constructive but in fact it would be quite a good conclusion if we concluded that the way things are done at present is just about as well as they can be done given the politics of it, as opposed to the practicalities, but the act of reshuffling the Government is essentially political, as you said a few moments ago.

Charles Clarke: I am not far from that position, and if you look at some of the long drawn-out issues, let us take, say, the chairmanship of the trustees of the BBC or the appointment of Governor of the Bank of England, or whatever, albeit in a more steady process and for political success within our system avoids there being reshuffle processes.

Q193 Paul Flynn: Tony Blair put a few reshuffled sacked Ministers back into other ministerial jobs—not many—presumably to encourage all the other sacked Ministers not to become troublemakers on the Back Benches. In this Parliament, we have something new, and four of the reshuffled Ministers this time were given knighthoods; do you think this is legitimate? Is this a way of further degrading the honours system or do you think it is sensible for the Prime Minister?

Charles Clarke: I think the knighthood system is absolutely mad and has nothing to defend it whatsoever and I think the use to which this Prime Minister has put it has been disgraceful. I do think it is perfectly appropriate for people to come back to office in other roles, including less senior roles. There are plenty of people who are capable of being Ministers of State or Parliamentary Under-Secretaries who were not very good at being Cabinet Members, and I see no dishonour in that.

Q194 Chair: Charles, I am so sorry to have to close this down after half an hour. Very good to see you again. If you feel you want to drop us a line with any further thoughts feel free, but thank you so much for your time today.

Charles Clarke: It is a pleasure and thank you for inviting me.

Examination of Witness

Witness: Rt Hon Lord Heseltine CH PC, gave evidence.

Q195 Chair: Very good to see you back in the House of Commons, may I say. Michael, you know that we are doing a study at the moment, an inquiry into the concept of reshuffles and we would like your expertise and knowledge to be brought to bear on that topic. Is there anything you want to say to start us off or shall we jump straight into questions?

Lord Heseltine: I leave it to you.

Q196 Mr Turner: In your experience, what impact do reshuffles have on the effectiveness of Government and the authority of the Prime Minister?

Lord Heseltine: I think there is no general answer to that question. Whether a reshuffle can contribute depends entirely on the circumstances, on the relative rebalancing, the success or otherwise of the Government and the economic pressures on the Government at the time. I do not think there is a generalised answer. Reshuffles are part of politics. You have to have them. There is no escape and you should want to conduct it in a way that promotes stability.

Q197 Mr Turner: But is it necessary that they do, because most countries do not have mid-term reorganisation?

Lord Heseltine: Yes, I cannot conceive of a situation where the pressures that build up both for more action and for political success within our system avoids there being reshuffle processes.

Q198 Mr Turner: Why is that?

Lord Heseltine: I cannot pretend to have been part of any other legislative process, but this one is immensely intimate. We are a very over-centralised...
Government and the focus on what the Prime Minister is doing every minute of every day, and the accountability that goes with that demands this instant result, this ever-present sense of drive and being in charge. If you have a Government Department that is not delivering, the short answer is to change the Minister. You have a successful Minister, the pressure is to say, “Let’s give them a bigger role.” You have a whole range of people in the House of Commons, largely, who think they should be Ministers. Some of them are right. So you have the younger generations pressing, you have every sort of pressure there all the time, and that is our system. I cannot pretend to know how relevant that is in other systems, but I do not think you can eliminate it from our system.

Q199 Mr Turner: There has been only one significant reshuffle in this Parliament, or half Parliament—that is two and a half years. Would you say that what has been done in the way of reorganisation is better this time than last time?

Lord Heseltine: I do not think you can put stipules over these things. Firstly, who would know the answer to that question, except people living with it day by day, and mercifully I do not have to do that. I do not think you can compare one reshuffle with another.

Q200 Mr Turner: But as a new Minister how long would it take to gain an understanding of the subject area and be functionally effective?

Lord Heseltine: That depends again on the Minister. Do they come with any experience of the subject? Are they a promotion from within the Department or have they been in that Department, gone somewhere else and come back? Has there been a PPS in that Department, have they specialised in their own private life or in their public life or whatever it is? Certainly I remember vividly when I became Secretary of State for the Department of the Environment I produced an envelope over lunch before I went to the Department for the Permanent Secretary with my agenda on it. But then I had been there twice before and I had shadowed it, so I knew exactly what I wanted to try and do. If I had gone to a Department of which I had no knowledge, I know what would have happened, there would have been a great pile of files telling me what the Department thought I ought to know. Of course the great mistake is to read that pile of files because if you do you are captured. I am oversimplifying it; of course you have to know what it is in it. But every Department has its own agenda and I remember vividly the Burials Bill. I doubt if any of you have ever heard of the Burials Bill. This was a piece of legislation in draft that every Secretary of State was presented with on arrival in the Department, “Have to tidy up the graveyards, Secretary of State, and here is the draft Bill and will you make a bid to your colleagues for it?” I do not think anyone ever did; it is probably still there.

Q201 Paul Flynn: You have great experience; for a very long period you were in ministerial office. Have you any views now about what is happening? It is two and a half years into a Parliament, and 18 of the Permanent Secretaries have gone, one Permanent Secretary has just been slipped back into his spot after being appointed by Sir Bob Kerslake. And there is an attack by Francis Maude who said that there are civil servants who are obstructing what Ministers want to have implemented in policy. This is after a reshuffle. In your time was there a time like this when there did seem to be a serious attempt by Government to politicise the civil servants, even after a reshuffle?

Lord Heseltine: I have always had a very clear view about the civil service. I have the highest regard for it. I believe it carried out what I wanted. It did not always agree, but your task is to detect the disagreement and rule firmly. You have a direction you want them to go in. My experience is that they do go where they are directed. The trick is to know how to direct and this is a question of management, of human relations. I describe the British civil service as a Rolls Royce. A magnificent piece of engineering, no fuel, no driver, that is what Ministers do. If the Ministers are not capable of doing that then the machine will either stand still or drift downhill or whatever it may be. It has to be driven. I find that quite acceptable because I do not want to have a machine that has made up its mind what is going to happen without political control. In doing the report I have just done, I have found exactly what I always did find.

Q202 Paul Flynn: We have all seen sacked Ministers who are deeply shocked by this and have no explanation. Tony Blair used to tell Ministers, “You are doing a great job, but I need your job to give to someone else” for some political drama that was going on elsewhere. Tony Blair used to reappoint just a handful of sacked Ministers to a new ministerial office, presumably to encourage the others who were sacked. In this present Parliament the Prime Minister is dishing out knighthoods to some of the sacked Ministers and he set up, for the first time ever, a special Committee to give honours to Members of Parliament. Do you think this is a legitimate way to treat the honours system? Is it likely to lead that into further degradation or should sacked Ministers have these consolation prizes?

Lord Heseltine: I have no complaint about Ministers being recognised in some way. I sit before you as a member of the House of Lords and it took 35 years or something for this distinction to be bestowed upon me. I have no problem with that and I know of no arguments that should not reflect long-serving or diligent or successful Members of Parliament. The honours system is built in. If you want to get rid of it, get rid of it, but do not single out Members of Parliament as though they should not be part of it. Many of them do a most commendable job.

Q203 Paul Flynn: It is questionable whether Members of Parliament would want the same honour bestowed on Sir James Savile and Sir Cyril Smith, perhaps in future, but the question is, this is done automatically to sacked Ministers and this Committee has been set up. It did not exist in your time. You did not have a special Committee which was manned by the Whips, to give honours to MPs and other parliamentarians.
Lord Heseltine: You tell me something of which I have no knowledge whatsoever.

Q204 Simon Hart: We had Chris Mullin in last week, and he was entertaining us with stories of Blair reshuffles and how relentlessly substandard they were, by the Prime Minister’s own admission. I think he said, “We do not seem to do this terribly well, do we?” and they seem to go on for an awful long time and never satisfy anybody. How could the process be improved so that people on the outside understand what is going on as well as people on the inside?

Lord Heseltine: I do not think it can. If you tell someone their career is over and they have lost their job, there is no nice way of doing it.

Q205 Simon Hart: If you do not mind me just following that up. One of the questions we have been asking previous witnesses is whether we have to do it in one big set piece event or should we look at it in the corporate way. If somebody is not doing their job, you do not wait until September next year when a reshuffle might be pencilled into the No. 10 diary. You move them there and then, or move them up or move them out, whatever it might be. Allowing this huge press build-up almost, in a sense, drives the process itself. I am wondering if we should or could move them there and then, or move them up or whatever it might be. Allowing this huge press build-up almost, in a sense, drives the process itself. I am wondering if we should or could make less drama of it?

Lord Heseltine: You could, but then you would inject a degree of temporary uncertainty into the whole thing, with people always looking over their shoulders—is the knife about to fall? Whatever system you come up with, you will be left with the human dimension, and I do not think there is any way to do it nicely or get it right or whatever it may be.

There is one aspect of reshuffle that I do remember, which may be worth just putting before your Committee. It is amazing how little a Secretary of State can know about the junior Ministers in their Department. First of all, they do not see them that often. They see them more now than they used to, but Peter Walker introduced, and I continued, a very intimate relationship with Ministers where probably we met every day. That is very exceptional. But you only then see your ministerial colleague in fairly unusual circumstances, whereas the Whips see them all the time and they know where they are, they know what they are doing, they know what their public interests are and what their private interests are. I can remember occasions when people were reshuffled in my Department, to my amazement, who seemed to be doing a perfectly reasonable job. I had not been consulted and one day they went. But when I found out why they had gone, there were curious reasons, not always apparent.

Q206 Simon Hart: We did ask the head of the civil service a couple of weeks ago whether it would be sensible to allow Secretaries of State to have more say in the appointments of their junior Ministers and I think there was a shaken expression on his face that such an idea could be mentioned, but would that help at all?

Lord Heseltine: I was very fortunate in that on each occasion I asked the Prime Minister if I could choose my team and invariably I got a significant way towards achieving that. There was always only one reason; I thought I could detect Ministers who could deliver and I wanted delivering Ministers because my first task on assuming a Secretary of State job was to delegate all my responsibilities, except in Defence, where security and intelligence could not be delegated. But everything else was delegated to one of my colleagues and I always had big Departments and so there were always five to six colleagues.

At that point, I knew that everything would come to me from a colleague so that the party political angle would have been thought about at least once and a politician would have sieved the information that was coming to me to make sure that it was in line with what the party might think, what colleagues might think; that it had a political dimension. But it also left me free to see whether I thought progress was being made, to keep constantly in touch with the colleague, and to play a driving role in the Department.

One of my obsessions, of course, is that nobody knows what is happening in Departments. There is no management information system. I mentioned this pile of files, which is certainly ever present, but how do you know whether it is the right pile or all the pile or that it tells the whole story or it is independent or whatever? You don’t. If you say to yourself, “I am in charge of 1,500 people,”—or in my case 52,000 people—“what are they doing?”, nobody can answer that question. Until you have management systems that can provide an answer to that question, you cannot effectively run the Department. Nobody knows. No civil servant knows, no Minister knows, in my view that is a huge lacuna in our arrangements.

Q207 Simon Hart: Chris Mullin was quite emphatic about the fact that longevity was important and he put a minimum two and a half year term as the bare minimum necessary to become an effective Minister and to slightly overcome the problem that you raise. Is that a reasonable time scale? I think he referred to the eighth Africa Minister in seven years and he said that was not an effective way of running the Department.

Lord Heseltine: Let’s take the Department of Trade and Industry, which I know something about. Under both the Conservative and the Labour Governments Secretaries of State moved in and out about once every year, something like that, 18 months at the most. There were three of us who were there for three years, Lord Mandelson, Lord Young and myself, but the others were in and out and it just tells you what you need to know about the attitude towards trade and industry. The fascinating thing about party politics is that each party is a coalition and you can get differences in opinion within a party, which are starker and more extreme than between parties. Certainly, I could go through the Secretaries of State that I knew about, and the differences between what I believe and what they believe were very sharp. You get a guy coming in, he has a view, I come in, I say, “What is the industrial strategy?” and they say, “We are not allowed to use the words”. That was the first reply. Unbelievable.
Q208 Chair: Michael, there is not a complete read-across between business and politics and there never will have been effective in-service training, you had means of spotting talent, you, as the boss, would never have appointed someone just for a year or so; you would replace people when they needed to be replaced rather than have your business in a sense of paralysis awaiting your decision on whether your key employees would be in a job or not after the summer. Yet, coming into politics, we seem to accept—at least in this country, but in no other democracy—that reshuffles on a regular basis are somehow an acceptable part of political life. Doesn’t one half of you rail against the way we conduct our politics in such a disorganised and short-termist way?

Lord Heseltine: Of course I am very sympathetic to the problem you raise. But I think that there are important things to say as well. First of all, I do not believe that you should have a Government that is all business people. I do not believe you should have a political party that is all business people. This is a parliamentary democracy, representative of a society, and I think that is very important.

Where would my instinct be in squaring this circle between having management efficiency and broad representation? I think my answer is threefold. Firstly, there should be induction courses for Ministers, which certainly never did happen, whether they do or not now, I do not know. Secondly, there should be a management information system, which is transparent and which means that there is a factual basis on which judgments can be made. Thirdly, a creative tension within Government that scrutinises the performance of Departments constantly is needed so that the problems I identified within our system are much less likely to happen. You get a Minister appointed who has a strong view on something and it is an important issue, and they come up with an initiative. That will get good press. It will take a year, at least, before it has any credibility on the ground because how can you compare one year from another until you have had a year, and by that time if the guy is successful there will be talk about his promotion or her promotion.

But the initiative will probably be very superficial within the context of the whole problem and before you know where you are another Minister comes and the initiative falls away. The problem remains. If I could give, for me, the single biggest example—our education system. The Government figures are stark. There are 571 sink schools, 20% of the children coming out of our education system are either illiterate or innumerate by modern standards. Those are not my figures. That has been the position in broad terms since they started talking about it in the Victorian age. This place tolerates it. It is intolerable. I could go on with endless examples of this phenomenon, but that is the worst one and it is not hidden. We all know it. All across the world, education standards are rising. The competitive challenge is becoming more intense and you only have to go to any of these countries and you can see it in the streets, the way they just walk in their uniforms smartly and you know in their classrooms the same disciplines apply. We have to face that challenge, and we do not. That is not a criticism of this Government. This is a criticism of the body politic and I happen to believe that Michael Gove is making important initiatives in dealing with this, but the statistics are still there.

Chair: I am deeply tempted to launch into my other favourite topic, which is early intervention and getting to the babies, children and young people before they go wrong rather than after, but I think my colleagues would not forgive me if I did that. I gave you very little warning, but may we ask you a couple of questions, while we have you here, on your recent report because it is pertinent to some of the work we are doing, particular on distinguishing local government from central Government and giving local government a little more autonomy. It is one of the inquiries we are holding at the moment. I know Andrew wanted to pick this up in particular, and I do, too.

Q209 Mr Turner: The proposal is that cities should get city deals whereby they get an amount of money from the Government, but they are to spend it. That is basically what has happened. Is this in addition to or an alternative to the money that they are getting?

Lord Heseltine: You are talking in terms of my report?

Mr Turner: Yes.

Lord Heseltine: My report is not restricted to city deals, it is restricted to taking the largely capital figure in the existing public expenditure levels and making it available to competitive bidding from the Local Enterprise Partnerships. There are 39 LEPs and there is something in the order of £60 billion over a period in the public expenditure, as reduced. You put that up for competitive bidding. The virtue of doing that is not just place-based politics and local initiatives, but that you make it competitive. Instead of getting £1 of housing money spent on the ground, you get £1 of housing money and somebody says, “We will add another £3 of our own money to it”, so you get gearing. The precedents are clear from the urban grant, from city challenge, from development corporations, the regional growth fund, and city deals. This is now a well-documented, proven process but it is too small scale and so my report says “We have done enough experimentation, go for it.”

Q210 Mr Turner: What about the rural areas?

Lord Heseltine: Exactly the same.

Mr Turner: Exactly the same? In other words, Cornwall or the Isle of Wight would get the money direct or people in Southampton or Portsmouth it would decide where it goes?

Lord Heseltine: The Local Enterprise Partnership—basically, it is Redcliffe-Maud of the 1960s, it is a city state, and so the Local Enterprise Partnerships, which are a partnership between local stakeholders, local government, local private sector, academia, whatever, design a plan. The Government has just given them each £250,000 for two years, each year, in order to prepare the plans in order to make the bids, which will become relevant in 2015. That is how the system
works. I am very encouraged by the Chancellor’s response in the autumn statement.

Q211 Chair: Michael, I press you further on this, in terms of the role of local government. We have a procession of witnesses on virtually whatever topic we are covering, who tell us we are the most over-centralised western democracy and that most other places have much more leeway and independence for their local units, whatever they are, and they are normally supported by some sort of constitutional settlement, which means the centre cannot take those powers away. Do you feel that that is a trend? Having read your report carefully, I know the answer, but do you feel that is a trend that we ought to follow in this country and free up our local government to get on and do more of the work?

Lord Heseltine: I think we should reverse the trend of 100 years that has neutered vast areas of this country outside London. As I have said, the Government have begun to pursue a localist agenda. They make speeches about localism and their credibility is clearly behind the concept, and they have now said they are going to move positively on a much bigger scale. We have to wait now until the spring to find out the detail of that.

Q212 Chair: Michael, thank you so much. I am so sorry that it has only been half an hour and I also am very sorry that we did not invite you in as a witness on our local government inquiry. I think that would have been a wonderful hour-and-a-half session, but perhaps we can write to you with any more questions we might have.

Lord Heseltine: If there are any more questions, you can ask Christopher Chope because he worked with me in the DTI.

Chair: Very remarkably, he has been quiet in this session. Thank you, Michael.

**Examination of Witness**

**Witness: Rt Hon Lord Reid of Cardowan**, gave evidence.

Q213 Chair: Good to see you, John. You know what we are doing. We are in the middle of an inquiry on all things to do with reshuffles. We had a set of very distinguished witnesses and I think it would be true to say there is a thread developing that the shuffle itself is a very difficult thing. It is a very personal thing. There is not an easy way for people to move on or move across or whatever at one level. Also, there is a bit of a trend line around, “Okay, it may be difficult, but do we need to do it so much?” Chris Mullin, in particular, put on the table a figure and he said, “You cannot be good at your job unless you have been working through … and you should be left in place, for two years”, was his view. I think one or two people have echoed that sentiment, if not the exact number. What is your own view on those two things, John, the immediate and the personal and the length of time you need to get on and do the job well?

Lord Reid: I am pretty certain that it is a difficult experience for those who are reappointed, particularly for those who are not and probably for the Prime Minister at any time as well. I do not know whether it is apocryphal or not, but it is said that Barbara Castle, when she was finally removed from the Cabinet by, I think, Jim Callaghan—I may be wrong in these dates—he said to her how difficult all this was and Harold Wilson had told him that this was the most difficult part of the job, to which she immediately responded, “That is why he never did it”, which I thought was quite an apt quote. I think the public nature of what happens and the fact that it becomes an annual or biannual ritual and it all happens at the same time, is difficult, and I do not see why we cannot find a better way of doing that. In any business you promote or demote people, not at a particular time of the year, but whenever it was felt appropriate to move people on. I understand that it is more difficult in politics because when you move one piece then you have to try to balance it up with different groups, different regions, men and women and so on. I am not a great fan of the annual reshuffle-type thing. I think also on occasions a reshuffle is probably used to divert attention from a particular problem that the Government has, “Let’s have a reshuffle, renew, or at least give the perception of renewal”.

On the second point that Chris Mullin was talking about, what was that, Mr Chairman?

Chair: Just on the length of time.

Lord Reid: Yes, I think that is a more difficult one. In an ideal world you would spend a few years in each job. I think it is difficult to get a metric for what point does a Minister become effective. I was sent a circular by Anthony King that asked me to tick a box on this—three weeks, three months, three years and so on. I don’t think you can do that. I know it sounds very British to say it, but it all depends. There are certainly some jobs I took that I felt pretty adequately prepared for either through life experience or, in the case of my first job, seven years preparatory work. There were other positions where I was pretty well thrown in and it took a lot of time to get to grips with the portfolio. However, I would qualify it with this perspective—certainly at the Cabinet level, at Secretary of State level, I think you have to distinguish between three things—leadership, management and technocracy. It is possible to give leadership and to have the qualities necessary to give leadership before you are a technocratic expert in your Department. In that sense, the Secretary of State is more a chairman of the board than a chief executive. There are people there who should do management and for the most part the civil servants do it very well. I personally would not want Members of Parliament or Government involved in the appointment or selection of those people. I know that is a current debate at the moment. I think that would be a wrong move.
Ev 52 Political and Constitutional Reform Committee: Evidence

13 December 2012 Rt Hon Lord Reid of Cardowan

There is also, in the civil service, an amazing reservoir of knowledge of the detail of various aspects of the Department’s business so I think that it is possible—dependent on the qualities of an individual and on that individual’s background and experience—to become an effective Secretary of State quite quickly. In other circumstances, it will take a great deal of time. Does that answer the point you were making?

Chair: It was very helpful.

Q214 Mrs Laing: I think you have just answered just about all of the questions because you know this subject pretty well. I remember a point where you were moving regularly from place to place clearing up messes that other Ministers had left behind.

Lord Reid: I would not quite say it that way. That could cast aspersions on my predecessors. I do not think that is the case.

Mrs Laing: I am not asking you to comment on that, but you were moving from place to place. Would it be reasonable to say that people on the outside sometimes say, “How can somebody go in and be a Minister?” for example, in education if they have never been a teacher, for example in transport if they have never flown a plane and so on. Would it be reasonable to say that the expertise that a Minister brings is in being a politician and bringing the political aspect to add to the managerial aspect of the Department?

Lord Reid: Yes, I think it would be difficult to paint an ideal picture of the criteria or the qualities that you want a Secretary of State to have, but if you were approximating towards the ideal, you would pick a man or woman who was capable of assimilating masses of information and applying a degree of intellectual rigor in terms of analysis, somebody who had the capacity to make decisions on big issues. You would choose somebody who could give the strategic leadership and carry people with them, identifying the primary strategic objectives of a particular Department and explaining the route and key points in that direction. They would have a capacity to undertake extremely long hours under considerable pressure and to work along with the civil service. I think Gerald Kaufman had it right years ago. He said that the civil service hate a Minister who does not know what he wants but they also dislike a Minister who knows what he wants but will not listen to the potential downstream consequences of the action that he is taking. I think if you have those qualities—I am not claiming those qualities—but the nearer you approximate towards them then the nearer you come to the sort of qualities that a Secretary of State would benefit from, particularly the leadership aspect. On the politics you are right—you have to carry your Department, you have to carry your Cabinet, you have to carry your Parliament, you have to carry the public. Then at the back of your mind there are always the values that your party is supposed to enshrine and your constituency and constituents and others would look for you to exhibit. I think all of that is true.

To answer your practical point, speaking from my own experience, there are some positions that I took that I felt reasonably well qualified to move into and be effective from a very early stage. For my first post, as Armed Forces Minister, I had spent seven years reading military history, meeting the troops, discussing with people; and to the credit of the previous Conservative Government, including the then Armed Forces Minister, Nicholas Soames, they had facilitated this because they had allowed me to come in a long period before the civil service would normally have required them to allow me to come in. That meant that when I came back as Defence Secretary I had then done about eight and a half years on the defence side. When I was appointed to Secretary of State for Scotland I had a pretty good awareness of what was going on and what was required.

In Northern Ireland, although I was appointed, again it was one of those occasions when someone resigned. Anyone who is brought up as a working class Catholic in the west of Scotland has a pretty good understanding of the issues and the history going back to the 12th century of the conflict. In other cases, such as transport, I had no particular knowledge, no particular interest. I did not want to go. I liked being Armed Forces Minister. The first day I was at Transport, I remember, they were doing the roads review in Parliament, which consisted of me at the despatch box and Glenda Jackson, the Under-Secretary, tearing pages out of a large briefing book to put in front of me when somebody asked me, “What were the latest plans for the A373 going through somewhere or other?” Health, that took me a bit of time to get a grip on because I didn’t seek the Health post, but Alan Milburn had indicated he wanted to leave it. That is why I say “it depends”. It depends on the circumstances. Generally speaking, I think we turn over Ministers too quickly. I certainly didn’t seek the number of posts that I had, but then you are part of a collective and basically you have to do what is required in the collective.

Mrs Laing: I think that sums it up very well. Thank you.

Q215 Mr Chope: I think you had seven Cabinet posts in nine years.

Lord Reid: I had seven in the Cabinet, eight at or in the Cabinet because the Ministry of Transport was at the Cabinet—

Q216 Mr Chope: When you moved into those posts, did the person who you were succeeding brief you at all? When you moved out of those posts did you brief your successor at all?

Lord Reid: Yes, in some cases. I remember for instance when I took over in Northern Ireland from Peter Mandelson, even although he was facing difficult circumstances at the time—that caused his resignation—he was kind enough to phone me and to meet with me almost immediately to go over some of the major issues that he thought I should know about, some of the background and so on. When I took over at health, Alan Milburn did the same.

In Scotland it was rather more difficult because Donald Dewar who had been the previous Secretary of State had gone to be the First Minister, so I was
engaged continually with him. It was about a fortnight before devolution.

In other cases, such as when I became Minister for the Armed Forces and Defence Secretary, as I said, I had spent some years doing defence, but my predecessors were available and I had a chat with Geoff Hoon, so yes. When I went I always made it plain to my successor that I was available. There is a fine line between failing to move on and trying to do somebody’s job when they come in and offering yourself and giving a briefing. For instance, I would have spoken to Paul Murphy and Helen Liddell when she came in in Scotland.

I am not sure if this is relevant to what you are asking, but you may find it helpful. I think you also have to have very quickly, as you go in, a view of your strategic objectives. I am not saying that everybody would agree with those strategic objectives, even within my own party, but you have to have a view of where you want to get to. When I went in as the Armed Forces Minister, I knew that we needed and wanted a strategic defence review, which we carried in 1997 to 1998, and we carried that out.

When I then went to Transport, I knew that one of the reasons I went there, under John Prescott, was to deliver the new underground link to the Millennium Dome by the millennium, because any Government that couldn’t deliver a link to the Millennium Dome by the millennium wasn’t going to be trusted to deliver much else. When I went to Northern Ireland, it was to achieve decommissioning of weapons from the IRA, to get a general acceptance inside the Nationalist community of the reformed police service and, if possible, to get a declaration that the war was over so that there was not only a theoretical end to violence but an actual end to violence. We achieved two of those in that period.

In Scotland, I recall that the strategic objective was to establish a competent and working Scottish Parliament, but clearly within the constitutional settlement of the United Kingdom, so it was a devolved Parliament, not a separate one.

Q218 Mr Chope: Do you think there are too many Ministers?

Lord Reid: I don’t think there are too many Ministers, no, and I will tell you why. A huge amount of information is now not only available but is imposed on decision makers of all types—we live in a networked world where there is a tsunami of data coming in to decision makers, in the private sector as well as in the public sector. It comes in in real time so the time you have to make decisions is much shorter. Also every aspect of life now in the digital age, in the cyber age, is under scrutiny so the ability to analyse information and to make decisions and the requirement of public scrutiny of decisions is much more difficult than it was 20 or 30 years ago. Of course, not all data is information. There are masses of data, but if it doesn’t change your perception or knowledge it is not information, it is just data, and yet we continually send each other a mass of data on e-mails and so on so you can imagine the amount that is coming into Ministers.

Q219 Mr Chope: The aspiration of the Government is to reduce the number of MPs down to 600 and the Government are rather coy about whether or not they wish to reduce the number of Ministers. One of the jobs of parliamentarians is to hold Ministers to account, so would you agree that there should be a significant reduction in the number of Ministers if there is a reduction in the number of MPs?

Lord Reid: No.

Q220 Mr Chope: That would be strengthening the Executive in Parliament enormously.

Lord Reid: No. First of all, that presupposes that I agree with the reduction in the number of MPs; I don’t. I think MPs are much maligned. The vast majority of MPs I know are people who work extremely hard, seven days a week, and now find themselves abused because there is an expenses system that is meant to ensure that not only the rich can come to Parliament but that it is possible for working people to come to Parliament. My guess would be that there is the same percentage of people in Parliament who are misusing that system as there would be in any other organisation outside. I don’t necessarily agree that the demands on MPs are such that you can reduce the number and therefore the premise on which you are asking the question falls. Even if there was to be a reduction, I believe that the demands of modern Government are such that the number of Ministers that we have should not be reduced.

When I came into Parliament a very wise old head and former Home Secretary, Merlyn Rees, told me never to tell anybody the hours that I worked because either they would think I was lying or they would think I was completely mad to do it. Yet, if you read large sections of the press you would believe in the misrepresentation, which was best signalled during the alternative vote campaign by a television advert video showing an MP hiding behind his curtain when the constituent came. I think that is a calumny on most MPs.
Lord Reid: I don’t have any comment to make on that. I don’t know the detail.

Paul Flynn: You remind me of the AV vote when—as I crossed the Vauxhall Bridge every morning I saw an advert there that said, “If we had AV” to mean that more babies would die in hospital and more soldiers would die in Afghanistan. I never quite got the point. There was a time when there was a low point in advertisements about the democratic process. You seem to have been the victim or the beneficiary of more moves than anyone else. I think Tony Blair put you in as a safe pair of hands or a hard man in various situations, many of them arising unexpectedly. Do you think that we need a system that does not depend on these regular moves and that we need more stability and fewer reshuffles generally?

Lord Reid: Yes, I would agree with that. Incidentally, I hope you don’t mind me commenting—I don’t know where this “hard man” comes from. I suspect it is partly my Glasgow accent.

Paul Flynn: Exactly, all villains have Glasgow accents.

Lord Reid: Once Mr Jeremy Paxman was having a discussion with two chaps from private schools as if I didn’t exist—I was at the end of the table. And when he turned to interview me, I made the point that if you went to a particular type of school and you got three O levels in basket weaving you are regarded as an intellectual but if you have a PhD and a Glasgow accent you are immediately classified as a hard man. I hope you don’t mind me making that point.

Mrs Laing: Some of us would support you there very strongly.

Lord Reid: I agree with you, absolutely. First of all, I don’t think a Minister or a Secretary of State wants to move that often. I certainly didn’t. I can tell you that I didn’t want to move from being Armed Forces Minister to Minister for Transport, even though it was a Cabinet post. I would have preferred to stay and without going into it in any detail, I made that absolutely plain to the Prime Minister at the time. I didn’t particularly want to go to Health. Firstly, I didn’t think I was sufficiently aware of the health portfolio, but I was told that I was a very quick learner. Secondly, and just as importantly, I was a Scottish MP and this was the English health service. I didn’t particularly want to leave Defence when I was Secretary of State for Defence to go to the Home Office. These are not reflections on the Home Office or any other Department, I just didn’t want to go. I thought that, having served a year or something as Secretary of State for Defence, to move on was a bad thing for me, for Defence, and so on. I think we went through a ridiculous number of Defence Secretaries. The problem, Paul, is that events happen. I went to the Home Office because Charles Mandelson had to resign. I went to the Home Office because Charles decided to resign over a dispute he had with the Prime Minister about moving him. I went to Health because Alan Milburn decided to resign. In a sense those three mini reshuffles, whether it was me or somebody else, would have happened. My first post was Armed Forces Minister and that was when the Government came in. Certainly, in half of these moves it was almost inevitable that somebody would have been moved, but it is not satisfactory.

Q222 Paul Flynn: To have come up with some recommendations on this and virtually all the evidence is that the system does not work. In your case, you were either moved sideways or promoted and there are others who were sacked and feel that they failed in life to this day, years later. A lot of it seemed to be part of an irrational game of Prime Ministerial chess that we were playing. You cannot always explain moves in terms of ability or in any other way.

Lord Reid: First of all, I think it is a subjective decision by the Prime Minister, so it is very difficult and I am not sure it is not illusionary to search for some metrics by which the Prime Minister should judge it. I have tried to identify some of the qualities that, if I were Prime Minister, I would look for in a Secretary of State. They are the qualities that I outlined at the beginning. Secondly, I agree with you that the present way of doing it, the big reshuffle with the media circus and so on adds a degree of humiliation. I have been fortunate, have I never been sacked. Indeed I was fortunate, probably uniquely, to decide in advance that I would voluntarily step down from the Cabinet the day Gordon Brown came in. I did that because I thought it was the honourable thing to do. Having done it, incidentally, I thought it was the honourable thing to do to keep quiet so that is why I went on radio silence for three years. I have never been in that position. I had the luxury of making my own decision that it wasn’t for me to stay—for the status or the car or whatever—if I didn’t feel confidence in the regime. I can imagine that for people who were sacked it must be an excruciatingly humiliating experience; the walk down Downing Street and so on. I am not quite sure whether that would be the case if changes were spaced out throughout the year. There is a sense that if they were spaced throughout the year and were sacked you would be the one person who was immediately covered in the news and in the press. I think in an ideal world this would be regarded by the press and the media as the natural part of the evolution of an organisation, as it is in the private sector, but it does not happen that way, given the public scrutiny.
Ministers who are good managers and become extremely good technocrats, but don’t have a grasp of strategic leadership either in the Department or indeed for the Government as a whole. I think that one of the reasons that I found myself in the media so often defending the Government on subjects that were not my own portfolio is that along with one or two others—Margaret Beckett springs to mind, and John Hutton—we had an overall understanding of the strategic purpose of the Government and the values that lay behind it. I think that there are exceptions, but all other things being equal, what you are saying about your strength vis-à-vis the civil service being weakened if there are continual changes must be right because there is not that continuity.

Having said that, I changed quite often and you could obviously talk to people who work with me in the civil service, but I think I worked reasonably well with them. The only occasion I can remember when it was wrongly said that I might be at odds with my civil servants was when I was at the Home Office. It was said that, by characterising the Home Office as deficient in a number of areas that somehow this must mean that I was at odds with the top civil servants. That was the interpretation in the press. As so often happens, the press had no idea whether this was the case or not. In fact it wasn’t, because the words I used, including “not fit for purpose” were not mine. They were the words of the most senior civil servant in the Department who I had asked to give me a two-page summary of the deficiencies in the Department. He was good enough to be completely candid with me and I thought it was so serious that I had to be candid with the Committee that was interviewing me and I used exactly his words including the phrase “not fit for purpose”, which has now stuck with me.

I read all of these stories written in ignorance suggesting that somehow this must have meant that I was characterising the civil servants as not fit for purpose. Of course at the time, like on many other occasions when you are misrepresented, it was impossible to put the record straight because these were internal discussions between myself and the senior civil servants. I think it is possible to establish a pretty quick and candid rapport, to give leadership without assuming the role of management and I worry about the plans to appoint or to have the Government Ministers play a role in appointing senior civil servants.

Q225 Chair: John, thank you very much for your time today, very informative indeed. I am so sorry we have only had half an hour.
Lord Reid: Not a problem.
Chair: If there are other things that occur to you afterwards, do not hesitate to drop us a line. I just want to thank you on the record for attending this morning.
Lord Reid: Thank you, members of the Committee. Thank you.
Chair: Appreciate it, John. Good to see you.
Thursday 24 January 2013

Members present:

Mr Graham Allen (Chair)

Paul Flynn
Sheila Gilmore
Fabian Hamilton

Tristram Hunt
Mrs Eleanor Laing
Mr Andrew Turner

Examination of Witness

Witness: Sir Jeremy Heywood KCB, CVO, Cabinet Secretary, gave evidence.

Q226 Chair: Sir Jeremy, welcome. As you know, we are doing an inquiry into reshuffles, alongside and as part of our general look at executive power in the UK. We are the baby of the Select Committee structure. We have been going just a couple of years to keep an eye on all things democratic and constitutional. It is a great pleasure and privilege to have you with us this morning. Would you like to say anything to start us off on reshuffles?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I don't think so. I think it would be good to get into the questions.

Q227 Fabian Hamilton: The first question is: what is the role of the Cabinet Secretary in advising a Prime Minister who is contemplating a reshuffle and what other sources of advice would a Prime Minister have on reshuffles, like the Whips office and whatever?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I don't think so. I think it would be good to get into the questions.

Q228 Fabian Hamilton: How far in advance does the process of planning a reshuffle begin? Does the Prime Minister say, “In one month’s time I am going to have a reshuffle, therefore we had better start thinking about it”, or is it literally, “Look, it is time we had a little bit of a swap around and who can I move to where and we will do it tomorrow”? Is it weeks in advance, days, months?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: It obviously varies very much from Prime Minister to Prime Minister and from reshuffle to reshuffle, but I would say we are talking more in weeks and months than days. I would think a month to three months would be the norm, but it would not be three months of concerted planning. That would be probably the point at which the Prime Minister would start thinking and talking to a few people about his intention to do a reshuffle. You only start serious preparation and planning in the three or four weeks leading up, I would think, but it is difficult to generalise.

Q229 Fabian Hamilton: Earlier, you mentioned statutory limits on how many Cabinet Ministers you can have and how many paid Government posts. Is that always relative to the size of the Commons? We have had all the controversy over reducing the size of the Commons, and that is not over yet. I think it might be determined on Tuesday next week. If the Commons reduces in the next Parliament to 600 MPs will the size of the paid ministerial posts in Government reduce as well?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I don’t think it does. It is determined by the 1975 statute and until that is amended—and I don’t believe it has been amended—I don’t think there is any automatic link at all between the size of the House and the number of Ministers.

Q230 Fabian Hamilton: Is there any internal written guide for Prime Ministers and civil servants on how and when reshuffles are best undertaken, based on previous experience, or is it just custom and practice?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: It is custom and practice, really. I don’t think there is anything written down. For the technical exercise of handling reshuffle day, with the sequencing of the phone calls and the involvement of the Palace and those sorts of issues, I suspect in No. 10 there is something written down that is passed on from principal private secretary to principal private secretary. As a logistical exercise, it is quite a demanding day in No. 10. You need to get extra telephonists on the switchboard, you have to line up your links with Buckingham Palace, you have to be very careful you don’t appoint someone to a job that has not actually been vacated yet, because that causes...
chaos across Whitehall. As a technical exercise for the civil service, it is quite demanding. There is probably some written guidance somewhere for the absolute nuts and bolts of how you do it minute by minute, but in general how you approach a reshuffle is very much at the discretion of the Prime Minister.

Q231 Fabian Hamilton: Do you think formal guidance would be useful, or is it something that you think could rely on past custom and practice?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I don’t really think it would be that useful, to be honest.

Q232 Fabian Hamilton: You mentioned the role of Buckingham Palace. When Labour was elected in 1997, I had a very close friend—the late Derek Fatchett—who was appointed as Minister of State at the Foreign Office and I remember his description of going to the Palace for the first time and receiving the seal of office. I think there was a reshuffle after two years and friends that I knew who were in one post were moved to another and of course there was all the business of going to the Palace and all the business with seals. How does that work? What involvement is there from Her Majesty, or is Buckingham Palace simply told by yourselves, or by yourself, “This is who is going to be doing this job. You need to see them at this time or that time”?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: Technically and formally the Queen has to approve all the appointments, and we absolutely adhere to that courtesy, but I think it is largely a courtesy in reality. I can’t remember a case where the Palace have vetoed the appointment of a Minister, because that is not the way it works, but nevertheless we have to make sure we go through the formal process of not appointing someone unless Her Majesty has indicated assent, and I think that is an important part of our constitution.

Q233 Fabian Hamilton: Secrecy is obviously understandable, for some of the reasons you have pointed out. Is secrecy necessarily helpful and does it create its own problems in reshuffles? Could the process be more open or would that simply create worse problems?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I think that would create worse problems. The process has to be done fairly confidentially. There is huge speculation in the media at the time of a reshuffle or running up to a reshuffle, most of which is usually wrong and ill-informed, but a lot of the debates about particular personalities in the Government get played out in the media in any event. I don’t see how a more open approach by the Prime Minister would help the process.

Q234 Fabian Hamilton: You don’t think it would be at all helpful for any advance notice to be given to Ministers who are going to be reshuffled into different posts, or indeed sacked?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I can see the arguments for and against that, but I think if people knew for certain the reshuffle was going to take place at a certain time it would essentially distract the whole of Whitehall and Westminster and the Ministers themselves, whereas as long as they know that there is a chance of it being them but also a perfectly good chance that it won’t be them people just get on with their business as best they can. I don’t think it would really help.

Q235 Chair: Sir Jeremy, is this process rational?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: Rational? The process of having reshuffles or the process by which reshuffles are done?

Chair: Both.

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I think it is pretty inevitable that during the course of a Parliament you will get some turnover, and obviously some reshuffles are prompted by an accident or an emergency or a sudden resignation, so to some extent it is inevitable. But it is absolutely reasonable that a Prime Minister will want to refresh, reshuffle the team at various points during a Parliament. I don’t see how you would keep a lot of perfectly understandably ambitious MPs happy for an entire five years if they thought that there was no possibility of getting any sort of job in Government for the whole five years of a Parliament. Of course, not all MPs want to become Ministers, but I think the hope of office is an important part of the Whip’s armoury, the Prime Minister’s armoury in managing parties during Parliaments.

As for the process itself, the thing that is unique about the British system is we have these rather abrupt dismissals and changeovers. You can elongate that process. It feels a bit chaotic on reshuffle day, particularly if suddenly a Minister has to appear before Parliament and answer questions on a brief of which he or she has no real awareness. There are obvious awkwardnesses on the day itself and the days afterwards but I don’t think, frankly, spreading that pain over a number of days would greatly enhance the situation, if at all. Prime Ministers always hope they are going to get a big political lift out of reshuffles. They usually don’t make much difference to poll ratings or the strength or credibility of the Government, in my experience. You just have to get through them and get back to normal business.

Q236 Chair: If we could make you Prime Minister, what would you change about this reshuffle process, or is it perfect?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: It is not perfect but I have no obvious answers to the weaknesses in the system. I think I would look for other things around the edges of this. For example, the process by which new Ministers get training and induction could probably be improved. There is still a slight stigma attaching to the whole notion of ministerial training. I think that is going away over time, but there is nothing at all difficult about people wanting to learn a little bit from their peer group and from former Ministers, for example, about how to be good Ministers. We could do a better job of that. The IFG is now starting to offer some very good 360-degree feedback to Ministers privately. I gather that that process is going well. Obviously it is confidential to the Ministers concerned, so I don’t know who does it and who doesn’t. I think we could offer more guidance and training for new Ministers.

If we are going to have fewer reshuffles—and I personally would support that and the current Prime
Minister has made that clear—it would be quite good to continue to think about how we can give feedback to Ministers between reshuffles. It is a pretty brutal system. Most Ministers don’t get much feedback about their performance until the moment they are reshuffled and they are either promoted or sacked or kept in place, and that feels a bit binary. It is easier to make that generic point than to think of a specific idea for how you would do it.

Q237 Chair: I think colleagues are going to ask you other questions about the five-year Parliament a little later, but in this context doesn’t planning, knowing you have a five-year Parliament, or more accurately a five-year Parliament and a five-year Government, give a framework to a Prime Minister to be able, for the first time in living memory, to say, “At a certain point within the five years I can make certain judgments. I have bookends, beginning and end and the middle, that might be useful points around which we could structure something a little more rational and sensible”?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: In general, five-year Parliaments or fixed-term Parliaments do enable you to plan more effectively and clearly ahead. That is certainly helpful to the civil service. I am slightly sceptical that it bears much on the reshuffle question because, as I said earlier, I don’t think it necessarily helps to say, “On this date X in the future there is going to be another reshuffle”. I think that would just lead to increasing speculation and distraction in the run-up to that date. If the Prime Minister has in his mind that, “Now I have a five-year planning horizon I am definitely going to do a reshuffle on day X” he has not told me. There are important planning gains from the certainty that comes with that but I don’t think it necessarily impacts on the reshuffle question. I will give you one very good example where it will help myself and Bob Kerslake, because we plan Permanent Secretary moves. Before the last election Gus O’Donnell did try to persuade a number of Permanent Secretary moves. Before the last election Gus O’Donnell did try to persuade a number of Permanent Secretaries to stay over until after the election because at that point we knew, roughly speaking, when it was going to be. Normally speaking, if there was uncertainty around when the election was going to be you would not be able to plan Permanent Secretary appointments, but knowing when the next election will be, subject to the Queen’s approval and all the rest of it, we can plan more clearly sequences of Permanent Secretary moves in light of that. There are plenty of other examples. I think you are in active conversation with many of my Permanent Secretary colleagues, Chairman, to discuss this.

Q238 Mr Turner: Can we go back for a moment to this three months, one month, bang? You suggested that the approach to a reshuffle took three months to one month. Is that with civil servants or is that with the Prime Minister and his colleagues?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: These are rough estimates. My instinct is that the Prime Minister will start thinking in his own mind, and possibly talking to one or two senior political colleagues, several months in advance but won’t start putting down a first cut of who might move to where and starting to test that against the criteria that he wants to use until much nearer the time, probably a few weeks in advance. Certainly you don’t spend three months agonising about lists of names because that would be a major distraction. The civil service doesn’t tend to get that involved until quite late on.

Q239 Mr Turner: How many weeks is that?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: It is days rather than weeks. I would say. As I said at the start, these are essentially political moments and the role of the civil service is really just to make sure that the numbers comply with the law of the land and that the Prime Minister has taken on board the likely challenges facing departments over a period of time. It is not the role of the civil service to make recommendations to the Prime Minister about who he should have in his Cabinet.

Q240 Mr Turner: That makes it clearer. The job of civil servants is making things work, making sure decisions are made?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: Very much so, yes.

Q241 Mr Turner: Thank you. That is a difference. What effect do you think reshuffles have in terms of their impact on policymaking and delivery? You have half answered this, I think. Sir Jeremy Heywood: I don’t think they generally make that much difference because usually the policy of the Government is pretty settled. Policy announcements go through Cabinet committees, get the support of the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister, they get enshrined in business plans. A lot of them hail from the Coalition Agreement that was very clear about what the Government was going to do, so the general course is set. Personalities of individual Ministers obviously change things around the edges. If a particular Minister comes newly into a post and has a set of new priorities the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister will be very keen to hear that, but the general thrust of policy is set by the Coalition Agreement and by the business plans. It can make a difference to the way policy is presented and, as I say, at the margin it can change particular priorities. For example, if we are about to embark on a spending round to look at the 2015–16 budgets, a different Minister might have a slightly different view about how a budget should be spent, and that is not negligible obviously. I would say the role of reshuffles on the drift of policy can be exaggerated.

Q242 Mr Turner: I know you can’t give current examples but perhaps you would like to go back to Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister. Could you say what the strengths were, refer to particular individuals and how she made this, being behind the Prime Minister?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: To be quite honest, I was a very junior civil servant in Margaret Thatcher’s era.

Mr Turner: That is why I am asking.

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I don’t really have much recollection of what her reshuffles achieved or did not
achieve. Do you want to ask me the question again? I am not sure I fully picked up the drift of the question.

Q243 Mr Turner: By all means answer this in a more recent era. What could a Prime Minister do that was different from what other Prime Ministers could do in terms of how she or he used the Cabinet and put different people in the places that they thought were important?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: Obviously the Prime Minister has a pretty significant influence over policy, both by choosing specific people for specific roles and giving them new tasks but also as chair of Cabinet and chair of Cabinet committees. Margaret Thatcher used to chair a lot of important Cabinet committees and merely the selection of which topics were going to get focus over a period of time would help. She was not constrained by a Coalition Agreement at the start of the Parliament, nor did we have in those days five-year business plans that set out in quite granular detail what was going to be achieved by when. There was a lot more autonomy in those days for the Prime Minister to change course during the course of a Parliament and decide, “This is what I am going to focus on for the next year or two and this is the person I want to help me lead that”. I think it has become a little bit more managerial now, if I can put it like that.

Q244 Mr Turner: That very word was popping up in my mind as well. Is managerial the right thing for the Prime Minister to be or is not the Prime Minister a much more dynamic person?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I am certainly not going to say the Prime Minister is not a dynamic person. Clearly, the Prime Minister is a very dynamic person. What I am saying is issues come up during the course of a Parliament that need new focus, that were not anticipated at the time that manifestos or Coalition Agreements were put in place. Of course any Minister can come in and decide they want to add some new areas and new priorities to the existing stock of policies. This Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister do that the whole time. The only point I am making is that one should not overstate the extent to which ministerial reshuffles suddenly lead to a completely new set of policies when you have a Coalition Agreement and a set of business plans that set out essentially what the Coalition Government is trying to achieve over this five-year period. You have to work within that even if you change the composition of the Cabinet. That still remains the overarching agreement, but of course new political priorities come up and need to be gripped.

Q245 Mr Turner: I am not quite clear whether you are talking about this Government being a coalition and that is making things more written down or those things would have changed even were it not for a coalition.

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I think it is a bit of both. The Coalition Agreement takes it to a new level. It is certainly the first time I remember having such a clear set of commitments that the Government was intending to achieve over the course of the Parliament. But there was definitely a move towards this under the Blair Government and then the Brown Government, through public service agreements for example, a much clearer attempt to say, “This is what departments are supposed to be achieving with the money we have given them”. We started off having hundreds of these PSAs, as they were called, and they were gradually winnowed down. It was an attempt to pin down and make more clear so that the civil service knew what was going on and Ministers knew what they were going to be held accountable for by the Prime Minister. There were definitely moves towards that even before we got to the Coalition Agreement.

Q246 Mr Turner: Staying with the Coalition for the moment, you will be aware that we, that is the Conservative part of the Coalition, were sufficiently unhappy for the push on the House of Lords changes, and I have no doubt the Liberals were equally unhappy in something else. Does that happen within the Coalition or is that pushing from outside the Coalition?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: There were backbench pressures, both in the Commons and the Lords, outside the Government and those pressures were felt by both David Cameron and Nick Clegg, but clearly the issue of House of Lords reform was discussed extensively within the Coalition as well as within the parties, the backbenchers. So I think a bit of both is the answer to your question.

Q247 Chair: To press on this question of the Prime Minister’s ability to hire and fire—I avoid the use of the word the “right” to hire and fire—there are so many executive and prime ministerial powers—and this is going broader into the question of executive powers—that are not written down, that are custom and practice, convention, make it up as you go along. We have made some representations, which have been listened to, thankfully, on the Cabinet Manual. Do you think it would be helpful to put a number of these things in writing so that everybody knows the rules of the game? Then specifically, with this inquiry in mind, should the prerogative power to hire and fire be written down so all can see that?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I don’t see much benefit from that. I think it is pretty clear to most people that the Prime Minister has the right to hire and fire Ministers. One of the essential roles of the Prime Minister is to form his or her Government and then be accountable for the performance of that Government to the House of Commons. That is absolutely fundamental to the role of being Prime Minister and I don’t think there is any great ambiguity or uncertainty about that role.

Q248 Chair: But there is incredible ambiguity and uncertainty about the timing and the extent. Would you even go as far as to say it might be helpful if an incoming Prime Minister made some general remarks about whether he anticipated keeping most of his colleagues on for a fixed five-year term and then other people would say, “Fine, we just have to get on with life and our turn will come at the next election”, or make a statement about having some sort of review at a midway point, or even saying, “Sorry chaps, you had better just get on with it and it will be like it
always has been and the axe can fall at any moment”?

I agree. We like to give personnel development, promotion policies, things that people can see and because of that transparency presumably people are more confident and reassured that they will benefit from and feel happier if they knew, roughly speaking, how long they were going to be in post. But I think the Prime Minister has to balance that sort of morale-boosting stability with just not fettering his own discretion so it looks like a U-turn if he has to do something earlier or a resignation arises and has to be responded to. Politics is full of events. You can’t predict the future. I think what the Prime Minister has done is say that in general he wants to have Ministers in post for longer to give increased stability and accountability for the delivery of policy as well as development of policy. I think that is a good thing and I am sure Ministers generally appreciate that. All I am saying is I don’t think you should necessarily pin that down and remove the Prime Minister’s discretion to make that choice for himself.

Q250 Sheila Gilmore: Would there be an advantage, or maybe a disadvantage, in giving Parliament a role in endorsing the appointment of senior Ministers?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I don’t really see the case for that at all in constitutional principle. I think it is the Prime Minister’s job to decide who he wants to have in his Cabinet and his Government. Obviously in the Coalition that is a shared endeavour with the Deputy Prime Minister. Then Parliament holds the Government to account for its performance and if Parliament believes that individual Ministers are behaving so woefully there are mechanisms by which Parliament can make its voice heard. I think it would mix up accountabilities if Parliament was implicated in the choice of particular Ministers by having consciously voted them through and it would leave periods of uncertainty between the Prime Minister’s nomination and Parliament’s approval and all sorts of practical things like that. Fundamentally, I think this is about clarity of roles and responsibilities. The Prime Minister has a responsibility for deciding who is in his Government and then Parliament can hold the Government to account.

Q251 Sheila Gilmore: Do you think that is particularly a process of our system? In other systems—the American system for example—there does appear to be a considerable ability to question and sometimes stymie getting somebody a position.

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I agree. The American system is a different system. I don’t personally support it for the UK. I think it leads to long interregnums when it is not clear who is in charge and I don’t think there is any great advantage in that.

Q252 Sheila Gilmore: You touched on something earlier in relation to what we would call appraisals in other jobs. How is the performance of Ministers assessed and could that be improved so that a better service is provided? People want Ministers to do a good job.

Sir Jeremy Heywood: There is not an appraisal system for Ministers at the moment. I doubt we will ever see one introduced, because it is not clear who would do the appraising. If we can build in a little bit more feedback for Ministers, particularly Ministers who are just starting off on the path, relatively junior Ministers—I am sure to some extent they do get feedback from the Whips, for example. I think it would be a benefit if we could gently find ways of feeding back to Ministers who perhaps need to develop their media technique or the way they behave in Parliament so that they get the opportunity to improve themselves rather than just facing the chop after silence for a year. In principle I think that would be a good thing. It is quite difficult in practical terms to see how you would engineer that because it is a bit countercultural, frankly.

Q253 Sheila Gilmore: On the parliamentary side in some ways you probably get feedback fairly quickly.

Sir Jeremy Heywood: In real time.

Sheila Gilmore: No doubt from, as you say, Whips and maybe colleagues as well it would become fairly clear if they think you are succeeding in that bit of it, and there are clearly issues with the media. But being a Minister is not about just being purely a political figurehead. It should be about having some involvement and control in the way things run; at least one would hope so. Is there any mechanism for that? That is the bit we are not trained for at all in many ways. People come to Parliament from various backgrounds and sometimes we have administrative, managerial experience but many others have not, and the bit that we do as backbenchers is very different from what you would do as even a very junior Minister.
**Sir Jeremy Heywood:** I agree. That is the key point, in a sense. I think the way it will generally work is that the Secretary of State will give feedback to junior Ministers on their work in the department and obviously the Prime Minister will see individual Secretaries of State and feed back any thoughts he has about how the department seems to be working. But I agree that it is a slightly unsystematic, non-codified and haphazard sort of approach to a difficult subject.

**Q254 Mr Turner:** Again, who does this? Is this the Prime Minister or is this you or someone in between? Who decided that this time we would have the reshuffle in the first week back? I am not sure, but I think Margaret Thatcher used to have her reshuffles at the beginning of the holiday. Others would have it at the end of the holiday. Are there not better times and worse times? Obviously he would not want to move the Budget and the Chancellor at the same time, but why was it decided that the actual day for reshuffling was the week we were back?

**Sir Jeremy Heywood:** The Prime Minister decided that. I can’t quite remember what his reasoning was but he obviously judged that was the right time to do it.

**Q255 Mr Turner:** You were not involved?

**Sir Jeremy Heywood:** No, I don’t recall being involved. Reshuffles are basically matters for the Prime Minister. It is up to him to decide when he wants to do it and how extensive he wants it to be. I imagine the press team or the political team gave him thoughts on which particular day but he obviously decided he wanted to do it broadly at that time of the year, having thought about it over the holidays, and that is what he did.

**Q256 Mr Turner:** So he did not receive any advice from you or your staff about the date or anything of that kind?

**Sir Jeremy Heywood:** No, he didn’t. Not on the date, no.

**Q257 Mr Turner:** Don’t you think that is pretty poor?

**Sir Jeremy Heywood:** No, because I think it is a political decision for him.

**Q258 Mr Turner:** It is rather like you not asking questions when you should be asking questions that have been referred to by another committee. You are saying, “This is not my job, therefore I will have nothing to do with it” where there could be relevant occurrences of which the Prime Minister would not be aware or may not be aware of their importance.

**Sir Jeremy Heywood:** I can’t remember the precise details of how the date was set. I am sure if I had had a strong view that it shouldn’t have been on the day for various technical or civil service type reasons I would have made these representations to the Prime Minister, but I didn’t see any particular reason to question his judgment that that is when it should be.

**Q259 Mr Turner:** So you did know about it?

**Sir Jeremy Heywood:** Yes, broadly speaking.

**Q260 Mr Turner:** By how many weeks?

**Sir Jeremy Heywood:** I can’t honestly remember. Two or three weeks, I think.

**Q261 Chair:** Just to follow up at a tangent really on Andrew’s question, we began our inquiry on the concept of reshuffles as part of our broader look at executive power, but we did so going back to April, or May perhaps. There wasn’t an inkling, not a straw in the wind about a reshuffle at that point. We did it as part of our look at executive power. The first little rumours started a couple of months later and then you get this generation of a rumour mill, which is easy stuff to write up. It is non-attributable, you could start talking about personalities and churn and who you would like to see and who is in, who is out. Is there a sort of inevitability created by the media—a media push—that adds to a desire in a Prime Minister to have a reshuffle?

**Sir Jeremy Heywood:** There is always that risk, but I don’t think in this particular case there was anything to do with media inevitability. The Prime Minister was always clear he wanted to do a reshuffle some time during 2012, either towards the end of the summer or beginning of the autumn, so that was his decision-making process.

**Q262 Chair:** Since the process is unwritten and unconstrained, is there a possibility that like the old Walkers crisps—once you have tried one you have to have another one and you do finish the whole packet—rather than thinking, “I have a couple of people who I do need to move; they have mentioned they want to retire; one is going to leave to do another job”, when you start a process it is a little bit easier then to get into the flow of doing this?

**Sir Jeremy Heywood:** No, I think the Prime Minister went into this particular reshuffle with a broad idea of what he wanted to do and he then executed upon it. It was a reasonably large reshuffle and that, in my view, was probably because he had not had one up to that date and was hoping to get as many changes out of the way at the same time as possible, part of his view about maximum stability between reshuffles.

**Q263 Chair:** Before I ask Eleanor to come in, I have one last one, just picking up one of Sheila’s questions, which is the role of Parliament. At one extreme there is the US almost arraignment of a potential Secretary of State who is brought before committees and duffed over by various congressional committees before being endorsed or resigning because the process is too wearing. That is one way to do it. At the other extreme there is just the common courtesy of informing Parliament that the Government has changed quite significantly, rather than it being leaked to the media. Between those two processes, one gentle and one quite severe, is there some way the elected representatives of the country can be involved in this process for endorsement or being informed?

**Sir Jeremy Heywood:** I don’t think so, but I will very happily take the question away and discuss it with the Prime Minister who would have to decide on that. I think fundamentally it comes down to the key point of principle that it is the Prime Minister’s...
responsibility to form the Government, consulting the Deputy Prime Minister in a coalition context, and then Parliament can hold the Government to account. Any blurring of that distinction of roles is unhelpful in my view, but clearly common courtesy is making sure that as soon as the shape of the new Government is known that is fully articulated to Parliament and Select Committee chairs are notified and so on. Obviously that can all be tightened up if it is not regarded as adequate at the moment. We should definitely look at that.

Q264 Chair: The Speaker quite rightly jumps on Ministers who make statements on some often quite trivial things out and about rather than coming to Parliament. One would have thought that the Prime Minister might come to the House or even give the Leader of the House a statement to read out, as a very bare minimum, that some very significant events in terms of the shape of the Government had taken place. Sir Jeremy, may I hold you to your very kind offer of dropping us a line about that?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: Yes, of course.

Q265 Mrs Laing: It can often be difficult to find out, other than by the media, what is happening during a reshuffle. I would suggest that it is not like Walkers Crisps, Mr Chairman, it is more like an Agatha Christie novel, you start with one murder and then there has to be another and another and another consequent upon that. That is the impression that we had while taking evidence from various sources as well as our own observations. But considering that actual process of reshuffle, should there be a formal process by which Ministers hand over directly to their successors or not? Should they rely on civil servants, should there be meetings, should there be a formal process and to what extent are you aware of what happens in ministerial offices when a reshuffle is taking place?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I think it very much does vary department by department and personality by personality. Most outgoing Secretaries of State or junior Ministers will, I am sure, and do speak to the new people to pass on some words of wisdom about what the agenda is, what meetings are coming up, whether the civil servants are any good, normal things you would expect in any sort of hand over conversation. Permanent Secretaries will then be absolutely focused on making sure the incoming Minister has a very good briefing on all the current issues, all the forthcoming challenges, all the stakeholders to meet, the parliamentary select committee involvement and so on.

We do not have prescriptive guidance on that because by and large we find that individual departments make sensible decisions and I never get any particular complaints. If there were to be a sense from incoming Ministers that they did not get properly inducted then I would look very carefully at what guidance we did put in place to help departments. But my sense is that that process works remarkably smoothly, given how abrupt it is, and that is basically because of commonsense on all sides.

Q266 Mrs Laing: Thank you. Just continuing down this idea about what actually happens, in practical terms, during a reshuffle. The Institute for Government published a paper called Reshuffling the Pack, which you may have seen. They suggested that one possibility would be to, “Carry out a phased reshuffle with a handover period of one week or so between appointment decisions being made and the new team taking up their posts.” Would such a phased reshuffle be possible, would it be desirable?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: It is certainly possible, and sometimes we do have reshiftles that extend over several days, until the final junior Whip position is resolved. It can be several days before you complete the whole thing. But I come back to my earlier comments. I do not, myself, see any great gain from elongating this process, which just causes instability and uncertainty, and people take their eye off the ball, which is the actual work of departments and so on. So even though it does feel a bit abrupt and fairly brutal at times, I think having minimum disruption and maximum continuity of clarity of who is in charge, as it were, I personally think that is the best approach. I haven’t yet seen any evidence to the contrary.

Q267 Mrs Laing: Thank you. Looking further at the way in which Government can be made to work well with Ministers, junior Ministers and civil servants all working together to produce efficient Government, should Secretaries of State not be involved in the appointment of their Permanent Secretaries?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: Their Permanent Secretaries?

Mrs Laing: Yes.

Sir Jeremy Heywood: Yes, they should be involved, very much so, and the new guidelines that the Civil Service Commission have issued make that absolutely clear.

Q268 Mrs Laing: This is rather an obvious question, but I have to ask the obvious questions so you can give the answers, Sir Jeremy, do you think that will improve the efficient running of Government?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I have always believed that you can’t have a well-run department unless the Secretary of State and the Permanent Secretary are working hand in glove together, obviously they have distinct roles but they have to be an absolutely tight partnership that works closely together. It is very important that in appointing a new Permanent Secretary we understand very clearly what the Secretary of State’s preferences are in terms of the skill sets and personality types and so on, and then we put forward somebody who is without any sort of political connection and can work for not just this Secretary of State but a future Secretary of State from a different political complexion. So it has to be someone who is apolitical but somebody who the Secretary of State is comfortable with, otherwise it will just be fragmented leadership from the word go. It definitely improves the quality of Government if you have a close relationship between the Secretary of State and the Permanent Secretary.

Q269 Mrs Laing: So would that go as far as to say that when a new Secretary of State is appointed then
that might be the trigger for a new Permanent Secretary, or would it only be when the Permanent Secretary is due for removal or to retire in any case?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: My hope and expectation is that most incoming Secretaries of State will be very happy with the Permanent Secretary they have and that would not be an immediate trigger for a change, because I think it is inherent in the word “Permanent Secretary” that you have a bit of continuity in the civil service leadership of the department. But, clearly, if a new Secretary of State comes in and the relationship breaks down within a period of months, let’s say both sides have tried to make it work, and I think we should definitely try to encourage them to do so, then you would have to think again. But that is not my experience of what happens.

Q270 Mrs Laing: As changes come in in that way, supposing there is a change of Government and so that effectively every Secretary of State is a new Secretary of State with new policies, do we take it that you would not then envisage a complete changeover of Permanent Secretaries immediately, but would you envisage possibly a changeover of Permanent Secretaries for political reasons?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: Well, I would not envisage a change of Permanent Secretary for political reasons, no. I think that would be a very damaging road to go down. As I mentioned earlier, I think at the last election my predecessor, Sir Gus O’Donnell, specifically persuaded a number of the more senior Permanent Secretaries to stay on until after the election so there was a point of continuity during the initial months of the new regime. It turned out there has been quite a large turnover of Permanent Secretaries since the election, in the year or so after the election. But that was a planned exercise, delayed retirements plus a couple of unplanned things with a couple of colleagues getting senior international jobs as well. But that was not politically driven, it was just that terms came to an end and it just so happened that that was the point at which the competitions would be run.

Q271 Mrs Laing: So there is no danger of us going down the American route of having nothing happen for several months after a change of Government because the whole system has atrophied because senior civil servants are removed and replaced?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: That has not been a problem to date, and I don’t—

Mrs Laing: No, it certainly hasn’t to date, but you do not envisage that happening?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: No. Certainly not. Not with the changes we have made. I think they are perfectly sensible instrumental change and I do not sense any part of the UK political spectrum that is wanting to move to the American system.

Mrs Laing: Good. I am not supposed to say that, am I? Sorry, delete that.

Chair: I think the words “danger” or “hope” would be—

Mrs Laing: Sorry. I will leave it there for the moment.

Q272 Chair: I will come back to you. Just a couple of things to pick up, Sir Jeremy, from colleagues’ questions. Firstly you mentioned ministerial training, which certainly on a personal level I would heartily commend, but is it also possible to extend that to the ministerial gene pool in Parliament so that people are prepared well in advance rather than on the day they are appointed?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: That is a very good idea. I am not completely familiar with all the courses the IFG put on and maybe they already cater to some extent for that demand, but in general I think it is a very sensible idea.

Q273 Chair: Would there be people in the civil service who, were there a will in the House of Commons—which I must admit I have very rarely detected in my time in the Government Whips office—we all emerge fully formed and totally across every issue as Members of Parliament when we are elected, but were that not to be the case and we could persuade the respective whips officers to do that, is there a capability within the civil service that could be offered to Members and to the House?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: There is no existing capability but I am sure we could expand the capability that currently serves the existing programmes. It is obviously something I would want to discuss with Francis Maude. But a lot of the most beneficial training, if you want to call it training, comes from Ministers, former Ministers passing on their pearls of wisdom. So it is not just civil servants and technocrats training up Ministers, it is more sharing experiences and the pitfalls. Reading some ministerial autobiographies is almost as good as a training course. I think we should just focus more clearly on if anybody wants to inform themselves—whether as a backbencher or as an incoming junior Minister—on what it is like, how to get the best out of the civil service and how to get the best out of Parliament and so on, we should be prepared to offer those sort of courses or seminars, or whatever you want to call them.

Q274 Chair: Also to refer back to an answer that Sir Bob Kerslake gave to us, and I can’t quote him from memory, but he mentioned that Permanent Secretaries produced a report card that they fed into the reshuffle process.

Sir Jeremy Heywood: A report card?

Q275 Chair: I don’t think he meant it as formally as that but put in a view as part of the mix at reshuffle time.

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I don’t remember what Bob said on that. It has not been my experience that the civil service draws up a report card, there is nothing quite as systematic as that, frankly.

Q276 Chair: Okay. If I may I will write to you with a question when I have looked at the record again and frame it a little more accurately, but there was definitely a sense of some interaction between the civil service and the elected element about how people have performed, but I will write to you about that.
Sir Jeremy Heywood: That is pretty ad hoc and not the general experience I would say. Within a department there may be discussion between the Permanent Secretary and the Secretary of State on whether a particular junior Minister has done really well on a piece of legislation or whatever, but there is very little feedback, if any, coming into the centre. Most civil servants are very loyal to their ministerial masters and teams and so on. We certainly wouldn’t see ourselves as standing in judgment on the political performance of individual Ministers.

Q277 Chair: No, I don’t think Sir Bob meant it like that and forgive me if I have inferred that. It was much more a gentle review than anything else, I think, but I will write to you. More pertinently, I guess, the reshuffle is not a standard issue item. A number of us commended the Prime Minister, as indeed I believe you have, for saying there will be some stability for as long as possible, perhaps halfway through the term. That is one form of shuffle that we have experienced. The other was the almost Maoist permanent revolution of the mid Blair years where junior Ministers, if they made it through 13 months, thought they had done really well. That impacted upon not just them but all the other people who were interested in moving to a ministerial job or feared losing a ministerial job. Again, I am searching for how we can get the essence of the mid Blair years where junior Ministers, if they were able to stay in their post for longer than 13 months and therefore, in general, I think it is very little feedback, if any, coming into the centre. Within a department, that would only be for administrative purposes. From the narrow perspective of the Prime Minister, are there particular attributes that define a good Prime Minister as opposed to a not so good Prime Minister? I would not dream of asking you that question in general, but in the very narrow confines of what we are talking about, the administration of Government and without making any comment on individual people, we look for consistency of purpose, clarity of mission, being good at, are there particular attributes that make a good Prime Minister? I would not dream of asking you that question in general, but in the very narrow confines of what we are talking about, the administration of Government and without making any comment on individual people, we look for consistency of purpose, clarity of mission, being good at.

Q279 Mrs Laing: That is a very important distinction. So the current position of the senior civil service is that Secretaries of State should be involved in the appointment of a Permanent Secretary but should not have the choice in the appointment of the Permanent Secretary?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: They have a choice as to whether to accept the recommendations of the panel or not, but they will not be given a choice of three or four candidates from which they can select and that is what the Civil Service Commission have concluded.

Q280 Mrs Laing: So what will be different in future from how things were done in the past?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I think the Secretary of State will be much more fulsomely involved and will meet the candidates; that does not always happen at the moment, for example.

Q281 Mrs Laing: Thank you very much. I just wanted to clear that up. Turning to the rules and powers of a Prime Minister, fixed-term Parliaments and so on, in terms of the efficient conduct of Government and the practicalities that we are looking at, are there particular attributes that make a good Prime Minister? I would not dream of asking you that question in general, but in the very narrow confines of what we are talking about, the administration of Government, are there particular attributes that define a good Prime Minister as opposed to a not so good Prime Minister.

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I suspect it is rather dangerous territory for me to be commenting on.

Mrs Laing: I am trying to make it not so dangerous.

Sir Jeremy Heywood: From the narrow perspective of the administration of Government and without making any comment on individual people, we look for consistency of purpose, clarity of mission, being good at chairs of meetings, having clear structures, having stability of ministerial teams, all those sort of things. I am afraid this is motherhood and apple pie. I am not going to get sucked into a more controversial debate about it.
Q282 Mrs Laing: No. I did not wish you to. I wanted it to be absolutely on that narrow practical point, thank you. Looking at fixed-term Parliaments, I think this is probably a rather obvious question—but again if I don’t ask the obvious question you can’t give the information to the Committee—has the introduction of fixed-term parliamentary terms made a significant difference to, for example, departmental financial planning and legislative planning?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I wouldn’t say it had made a significant difference yet, but I think we all feel the benefit of having the clarity that we know when the next election is likely to be, almost certainly going to be, and so that means we can think in terms of five years of legislation rather than four, in terms of, as I said earlier, planning Permanent Secretary appointments, for example. We know broadly when we need to be thinking about and be conscious of a possible change of Government—although there may not of course—so it is starting to figure in our planning. It gives us all a clarity about what is likely to happen and when, roughly speaking, during the Parliament. Going back a few years, at any point beyond year three of the Parliament you just did not know whether you were now in the pre-election rush or whether you had another two years to go. That makes quite a difference to the way in which you approach policy development for Ministers, implementation and so on. I suspect we will start feeling the benefits more as we get into this zone of year three to four, which previously was a very unclear period of the Parliament, and for the next period it is going to be pretty clear that we have another full two and a half years to go.

Q283 Mrs Laing: Could it be dangerous for a Prime Minister to have given up the right to choose when a general election and therefore possible change of Government might come?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I don’t think I would use the word “dangerous” but definitely he is giving up some discretion.

Q284 Mrs Laing: When that flexibility is gone, from a civil service point of view, are there difficulties that could arise due to not having that flexibility?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: From giving up that flexibility? No. I think that is essentially a political matter, it is really to the political advantage of the Prime Minister to be able to decide in the past. From a civil service perspective, the stability of knowing that the election is going to be on a certain date in 2015 is basically helpful because it gives more clarity rather than less, more stability rather than less and therefore we can plan back from that.

Q285 Mrs Laing: Thank you very much. Looking at what is set out in the Cabinet Office business plan, which was published in November 2010, what procedures and policies are there in place to ensure that the Prime Minister has access to high-quality advice in order to support his cross-governmental responsibilities as opposed to his obvious political ones? His cross-governmental responsibilities particularly in the Coalition situation.

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I would not say there are policies and procedures in place, that is what I am accountable for. It is my job as Cabinet Secretary to make sure that the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister, and the Cabinet as a whole, have the quality of advice they need, and if that means changing personnel or if it means expanding personnel or refocusing bits of the Cabinet Office at No. 10, that is what I am responsible for. At all stages we get feedback from the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister that, “The advice I am getting in this particular area seems a bit flimsy” or, “I think we have had some excellent paperwork done on this subject”. That is feedback we get all the time in real time. My job is to assimilate that, talking to the political staff at No. 10, talking to the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, and making sure we are fit for purpose. That is fundamentally one of my core roles.

Q286 Mrs Laing: Again, this is one of those obvious questions, has it been significantly different under a coalition from how that role would develop and that duty would be seen under a one party Government?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: Yes, it has made a difference, but I think in some ways the bigger difference was this Prime Minister’s desire to do more work through Cabinet and through Cabinet committees and less through more ad hoc ministerial groups, bilaterals and stock take meetings. That was the more important change in a way. Once you have decided to operate more through Cabinet and Cabinet committees and through ministerial write arounds with a long enough period for Ministers to read the material and think about it, then it is a relatively straightforward matter to adapt those sort of collective procedures to a coalition situation.

Q287 Mrs Laing: That is a very interesting piece of information you have just given us. Does that mean that the collective responsibility of the Cabinet is working possibly better than it did in the past?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I think we probably have longer Cabinet meetings and more substantive discussions; collective responsibility is a broader concept than just what you discuss in Cabinet.

Q288 Mrs Laing: So this working through ministerial write arounds, Cabinet committees and so on, is that different from recent previous administrations?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I think probably Cabinet meets for longer, as I said earlier, and we probably have more use of the Cabinet committees, although it is very difficult to generalise because at different stages, for example, Gordon Brown had a National Economic Council, which was a very central part of the Government machinery, so at different stages different Prime Ministers use different techniques. It certainly feels to me as though we have more Cabinet business, more Cabinet committee business, more ministerial write arounds and more active debates in Cabinet committees than we had at certain stages of the previous administration, certainly.
Q289 Mrs Laing: Is that very much a function of Coalition Government or just of efficient Government or, let me put it this way, democratic Government?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I would not say it is more democratic or less democratic but nor, as I said earlier, do I think it is entirely driven by the needs of a coalition. I think to some extent it reflects the taste and approach to Government of the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister. But certainly having a coalition makes it all the more important that you have clear processes for resolving interdepartmental, interministerial disputes, some of which are based on coalition lines, many of which are not.

Mrs Laing: Thank you.

Q290 Tristram Hunt: The size of the Cabinet is now ridiculous, isn’t it? The number of people you have around that table—it seems if anyone is demoted from a proper Cabinet post and they are given another post they are allowed to attend Cabinet. What do all these people do attending Cabinet? Do they say anything useful?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: All Members of the Cabinet say things that are useful, yes. It is unusual, I agree.

Q291 Tristram Hunt: It is like a speech. How many people are there normally?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: Well, I think there are 21 Members of the Cabinet plus the Lord Chancellor, plus maybe four or five others. It varies. Often one or two Members of the Cabinet have to be away on overseas business, European business or the Foreign Secretary obviously travels quite a bit, so you do not usually have the full complement. But they all contribute to a lively discussion usually.

Q292 Tristram Hunt: That is an effective organising body, you think, at that size?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: It is effective at what it does, which is to take major issues, make sure that everybody in the Cabinet is comfortable with the direction of travel, understands the direction of travel, clearly for other bits of business where you are trying to thrash out disagreements, for example, probably smaller committees are more useful.

Q293 Tristram Hunt: Could I just briefly return to the fixed-term Parliament issue? We now have the longest parliamentary session in the world, barring Rwanda at five years, three months. This may not be your main locus but in terms of the democratic health of the country rather than the enjoyment of the civil service, do you think it is a good situation we have?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: To be honest, it is not anything to do with the health or enjoyment of the civil service. This is a decision that was taken by Ministers and agreed by Parliament, and I think it would be wrong of me to criticise it.

Q294 Tristram Hunt: But are you finding it, in terms of the civil service, a lot more amenable structure?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I would not say a lot more but I am saying I think we are beginning to get into the stage of the Parliament where the benefits will become clearer. In the first half of a Parliament, frankly, we are focused on delivering the manifesto pledges, the Coalition Agreement and getting on with the business of policy development and so on. I think it is as you get into the second half of the Parliament, this is the point where previously they would have been starting to see speculation about when the election is going to be, does that mean we only have one more term of Parliament, one more parliamentary session or do we have two? That is when the instability would start to be felt, so I suspect as we press on now we will realise more and more the benefits of this.

Q295 Tristram Hunt: One of the results is obviously that we know when the election will be. Previously there was a very hazy rule about the moment at which oppositions could gain civil service advice. We now know when the election is. Are there plans in place for a proper timetable for oppositions to begin to have access to civil service advice?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: We do not have plans at the moment but we definitely will want to put plans in place. I think it will be one of the benefits, that we will know for certain when the election is going to be and therefore we can say if we want those talks to start a year in advance, and we know when that could be. I have not had that conversation with the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister or indeed with Ed Miliband. But it is obviously very important that we come to an agreement on what the right timeframe is. It will definitely be helped by the fixed-term Parliament.

Q296 Tristram Hunt: It is two years away, you probably want the talks to begin at about a year; do you see those conversations beginning to happen later this year?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: Talks with the Opposition? No, I think probably a year is the normal period, that feels about right to me, but I obviously want to consult all the political leaders.

Q297 Tristram Hunt: Who makes that decision?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: The Prime Minister.

Q298 Tristram Hunt: The Prime Minister makes the decision when the Opposition can begin to be allowed—

Sir Jeremy Heywood: That is traditionally the way it has worked but my experience has been that most Prime Ministers are perfectly accommodating and understand the importance of those sorts of conversations.

Q299 Tristram Hunt: One of the curious constitutional developments is the elevation of the role of Deputy Prime Minister through the Coalition Government. What is the inter-relationship between the Office of the Prime Minister and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, and has that required some new civil service thinking?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: There is very active hour by hour interaction between the Office of the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister and I get involved in a lot of those discussions as well. It took
us some time to resource up the Office of Deputy Prime Minister so that it had sufficient capacity to the job that was needed. That was the main learning point.

Q300 Tristram Hunt: We now have questions to the Deputy Prime Minister that cover all sorts of grounds. Do you think institutionally as a result of coalition the role of a Deputy Prime Minister will grow or do you think—rather like Geoffrey Howe—it comes and goes with the politics of the period?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I think where there is a coalition it is essential you have a Deputy Prime Minister and I think it works very well. Absent a coalition, I think, as you say, it comes and goes, it depends on the personalities within the governing party, whether there is a big figure like John Prescott who needs a sufficiently senior title, or not, but it is much less necessary. But in a coalition it is absolutely essential.

Q301 Tristram Hunt: Finally, in terms of the business plan modelling, do you regard the business plan as a welcome update in terms of managerialism for the function of the upper echelons of this? How has it practically helped Governments in government?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I think it definitely helps to get Ministers to be explicit about what they want the Government machine, to deliver for them. I think in truth the first version of the business plans that we had in 2010 were not perfect and so they have evolved over time. At each annual refresh they have been improved but having a sense of what we are trying to achieve over the five years on behalf of Ministers is very important to departmental resource allocation, departmental planning, the Permanent Secretary, objective setting and for holding the civil service to account. It is very good to be explicit about what we are trying to achieve. But it can’t become so rigid—to come back to Mr Turner’s line of questioning—that you get locked into a managerial position and can’t respond to political pressures or new political priorities once the business plans are set. They are not set completely exposed to the five years regardless of events, but definitely it helps us to have that sort of framework within the business plan.

Q302 Tristram Hunt: Finally, there have been some criticisms that there has been an absence of emphasis of collective government in terms of the business plan. Do you think it feeds into a Napoleonic sensibility for Downing Street or is it just good management?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I think it is good management and it is not that No. 10 just imposes these business plans on the departments with no discussion. The Treasury has to be closely involved, it has to go through the coalition process and the Secretary of State has to be very comfortable that the milestones in the plan are deliverable and practical. So it is not just handed down on high from No. 10, it is very much a process that is negotiated and reflects practical reality.

Tristram Hunt: Thank you.

Q303 Paul Flynn: When Gus O’Donnell retired—known as GOD, of course, because of his initials—he was replaced by a trinity of you, Ian Watmore and Bob Kerslake. The civil servants that I represent, several thousand of them, thought it was a bit unusual at the top to see that one job is in future going to be done by three people, while they were under pressure to have three jobs done by one person by reducing staff. Is this an example of one law for the chiefs and another for the Indians?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I don’t think so. I think it is in the interests of everybody in the civil service to have enough leadership capacity at the top of the civil service to lead the civil service through the challenges we face and I think so far the split of responsibilities, in my view, has worked well. Most of the civil service I talk to are very happy with it and under that leadership we have helped to oversee a significant increase in the productivity and efficiency of the civil service at a time when the country has never faced greater challenges. I think it is not unreasonable to try to increase the leadership capacity while overall maintaining your efficiency.

Q304 Paul Flynn: People at the coalface can make this same claim as well, but is it not extraordinary that if Gus O’Donnell did have divine powers presumably he could do the job that three very well paid people do now? How can it make sense that Gus O’Donnell did those three jobs, covered all those responsibilities for a large period and was regarded as being very successful and it requires three people to replace him? How can that make any sense?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: It is not quite as simple as that. Ian Watmore was doing his job anyway, so he was not replacing—effectively he replaced me in my previous job at No. 10, plus Ian Watmore plus—

Paul Flynn: He was a Permanent Secretary?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: Yes, and he basically took on some more responsibilities from Gus, so in a sense you replaced three Permanent Secretaries with three Permanent Secretaries with slightly reconfigured responsibilities. My salary is certainly a lot less than Gus O’Donnell’s, so there were definitely efficiencies made in the process.

Q305 Paul Flynn: Did it ever occur to you at the Olympian heights at which you live as top civil servants to think that it might act to demoralise staff who were working for very modest salaries and, in my view, in many cases being treated abominably in the pressures and cuts that have been imposed on them to increase the workload that they do? Was this ever a consideration in turning GOD into a trinity?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I don’t think that management shift has led to an increase in workload for junior civil servants. I think, as I said earlier, it is good for all civil servants to have strong leadership at the top and the replacement of Gus plus Ian Watmore plus me in my previous job, by me in this job plus a bit of Bob Kerslake’s time and what is now Richard Heaton’s time, I don’t think that is a net increase in cost. Frankly, it is a reduction in costs.

Q306 Paul Flynn: It is part of your duties to defend civil servants against the egregious attacks from Government Ministers, particularly Francis Maude,
who is a constant attack on the civil servants. We have had evidence from people who suggest that at certain points in the life of a Government, having blamed the last lot and having blamed the European Union, they turn on the civil servants and attack them and say all the problems they have are the result of actions of civil servants, which is exactly what we are seeing now from Francis Maude. How do you react to that? Do you see yourself as a defender of the civil servants?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I definitely see myself as one of the defenders of the civil service, alongside Bob Kerslake who is head of the civil service. But I don’t think what you say about Francis Maude is correct at all. Francis Maude is a very strong supporter of the civil service and we are working very closely with him to try to reform the bits of the civil service that definitely do need reform, which is quite a lot.

Q307 Paul Flynn: How can you say that? He complains about the rubber levers, that Government take decisions and then nothing happens. They pull on the levers and then nobody does anything because of the antagonism from the civil service, civil servants who are not carrying out the will of the Government. Are you unaware that Government Ministers, Francis Maude, has said these things?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: All I can say is my experience of working with Francis Maude very closely over this period, is that he is a strong supporter of the civil service but like Bob Kerslake and myself wants to see the weakest parts of the civil service reformed and improved.

Q308 Paul Flynn: What about the rubber levers? Is it possible that politicians could take decisions that are not then implemented by civil servants?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: That is not my experience. The civil service professionally, with high integrity, does seek to implement the will of democratically elected Ministers. That is our job.

Paul Flynn: This is a Sir Humphrey answer. You are among friends now; anything you say will not go beyond this room as you realise. It is a totally insulting answer, you give us this pat excuse and say, “Yes, we all do that and Government is working well”. I welcome the fact that civil servants obstruct some of the more eccentric decisions of Ministers, and particularly extreme Government as we have at the moment. They act as a good protection to give stability and a memory to Government that politicians do not always have. It may be a good thing, but it certainly happens.

Chair: You are getting—

Paul Flynn: Yes, I know, I am afraid it is—I will leave it.

Chair: It was a preamble but I am not sure there was a question at the end.

Q309 Paul Flynn: Are you seriously saying—I have sat in this room with David Blunkett, Ken Clarke and they all said the same thing, not just this Government, other Governments—that the rubber lever is a great problem? Ministers decide things are going to go ahead and they go back to the civil servants and they say, “Why hasn’t this happened?” and there would be a whole load of excuses and the verbal ectoplasm that you have been spewing into this room.

Chair: Sir Jeremy, are you aware of that, as Paul’s question began?

Paul Flynn: Of course he is.

Sir Jeremy Heywood: No, I am definitely aware that many Ministers over the years have been frustrated that policy that has been announced has not always been fully implemented on the ground. I don’t believe that is due to maligned civil servants, sometimes it is due to inadequate resourcing, sometimes it is due to imperfect policy design, sometimes it is due to poor marketing, sometimes it is due to incompetent civil servants, sometimes it is due to other factors. There are a whole variety of different reasons why a policy that looks bright and shiny when it is announced to Parliament ends up not being as effective on the ground as we had all hoped. But I don’t think that is attributable to civil servants taking it upon themselves to block the wishes of Parliament and Ministers. Most civil servants would be horrified by those sorts of rumours.

Q310 Paul Flynn: I am grateful for your answers and I am sure the people who are producing the new version of Yes, Minister will also be grateful because they can take what you said verbatim and put it into the new series of programmes.

Chair: Thank you, Paul.

Sir Jeremy Heywood: There is going to be a documentary about Yes, Minister. I can only just give you my honest answer.

Q311 Chair: We are also looking, Sir Jeremy, at better government. It is one of our inquiries. How we can improve the quality of legislation. Just to tie the two together, the fixed term and the quality of legislation, if you have a fixed term that obviously helps in a number of ways, would you agree, in terms of having more ability to plan the flow? There is always a log jam as people historically are never sure when the general election is going to be, get your Bill in in the first tranche as fast as you can, push it in because we may not be here in two years, three years or whatever, that there is that planning horizon.

Secondly, we are looking very carefully at pre-legislative scrutiny for all Bills and possibly post-legislative scrutiny for all Bills. Is there an option opening up here of a genuine partnership between Parliament and the executive whereby proper scrutiny could take place, much better quality of legislation and, indeed, better accountability, where we could learn lessons whether the Bills have been successful or not, because we have now a fixed planning horizon?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: Yes, I think there is definitely some truth in that. One of the ways in which a fixed-term Parliament does help is on the planning of legislation because you can plan for certain, even have the five years rather than thinking you might only have four and that fourth one might be a pre-election session. Therefore certain controversial Bills will be less favoured. So I think it definitely allows you to pace and plan more effectively your legislation
programme. Quite separately from that, we are interested in improving the quality of legislation through pre-legislation scrutiny and other techniques as you say. So it is definitely a debate worth having with the Leader of the House.

Q312 Chair: As you mentioned, I have been writing to and seeing a number of Permanent Secretaries about the fixed-term Parliament and its impact and we will be having a report to the Committee at some point on that little journey. One of those individuals I met I asked whether there had yet been a meeting, I understand there is a regular Permanent Secretaries’ meeting every Thursday, is it?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: Every Wednesday morning.

Chair: I asked whether this question of a planning horizon had been discussed and he replied that it hadn’t. Is that something I could leave with you as a possible agenda item so that collectively the Permanent Secretaries could have a look at this? We are halfway now. That first half of Parliament and the helter-skelter effort to get lots of legislation in front of us—I am not going to suggest there is now a pause and everyone is taking it easy, of course not—but is this a good moment perhaps to raise that issue with colleagues and capitalise, as you mentioned, on the most productive part of a five-year Parliament?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: Yes, I am very happy to put that on the agenda for one of our meetings. I think it would be a good subject to discuss, to get different departments’ perspectives on it.

Q313 Chair: That is very helpful. Would that possibly involve looking at the Comprehensive Spending Review? Again, I think colleagues around the table and certainly myself have experience over many years of a very short time of financial planning, and I mentioned before having run a local strategic partnership in a major English city, having to fire people around January, give them notice, because the money would run out, we always hoped it would come back in again after 1 April. But this year to year or even two years to years is not helpful on the ground. Would it be possible, again, to look—now we have a fixed planning horizon—at the Comprehensive Spending Review and whether that might be a five year plan rather than a three year one?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: Well, as you know, the spending review that was conducted in 2010 was a four year spending review, which is a big step forward in terms of planning, and the fact that the Government has stuck pretty religiously to those numbers has again helped reinforce the credibility of that process and its usefulness. Whether that should be extended in the next Parliament to a five year spending review, that is obviously something we will have to look at closer to the time, but it is certainly an issue that we do debate and discuss.

Q314 Chair: Another thing that Select Committees are notoriously poor about is looking at expenditure by departments. Not this Committee, of course, because we are going to have a look the DPM’s budget, but many of our brother and sister committees do not delve into how money has been spent through the department. It is a little bit boring to look at the accounts and follow through on expenditure decisions when you can bring a celebrity witness before you and enhance your chances of being on the TV. Is it possible that this five year planning horizon might help our sort of Select Committees to be much more rigorous in the analysis of public spending by department?

Sir Jeremy Heywood: I think it might make some difference in that area. Certainly most Permanent Secretaries would regard the Public Accounts Committee as being quite a potent mechanism for Parliament to get under the skin of what departments are spending.

Chair: Imagine 15 Public Accounts Committees.

Sir Jeremy Heywood: Yes. Quite a lot of departmental Select Committees also do spend time looking through what departments are spending their money on, but we greatly welcome more scrutiny.

Q315 Chair: I think where we are at the moment—and colleagues will jump on me if I am getting this wrong—there is a general view that the reshuffles have a lot of disadvantages, that we have yet to have anybody come forward and give us the answer as to how we could do better. I am going to repeat a question I asked earlier by promoting you, if you like, to Prime Minister and it is now open to you to advise us on how we might do reshuffles better.

Sir Jeremy Heywood: As I said earlier, I do not have any great ideas on that subject.

Chair: I was afraid you would say that.

Sir Jeremy Heywood: It is better to deal with the consequences of the disadvantages, i.e. suddenly Ministers find themselves thrust into new jobs without much preparation. I would rather deal with the consequences than try to change the process particularly because I think short, sharp is as good as it is going to get, and having weeks of blight as people plan for it or weeks of blight as we stagger it over two or three weeks to complete it will be even worse than the current disadvantages. So I think we should stick with more or less what we have, try to do it as infrequently as possible because I think more stability of posting is good rather than bad. But it has to be balanced off against all the other factors the Prime Minister has to weigh up in making those sorts of decisions. We could try to address some of the problems that arise by better induction processes, better training—making more availability of training anyway—and as I said earlier as well, if there is anything more we can do at the margin to give Ministers more systematic feedback about how they can improve their performance in whatever dimension is lacking, it would make the whole thing a little bit more professional.

Q316 Chair: Thank you, Sir Jeremy. Finally, almost by way of advertisement, just to put on your radar that our Committee is publishing a report next Tuesday on the codification of the relationship between central Government and local government, which we will obviously send you an embargoed copy of. We are also working at the moment on the need for a constitutional convention with the Scottish
referendum coming up, with certainly three of the four nations of the UK already devolving quite considerably and what the impact might be on the fourth nation. Again, once we have concluded our deliberations perhaps we can send you a prior copy of that for your consideration.

Sir Jeremy Heywood: Thank you very much indeed.

Chair: If my colleagues have no more questions, I think that is it. Sir Jeremy, thank you so much for your patience and your comments and answers today. It has been a great pleasure to have you with us this morning.

Sir Jeremy Heywood: Thank you very much indeed.

Chair: Thank you so much. Thank you, colleagues.
Thursday 31 January 2013

Members present:
Mr Graham Allen (Chair)
Mr Christopher Chope
Sheila Gilmore
Fabian Hamilton
Mrs Eleanor Laing
Mr Andrew Turner
Stephen Williams

Examination of Witnesses


Q317 Chair: Chris, good morning; and Steve, welcome.
As you know, we are conducting an inquiry into reshuffles, and we have been taking evidence from many people. We hope to conclude this in the not-too-distant future. We have one further witness to come, Gus O’Donnell, and then we will start writing up a report. Some very interesting comment has been made about the whole process, and, of course, halfway through our inquiry, the Prime Minister—just to help us along—had a reshuffle, so that we could have a look at one first hand.

Chris, are you receiving us loud and clear at the moment? Is your hearing aid difficulty resolved? Are we loud enough for you?

Chris Moncrieff: If you could up the decibels a bit, I would grateful.

Chair: If colleagues will just bear that in mind.

Chris Moncrieff: Thank you.

Q318 Chair: Chris or Steve, would you like to say something to start us off, or shall we jump straight into questions?

Chris Moncrieff: I am quite happy for you to go straight in.

Steve Richards: Yes, similarly.

Q319 Fabian Hamilton: Good morning, gentlemen.
Pete Riddell told us that he thought there was a danger of exaggerating the influence of the media on reshuffles. How much impact do you think that media speculation has, both on the timing of a reshuffle and reshuffles. How much impact do you think that media has, both on the timing of a reshuffle and on decisions about who should be moved and when?

Chris Moncrieff: I think that is exaggerated. I do not think the media have all that much influence over reshuffles. It has led to the resignation of one or two Ministers who had said they were not going to let the press get rid of them, but they eventually have gone. There is too much talk of the power of the press. I do not think that exists in this area. I believe that Prime Ministers take their own decisions and are not influenced by the press. Indeed, there have been junior Ministers who have come to me, fearing they were going to get the sack, and asked me to run stories, saying, “This man must go”, because, generally speaking, a Prime Minister would not do what the press invited him to do. I never followed up those invitations, but that did happen. I just do not think the press have much influence at all on reshuffles. They certainly did not in the Thatcher era, and I do not think they have since. The talk about the power of the press and the influence of the press in politics is overstated.

Steve Richards: I agree with everything except for the last sentence. I think the power of the press and the media generally is immense on British politics, but not in this area. This is an area where other factors determine whether a Cabinet reshuffle takes place. The media enjoy speculating about reshuffles; they do it without any informed material because this is a Prime Minister’s decision with his close colleagues. I think the media impact is nil, in terms of timing and content.

Chris Moncrieff: Nil, really?

Steve Richards: In terms of reshuffles, yes. In many other areas, immense, but not in terms of reshuffles.

Q320 Fabian Hamilton: Even to the extent that there is often media speculation about who is going to go where. Does even that have no influence whatsoever?

Steve Richards: None whatsoever. That kind of speculation fills columns and pages every now and again, but it has none whatsoever. Clearly, a criterion for promoting or getting rid of Ministers might be the way they perform in the media, or the way they are perceived in the media, but that is a completely different issue from whether the media in any way shape the timing or substance of a reshuffle.

Chris Moncrieff: Yes, I agree with that. I think you had the Cabinet Secretary, Jeremy Heywood, here the other day, and he said that he did not like all this press speculation because they always got it wrong. I do not know where he got that idea, quite frankly, because I can remember several instances, including with Margaret Thatcher’s very first Cabinet in 1979, when some of us got the entire Cabinet right hours before it was announced. This was no leak on the part of Thatcher herself; she was bitterly opposed to that throughout her premiership. There were no leaks from her or authorised by her. It was just if you knew where to look, where the gossip was and who to ring up, and we had the whole thing set up. Indeed, you could also find out—and Ministers themselves often knew in advance, through guesswork, that they were going to get the sack.

Sir Ian Gilmour was one of the first Thatcher Ministers to be dismissed. He was about as far from Thatcher politically as a fellow Tory could be. He told me that he thought he would last about another month as Lord Privy Seal. He gave me a bit of paper and said, “Put this in your pocket and put it out at the appropriate time,” and he was right. He got the sack just a month later, and that piece of paper said, “It
does no harm to throw the occasional man overboard, but it does not do much good to us steering full speed ahead for the rocks?”. He was not a master of subtlety, but he got it right.

**Q321 Fabian Hamilton:** That is a very good one. I seem to recall, just before the 2001 general election, intense media speculation that David Blunkett would be the next Home Secretary, and that was exactly what happened. Do you think that that was because somebody wanted the media to know, because it was going to happen anyway, or was it pure guesswork on the part of the press?

**Steve Richards:** No. Probably somebody wanted it out there that this was going to happen, and I seem to remember that speculation. It was probably quite well informed, but again, that is politics. That is not about influencing a reshuffle; that is reporting what a Prime Minister plans to do. There are many interesting areas about the impact of reshuffles on policy and politics, but this one is a complete red herring. The media can report speculation about what is happening, but that does not influence the outcome—it is a reflection of what someone is already planning to do. It is one of the few areas where a Prime Minister, however tight a corner he or she is in, tends to exert quite a lot of power. In the old days, in the 1970s, people like Wilson had to weigh up the balance between left and right in his party. Cameron now has the dynamics of the coalition, but a Prime Minister with a strong overall majority can obsess about the media in most areas, as Tony Blair did, but not in this.

**Q322 Fabian Hamilton:** That is very interesting. When he gave evidence to us, Lord Reid suggested that, in an ideal world, the media and everybody else would regard reshuffles as part of the natural evolution of the Government, in much the same way as it would in the private sector with personnel changing. It seems to me that the media do not regard reshuffles in this way. What do you think?

**Chris Moncrieff:** The situation changes with whoever is Prime Minister. The present Prime Minister, admittedly inhibited by leading a coalition Government, has had only one really major shuffle since he came to power. After the Andrew Mitchell affair, he managed to fill the gap by reintroducing Sir George Young into the Government, thus avoiding any kind of domino effect.

Tony Blair was a great one for reshuffles. I think one of his favourite Ministers was John Reid, who he used to put in various Departments—forgive me if I may be a trifle inelegant—to give them a kick up the hindquarters. John Reid did not enjoy the reputation for nothing of having a safe pair of fists. They vary a lot, Prime Ministers. Cameron said at the start, and he seems to have stuck with it, that he was not going to move Ministers around much if he could avoid it.

**Steve Richards:** The reporting of reshuffles on the day they happen is often over-excited and exaggerates their significance, but that is not unique to reshuffles. It is a very accessible drama—the sacking of quite well-known, prominent people who rise above us. It is a vivid political story that gives an impression of greater significance than reshuffles deserve. So, you are right in that respect.

I doubt whether the churn of Ministers is typical of other corporate sectors and organisations. I think there is a real problem about the turnover of Ministers. Ironically, it is one of the reasons that when reshuffles are reported the significance is exaggerated, because most Ministers are in their jobs for such a short period of time that they do not have much influence or power. Yet sometimes these changes are reported as if they will change all our lives. In reality, it does not even change the lives of those who have been promoted because they go into a Department for about six months and find they do not have much power. In that sense, on the day, there is an over-exaggerated sense of the significance of these things in the media. I think the reporting of the change as unusual is absolutely fair. For example, I cannot think of any other area where you would have a Transport Secretary every six months. Virgin Trains does not get rid of its chief executive every six months, for instance. This is an issue and a problem. Obviously you are looking at that, because it is a really serious problem.

**Q323 Fabian Hamilton:** Yes, but the point is: is it far from a natural evolution or change?

**Steve Richards:** Yes.

**Q324 Chair:** Steve, just to take you back to this very clear answer that the media has virtually no impact. I could understand that, in terms of the personnel, how it is done and the days around a shuffle—which could be very personal for the Prime Minister, and probably are—but what about the build-up, and the idea that it is about time and we think there is going to be one, so it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy? Perhaps less so under Prime Minister Cameron, but certainly I believe that colleagues in the House would have had the sense, for example under Prime Minister Blair, that it was possible to keep winding this up and somehow, if you were not going to do it after that, you were letting everybody down. Is there a drive—a momentum—that can get going?

**Steve Richards:** No. I could go through—I will not—every reshuffle in that period. The explanation for the timing and what happened was nothing to do with the media and all to do with the internal politics at the top of new Labour: Blair’s constant search for Ministers that he regarded as top performers; his constant search for Ministers who he regarded as ideologically closer to him; and the constant need to balance with Gordon Brown. I can assure you that these were all the factors. As I said earlier, the media was a big factor in many things he and Gordon Brown did, but not reshuffles. I could take you through each one and explain every appointment, and it would not be about the media or the timing.

**Chair:** Very unequivocal. Thank you, Steve.

**Q325 Mrs Laing:** Steve, just carrying on from there, you have written some incisive articles about this, most of which do equate with the evidence that we have taken from many other sources. You said it is
not about the media. Is it about policies rather than people?

Steve Richards: What, the constant change of Ministers?

Mrs Laing: Yes.

Steve Richards: I think it is a combination of the two, and I think it is one of the most serious problems in British politics—and it is one of the most under-explored as well. Here you cut across the relationship with the civil service, the quality of policy making and what is the role of a politician and a governing party. I think these are the questions much more than the media in this particular area. In each of them there are huge problems. First, every Prime Minister I have spoken to about this complains—and I am sure you will all disagree with this—that they struggle to find enough people to fill what they think are key posts for them. Secondly, when they put people in post, they do not leave them there long enough to develop policy. That is partly a personality thing but, as you also suggest, it is about policy and perhaps disagreement with the Prime Minister about what precisely should be done in a Department. One of the things we have had recently is Prime Ministers who have had no experience of departmental life at all: Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron; three now. There has been a gap there that explains something. But all those things do not explain why in some Departments, there has been a gap there that explains something. But all those things do not explain why in some Departments, such as Transport, there is a change about once every nine months. It is just ridiculous.

Chris Moncrieff: The way things happen is not always political; it is also managerial. If you get, as with the present Government—and again I say it is inhibited by being in coalition—people kept in the job for a long time, and they say that that is how they are going to run their Government, it creates a lot of disaffection among Back Benchers on the Government side. They see no chance of promotion through this policy of keeping people as long as possible in their jobs. It is a difficult problem, because you want to give a chap or a woman enough time in a job to get a grip of it but, at the same time, you are holding people back.

I think that this is especially true, of course, with a coalition Government. There is a certain number of Liberal Democrat Ministers that has been agreed in the Cabinet. My personal opinion is, for instance, that Cameron would be a much happier man if he could get rid of Vince Cable, who has said one or two very disobliging things about the Government over the past couple of years, but I do not think he would dare do it. I think he is, as Thatcher would say, “Frit”. He knows that if that happened, there would be a virtual riot in the Liberal Democrat ranks, and he has to keep the numbers up. You also have a situation at Energy where Ed Davey and one of his Ministers, John Hayes, are at diametrically opposite points on the key question of onshore wind turbines. They publically row about this. It is a very strange set-up, quite frankly. There is a lot of discontent among Conservative MPs that they stand very little chance of getting promotion in the present circumstances.

Q326 Mrs Laing: It would be very hard to disagree with what you have just said, Chris—every single word of it. Let me put that in the form of a question. Do either of you consider that, rather than being about policies—you have said management and policies and people—the reshuffle process is really a way in which a Prime Minister exerts authority? Is it possible that some Prime Ministers might not want to keep somebody for a long time in a key job, because that person would be building up their own power base, after all, and this is politics?

Steve Richards: Inevitably, politics plays a huge part in the formation of Governments and who stays and who goes. By the way, all Prime Ministers are powerless to some extent—not just Cameron with Cable. Tony Blair thought every now and again of getting rid of Gordon Brown—and a lot of his people wanted him to—but he never did, for reasons that were complicated, so they are trapped about who they chose.

There is a very interesting study you could do. In 2001, Blair invited the three so-called reforming Cabinet Ministers that he had just appointed to dinner: Alan Milburn from Health, Estelle Morris from Education and Stephen Byers from Transport. He said to them, “I want you all there for the full term. You’re my people. You are going to do the reforms that I care about.” They were all gone within a year. This was someone who had a majority of about 150 at that point, but he could not keep those three, and the reasons were all different. One was through “scandal”, as Byers was forced to resign—by the way, this is where the media does have a role. This is a minority view, but I think that more Cabinet Ministers resign than should do in a scandal. This is where the media does have pressure, with Andrew Mitchell being the most recent example. Milburn went because of an ideological and policy dispute over his NHS reforms. I know he said he wanted to spend more time with his family, but it was because of that dispute. With Estelle Morris, it was because she basically disagreed with what Tony Blair wanted to do in Education, although she said she was not up to the job. There you have the three areas, if you look at them, which explain why most Cabinet Ministers do not last very long even when, in theory, the Prime Minister wants them there for the full term.

The problem with that is that the analysis is straightforward, but what the hell you do about it is really problematic because, as Chris said, you have other MPs who want to have a chance at being in government, and you have the normal grind of politics that means that people either want to leave the Government or the Prime Minister has to get rid of them. It does put civil servants in a much more powerful position; some of the senior ones who are there for five or 10 years and almost regard their Departments as their fiefdoms. These Cabinet Ministers come in for about ten minutes and are gone again. That is a real problem.

Chris Moncrieff: As to Prime Ministers worrying about other Ministers who build up their own power base if they are kept too long in a job, my first recollection of a reshuffle was the most spectacular we can remember: the Night of the Long Knives in 1962, when Macmillan got rid of seven Cabinet Ministers, as they say, at a stroke. I think he was
31 January 2013 Chris Moncrieff CBE and Steve Richards

terrified of Rab Butler usurping him. It was Rab Butler who leaked the prospect of this reshuffle accidentally—if you can do it that way—to Lord Rothermere of all people. That reshuffle did Macmillan no end of harm; he bitterly regretted it. The Tories had lost some important by-elections, notably Orpington, and he wanted to introduce a younger element into the Cabinet. I do not think that is a good idea. I would sooner, myself, be governed by the younger element into the Cabinet. I do not think that, not on that scale anyway.

Q327 Mrs Laing: I wonder if subsequent Prime Ministers have learned from that because, apart from perhaps the 1981 reshuffle that Steve refers to, there has not been anything quite so dramatic in the last 50 years, has there.

Chris Moncrieff: No. I imagine they have learned from it, but I cannot see another Prime Minister wanting to do anything as drastic as that in any event. It looked as though Macmillan had suddenly had a hot flush in the middle of the night. It was quite incredible really; totally out of character, but there it was. As I say, it did him no good. There has been no repeat of that, not on that scale anyway.

Q328 Mrs Laing: Thank you for that, Chris. It is really good in a Committee like this to hear—if I may call it—history directly from someone who remembers it themselves, rather than merely having to read about it.

Coming back to what Steve said about resignation, it is very interesting that you said more Ministers resign than is necessary. There is another train of thought: there are not enough resignations, particularly the Labour Home Office for reasons clearly not directly to do with him. The whole thing is ridiculous. I think too many Ministers go unnecessarily because of hyped-up scandal and a sense of responsibility, which is ridiculous.

Q329 Mrs Laing: You just used the phrase “anti-politics”. On this anti-politics atmosphere—in which many media commentators and several newspapers like to say every day, in some way, that all MPs are bad and in it for the wrong reason, and that anyone who is elected to Parliament is fundamentally wrong, bad and selfish, and should be attacked at every stance—do you think it has gone too far and is damaging democracy?

Steve Richards: Yes, unequivocally. I think it is really dangerous. It is one of the reasons why there is this turnover of Ministers. There is a complete mismatch between the amount of power most of them have and the perception of these mighty, arrogant, detached people who need a kicking every day to bring them back down to earth. As you all know better than me, the reality is that most of them feel pretty powerless, pretty overwhelmed and terrified they are about to lose their job, and then lose it. That is the more real sequence than the one perceived, by lots of the media and outside, that they are a bunch of arrogant, selfish, egotistical, in-it-for-themselves, mighty people who are wrecking all our lives. That perception is a very dangerous one. It is not by any means the only reason, but it plays a part in explaining this high turnover, and that needs to be robustly addressed. Obviously you can really address it only if you are a strong leader. You just have to say, “That’s not true. I know it is the perception, but I’m not going to accept it.” Obviously, if Ministers are found to have done something wrong, they are out. But, as I say, there is a sort of frenzy, and that can kill them off prematurely.

Chris Moncrieff: I would go along with that. I think there is a case for saying that MPs have brought a lot of this opprobrium on themselves, not least through the expenses affair of two or three years ago. They are now a tarnished race, which I think is grossly unfair. I do not know what they can do about it. I do not think MPs have been very successful in restoring their good names. If you think about it, probably 99% of MPs are good, honest citizens; there are just a few bad apples there. The trouble is that, after the expenses affair, every MP was tarnished for ever. Quite frankly, they are not making a very good job of getting out of the mire.

Q330 Mrs Laing: That is a good point. If I could continue on the resignation issue, just as it is easy for the press and the media to tarnish MPs, it is just as easy for MPs and others always to blame the media. You were talking about the media pressure that brought about resignations, particularly the Labour
31 January 2013 Chris Moncrieff CBE and Steve Richards

ones in Tony Blair’s Cabinet that you just mentioned. Steve, I seem to recall that there was considerable pressure from the Opposition, too. Is it the case that the Opposition see pressure on a Secretary of State or a Minister as a political tool and that forcing a resignation, and therefore weakening the Government, is a direct hit and a victory for the Opposition?

Steve Richards: Yes, and I think they are wrong to do it, on every level. I do not think it gives them much of a boost. I do not think that Cabinet changes make a difference to a party’s standing anyway, but it is also wrong. Ed Miliband made a big mistake early on when he called for Ken Clarke to resign over some interview he had given to 5 Live. That was not a resignation offence. It would have been wrong for Clarke to have gone over that, but he leapt in and called for him to resign. It is a sort of natural default position. It would improve the culture of this side of politics if that did not happen. Someone who is quite measured about this is David Davis, who every now and again has got a scalp, but he is absolutely forensic and goes for the kill, so to speak, when he is absolutely sure that the evidence is there to pursue it; otherwise he does not. Clearly when people are wrong and the evidence is there, they should be pursued. You would not be doing your job if you did not—that would be crazy. But the default position is, “Get rid of him. Sack him”.

I remember being on “Question Time” when Charles Clarke was under pressure—it was over foreign prisoners—and dared to say it would solve nothing if he moved. I have no idea what happened to the policy. The moment he left the whole thing went away, and it did not solve anything.

Chris Moncrieff: It may sound a bit of a crude argument, but I think that when an Opposition call for the resignation of a Minister, they very often do so purely to get a story going in the papers. I do not think the Opposition believe they will be successful because a Prime Minister is likely to repel any suggestion, even if he wanted to sack someone. If the Opposition called for it, he would not be enthusiastic; he would probably be reluctant to do it. It is an odd situation. I just think it is an Opposition call for more publicity for themselves. It just creates a story in the papers, and of course we lap it up.

Mrs Laing: Thank you very much.

Q331 Mr Turner: You said you did not think that Andrew Mitchell had done anything wrong. Do you take that view of David Laws?

Steve Richards: I did not look into it in any detail. That one was more complicated, because he himself acknowledged he had not followed the rules over expenses. If I were the Prime Minister, I would have tried to keep him, but it is a problem to continue when you are being investigated by Committees and so on. I would be at the end of the spectrum that says, “The investigation is continuing. Let him carry on until we know its outcome.” Instead of having the deeply destabilising thing of a Chief Secretary to the Treasury, with arguably the most important remit in the Government—whether you agree with the policy or not—out within about two weeks. I would err on the side of keeping him in until these investigations were completed, but I can understand the pressures for an alternative in those circumstances.

Chris Moncrieff: I am afraid that I have to disagree with that, if I may say so. Quite frankly, what Mr Laws was guilty of was playing fast and loose with taxpayers’ money, and therefore he did not deserve to stay in the Cabinet and he went. The fact that he paid back a lot of this money, if not all of it, I do not think is any kind of exoneration. I was personally absolutely astonished that the Prime Minister admitted him back into the Government recently. I could not believe that. I thought it was very, very odd.

Q332 Mr Turner: On that, perhaps we must distinguish between the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister regarding who is making the appointments. Technically the Prime Minister is making the appointment, but is it an area that is hived off and it is, “You do it, Nick”?

Chris Moncrieff: Can you do that one?

Steve Richards: Yes. The Lib Dem appointments are Nick Clegg’s appointments. That is clear. In the case of this resignation, I think in the end David Laws decided to do it himself, but Clegg and Cameron did not stop him. Clegg was involved in all the conversations. It is more complicated managing these changes in a coalition, but I think the coalition is a bit of a red herring, in the sense that we might not have many more of them and, if we do, most of the same issues arise—the scandal situation, the media pressure and the internal politics of the party. You mentioned Vince Cable being there even though the Prime Minister might not want him. Arguably, the Deputy Prime Minister might not be his greatest fan and could be worried that he is going to be part of some leadership threat, but that would be a reason for keeping him in rather than out. So I think the same sort of criteria apply, even in this coalition.

Clearly, one thing this coalition has done is to make it a lot less attractive to do reshuffles, because they are so complex when they involve two parties. That is clearly one of the reasons why David Cameron has not done it. I know others have praised the fact that he has not, and it is a good thing. I read a column in The Guardian today praising Theresa May and her reforms of the police. I remember about a year ago she was under huge pressure to resign over a dispute about what was happening with a senior civil servant. It was right that Cameron stuck with her. Part of the reason he did so is that the prospect of a reshuffle must be a total nightmare for him.

Q333 Mr Turner: Going back to another issue, we are talking about the difference between David Cameron, for example, and Tony Blair. One of them has so far kept people in their posts since 2010, and others are joining just recently. It is a significant change, but it is not a huge and regular change, whereas it appears to me that Tony Blair could not keep a lot of people in positions for more than about one and a half years. What is the difference? If that was not the press, does that say a great deal about Tony Blair’s ineptitude?

Steve Richards: He certainly was not a good manager of Ministers, and I have heard that from a lot of them.
Look at those three examples I gave earlier. The reasons why there was this constant churn in that period was partly that he was not a good manager of Ministers, but also all the other factors that I briefly mentioned—hugely highly charged internal politics; complexity over what he meant by public service reform, and what some of his Ministers meant by public service reform—to give other examples of why there was this constant movement. Clearly at times he regarded reshuffles as a symbol of assertion of power. I remember one, in particular, in about 1998, where all the headlines the day after the reshuffle were, “Blair sticks two fingers up to Brown”, and I know they were pleased with those headlines. That was another dynamic that does not really apply now. Now Cameron, because of the coalition, and I think because of a reaction to that constant change, has tried to have a more stable set of Ministers. Whether you agree or disagree with the policy, the sense that they will probably be there for the full term has given them a certain grip over their Department.

Chris Moncrieff: I think that is entirely true, but I think that Cameron is hamstring to a huge extent by the coalition. It may be his policy to keep people in jobs, but if he wanted to change people, I do not think that he could do it very easily at all now.

Q334 Mr Turner: No. Could I ask what you think is the effect on those who lose office or who never gain office—those who are never going to be Ministers, or those who wish they still were Ministers?

Steve Richards: In some ways, you are all better placed to make that judgment because you go into the House of Commons—perhaps; I do not know—to be a Minister. It is an interesting question—why do MPs become MPs? I think this a real problem of management, and it partly explains the restiveness in the Conservative parliamentary party at the moment, in that a number of MPs, because there are fewer posts and so on, have concluded they will not be Ministers and had really hoped to have been. That creates a management problem. It also does for a landslide Government— the exact opposite. There are so many MPs that a lot of them will never make it, and they are clearly harder for a leader to control.

One of the things that Blair often did was to hint that jobs were about to become available to try to persuade MPs to stay in line. This power of patronage is huge when Prime Ministers have a landslide. Cameron has less power of patronage, and I think that is one of the reasons why the Conservative parliamentary party is harder to control than the landslide Parliaments we have had recently. So, there is a big issue. When Ministers leave, similarly, they are obviously harder to control, because they know leaders have no further powers of patronage over them—of that sort anyway. So, there is a perfect moment for a leader, in relation to ministerial posts, which is early on having won an election in a new Parliament with an overall majority, where you have huge power over your party, because some people are content because they have been given ministerial posts, yet there is plenty of time to come so others can get ministerial posts, and there are no ex-Ministers. That must be the time when a leader has maximum control over a parliamentary party.

With Cameron, that scenario has never arisen. He is in a hung Parliament in a coalition where powers of patronage were limited at the beginning. He now has ex-Ministers, and some who know they are never going to be Ministers, and it is a much harder parliamentary party to control.

Mr Turner: Hear, hear.

Chris Moncrieff: I could not disagree with any of that—it is absolutely true—but I think it has put Cameron in a pretty weak position. In different circumstances, he might have been a very, very strong Prime Minister, but I think he is totally hamstrung by the present situation and there is nothing at all he can do about it; just nothing.

Q335 Mr Turner: Could I ask you this? Three weeks ago, when I was speaking to a colleague in the Tea Room, I discovered that he had been given an appointment that concerned covering Mali. Nobody had ever heard of Mali then. This was someone who used to be a Minister, so is it true that the Prime Minister has no power post-sacking someone?

Steve Richards: Because they can make other appointments, like giving them a job abroad or something, they continue to have power of patronage—or do they? I think it is much more limited. You are right to some extent. I remember, when Gordon Brown tried to woo Charles Clarke, the first job he offered was to go to Iraq to preside over the rebuilding of a dam and, as Charles Clarke reflected, “If I wasn’t blown up en route to the dam, I probably would have been when I got to the dam.” So there are limits sometimes to the appeal of these offers to ambitious domestic politicians. But you are right—and you all know this better than us—that peerages and all the rest of it can be hinted at to calm people down. As I say, in measuring the leader’s relationship with his parliamentary party, the powers of ministerial patronage are the most important by a long way, but you are all better placed to make that judgment.

Chris Moncrieff: Margaret Thatcher had a problem with Edward Heath. She offered him the ambassadorship in the United States, and he turned it down. I am not surprised, but I think she would have been a much happier person if she could have seen the back of him.

Q336 Mr Turner: Finally, you mentioned old codgers being in charge in 1962, or whenever it was. Crichel Down, of course, was even earlier, was it not—the 1950s? This is for Chris Moncrieff: did you always believe that old codgers were the people to do a good job, or did you only find that as you reached your current age?

Chris Moncrieff: No. I may be a grumpy old man now, but I was also a grumpy young man—I was what was known as a young fogey, I think, in those days. Gerontocracy is not a very pretty word, but I think I would prefer that type of Government to one that I suppose we would call a paediocracy. I am all in favour of mellow veterans running the country rather than young people. The idea that we could have 16-year-old MPs nearly put me in the queue to emigrate to Australia, quite frankly.

Mr Turner: Excellent.
Q337 Fabian Hamilton: I want to follow on very quickly on something that you said, Steve. I wonder why most journalists in the media believe that people stand for Parliament only so that they can become Ministers in a Government. There are an awful lot of MPs in this place who like being MPs and have no desire to be Ministers.

Steve Richards: You are right; this is something I have discovered. I think this is another reason why Cameron has quite a problem. I think there has been an increase in the number of MPs who arrive and regard their main line of accountability as to their constituents, not the parliamentary leadership.

Fabian Hamilton: As they should.

Steve Richards: Again, that is a very interesting and important dynamic. I do not think this is quite in the sphere of this particular discussion, but I think it is really interesting as to who an MP feels most accountable to when they get to the House of Commons. You obviously feel the same. But it is quite interesting that when I have spoken to Conservative MPs who are stirring over particular issues and they explain why, one of the reasons they give is, “I know that this is what my constituents feel over x, y and z, and I don’t care what David Cameron tells me to do; I am going to do what I think my constituents want.”

This is an interesting dynamic.

Chris Moncrieff: The trouble with that is that too many MPs now work far harder than they used to when I first arrived here, because they are doing a lot of work that really belongs to county councils, and even parish councils. Roger Gale said to me recently, “We are not MPs any more. We are just social workers and not even glorified social workers.” It is a fact. They spend too much time fiddling about with constituents’ plumbing and too little time doing what they are elected to do, in my opinion.

Q338 Mr Chope: Without going into all those areas, first of all, can I put the suggestion that the problem that the Prime Minister has at the moment—about controlling Conservative Members on the Back Benches—is primarily because the Government are often not doing things that are Conservative? For example, this week there was a headline article in The Times saying that the Government were planning to bring in reporting by companies on the ethnicity of directors. That is not a Conservative party policy. It is that sort of thing that is creating discontent among Back Benches. Going back to your point about Ian Gilmore, again the problem with him was that he was not really a Conservative—he was so far over on the left. If he had been responsible, he would have resigned first rather than have been briefing against the Government of whom he continued to be a member and from whom he continued to get his salary.

Chris Moncrieff: I think it is absolutely true. There are a lot of Conservative MPs who do not regard David Cameron as a true Conservative, and some of the policies he is pursuing—particularly, for instance on same-sex marriage—many, many Conservatives regard as total anathema. That sense of not really believing in David Cameron adds to their frustration about the prospects of them not getting jobs ever, because of the coalition situation where Cabinet jobs are at a premium and Cameron has to keep the requisite number of Liberal Democrats in office. That is why you get a lot of disgruntlement in the Conservative party and frustration at the lack of prospects of promotion. Also, as you say so rightly, they think the Government are not pursuing policies that are Conservative with a capital C.

Chair: If I could ask questioners and witnesses to include the word “reshuffle” in anything they say, it would really help me out. Chris, set an example for us.

Q339 Mr Chope: I will try, Chairman. I think that Steve Richards said that senior Civil Servants regard their Departments as personal fiefdoms visited fleetingly by precarious Cabinet Ministers, implying that it did not make much difference what happens and that the power still resided with the civil service or ultimately with the Prime Minister. But what we have seen recently—I think that something like 18 out of 20 permanent secretaries have changed—is that permanent secretaries are appointed by the Prime Minister, so is the Prime Minister now exercising more power through reshuffling permanent secretaries than by reshuffling Cabinet Ministers?

Steve Richards: That is a good point, and I think the answer is a bit of both. The civil service is another issue, although it is related in the sense that I do go back to the point that, on the whole, permanent secretaries are at a Department for a lot longer than most Ministers. As you say, at the moment there is quite a reshuffle going on of permanent secretaries, but if you look at it, that is spanning several Governments. I think that the power of relative job security, and the fact that they are there for so long, gives them incredible authority over a Minister who is permanently worried they will not be there for very long and might actually not be. I think that is an imbalance. It can only be addressed not, I think, by constantly getting rid of permanent secretaries, so they too are in this state of churn, but in the key Departments letting people stay for a bit longer as Ministers. In the end, I do not think you can be that prescriptive beyond having a leader determined to do it.

Q340 Mr Chope: So do you think there is an optimum length of time that, for example, a Cabinet Minister should stay in position?

Steve Richards: Yes. A full term would be the ideal—Mr Chope: So a five-year Parliament.

Steve Richards: I have written today that I am not a great fan of five-year Parliaments. I think they should be four years; five years is too long. But, for a Cabinet Minister, I really do not think you can do anything in less than four years. Whether you agree or disagree with them, if you look at the areas where reform has taken place, and to some extent endured, it is when they were there for four years. David Cameron is presented as a bit of a saint on this. He is not, really. He tried to move Iain Duncan Smith in the last reshuffle and Iain Duncan Smith refused. Again, whether you agree or disagree with what he is trying to do, he was absolutely right to refuse. If you are
going to reform welfare, you need one person there for the full four or five years. If you look at Gove in Education, there was some speculation he might move to party chairmanship—crazy. So I think one term would be the ideal.

Q341 Mr Chope: Could you give some examples of Ministers—not currently serving but in the past—who have had decent terms in a particular Department and have made those sorts of reforms?

Steve Richards: Yes. Under Blair, below there was this constant movement all over the place, but he had Blunkett at Education for the first term, and Blunkett went in with a set of reforms that he wanted to introduce and, on the whole, he introduced them. He had a Chancellor there for his entire period in power, and whether you agree or disagree with Gordon Brown, he introduced some substantial reform at the Treasury. Who else was there for any length of time in a four-year period? There were not that many others, but those are two examples. I think Jack Straw was, at the Home Office. The senior people tend to stay in post. Perhaps that is something you can look at as well. It is in the delivery, public service Departments that there seems to be this constant turnover—at Secretary of State level, but especially at junior ministerial levels—and I think that is where it has been very hard for Ministers to get a grip on a reform agenda of any sustainability.

Q342 Mr Chope: Would you put an advisory limit on the length of time a junior Minister should have in a particular post?

Steve Richards: I go back to the point that the politics of it make it very difficult. For a junior Minister to make an impact—I have read the diaries of Chris Mullin and others—I think they need a full term in there as well. They are moved around with a regularity that is just absurd, given the limited power they have at the very beginning, so ideally a full term. I am not saying this is possible—politically it is impossible—but I think if people worked on the assumption that the ideal to get a manifesto reform agenda of any sustainability.

Q343 Mr Chope: Finally, do you think if the Prime Minister was prepared to delegate more power and responsibility to his Cabinet Ministers and their junior Ministers, the Government would be better run as a whole? For example, we have heard Steve Hilton saying from the other side of the pond that he was amazed at No. 10 that they did not know everything that was going on. But surely the whole essence of Government should be that the Prime Minister chooses people to whom he gives responsibility and power so that they can exercise that responsibility and power within their own domains?

Steve Richards: I think you need Cabinet Ministers in post for as long as is feasible, and a strong No. 10. It is when you have a weaker centre that these regular reshuffles start to happen, because No. 10 suddenly discovers something late on, which they did not know was going on, panics and gets rid of the Minister. We have had a classic example with Andrew Lansley who was in the middle of this complicated—complicated being an understatement—set of reforms, which apparently No. 10 did not know were happening. I am not quite sure whether that can be the case, but he was moved. You need a pretty strong No. 10 working with these Cabinet Ministers. With Blair, when he appointed Estelle Morris as Education Secretary, perhaps he did not know that she had doubts about quite a bit of his reform programme. They should have been sitting down talking about all these things from the beginning. So, I am not in favour of a weak centre. I was very interested in your proposal long ago for a Prime Ministerial Office because, in effect, I think that recognises what has almost happened anyway, but that was only partially related to this.

Q344 Chair: Steve, to follow through on what you have just said, are you really saying that right at the beginning of a Parliament there should be some public statement from the Prime Minister that, “Barring death or scandal, this is my first team. I am putting them in the field.” I do not think you could possibly say to be there for five years, but, “I want them to be there for as long as it takes to get their respective jobs done, and to give them a sense of security.” And also to give people who are in the parliamentary parties, who may want to aspire, a sense that, “I have to come to terms with the fact that this five years is part of my apprenticeship, and I know the Prime Minister will do this again should we win the next election,” so that there is a dampening of expectation, or a replacement of the current expectation that, “At any moment it could be my chance, and I am frustrated because it isn’t.” Would a public statement be of some help?

Steve Richards: I think you are looking at those sorts of cultural changes rather than coming up with a list of practical recommendations. We are in the world of politics. Politics is partly an art form; it is not a science. It is something along those lines. Cabinet could gather on day one with an assumption that they would be there on the final day of that first term, but of course it will not happen because that is politics. Instead, at the moment, the assumption is that half the people sitting round the table fear that they do not have the confidence of the Prime Minister. “We are only there because he has had to put them there. I’ll be gone in the first reshuffle, probably in nine months’ time. Help, what am I doing?” The permanent secretary will know that that is the case, and that dynamic is very, very damaging.

The other side of that is that the Prime Minister must have that confidence, and that is quite unusual as well. Blair used to say to some of us columnistists, “When it comes to a reshuffle I struggle sometimes, because I can’t find the people I want to do what I want to do.” So the Prime Minister, in making that kind of statement—“This is our agenda. It is a tough period. Here is the team working for four years to carry it through”—must feel that that is the team. It has to work on both sides. When you look back that dynamic is hardly ever in place.

Q345 Chair: Do Prime Ministers bring to office a sense that the rest of the people in Parliament are
chumps who are not quite up to it and people who are difficult to deal with and cause problems, meaning that a sense of contempt can develop between the Executive and the legislature?

Steve Richards: I think “contempt” is too strong a word, but there is a bit of that, yes.

Q346 Chair: Do you think that at some point Parliament—held in contempt or not—should be informed, as a matter of courtesy, that half the Government is being replaced, or that a large number of senior figures have been, rather than this being leaked out through the press or a little bit of briefing against people? At a basic level of common courtesy, after a shuffle has taken place, should someone—hopefully the Prime Minister, but perhaps the Leader of the House or somebody—read out a statement, “The Government has undergone a number of changes. So-and-so is now the Minister for whatever,” to properly and officially inform the elected assembly of the country?

Steve Richards: I can see the symbolic worth of that, yes. I can see the symbolic worth. It is no more than a symbolic move to acknowledge that, in replacing half the Executive theoretically accountable to Parliament, Parliament should know. There are no briefings to the media in advance of Cabinet reshuffles. There really are not. Chris will know more than me that in lobby briefings they ask, again and again, “When will it be, and who?” and even privately. If you look at press speculation about reshuffles, he always got it right, but quite a lot of it is wrong. It is guesswork, partly. But, yes, Parliament should be kept informed. What you could not have is the situation where a Prime Minister is standing there having to explain why he has sacked x and y. I think that would be unworkable.

Chris Moncrieff: The speculation about reshuffles has largely been accurate. I know there is a certain amount of guesswork, but again I will refer to the Thatcher days. You may find this hard to believe, but one of the greatest contacts we had—one of the most gossipy people I remember—was Ian Gow, of all people. He used to regularly fill us in on Thatcher’s plans to change the Cabinet, and one or two other Ministers did the same. Thatcher never did nor ever did Bernard Ingham. He remained tight-lipped throughout all this. You could not get a syllable of speculation or anything out of Bernard Ingham about Margaret Thatcher’s plans to change the Government. I think part of it was Margaret Thatcher’s desire not to upset people who were going to lose their jobs, when they thought they were on the way up still and suddenly found themselves on the way down. She was not obsessed or even bothered much about presentation, but she was very caring, or thought she was, in that area, and Bernard Ingham implicitly followed her requests that there should be no speculation whatsoever. She could not rely on some of her Ministers who used to talk quite freely to us about what she was trying to do, and they were always right.

Q347 Chair: I have Sheila to come in, but I just remind you, Steve, I think you have very kindly run over a little bit.

Steve Richards: Another five minutes, if that is all right.

Chair: We will have Sheila and then Steve, and then that will be it. We might keep you to the end, with a bit of luck.

Q348 Sheila Gilmore: Would staggering moves rather than this, “Let’s reshuffle everybody”—well, not everybody but nearly everybody—be better for the Government?

Steve Richards: Sorry, what kind of moves?

Sheila Gilmore: Staggering moves, so that reshuffling is staged over a year or two years. There would be a certain number of reshuffles take place but not a big bang.

Steve Richards: That still does not address the fundamental problem of this constant movement from Department to Department, or out of Departments. I still think that would make Ministers incredibly insecure. The civil servants would know they are insecure. So, no, I do not think so. If you look, as well, in terms of the mood music, you do have these moments sometimes where a very small reshuffle takes place, like after the Andrew Mitchell thing. It can be just as turbulent and dramatic as the bigger ones that take place. To be honest, I do not think that would address it.

Q349 Sheila Gilmore: Do either of you think there is an optimum time in the parliamentary year for a reshuffle to take place?

Chris Moncrieff: I do not think there is. For instance, Cameron waited a couple of years. I think that was already his plan. If disaster befalls the Government, obviously they have to do something about it, but I think a lot of this is done on the Prime Minister’s own whim. Cameron’s idea is to keep Ministers in jobs as long as he can; Blair’s was the reverse. I do not think there is an optimum time for doing this at all, no.

Q350 Sheila Gilmore: Should the Prime Minister do it in the summer so that a full parliamentary year can be done, or does it not really matter?

Steve Richards: Sometimes it is forced upon them, so they have no control over the timing. When they have control over the timing, it seems more common to do it in July—just before the recess seems to be a favoured time. To be honest, I do not think the timing is that significant.

Chris Moncrieff: I agree. If he were to do it in July, the new Ministers have the opportunity to get their homework done and bed themselves in during the long summer recess. I suppose that could be called an optimum time, but that is just a matter of convenience, really.

Q351 Stephen Williams: All these questions and answers, so far, have really been about the drama of politics—the sort of stuff we enjoy discussing and you enjoy reporting. How much of it is in the interests of the country? If you were to allocate proportions or percentages as to what is uppermost in the Prime Minister’s mind, or even uppermost in your minds when you are reporting on it, how much of these reshuffles are in the interests of good government?
How much of it is party management, and how much of it is throwing a few bits of meat to the reptiles who report to other newspapers?

Steve Richards: To be honest, I do not think we have focused on the drama. It is those three ingredients I raised early on, as we all know: internal politics; policy; and policy differences. The judgment as to whether the voters benefit from it is partly subjective, depending on whether you agree that someone else has come in and is doing a policy implementation programme that you support. Again, that is part of politics. What I am sure about is that the number of changes is unhealthy for the electorate, in terms of stability and quality of policy making.

I also agree with Chris about the fact that now so many people come in with very little experience of government, from the very top downwards. That again is partly a product of one party ruling for so long and then another. So, no, I think these are serious things, and they do have a very big impact on the quality of policy that surfaces at the end of this process.

Q354 Stephen Williams: Is there any appetite for that to be changed? There is no internal, cultural reason to change it because people select people who they feel comfortable with. Should your profession not be challenging political class, which I think is in a book written by one of your colleagues, *The Triumph of the Political Class*? Should there not be more of a challenge to that culture from outside?

Steve Richards: Probably. Yes.

Q355 Stephen Williams: But people say that, don’t they?

Steve Richards: That stuff gets written about all the time. Again, I think we are moving off the remit a bit. Who gets into Parliament is obviously a very, very interesting and important topic.

Q356 Stephen Williams: Who gets to be a Minister once they are in Parliament is very much part of this.

Steve Richards: Is the number one, yes. I think the degree to which the media can make a difference to that is fairly limited. This is for the parties and the party Whips, who I gather advise on reshuffles—

Q357 Stephen Williams: But the media tips people, do they not? Chairman, you asked earlier about the role of the media. That was what you were asking when I came in—I am sorry I was late. We all read every time it is reshuffle season, or what is perceived to be reshuffle season, that there are people who are tipped. Do you not feel that your profession tips people who you know, who you feel comfortable with and who tend to be full-time professional politicians—the spadocracy that has grown up in recent decades?

Steve Richards: Not necessarily, frankly. I think. There are a lot of those people around in the House of Commons now, and whether that is a good or a bad thing is up to you to decide. But, no, I mean it was great—to use Transport again—when Andrew Adonis, who had a complete passion for transport, was Transport Secretary. He told me—and he was not showing off—that he was the first Transport Secretary with an interest in transport since someone in the 1950s. I cannot remember who it was. It does seem to me crazy that people with a specialist passion cannot be matched more often with the Department that feeds that passion. But I think that is slightly different. I do not think you should say that the media should be spending the next year writing articles about: why is that guy from Virgin Trains not an MP? It is an interesting question. Perhaps he should be.

Mrs Laing: He is earning four times as much with Virgin Trains.

Q358 Sheila Gilmore: Just to follow up on that, it is politics and not administration, and coming from a council background I have also seen to some extent—and perhaps you would agree with this—the opposite, which is that as a politician you get sucked into
administration, and that is not actually the role. There is sometimes a role for having a political head.

Mrs Laing: Absolutely right.

Steve Richards: Completely. Absolutely.

Sheila Gilmore: Although admittedly it is sometimes perverse—how people are appointed to the opposite of what they are interested in.

Steve Richards: Yes.

Fabian Hamilton: Because nobody knows they are interested in it.

Chair: Let us ask the witnesses the question. I just want your comments on Sheila’s question.

Steve Richards: Yes. I completely agree. Cabinet government is a highly political theme, and you do not just want a bunch of apolitical managers in there. Again, I do not think the problem is having a bunch of apolitical managers in Cabinet. That is not the problem at the moment. It is about the instability of the role.

Q359 Chair: Is it not also about the insecurity of a Prime Minister? The Prime Minister wants safe pairs of hands and does want someone to administer the Department, and not get into the newspapers for the wrong reasons—in a sense, almost depoliticise Cabinet appointments—so that they are going to do pretty much as they are asked to do by No. 10, rather than saying, “It’s my job to manage the talent and I need the most talented people; no, it is my job to keep everything quiet so the focus remains under my control.”

Steve Richards: Yes. That is another issue. Again that is about the dynamics of politics. You cannot prescribe. For example, the last Labour Cabinet chose to behave like that. They did not have to. Peter Hennessy described the last Labour Cabinet, in relation to Iraq, I think, as one of the weakest in post-war politics, but they did not have to be. They could have been assertive. The Wilson Cabinets of the mid-1970s were incredibly assertive. That was not because Wilson enjoyed dealing with eight very difficult heavyweights around that table, but because there were eight heavyweights with power in the party at the time that gave them leverage over a Prime Minister, which enabled them to be assertive in Cabinet. In the early years of Margaret Thatcher that applied as well. So I think there is a sort of political dynamic at play that explains the relationship between a leader and a Cabinet.

Q360 Chair: But the people around that Cabinet table on the Iraq question were not assertive before the Iraq war arose. Many of them were chosen for their lack of assertiveness, so it was no big surprise that they did not suddenly pop out and be assertive on a major foreign policy issue.

Steve Richards: Yes, I agree, but it was still their choice. There could have been a whole different dynamic in that Cabinet if they had chosen to assert themselves, but they did not. In the 1970s you had Cabinets that chose to be assertive. I think the current Cabinet is a mixture of the two. Cameron is not as in control as Blair was of most of his, but the whole Blair/Brown thing was another weird phenomenon of that period.

Chair: Steve, Chris, thank you so much for your time this morning.

Steve Richards: A pleasure.

Chair: It was very informative and, as you could tell, people were very keen to pick your brains and your experience—particularly, if I may say, Chris, your longevity, starting with the Night of the Long Knives—on many issues beyond reshuffles, and perhaps we might join you to do that over a drink somewhere, as well as in Committee. Thank you both very much for coming along. Thank you so much.
Thursday 28 February 2013

Members present:

Mr Graham Allen (Chair)
Mr Christopher Chope
Paul Flynn
Sheila Gilmore
Andrew Griffiths
Fabian Hamilton
Tristram Hunt
Mrs Eleanor Laing
Mr Andrew Turner

Examination of Witness

Witness: Lord O'Donnell GCB, former Cabinet Secretary, gave evidence.

Q361 Chair: Welcome to our Committee, Gus. We are absolutely delighted to see you this morning. Thank you for taking the time to come and give us some advice.

We are looking into the impact and effectiveness of the shuffle. I am sure it is a State secret, but the Committee probably is not overjoyed about the concept of shuffles and how they happen. However, I would also say I think that the Committee does not have a great long list of reforms that immediately spring to mind on how to make that system better, although there are a number of obvious, small reforms that might be helpful. In a sense, it is quite a free field for a known radical like yourself—seriously, as someone who has great experience on the inside to offer a little advice on how we might propose that these things could be done a little better. Gus, would you like to say a few words to start or you happy to jump in?

Lord O'Donnell: Certainly; thank you very much. You asked for ideas, so I will throw them in, and then you can then tell me whether I am mad or not.

First of all, a basic principle: it is a very good idea to have a longer tenure in post for ministers, particularly Secretaries of State. I can see Ministers of State learning their art and junior ministers moving around, but with Secretaries of State, let us have them there for longer.

I mentioned this to David Cameron when we had one of our discussions when he was Leader of the Opposition. He was saying something like, “Well, what could we do for you?” and I said, “Keep ministers in place for longer, please; that would be my No. 1 ask.” He has delivered on that, and that is partly, but with Secretaries of State, let us have them there for longer.

I mentioned this to David Cameron when we had one of our discussions when he was Leader of the Opposition. He was saying something like, “Well, what could we do for you?” and I said, “Keep ministers in place for longer, please; that would be my No. 1 ask.” He has delivered on that, and that is partly, but I think it is really important to have that attempt at stability. Of course, events could throw you off, but let us start by trying to have a strategic view about objectives.

Then, for that team of ministers, you should be saying, “Right, here is what you are trying to achieve.” You would agree on the top line, and then you would allocate out among the ministers the areas they were going to concentrate on particularly. You would have some milestones about reviewing progress as we go along. It could lead into a kind of plan for Government. We saw that the coalition forced a plan that had not been pre-prepared. It was quite heavy on tasks, but not so heavy on overall outcomes, I would say. So, we had a lot of things that we were able to tick the box for, but there was a question mark on how were they related to the outcomes that were desired. For example, you might say you want to achieve a certain number of schools of a certain type—academies, free schools or whatever. You could do that, but what is the outcome—what is that for? Is it to improve children’s education, for example, and how might you define that? So I would have some big-outcome measures.

Then I would go into the whole training and appraisal system. These are things that are common in virtually every organisation. There should be feedback. I really feel for ministers that it is very hard for them to get feedback—honest, constructive feedback. It is a process that is very difficult and does not happen very much at the minute, as I think you have heard. There are all sorts of ways you could achieve that. There could be pre-training as well: training of MPs in opposition so that they can be ready to come in, as well as training for ministers while in post. You have organisations now like the Institute for Government...
that did an excellent report on reshuffles, which brought together lots of the evidence. That is what they are really good at. They could, as an independent cross-party body, start to say, “Let us fulfil some of these functions if we have all-party agreement to this.” I think your Committee saying that this is the way that we should go would be very helpful. At the moment, ministers are stuck with reading a couple of books, which are very good, but having that work together—Finally, I would say there is a big relationship for the ministerial team to work with their senior civil servants, and that is something that could be exploited more.

Q362 Chair: Why did you feel you could not get that rolling when you were in your previous post, particularly at the moment when a new Prime Minister took over? Wasn’t that a really good time to press those? What got in the way, because you clearly feel very strongly about this? Why couldn’t that be done at the time?

Lord O’Donnell: When you are setting up a coalition Government, this is completely new—it is unprecedented—and you suddenly have a Prime Minister having to deal with a number of his colleagues who thought they would be in Cabinet but now are not. You are thinking about how you are going to make this completely new form work. It was a question of managing that first.

Chair: Of course, yes.

Q363 Mr Turner: That is talking about the current Prime Minister, but what about the previous Prime Minister? Why couldn’t you impose—I am sorry to use the word “impose”; it is not right, is it? Why couldn’t you suggest those things to Gordon Brown?

Lord O’Donnell: It was true with Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. They had both been in government for a very long time, and they were used to the system, as it existed. They were content to leave it as it was. When I arrived as Cabinet Secretary, Tony Blair had been Prime Minister for eight years. He had settled on the way he wanted to do those sorts of things. With Gordon Brown, I think if there had been more time—if, say, he had won the last election—he might have come round to thinking about some of these issues. I do not think, in a sense, any Prime Minister has ever been anti them; it is just a question of it is not their first priority.

Q364 Mr Turner: Okay. At the moment, we have the great advantage—or disadvantage—of a coalition where you cannot get people who agree, sometimes, what the aim should be. John Hayes is a well-known example. Do you think that that is because of the coalition, or is it because it is just one of those things that happens as people stay in government at middle-ranking posts?

Lord O’Donnell: It has certainly been the case that you have had, even within a single-party Government, Secretaries of State who have had very different views about the way things should be done. I look back at the Home Office, for example, and see John Reid and Charles Clarke, and I would say that they both had very different views about how they should approach questions such as the effectiveness of prison and the prison capacity question. That is the world we live in. We could live in a different world, and one of the advantages of having a Secretary of State imposed for longer would be that those sorts of differences would not happen. You would not get a lurch from one position to another. Now, that is an advantage if the position you are in for that longer period is the right position, but a disadvantage if it turns out to be the wrong one.

Q365 Mr Turner: It seems to me that there is not a leadership under any Government that sticks by an intention, because they change when a new Minister is appointed.

Lord O’Donnell: No, not always. I would say that there are some very clear things. The Chancellor has laid out an economic programme that he has stuck with. The Secretary of State for Education has a clear programme that he has laid out. In particular, the coalition agreement itself and the programme required rather more discipline than we have ever had in the past. In the past, all you have really had to go on have been manifestos, and they turn out to be—I just say this as a matter of evidence—not a great guide to what Governments in the end have done.

Q366 Mr Turner: Our witnesses seem to regard the reshuffle as inherently chaotic and irrational. Do you think that is true, and, if so, what can you do about it?

Lord O’Donnell: I would say it is extremely political. It is the Prime Minister’s way of maintaining control, and it is ultimately his decisions about who stays in post, who changes and who goes where. Obviously there are slightly different procedures for coalition but, in general, it is Prime Ministers expressing their views about what should happen.

Is it chaotic? If you were doing this within other organisations, you would be sitting there and looking at some evidence and appraisals of what people thought of this person. You would have some objective evidence about how that company performed, how that individual performed in their area—all those sorts of things. They would be written down. There would be a lot of evidence. You would ask people for their views on that. That is all very difficult. Obviously one of the issues, of course, is in a world of HR, there are normal HR procedures, you would write these down, and there would be rules about what is open and what is not, and all the rest of it. In the world of Cabinet and reshuffles, you would be in the world of FOI. I can imagine that people would be saying, “Oh yes, let’s see what so and so’s views on x were”. We would, as ever with FOI, have absolutely no certainty as to whether that information would be made available or not.

Q367 Mr Turner: These things were true even before FOI was introduced.

Lord O’Donnell: We have managed it, and we still manage to have proper HR procedures where we write things down. We have written appraisals. I had a fairly elaborate appraisal system for myself to get 360° feedback. That is very normal, yes, but in a political world, people would find it very hard. They would be
very nervous about having appraisals out there in public.

**Q368 Mr Turner:** I can see why they would be. Who does the Prime Minister turn to for advice?

**Lord O'Donnell:** Usually his Chief Whip is a very key person. There are usually one or two very close allies for whom he has a very clear view about which particular post they are going to be in. It may well be that he wants to keep them in their specific post for a long time, so they become part of—as it were—an A-team that sits and plans what the next reshuffle will be. Prime Ministers can ask their Cabinet Secretary, “What’s the civil service view of A, B and C, and are they viewed to be someone who gets on with the job, is effective and does things?” They can treat that information as they wish, or they may choose not to ask.

**Q369 Mr Turner:** Would it be helpful to have internal—well, in a way you have answered this—written information on reshuffles: how, when and so on; how frequently and how best to hold reshuffles?

**Lord O'Donnell:** To have written guidance on that?

**Mr Turner:** Yes.

**Lord O'Donnell:** You could have some written guidance. I think Prime Ministers would not feel bound by it, because quite often these things happen because of a crisis—because of a scandal, a resignation or whatever. But within the civil service, there is a standard procedure. We have a little bit in the Cabinet manual—not much I agree—laying out what the rules are. It is very important we make sure that we do not break the 1975 Act. We understand the numbers game. That sort of information is provided by the civil service—by the Cabinet Office—as a back-up to ministers as they are going through reshuffles. We ensure that they meet the various legal requirements.

**Q370 Fabian Hamilton:** To some extent, Lord O'Donnell, you have answered this, but I wonder if I could just explore a little further this idea of annual performance reviews for ministers. The think-tanks, Reform recommended this would be a good idea. Do you think it would be useful?

**Lord O'Donnell:** Yes, I do. I have always said the people who do well in life, and who grow and carry on developing, are those who are open to feedback. None of us are perfect. I got pretty strident feedback from my colleagues about the things I was doing well and the things I was doing badly, and the things they wanted me to improve on. That helped me get better. I find that very useful. It is a process for all of us of growing and developing. You need someone who can look at you from outside and say, “Well, you need to get better at this.” We all have it. Our families tell us our dress sense is rubbish. Daughters are particularly good at that.

**Fabian Hamilton:** That’s true.

**Lord O'Donnell:** I try my best.

**Fabian Hamilton:** No, I meant in my case.

**Lord O'Donnell:** I see.

It is a very positive part of development. It is in almost every sphere of life. You look at your education. All the way through, you are getting feedback, you are learning and you are developing. I see no reason why that should not continue through the political world. Obviously you are in this media environment where people would love to have all of these things. Sometimes you just have to go through with it. When we did capability reviews, they said, “Oh my God, you are going to publish things saying this Department has some weaknesses.” Well, yes, that is feedback, and we need to be open about the fact that we need to improve.

**Q371 Fabian Hamilton:** Do you think that sort of review is not just to help individuals improve and do the job better, but is some kind of check on the untrammeled use of authority when people are in very, very senior positions?

**Lord O'Donnell:** It would certainly do that. You would be able to observe—or a Prime Minister would be able to observe—that so and so seems to be going their own way. You often have a situation when you are asking to what extent Secretaries of State are doing this in line with Cabinet approval and to what extent have they gone off on their own. In some ways, you want them to be proactive, but you want it to be within a structure where everyone in Cabinet can sign up to it. I think there is a case where you would want that to be part of the feedback, because it will tell you if this Minister is one who pushes boundaries and who wants to get on and do things more. There will be certain areas and certain departments where the Prime Minister would say, “That is what I want in that Department. I really want to shake that area up. I want someone pushing the boundaries.” In another area, you may say, “Look, this particular Department has been through a massive change for so long that I want someone just to calm it down and steer it through the next five years. This is about implementing changes we have already announced.” So, that means different sorts of individuals, and if you had more feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of different individuals, you might get the right pegs in the right holes.

**Q372 Fabian Hamilton:** Good point. Assuming we have the right pegs in the right holes, what kind of training, if any, should ministers get when they take up a new job or come into government in the first place? Should there be any?

**Lord O'Donnell:** Ideally, before that, so you do the work if you are in opposition expecting to come in. We have this random thing that sometimes you have an Opposition coming in and they have been Ministers before. Sometimes you have an Opposition coming in and they have not been Ministers before due to the vagaries of our electoral system.

**Q373 Fabian Hamilton:** Well, in 1997.

**Lord O'Donnell:** Exactly. So, in 1997, wouldn’t it have been great if the Institute for Government had been around and could have said, “Right, here is how to be a junior minister and here is how to be a Secretary of State”, and obviously in this you would want experienced ministers—people who have been through the system. This is not about being taught by civil servants, although there will be an element of...
that in it. It is a lot about people talking about leadership and how to manage strategy and planning—that whole business. It is about building teams as well—one thing I said—because you quite often find junior ministers who are not really bought into the whole ministerial team. It can be a very frustrating job, as I think one of the books pointed out.

Q374 Fabian Hamilton: Certainly friends of mine who have been ministers have told me the same. Do you think there should be a more formal process for the handover by one Minister to another when ministers change jobs? When they hand over to their successors, should there be a formal procedure, or should it just be left to rely on civil servants to help with the handover process?

Lord O'Donnell: These things work best when there is a—how shall I put it?—friendly handover, when the outgoing Minister sits down with the incoming one and they have a discussion. They will have a discussion that will say, “Look, I found these civil servants particularly useful. I found these ones not so useful. I think I am on top of, and made the right changes in, these areas and they are working fine; I think with these ones I am really worried, and I am not sure if progress is fast enough. If I were you, I would concentrate on these areas and, by the way, I do not think I did very much in this area, and I know that you are really interested in that, so that is something you might want to do.” That kind of conversation would be incredibly useful. In this world, it is a set of conversations. But, of course, sometimes you have a Minister who has been sacked and is not in the mood to have that kind of conversation, in which case the civil service has to step in. But it could easily be that other ministers who have been in that Department could help in that role. Hopefully you are not moving everybody at the same time, so it could be done by somebody else in the ministerial team.

Q375 Fabian Hamilton: In your opinion, Lord O'Donnell, do you think that the prerogative to hire and fire ministers should be put on any sort of statutory footing, or is the current system adequate, where the Prime Minister has the sole decision?

Lord O'Donnell: This is so much about the way we do government. With our current system, I would say it is fine as it is. There is an interesting question to be had about what mix of ministers you want. People have talked about the US system, where someone who is not an elected politician can come in. I think it is rather interesting to think about the role of experts, but I have been looking very closely at Italy as an example.

Q376 Fabian Hamilton: I was just going to say, yes. Lord O'Donnell: Exactly. Sometimes I think there is a belief. If you look at the LSE growth commission, for example, a lot of its recommendations are about taking things out of politics—taking the planning system out of politics and having an infrastructure board. Some of the things I have argued for: an independent statistics office; the independent Office for Budgetary Responsibility; an independent Bank of England—it is taking things away from politics to these independent bodies. I think that is fine, as long as you have the political democratic control and they set the strategic objectives. Where you get problems is when you have that independence, and then you suddenly move into the political. Mario Monti experienced the feeling that, as a technocrat, you can be highly regarded, but once you move into the political sphere, curiously enough you are a politician and you get treated that way. We saw, in effect, that people did not vote for him.

Q377 Fabian Hamilton: It is surely about accountability. You mentioned experts coming in who have not been elected but, of course, we have a system that allows that.

Lord O'Donnell: Yes, we do.

Q378 Fabian Hamilton: Gordon Brown hired quite a number of people who came into the Lords and became Ministers. They had never stood for office or election. They were perhaps good technocrats, but I think most of us would agree—on all sides—that they were not necessarily good politicians, whatever they brought to the party.

Lord O'Donnell: Indeed, and I think the one thing that ministers do—and that civil servants can never ever do, and should never ever do—is the politics, so you do need people who are politically astute. I would say the best way to get experts in—and there is plenty of scope for this—is to bring them into the Department. If they are really experts, get them in. That is a great way to do things. Of course, our system is slightly different. If you appoint a Minister in that way, you end up appointing them in the Lords usually, so they do then have experience of the legislative system and the accountability associated with being a member of a legislative body. If you are Secretary of the Treasury in the States, you do go before Congress at certain times, but it is a different relationship.

Q379 Fabian Hamilton: But, of course, those experts may not have ever been Members of the House of Lords before they were brought in.

Lord O'Donnell: That is right.

Fabian Hamilton: The Government made them a Member of the House of Lords.

Lord O'Donnell: Indeed.

Q380 Fabian Hamilton: I recall one Minister telling me that she was rather frightened of the process of being introduced into the House of Lords, although she had already been in government for several weeks before she was formally introduced.

Lord O'Donnell: Yes.

Paul Flynn: Ritual humiliation.

Fabian Hamilton: It was, exactly. Anyway, thank you very much, Lord O'Donnell.

Lord O'Donnell: It is technically true that you can have someone in Cabinet who is not in either House—it has happened.

Q381 Chair: Certainly, one thing that is accepted is that civil servants should not interfere in politics, but isn’t there a point at which all of us, including civil
servants, have to look after, maintain and burnish the political process itself? I will explain what I mean. You have rightly pointed out if you are going to get good-quality ministers, you want good-quality MPs, so there is the training element or an induction element there. Isn’t part of that also that you need to ensure that further down the gene pool—in local government and within the political parties themselves—there should also be an element of training, help or education, and you are into some quite sensitive territory there? Sensitive it may be, but, none the less, isn’t there a responsibility to maintain the fabric of political parties? How might that best be done? It sounds a long way away from reshuffle, but the reshuffle is often the consequence of not having had all those things at the base of the pyramid operating for you over a number of years.

**Lord O’Donnell:** I strongly agree with that. We saw one of the symptoms of that when we had those trust figures come out—the levels of who do you trust to tell the truth—and for politicians it was incredibly low. In those circumstances, when you have a society giving those sorts of answers, how are we going to encourage people to come into politics? We know that party membership is in decline. With participation, when I look at the vibrancy of a democracy like Ghana and then think of the latest police commissioner turnouts here, you think are we taking something for granted. Do we need a big push, possibly through the education system, really to urge the merits of politics? I am spending my time talking about the benefits of bureaucracy at the moment, but there is a second thing that someone should be doing about the benefits of politics and how we need good, well-informed politicians who are active and who participate. A strong participatory democracy is a really good element, I think, of good governance.

**Q382 Tristram Hunt:** I was just going to say that much of the discussion is about fighting the last war, and the last war was basically the repeated disasters of the Tony Blair reshuffles. What we have had in this Administration is a fairly sensible response to that in our system of government, which is not the German system and not the American system—it has its own peculiarities—when what we have seen, if we take the politics out of it and just in terms of the reshuffle of Administration, is an understanding of the problems of governance that arose from the hyper-mobility of the Blair years to reach a more stable situation.

**Lord O’Donnell:** I hope so. It is really hard to work out how much of this is due to the fact that the Prime Minister has really got this and bought into it, and how much of it is due to coalition, because if you look back at certain episodes, I put it to you that there are Ministers who went through certain periods when they probably would have been sacked had this not been a coalition. I think coalition has certainly helped.

**Q383 Tristram Hunt:** Yes. What you are saying is that coalition gives it a stasis that would not necessarily be there, because you have to square off every angle.

**Lord O’Donnell:** Exactly. I think that has been very beneficial, and I hope what you will get is people saying, “Oh, that worked rather well.” If, next time, we do not have a coalition, one of the things we should try to carry forward is some of the benefits of the Cabinet Committee system that has been implemented, and also keeping people in post longer. It would be a really good outcome if people learn from this and say, “You have a Pensions Minister who has been there a long time and who knows pensions backwards,” and if you look back at the number of Pensions Ministers we had—and pensions is the ultimate long-term issue—we had lots and lots of them, and their tenure was incredibly short. I hope that people will infer from this the right lesson: whatever the form of the Government—single party or coalition—keeping ministers in post for a longer time really works for the effectiveness of government.

**Q384 Tristram Hunt:** It seems that is ultimately a question of culture because, just in terms of the politics, you cannot set out, as it were, the statutory requirements for periods of office and all the rest of it. It is about human relations, politics and the nature of the leadership.

**Lord O’Donnell:** Yes, but if the leadership starts off and says, “We believe that this is what we are trying to achieve. We are going to lay out strategically the programme, and this Secretary of State and this team are going to carry it through,” that would be a really good start.

**Q385 Chair:** Both in terms of the aspiration that you responded to my question with, in terms of strengthening the fabric of political parties, and the aspiration you have outlined in response to Tristram, in terms of how you improve reshuffles—these are good aspirations—is anyone listening inside the civil service? Is anyone thinking about this, or does it need a retired Cabinet Secretary to pull some of this stuff together in one place? Otherwise we lose the learning, do we not, and we re-invent the wheel and get it wrong again?

**Lord O’Donnell:** Yes. I do think, when you have been in the sorts of positions I have been in, you do try to pay back and think about the lessons. You have a lot more time to think, so you can try to think about these things. As I said, for a new Prime Minister, this is unlikely to be the first priority, so I think there is a role for areas like the Institute for Government or individuals who have been in senior posts to start to think about these things. What I think we need as well will be some former Ministers starting to think about this and saying what they think would improve matters. Otherwise this tends to be, “Oh, well this is just the civil servants trying to say how the Government should be.” You can look at what I thought was a very interesting piece of work by James Purnell and Leigh Lewis, a Secretary of State and a permanent secretary, about how the two should work most effectively together. I think it is where you have the politicians and the civil servants saying, “Okay, let’s think of this as a joint exercise. You are deciding, we are advising; let us see how we make that work more effectively.”
Q386 Chair: Then you hope the political leadership will listen.

Lord O'Donnell: Yes. In the end, if you can prove that it works better, why would you not do it?

Q387 Chair: I did the induction for a lot of people on our side in 1996, and we took everybody away to Oxford. We had fantastic support from former Ministers—people like Gerald Kaufman and Jack Cunningham—and a number of former permanent secretaries, such as the Department of Social Security’s Mr. Partridge. They were guys who had been there, done that, and had retired recently. We had a full house in Oxford, and the only two people who did not show were the leader of the party and the shadow Chancellor, which rather rendered it a little less than it could have been—let us put it that way.

Lord O’Donnell: But it is interesting. You had a situation in 1997 with completely new ministers coming in, and the whole system did not fall over. If you were to take a company and, say, take out the whole leadership and put in people in who had never had that sort of job ever before, you would expect the company to go broke.

Q388 Paul Flynn: Can I say just a word of thanks and encouragement for your splendid campaign to expose the joys of bureaucracy? I have an equally daring campaign that is hopelessly idealistic: to try to introduce into the Chamber some slight link between questions asked and the answers given. We can try to do this.

Lord O’Donnell: That is a bit unreasonable.

Q389 Paul Flynn: Absolutely; totally revolutionary reform, particularly after yesterday. My experience of one Prime Minister was that his line when he sacked ministers, including ones who had performed very well indeed, was to say, “The nation is grateful to you and I am grateful to you, but I need your job.” I was so annoyed about one, I raised it with the Prime Minister as a question, because it seemed to me outrageous that they would sack someone. The person who had the job went in and told me afterwards, “When I went in to see the Prime Minister, he did not know who I was or what job he was giving me, and he had to ring up someone to tell him.” There are strange forces that mean that Ministers who perform brilliantly are destroyed, and some of them permanently damaged by the experience of being there, doing the job and then suddenly being branded a failure. So, the question is: do we need a strong trade union for ministers to defend them?

Lord O’Donnell: There are two things I would say to that. First of all, the Prime Minister is trying to manage the Government, and if the Prime Minister thinks that the Government should be going in a certain direction and you have a spiky Minister who says, “Well, I do not agree with that. I am going to do my own thing,” you can understand the Prime Minister saying, “Well, that is not what I want, thank you very much.”

Secondly, civil servants like ministers who are very clear about what they want to do, and if it is inconsistent with what the Government want to do and they have strong, clear views, that is great—get on with it. When you are looking at this appraisal system, I would say the last thing you would want is just one faction to be giving you information. You would be interested in that system in having what the civil servants say about them, and you would be interested in what the other Ministers within the ministerial team say about them. Are they good team players? You would be interested in that system in having what the civil servants say about them, and you would be interested in what the other Ministers within the ministerial team say about them. Are they good team players? You would be interested in what some Ministers in other departments who work with them say, because there are a lot of issues that cross departmental boundaries. Are they good at managing that? Also, you would be interested in the Whips and other people telling you about their parliamentary performance and all the rest of it. The civil servants might say, “Well, this person is trying to change everything too quickly,” but the Prime Minister has to weigh that up and say, “Is that because I think they should be or not?”
Q391 Chair: But within Government, the Prime Minister’s function is to run the whole of the Government and, particularly, its politics and its outward face. There is no function within the Prime Minister’s Office that is fundamentally about personnel, about bringing people on, about assessing people and about giving people the right in-service training so that they may be reprogrammed if they are not quite getting it right. Politically, there is no function like that. Having been in the Whips Office, there is not even a personnel function through the Whips Office. Isn’t that a very fundamental weakness—that the team manager is the outward face rather than getting the best out of a team? It is somebody who is saying, “You have to conform to my outward-facing view otherwise it is embarrassing for me.”

Lord O’Donnell: Yes, you can imagine a world in which you have an HR function reporting to the Prime Minister that would look at ministers, and maybe special advisers as well, and doing this whole process of appraisal—what is working, looking at teams and giving that sort of advice. There would be a lot to be said for that. The Prime Minister would have to bear in mind all the different politics as well, but I think that kind of information would be very useful. At the moment, of course, we do not have the building blocks for it.

Q392 Andrew Griffiths: Apologies for my late arrival. Could you tell us how long it takes a Minister to get into their brief and understand the Department that they run?

Lord O’Donnell: It very much depends on what they have done before. You might have someone coming in who had been that Minister before. With a change of Administration, if there were a Labour Government coming in and Ed Balls was shadow Chancellor and then became Chancellor, he has been in the Treasury a very long time and knows the Department backwards, so you would expect that induction process to be quite short.

Q393 Andrew Griffiths: I suppose what I am saying is how quick is too quick to reshuffle or sack a Minister? We have seen with some Ministers that they are in post for a serious amount of time and properly understand their brief, and then we see other Ministers who are reshuffled and moved from department to department, or reshuffled out very, very quickly.

Lord O’Donnell: Sometimes you are forced to. You have someone very able and it turns out that there has been some event, so someone has gone. So you think, “Well, it would make sense for them to move there and have a long period there.” I do not think any Prime Minister would really want to be moving people very briefly, as a Cabinet Secretary would not want to be moving permanent secretaries very rapidly. You would want your junior ministers to be there at least two years, I would say, and I would like to see Secretaries to stay for a Parliament, if at all possible, but they are aspirations, really.

Q394 Chair: We will accept there will be accidents, births, deaths, marriages or scandals when things have to happen, and that happens in every business.

Lord O’Donnell: Yes, absolutely.

Chair: But as an aspiration to say publicly, “With all other things being equal, we would like to give people these terms,” is where the Committee is feeling towards.

Q395 Mr Chope: Just a quick one. In your opening remarks, you talked about the importance of picking teams. You did not say that you thought that the present Prime Minister had picked up that idea from you and carried it forward, unlike the first idea you put forward in relation to length of tenure. You refer to managing the Government, but surely the Prime Minister should be leading the Government and setting out the objectives, and then giving responsibility for the delivery of those objectives to his chosen Cabinet Ministers? What better way of demonstrating his faith in those Cabinet Ministers than to say to them, “Joe, you choose your team to deliver on these objectives”? But that is completely the reverse of what seems to happen in practice, because the Prime Minister starts interfering. Once Joe has been going for a year or two with his team, suddenly he finds that people are taken away from his team—sacked for reasons that are never explained. What do you think could be done to try to reinforce this principle, which applies in almost every other walk of life, of team-building and delegation of responsibility in government?

Lord O’Donnell: What happens at the moment, to be fair, is that when a Prime Minister has selected a Secretary of State—and Prime Ministers’ habits in this have varied—there does tend to be a discussion about the team. The Prime Minister will generally say, “Look, I am thinking of these Ministers within your Department.” This is what we try to encourage if they have that worked out and say, “Can you work with all of those? Do you think that would work?” Sometimes a Secretary of State will say, “Well, I just could not work with x”, and then you try to bear that in mind. Ideally, a Prime Minister would be talking to a Secretary of State about the people within their team who they thought were doing well or badly. Sometimes, a Prime Minister will say, “I know you do not like x, but I want x there because I am told by everybody you have a weakness in this area and x meets that weakness.” You cannot just go on the Secretary of State saying, “I want to pick my team.” A Prime Minister might have legitimate reasons as to why he wants to say, “Yes, but I think that the team I am proposing is rather better than that.” So it is a two-way process.

Q396 Mr Chope: Or the Prime Minister might be saying, “Although I say I trust you, I do not really trust you, so I am putting somebody in your team who can report back to me on what you are really up to”.

Lord O’Donnell: That is the way a politician says it and maybe not the answer a bureaucrat has. You are absolutely right, of course; that is absolutely part of it.

Chair: That is a very good point on which to finish. Gus, thank you very much for your time this morning.
As always, if there are things that occur to you, as you walk out the door or out of the House of Commons, and you want to drop us a line or anything, please feel free.  

*Lord O'Donnell:* Certainly.  
*Chair:* That has been extremely informative. Thank you so much.