



The Role of Ministers

Why politicians?

What ministers bring to government

- being “decisive”;
- the ability to bring insights from their political philosophy;
- a feel for what is politically necessary, practical, acceptable’; ‘political understanding’
- leadership;
- partnership;
- communication;
- the ability to balance interests (‘balance public needs and ... policy’);
- accountability;
- legitimacy; and
- insights from their role as an MP, such as case work and constituency encounters.

Proposal One

Open up policymaking

Ministers are supposed to bring their experience to bear on policy.

But in practice the Civil Service has a near monopoly on policy advice, and filters external advice and information.

Particularly problematic as there is often an understanding gap between ministers and their civil servants, which external appointees who are sympathetic to the minister's policy objectives can bridge.

- Each Secretary of State should have a Principal Policy Adviser and a team of Policy Advisers, politically restricted but usually drawn from outside the Civil Service;
- Open commissioning of policy advice should be extended and encouraged; and
- Ministers and Civil Servants should be freer to seek a second opinion on civil service advice.

Proposal Two

Ministerial overload

Ministers are supposed to bring their broad experience and their knowledge from their role as a constituency MP to bear on departmental issues. But in practice their experiences are limited upon taking up office; their diaries are filled. They rarely have experience of running large organisations.

- Each Secretary of State should have a politically unrestricted Chief of Staff;
- The Chief of Staff should be a substantial figure able to command credibility and help the minister navigate complex Whitehall relationships;
- The Chief of Staff should have an explicit remit to ensure that the minister has sufficient time to interact with outside organisations, such as think tanks;
- Remove the five-year limit on external appointments in EMOs; and
- Ministers should be able to co-locate their parliamentary staff in the Department.

Proposal Three

Strengthen junior ministers

Ministers are supposed to help join up government policy and make it coherent. However, too often they become victims of departmental silos. And how far junior ministers have a meaningful role is too dependent on the personality of the Secretary of State.

- Amend Ministerial Code to require consultation with JMs on relevant decisions; and
- More junior ministers should have cross-departmental responsibilities, a small number of whom would head programme ministries with their own support, objectives and budgets.

Examples might include

- Offender rehabilitation, jointly under DH, MOJ, DWP, DCLG, Home Office; and
- Drug policy, jointly under Home Office and DH.

Proposal Four

Accountability

Ministers are supposed to bring accountability. But in practice being accountable for everything means being accountable for nothing. So ministers and civil servants should be more prepared to formalise directions when a minister wishes to act against the advice of his civil servants, and ministers should be willing to justify those decisions publicly.

The primary accountability of all ministers is to the elected House.

Ministers outside the House of Commons – including ministers outside Parliament altogether – should be scrutinised by all MPs, not just Select Committee members. Where Departments are headed by ministers outside Parliament, there is a case for moving Question Time to Westminster Hall in order to allow them to be scrutinised like other Secretaries of State.

Proposal Five

Stability and support for ministers

Ministers are supposed to bring strategic oversight of their departments. But too often they lack the time, skills and confidence to do so.

Ministers should be given sufficient time in post to establish themselves, and coaching and mentoring to help them navigate the complex relationships of Whitehall.

- Prime Ministers should attempt to keep senior ministers in office for at least two years;
- Junior ministers should be allowed to develop in their roles without the constant threat of upheaval, while allowing for promotion and career development;
- A proper programme of training for ministers before and during their time in office; and
- The Prime Minister should require ministers to either receive professional coaching or to have a counsellor – effectively a mentor – such as a former minister of considerable experience who can provide guidance, wisdom and support.

Thank **you.**

