

GLOBAL STRATEGY FORUM

EDITION No. 27 - SEPTEMBER 2020

The 27th in our series of expert comment and analysis, by our regular commentator, General Sir Richard Barrons, Commander Joint Forces Command (2013-2016), now Co-Chairman of Universal Defence & Security Solutions, and GSF Advisory Board member. As always, the views expressed are those of the author and not of Global Strategy Forum unless otherwise stated.

The Competence Premium

It would take very rare generosity of spirit to commend entirely our present government and Civil Service on the competence and decisiveness with which they have steered our country through the past few difficult months. That is not to underestimate the literally unique circumstances wrought by COVID-19, nor the unprecedented consequences seen already in education and about to be seen in economic recession. This is also all before the immediate consequences of Brexit are known – we accept there will be some more economic wounding in the short term. No one could argue this period was ever going to be easy.

On the other hand, governments elsewhere with the same COVID-19 challenges seem to have fared better. Are we missing something? This question matters as it is more likely than not that in we must contend in future with not only pandemics but also a generally

more challenging world. If our future is to be dominated by a highly charged trinity of the rise of China, the effects of population growth and climate change, and the fourth industrial revolution, our elected leaders and their staff will face a substantially different and harder task.

We should insist that we are governed by politicians and civil servants fully capable of rising to meet this new world order with vision, confidence, realism, skill etc – that they are *competent* to lead, not a smiley concierge presiding over an avoidable apocalypse across our national life. But if we, the citizenry, want high competence to be non-discretionary and to hold our ministers and officials resolutely to account for this, then we will need to rethink how we educate, train and support our public servants. Leaving them to their own devices has been a mixed bag.

Fortunately, we have often been blessed and still are today, by very talented people choosing to enter public service as



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either politicians or officials. The fabric of government usually relies on the unstinting commitment and genuine brilliance of a very small cadre. Yet it is equally true that there are plenty of politicians and public servants who unknowingly (generally) frustrate the creation of good policy and the execution of sound administration. We have created a bureaucracy that can be brilliant, but also can so diligently apply rules and ways of working that overwhelm, stun and occasionally fatally throttle the prospects for success.

If desirable outcomes are continually speared by elegant process we will have a bleaker future than is necessary. For example, if a labyrinth of boards, committees and working groups are propelled by an all-consuming search for consensus within and between departments, it may mean that either nothing happens or whatever happens never rises above the disappointment of a lowest common denominator solution.

The challenge has certainly been amplified by the pressure from the budget cuts imposed in many areas of public service since 2008, creating spirited but doomed expeditions to traverse the valley of death between a noble stated objective and the money actually available to pay for it. Our diplomats, for example, have been so strapped for cash that the environment and hospitality that serve as principal tools of their trade have passed from canapé-rationing to a systemically embarrassing output for a medium sized, developed G7 nation. Funding for projects and other activity that win influence (other

than for the Development Aid run on well-resourced lines by the now defunct DfID) were reduced to gestures when compared to many peers and competitors. We need to do better than this.

We are also witnessing the struggle to apply Digital Age technology in public administration, where we expect see our government to emulate in at least some degree the effectiveness and efficiency gains that have already accrued in other institutions and businesses.

The fracas around this year's school examination results has illustrated that there is some way to go in understanding how data and AI should support human decision-makers. It should certainly neither supplant nor bamboozle them. The difficulty since February to understand the spread and penetration of COVID-19 and then test, predict and measure the effects of various interventions illustrate where we have progress to make in data collection, analysis, modelling, simulation and distribution.

A by-product of the pandemic has also been to expose that we can't sustain access to highly classified information if we don't equip our public servants with the technology to handle that information anywhere other than the very office from which we have just banned them. Resetting competence now includes grasping the potential of Digital Age technology better and more quickly.

Refreshing the expectations we hold for



our elected representatives and our Civil Service, so we have solid confidence in their competence to lead is through great turbulence raises some very thought-provoking issues to be confronted. Shouting at the radio over breakfast is a start but likely not sufficient. It will include insisting that the bill that comes with raising the bar must be paid. Building a well-selected, well-trained, well-resourced Parliament and Civil Service is foundational to the government we need, not a discretionary overhead. The habit of reducing the *quality* of government as part of cutting programme costs has run its useful course.

This debate will also require us to accept that if we task our leadership to take hard decisions, some of these decisions will smack into the limits of how much our national and private lives can be well-cushioned by somebody else's money. Hard decisions may indeed be better in aggregate for a majority, but they also will bring difficulties and unhappiness to a minority.

We can see already, for example, the inevitability of the better-off paying more tax and rebalancing wealth from the grey end of the population to their children - prior to as well as on death. Right now, we appear to be stuck with a system of government that struggles to set out challenges that have bad news attached in an honest and principled way, because if they do so they get a kicking in the polls and the ballot box. Yet we know

it is just not possible for we the taxpayer to service every single wish of we the citizen to be eased through all the vicissitudes of life. So, if we demand more competent government the pact will include demanding hard truths and difficult options are spelt out to us, and tough decisions well implemented with less whining from the less well benefited. Our politicians need to know they win points being candid, deploying integrity and rigour, we don't want to be just stroked like a grumpy cat.

We certainly realise we have made some curious choices that require some thought. For example, should we be disappointed that in 21st-century Britain, 2.5m children¹ are 'food insecure', where a child now goes hungry just down the road from a man who gets £10 off his Wednesday curry in August? How do we feel about easing small businesses out of our high streets because of the business rates we impose, unless they sell frothy coffee or recycle our junk?

We also know that we are doing this in step with the tiny tax burden we place on the online monopolies from whom we buy most of our stuff and to whom we give most of our data for free? We will need to support government at national and local level to place this sort of thing in our faces, regularly raising our gaze above the weeds of masks yes/no/maybe. Competent leadership means being clear about the problem to be addressed, creating a realistic,

¹ According to Unicef in April 2019



affordable vision and strategy to deal with it, communicating this honestly and in good time, and making sure that execution happens well. Much easier to say than to do, and but still not impossible, but there must now be more points for propelling a national discourse on big, hard questions, and fewer for playing Trivial Pursuit well.

For both our politicians and our officials, recognising that we start with a mix of talents, how might we spur change? Perhaps to do a better job of matching the capability of our public servants to the authority that we confer on them we should restore a due sense of elitism? This is not about drawing exclusively from any particular strata of society, and certainly not from a narrow band of educational establishments, but it is about creating something of a pedestal for the people who lead our public administration. We need them to be amongst the most talented in our society. This means *selection* on the basis

of potential and then *education and training* over a career to develop potential into proven performance and to filter for promotion to higher grades. We need our public servants to be Premier League not Pub League, and to admire them as much.

This applies to politics as much as administration. We surely have exhausted the benefits of whirling ministers and civil servants through short-term appointments, agnostic about their experience or competence for a particular field? Our national performance has suffered where

leadership is primarily a personal voyage of discovery – a discovery that too often includes being a bit rubbish at a particular role without individual consequences, but many other poor consequences.

There have been attempts to invest in more education and training for politicians and civilian officials around defence and security in recent years. To some degree this has recognised the disparity that exists between the investment the military makes when compared to their civilian counterparts in what is an increasingly broad and common field of endeavour. A military officer could well spend six months as a major, a year as a lieutenant colonel, and four months as a brigadier to make his or her way on the Jedi fast track towards 2-star promotion. A civilian counterpart probably gets some specific skills training in areas like finance, but otherwise is left to learning by doing – for good or ill. Military officers are also going to remain within their broad field, so an expert in commanding warships is never sent to master the administration of modern agriculture. No wonder so many high-grade civil servants sent to MoD endure 3 years of bewilderment before securing an escape tunnel back to something they really have mastered, 3 years being enough of an outsider to find the MoD is mad and byzantine, but not enough to change it.

It is, rightly, something of an article of faith that anyone should be able to stand for Parliament to represent their constituency. This is a healthy thing, but it is no guarantee that those who do stand are any good at



leading in policy or overseeing efficient and effective execution in complex affairs. Without losing in any way the essential political intuition needed in Parliament, it should be possible to provide – at public expense – structured education and training for our elected representatives. Aspirant ministers need to know how to succeed in high office just as much as aspirant Permanent Secretaries, both in the general terms of how these roles work and in sector-specific expertise. Just as the Armed Forces found clear limits in how much to expect of a gifted amateur leading in battle, so too we witness in the business of governing.

The difficulty of establishing civilian education and training even in diplomacy, defence and security has been considerably amplified by the miserable resourcing of the institutions trying to accomplish it. The Foreign & Commonwealth Office has a Diplomatic Academy, but it is a largely virtual entity with a tiny staff and threadbare infrastructure. This is not the way to signal that investing in learning is core to career development. An elite will need building through high quality, challenging education by inspirational figures who set personal examples of great achievement. This is not beyond our capabilities to establish.

A more assertive approach to competence will require that performance in a post and in education and training is *objectively assessed* and part of selection for more senior positions. This seems to alarm people: the idea that simply attending a course is

enough may be Standard British Comfortable but it is just not effective enough. There are parallels here with the military experience, where grading to get selected for and whilst attending Staff College is a factor in the selection for subsequent employment in the more demanding posts and relevant to the pace of career progression. Does this lead to some regrettable behaviour? Yes, it does: there are a few sights more distressing than a born-again military shit in full careerist mode at Staff College, a mode usually initiated by their partner pointing out the limited joys of spending the next 20 years as a major. On the other hand, grading performance does mean that most people lean forward into their work and what you see is a reasonable exposure of their talents, certainly more useful than proof of capacity to dawdle through a thoroughly pleasant syllabus.

Improving competence will mean confronting failure. The political record here is mixed, some ministers have resigned to take responsibility for actions taken within their department that do not reflect on their own personal competence. This can mean losing talent, even if perhaps only briefly, we can ill-afford to part with. In other cases, ministers survive despite presiding over a complete cluster, even thriving as serial offenders gliding from post to post with impunity.

A rethink about accountability should be part of resetting the competence bar. We will certainly need to accept more readily that in order to encourage boldness and innovation



our public servants, political and official, should be expected to take timely decisions without perfect consensus and experiment. When they do this, sometimes it won't work out well. Part of the price for progress will have to be our tolerance for honest mistakes and the bill that comes with it. On the other hand, a proven talent for disaster need not be retained indefinitely.

The present regime in our Civil Service makes it extraordinarily difficult to remove people from a post or from the Service except for the most egregious offences, generally linked to personal conduct rather than performance. In addition, the barriers to changing structures and roles are also substantial if they directly affect the personal interests of even junior officials. In an era of greater risk and opportunity, both manifesting at high tempo, we will need to lower these bars to securing results, flexibility and adaptiveness.

The comparison with the private sector and its harder-nosed approach to changing organisations and to removing people - even highly capable people - because they are no longer needed is now stark. It is unlikely that we can continue with Civil Service arrangements that struggle quite so much to fire people who repeatedly fail or inhibits the pace and manner in which it is organised. Change is normal, not a demon. An element of this will be to accelerate how easy it is to

traverse between private and public sector at all levels, with inflow to public service supported by thorough induction, security vetting and training. The costs of this two-way street are marginal when compared to the risks and opportunities of a public sector of some £770bn per annum, the benefits are potentially significant.

This autumn is likely to see some tests for how competence can be raised in the Civil Service. The Integrated Review is expected to consider the creation of a capable National Security Academy. There are clearly moves underway to change how No10 and the Cabinet Office are organised and operate. A bit further ahead, surely the refurbishment of the Palace of Westminster is an opportunity to re-examine how the Mother of Parliaments works, a Mother currently showing many signs of being wearied by age? We should encourage any steps that look like they will genuinely enable our politicians and officials to lead us better, for we will certainly need them to do just this.

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September 2020*

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