

Commission meeting with Sir Bob Kerslake, Head of the Civil Service

11 July 2013

Commissioners Present:

Paul Silk

Nick Bourne

Jane Davidson

Eurfyl ap Gwilym

Trefor Jones

Noel Lloyd

Helen Molyneux

Points made in discussion:

- As Head of the Civil Service, [Sir Bob](#) oversees Permanent Secretaries ~~largely~~, with a common approach to standards but an understanding that the Permanent Secretary of the Welsh Government may take a different approach. There was a common ambition to ensure devolution worked well, ~~and~~
- ~~T~~he unified civil service helped ensure this, [and made available to Wales with](#) a larger pool of talent and skills.
- There was no significant difference in the relationship between the UK Government and Scottish and Welsh Governments; it was felt they were now broadly on equal footings with a clearer sense in Whitehall of Welsh Government priorities.
- There were a number of ways that governments engaged at official levels. Wednesday Morning Colleagues meetings [of Permanent Secretaries](#), which were private, wide-ranging and with a good level of attendance, allowed a space for issues to be discussed between colleagues – which would include devolution issues but also more general matters. There were additional quarterly sessions to discuss specific topics, such as Europe or Civil Service Reform. The Top 200 meetings of the most senior civil servants included officials from devolved administrations. There were also some formal committees which pulled together different expertise.
- [Questioned o](#)n Whitehall's capacity [and willingness](#) to deal with issues arising from devolution, [Sir Bob said that he had studied the matters raised in the First Minister's letter to the Commission. He acknowledged that things had not always worked perfectly, but he noted that](#) the Wednesday Morning Colleagues meeting of Permanent Secretaries were committed to deal with devolution well. It was acknowledged that some departments' performances can vary, and there can be variation within departments. ~~T, and~~ typically the implications of non-devolved responsibilities [were](#) better thought through than those of responsibilities devolved in Wales. Permanent Secretaries ought to consider where staff in their departments would need to refresh their understanding. It was further noted that there were very few possible implications for Whitehall arising from Welsh Government decision-making.

- A particular difficulty came when issues were dealt with at pace, and also where there were intertwined responsibilities. It would be difficult to guarantee against mistakes, but it was important that issues could be escalated quickly for resolution at the required level. Noting the reducing size of the civil service with a maintained level of work, it was suggested that cooperative attitudes and good, sustained relationships, as well as robust systems, would be required to ensure devolution issues were properly handed.
- While there was a more mature relationship with growing understanding (with the development of the Military Covenant giving a good example of joint working, and Enterprise Zones as an improving one), there ~~is a more~~ continuing general need to understand devolution. This was promoted in induction programmes and in recent efforts to increase policy-making capacity (for example, with online products). Additionally, there was a desire for greater sharing of best practice between officials of the different Governments of the UK.
- On the interchange of staff, ~~while this did it was felt to~~ occur to some extent, ~~but~~ more would be desirable in both directions, as part of a wider ambition for a more rounded civil service (for example, secondments to business were also desirable). As an example, the Faststream coterie was encouraged to undertake one of their placements in a devolved administration. There was ~~not~~ separate recruitment to the Faststream in Wales, and the unified civil service allows exchanges to happen far more easily than if departments there were ~~part of~~ a separate ~~Welsh~~ civil service ~~in Wales~~. This was helpful in providing access to specialist expertise to the Welsh Government's more generalist and modest cadre (of 5 000 officials).
- Asked whether Whitehall departments benefit more from this larger pool of talent, with secondments out to devolved administrations less likely, it was noted that seven in ten civil servants were not based in Greater London, and that more civil servants in Wales were employed by UK Government departments than the Welsh Government. Further statistics on the levels of staff exchanged between the UK and Welsh Governments would be provided in writing.
- On the different process of appointment for the Permanent Secretary of the Welsh and Scottish Governments, it was noted that the Head of the Civil Service appointing the candidate, rather than the Prime Minister, was not a significant difference. In Scotland or in Wales the First Minister would be consulted on the type of person and role envisaged, the long and short list, and the emerging front-runner. Neither the Scottish nor Welsh First Minister ~~shw~~ould be unhappy at the outcome of any selection process.
- Asked about recent press reports about a possible different model of immediate support to Ministers, using a mix of traditional private offices and political and specialist policy advisors, it was noted that this was already possible within the devolved administrations.
- Asked about whether ~~there~~ the Head of the Civil Service would assess the capacity and capability of the Welsh Government, it was expected that the Permanent Secretary would oversee that. He would be able to choose

whether to use the UK Government's assessment mechanisms, which would have the advantage of allowing comparison of performance, but this would not be imposed.