

New cabinet secretary Simon Case has a lot to prove and even more to do

Blog post by Senior Associate Joe Armitage, 2 September 2020

Simon Case, who was appointed permanent secretary of 10 Downing Street this May, has been confirmed as the next cabinet secretary. At 41, he is the youngest person in the position since Lord Hankey, for whom the role was created in 1916, during the middle of the Great War. Like Hankey, Case will sit next to the prime minister at meetings of the Cabinet and assume ultimate responsibility for the management of the government's bureaucracy at one of the most challenging moments in the country's history.

It's widely known in Whitehall that he wasn't the first pick for the job. The prime minister hoped Sharon White - the former CEO of OFCOM and current chairwoman of John Lewis - would agree to re-enter government and take on the role instead. Chris Wormald, permanent secretary of the Department for Health and Social Care, is understood to have been considered second favourite.

Key Number 10 political staff have placed a great emphasis on recruiting people with a scientific background into key roles, labelling those with arts degrees and a private education as "public school bluffers." However, like most of their other key appointments to date, Case's background is not in keeping with this given that he was independently educated before studying History at Cambridge.

Unlike most cabinet secretaries he has not served at either the Treasury or the Foreign Office, he also has no experience of leading a significant government delivery department as permanent secretary. This is a disadvantage, given that it is said in Whitehall that 10% of governing is policy and the remaining 90% is delivery. Already, his colleagues are briefing in the press that he has only ever been responsible for managing Number 10, a small house with 100 staff. This might be unfair, though, given that he served as director of implementation at the Cabinet Office under prime minister David Cameron.

Like during the Great War, Case will be expected to marshal Whitehall's efforts to successfully deliver at a time when the odds are firmly stacked against the country. His experience of overseeing the implementation of government policy at the Cabinet Office will be an advantage in this regard. It also so happens that the prime minister's political team will shortly be transposed to the Cabinet Office, where political advisers will sit together in an open planned office with real-time departmental data beamed into the room via large screens, akin to how Gordon Brown attempted to run the country.

Politically, some Conservative backbenchers might have their reservations over the appointment of Case. Many of them deeply distrust the civil service due to their belief that some of its senior members sought to stymie or dilute the delivery of Brexit under the Theresa May government. Few civil servants played a more significant role in the attempt to deliver Brexit under May than Case, who was a director at the Cabinet Office responsible for negotiating areas of the withdrawal

agreement concerning Northern Ireland. This is not regarded as problematic by the prime minister's team, though, as it is their understanding that Case wasn't wholly convinced about the political deliverability of May's original withdrawal agreement.

Reservations over Case's appointment are far more likely to be significant from within the civil service. A key requirement for the role is a willingness to see through substantial civil service reform, something Number 10 regard as fundamental to acquiring the ability to implement their agenda. The civil service reforms are understood to involve reinstating basic numeracy and literacy tests, adjusting pay scales so that talent rather than length of service is rewarded, and equipping ministers with the ability to seek external legal advice on significant policy decisions.

These plans to clip the wings of and reform the civil service - in addition to a discernible difference of opinion between some of the senior civil service and Number 10 about how to run a government - might partly explain why very few of the current permanent secretaries applied for the position and why an unprecedented number have departed from key government departments.

Reforming the 400,000 strong civil service would be arduous in and of itself but it is made even more difficult to achieve during the middle of a pandemic and on the cusp of a potential exit from the Brexit transition period without a free trade agreement. Significant scenario planning in Whitehall to account for this potential double whammy of difficulty - a potential no-deal exit from the transition period coinciding with a resurgence of the virus in the winter - is already ongoing, and Case will now assume responsibility for the delivery of that.

He will also be expected to mediate the inevitable battles between government departments during autumn's spending review process and make up for lost time implementing the government's legislative agenda, some of which will prove contentious and require delicate handling, such as the legislation on planning and national security M&A reform.

All in all, he will have his work cut out over the next few months and he will likely be judged quickly and unforgivingly.