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COMMENT

# Dominic Cummings' plan to 'shake up' Cabinet committees is positive – but not without problems

15 JAN 2020

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The success of last year's Brexit Cabinet committees has reportedly inspired the government to make big changes to the Cabinet committee structure, but Joe Owen argues that it hasn't yet found the perfect formula.

The Cabinet committee structure is the latest piece of Whitehall machinery to find itself in Number 10's crosshairs.

Cabinet committees have been around in some form or another for over 100 years. They allow groups of relevant ministers to take decision on specific policy areas and drive activity on government priorities through collective agreement. At that formal level, they work. But beyond that, there is little evidence that traditional Cabinet committees drive quality decision making on difficult issues, break down Whitehall's infamous silos or ensure that policy ideas are turned into effective delivery.

Every prime minister wrestles with how to get more out these committees, and this administration is no different. Its reported plan is for a structural 'overhaul' based on COBRA and the XO (Exit Operations) committee, which was used to drive Brexit no-deal planning under Boris Johnson. But there are limitations on how far that approach can be extended to the whole range of issues government must address.

## **The Brexit 'XO' committee is a model worth replicating**

In July 2019, Boris Johnson gave responsibility for 'Brexit readiness' to Michael Gove in his new role as chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. To marshal preparedness across nearly every government department, Gove used the newly created XO committee.

Built on the National Security Council approach of involving officials and relevant secretaries of state, the XO committee took over work that had been done less successfully in the DExEU-chaired 'inter-ministerial groups' – which were deliberately placed outside normal Cabinet structures.

The high frequency, operations-focused meeting largely reflected Gove's experience of preparing for no deal when secretary of state at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and his frustrations with central co-ordination of no deal under Theresa May. XO met daily to thrash through a rolling list of issues, make decisions and conduct deep dives into specific areas – giving the centre and Number 10 a firm grip on delivery.

A big reason for XO's success were the people around the table. The divisions that drove the political paralysis under May were gone – the ministers present were eager to prove their commitment to the new boss and were all signed up to the same agenda. By meeting so regularly and covering such details, they built a level of understanding and engagement that Cabinet committees rarely achieve. In Gove, it had a chair with the authority to crash heads together – and with Dominic Cummings present, the prime minister's presence loomed large.

Finally, by giving officials a seat at the table, rather than have them sit silently at the back, ministers were able to draw on their analysis and expertise throughout the meeting.



## **The 'XO' committee approach also had its faults and requires improvements**

XO is widely considered to have been a success – at least in comparison to what came before. The committee quickly drove progress, moving rapidly on issues that had been stuck for months in May's clogged up central co-ordination machine and endorsing decisions made under the previous government. But if it is to be replicated, or even just repeated for preparing for the end of the Brexit transition period, some significant changes are needed.

The major problem was the daily meetings, which required an enormous administrative burden just to 'feed the XO machine'. With papers and agenda not agreed until the evening before, the relevant departments had just a few hours to find the right experts and produce briefings on hugely significant and technical issues. Senior officials had to sign off papers overnight, before briefing the minister first thing in the morning – often with minutes to spare before XO began. There was almost no room for rework, questions or concerns, and little spare time to find the right people to address any problems. Officials worked shifts just to manage a given meeting, but ministers would often enter XO with an insufficient briefing and with advice scrambled together to meet a deadline.

Simply changing that schedule to allow a few days between meetings would create more time for co-ordination at an official level and the chance to look (and plan) beyond what was happening in the next 12 hours. That alone would increase the meetings' value significantly.

More fundamentally, XO is not a model that can be replicated across every area. It could be used where the centre wants to drive a programme of action with cross government responsibilities, but that is not the major function of Cabinet committees – which is to make collective policy decisions.

## **Boris Johnson's 'XS' Brexit strategy committee did not work as well as XO**

If XO reflects Dominic Cummings' aim to have a firmer grip on delivery, XS reflected his view that the Cabinet should be comprised of only a handful of people.

In addition to the PM, just five ministers (Javid, Raab, Gove, Barclay and Cox) attended XS. It made the critical strategic decisions on Brexit on both deal and no deal – leaving the operational-focused issues and decisions to XO. Other Cabinet members had no input, even on areas which were their responsibilities. Final decisions on negotiating approach or the no-deal tariff schedule were taken in XS, with little consultation of other ministers or departments

In the particular circumstances of the autumn, that did not cause the prime minister political problems – though some ministers went public about being kept in the dark over government planning. But it is not a sustainable way to run government. As Number 10 will discover, the centre cannot both decide and deliver. Knowledge, expertise and, crucially, money and policy levers are all located in departments.

The desire to change the way committees work is not revolutionary. But Johnson and Cummings should think about why the Brexit committees worked before deciding to remodel their government along the same lines.

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