

Those of us who have been involved in building or rebuilding governance from scratch in countries like Afghanistan or Iraq, or indeed in supporting governments in other fragile or failed states, perhaps have a clearer perspective on the limitations of central government than we usually permit ourselves when examining our own. I've often seen myself as an outsider with an insider's knowledge. In the "Seven Pillars of Wisdom" T E Lawrence put it best: "Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better they do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly ... you are to help them, not [do] it for them. Actually, also, under their conditions, your practical work will not be as good as, perhaps, you think it is". Or in the famous development aphorism: "better teach to fish than provide a fish".

In a complex society and economy, and in an even more complex world, the role of government is to convene, orchestrate and ensure that policy interventions catalyse the right response from citizens, communities, businesses, and internationally from other countries. And they should be designed or rather co-designed with that purpose in mind rather than reaching automatically for the traditional levers of legislation, regulation, or direction, which often provokes frustration in Whitehall that local and devolved government, businesses and charities, citizens and communities aren't getting with the programme.

With all the data available to us in the modern era, the man or woman in Whitehall really should know best, but knowledge isn't impact and so insight from big data should inform our leadership of the wider system, and that leadership must be persuasive and convening to be truly effective. And of course, nowadays, based on data and behavioural science and understanding the impacts of our actions.

One of the proudest achievements of my time as Cabinet Secretary has been the establishment of the National Leadership Centre and of the Public Service Leadership Group (a Top 300 to replace Whitehall's old Top 200) bringing together great leaders from across the entire public service – military, police, fire, health, education, local, devolved and national government, civil servants and other public servants – to build the networks to deliver for government and citizens, and to learn from one another's leadership experiences. Or to put it simply, and perhaps for those of us who have been somewhat slow learners on this: Sunningdale on steroids!

That also means systematic reform. I have never really thought of myself as the head of the Civil Service but more as operating from the heart of the public service. My fondest memories of this job will be the time I've spent with our brilliant public servants from all disciplines on the front line. And one of the best leadership techniques I've developed is to bring that front-line perspective back to the policy centre. While restructuring programmes can be disruptive and controversial in the short term, properly designed and implemented, there is the opportunity to make governance one of the UK's competitive advantages over the next decade.

We have a strong platform. We've seen the excellence of British public service over the past couple of years in the preparations for Brexit and in the response to the Covid crisis. We should apply that methodology – collaboration, innovation and impatience – to normal business. As the Prime Minister indicated last week, whenever the Covid inquiry is held, it should, of course, ask whether the