

DOMINIC'S SHORT CUMMINGS?

LEN SHACKLETON looks at ill-fated attempts to reform Whitehall

I admire Dominic Cummings's iconoclasm – if not his dress sense. The "Kevin-the-sulky-teenager" schtick amuses.

But is he going about his attempts at reforming Whitehall in the right way?

Over the years, there have been many attempts to reshape and reform the civil service and the machinery of government. In 1964 Prime Minister Harold Wilson brought in two powerful but eccentric Hungarians as independent advisors. By the standards of the day, they were the kind of 'weirdos' Cummings now hopes to find.

Wilson then created a new Department of Economic Affairs. It came up with the UK's first – and so far only – National Plan, setting out targets for whole sectors of the economy and for wage increases for everybody. But within 18 months it was dead in the water as a result of a sterling crisis.

Many subsequent attempts have been made to reform our system of governance, with endless chopping of departments, mergers and

demergers.

But even if Cummings's reforms were to succeed, their purpose seems to be to make the state more powerful. No-one ever seems to take seriously the idea of reducing the scope of government. Instead it grows and grows.

Take, for example, a recent government proposal which would require all cat-owners to microchip their pets at a cost of roughly £25 a time – and non-chippers could be fined up to £500.

It was argued this would be useful in reuniting lost cats with their owners – and that dogs were already required to be chipped. But this seems a poor argument (particularly the comparison with dogs, which are often dangerous) on which to create more 'criminals'.

It would entail new bureaucracy and new enforcement – and a high proportion of the 'criminals' would likely be older, poorer and possibly confused people.

It could also create unintended consequences. If a poor family's moggy gives

birth to six kittens, they're not going to afford £150. The poor creatures will be let loose or, worse-still, tied up in a sack and dumped in a canal.

A more serious issue was highlighted by think tank EDSK, in a report on the government's apprentice levy scheme (into which large firms must pay 0.5% of their wage bill). Not only had the scheme failed to meet its target of 3 million high level apprenticeships, but employers and educational institutions had used the scheme to rebadge existing courses and training programmes which weren't really apprenticeships at all. The Director of EDSK said the scheme was 'descending into farce'.

Or consider a recent employment tribunal decision to recognise veganism as a protected belief under discrimination law. Although not directly the consequence of a government decision, poorly-drafted laws have allowed tribunals and courts to expand the scope of protected belief beyond what Parliament (and the European Commission) envisaged.

This protection – originally intended to protect Muslims against discrimination – has now been held to cover belief in climate change, opposition to fox hunting, public service broadcasting, public service for the common good, spiritualism and the ability of mediums to contact the dead, and Scottish independence.

Examples like these might suggest the government should be rolling back state interference, rather than spending time and political capital trying to make the government apparatus more efficient at expanding its role still further. ●

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