



Civil Service Commission chief Sir David Normington this week rejected plans to allow ministers to pick their own permanent secretaries. It will be a great disappointment to Francis Maude, who argued involving ministers in the appointment process would increase the accountability of the most senior civil servants in a department.

I've had a chat with one former Secretary of State who agrees with Maude that the selection process is in desperate need of an overhaul: Caroline Spelman. The former Environment Secretary has kept her head down since she lost her job in September's reshuffle, but she's emerged to speak to Coffee House on this key issue of civil service reform. As someone who has led a department recently but is no longer bound by ministerial secrecy, Spelman offers a rare insight into the working relationship between ministers and senior civil servants.

She says she still met the candidate for her permanent secretary, but it wasn't formalised as an interview. Spelman therefore wasn't allowed to ask any questions:

'You can't interview the shortlist of candidates, and you ought to be able to. The whole system is in need of an overhaul. It should be a normal two-way interview process. I don't dispute that we got a good person for the job, but we should formalise that process which allows cabinet ministers to meet the shortlist. I just think we have to stop beating around the bush: it is a de facto interview anyway, so let's call it an interview.'

She also objects to the ease with which public officials can hop from department to department, leaving positions unfilled and hindering a department's process in implementing policy:

'It is not good that civil servants can move very quickly to a job in another department. it's very hard on the department that sponsors that move. It could take months and months to fill the post they left, and we often don't have time to prepare a successor, leaving the department vulnerable. We had a very good interim secretary but it was several months before we filled the position officially. That needs to be addressed.'