

# AI Transcript of Darren Jones' speech, 20 Jan 2026

[The Minister's original text is in black, NO2ID commentary is indented in purple.]

Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister Darren Jones gave a “**Move fast. Fix things**” speech on rewiring Whitehall and building the new digital state. In this document we go through it line by line, with commentary. [Original sources: [video](#) + [civil service text](#) and [related interview](#).]

How government talks to industry and the public is very different from how it talks to itself, as in recent CSW briefings, [which we also went through line by line](#).

In line with the Government’s advocacy of AI, and since the [GOV.UK transcript](#) has had all political content redacted in line with civil service rules, this is an AI transcript from the [IfG video as delivered](#). There may be homophones, etc. but no outright hallucinations that we’ve spotted. (Well, no hallucinations that weren’t in the original speech, anyway.)

**Darren Jones:** Good morning, everybody, and thank you so much to all of you for taking the time to be with me this morning.

I'm very grateful to all of you, to our Innovation Fellows, who have just had a great seminar upstairs about how we innovate in government, to colleagues in government, including all of my ministerial colleagues in the Cabinet Office and friends from Parliament, to Megan Smith and Alexander Mack, who were the Chief Technology Officer and Deputy CTO in the American Administration, to our friends at the Institute for Government, and indeed to [What3Words](#) for hosting us today.

As was said, What3Words is a brilliant example of a British start-up built to tackle a complex problem, how to describe any location in the world, and designing a simple solution using creativity and modern technology. [Simple, convenient, and digital](#).

Yet also, [What3Words is a mess; dangerously terrible in various edge cases](#) – also more [legally aggressive than substantive](#). It has the sort of “data driven” culture which doesn’t care if mountain rescuers sometimes go to the wrong mountain. In HMRC the same culture has the effect that honest people can’t feed their kids because one data source suggested they have their Child Benefit stopped for fraud so as to ‘encourage’ them to call HMRC, even though all the other data sources [suggested otherwise](#).

Those who picked the location for this speech probably didn’t know there was even a problem. We’ll come back later to the damage of small underinformed teams who don’t know what they don’t know, and of lack of awareness amongst political decision makers...

What3Words can’t fix their bugs because their tech is already out there. Changing it would destroy the company – or at least, the current leadership – and their small team didn’t realise it was a problem until it was too late to change it. People weren’t

rescued from the right mountain, and off-the-record denials and legal threats are cheaper to the corporate balance sheet than saving people's lives. Such bluster may dissuade a journalist on a one day story, but if asked in the House of Commons, politicians would smell blood.

There's a lot that government can learn from that, so what a great place to talk about it today.

Lessons can be learned, for sure – but will they be the right ones? Or, as Dr Hannah White OBE put it in her introduction to the Minister's speech: "why will this time be different? ... what is important is what comes next."

One immediately obvious lesson comes from the choice of location, and the small brew controversy around it. The location was probably decided by a small team, possibly fed on two pizzas, but it still didn't sit well with those who would otherwise be entirely onside with the agenda, irrespective of outcomes. For a speech that's been delivered, it barely matters – speeches without follow through disappear into the Westminster mist – but it illustrates that those who may support what you say can have problems that impede support for where you stand...

In planning terms, everyone loves building things until it comes to someone else demolishing your house – and there are a lot more houses now about which people have views and comments, as well as the resources to ensure those comments and views are not ignored as inconveniences by those who wish to build the 'hyperspace bypass'. Put another way, why shouldn't China or Russia build an "Embassy" next to some cabling or the offices of MI6?

But first, we must, I think, take a moment to recognise the global challenges we also face as a government. International events which demand the focus of government and fill our screens with headlines we hope belong to another age.

It used to be that those mounting a coup would send a platoon to the TV or radio station – now they also need to send a laptop to the data centre. One of the first acts of the second Trump administration was to have DOGE copy anything they wanted into the data systems that Palantir had built for them.

It's no longer enough to have an absolutely loyal military, you also need a loyal technical team who care more about the mission than about citizens. The Americans name-checked at the top of the speech may feel this... viscerally, with data on families taken by political actors for any purposes they chose.

Think tank discussion papers can sound wonderful over canapes at TBI or Labour Together HQ, but they ignore the real world. We note Sir Tony is building his own tech team to allow him to impose digital services on his parish in Gaza. His 'Gaza Digital Service' may take some lessons from this speech, but it's unlikely to instil confidence in the people who are subject to it.

As the Prime Minister has said in these fast-changing times, we must be more clear than ever about the values and the interests which guide our response. I'm confident this is an approach supported by the British public, not only because they recognise the role that Britain plays in the world, but because they know the impact of events and decisions far away is often felt at home in our communities.

So who does the state listen to?

Wes Streeting, protégé of Peter Mandelson, whines that Government must do exactly what's announced. Get It Right First Time matters very much in surgery, but in policy it assumes you will learn nothing at all in implementation; that no-one knows anything more than the two pizzas who wrote your speech – or, as Dom Raab put it, "I hadn't quite understood the full extent of ... the Dover-Calais crossing."

So whether it is Greenland or Gaza, the war in Ukraine or the famine in Sudan, these challenges threaten not only our international security and that of our allies, but also make life more difficult for ordinary families across Britain. As the Prime Minister set out yesterday, this caused for strong British leadership abroad, but also a more active government at home, because for too long, government hasn't worked the way it should. Everybody agrees that the status quo in our public services is not working.

To quote a phrase the public will often refer to the so-called broken state. That's why the public, politicians and yes civil servants are all frustrated by the pace of change. But this diagnosis is not new and it's why the Prime Minister has asked for nothing short of a complete rewiring of the state.

As Hannah alluded to, it's also not new for a minister in a role like mine to say how we're going to fix the state and if we're honest, nor for the public to not believe a second of it.

The minister is refreshingly blunt. Let us be equally so: one post-Covid dividing line is whether you care about the effects of your actions on innocent others. Trump does not – where do UK actors choose to sit, especially given the GOV.UK Black app will require every team to be perfect every time?

The Greens care about the effect of every action on every person; Reform cares about none of them, or at most a select few. While the Government may say one thing, government all too often does another. Who should the public believe?

So I want to try to tell you today, alongside the reforms I'm announcing, why I think this speech is different and the political argument that is in front of us about the future of our public services and the role of the state. Because in my view, this is not a speech, a traditional speech of incremental change, where there are a few tweaks here and there, but the state is in a continued state of decline. Nor is it the populist speech, where they tell you all of your challenges are the fault of a broken state and that the only answer is therefore to tear everything down.

Instead, this is a modernising speech that calls for a new consensus on what the state does and how it does it. We all want Britain to be a richer, fairer and stronger country that can face

into the geopolitical and climate change induced winds of the world and that helps every single person achieve their aspirations.

Now whilst that's a broader debate about the shape and future of the British economy and our defence and security capabilities, it is also a debate about how our public services equip, enable and support every citizen to play their part in the national endeavour and to deliver that richer, fairer and stronger future for them.

Consider a worked example of a service intended to enable and support citizens to make their own vital contributions to the national endeavour; the [digital redesign of Carers Allowance in 2014](#). (That link is to a really good video about the intent of the service and those building it, from Ministers on down.)

A 'rewired' service so good people cried when they first saw the new one: "I've seen videos of user research with real carers in tears at the fact there's now a service that respects them as carers, that speaks a respectful language to them." Real carers presumably also cried when they were [taken to court and punished](#) for the consequences of using it, a decade afterwards...

[The vision wasn't wrong, but the remit wasn't complete](#). And the result was that real users, the people the GDS lead and his colleagues were trying to help, were given criminal records. (Where are the blog posts from the tech crowd in 2026 figuring out how to avoid that ever happening again? ... crickets ... )

You may agree with UC and Carer's Allowance SRO in DWP, Neil Couling, when he says his team / Department [didn't do anything wrong](#) putting innocent people in jail because it was the victims who failed. No single raindrop believes it is to blame for the flood – but the true measure of reform, of a system's success, is its capacity to support every citizen.

(On potential uses of digital ID, Tom's [example on voter registration](#) is also worth watching.)

So the question is, why are our public services today not working?

As I say, the public blame the so-called broken state for the country not heading in the right direction. In my view, this is down to two things.

First, after years of cuts to public investment and second, due to an inherent lack of competition to drive innovation. It is for these two reasons that public sector productivity has fallen, unacceptably, that we have unsustainable increasing costs and poor outcomes and unacceptable customer experience.

Government can ruin far more than just someone's day, or a single purchase. A valuable fragile object delivered in [shattered](#) pieces is an unacceptable customer experience; taking a "customer" who has done nothing wrong, pushing them through the Single Justice Procedure because your department did not act earlier – sometimes forum shopping to get sympathetic judges to blame the victims for that

delay – and then stripping those people of their life savings, is not merely an “unacceptable customer experience”.

Glib disregard aside, there’s an assumption that the power of government to help is (not) equally matched by the power of government to *really fuck someone over*. For example, how many staff does DWP have looking at UC claimants to see if they’ve underclaimed? And how many staff does DWP have looking at UC claimants to see if they’ve *overclaimed*? And when DWP tells you it’s a similar number or effort,<sup>1</sup> what do the claimant counts and finances show for this supposedly ‘similar’ effort?

It was much harder for all the children who didn’t get breakfast as a result to learn in school that day than it was for one civil servant to write the few lines that removed the safeguard of data checks in the HMRC Child Benefit travel fiasco. It took much much more effort from citizens – and the state – to clean up the mess than it did to cause.

The public rightly ask, if I can bank or shop in a quick and digital and convenient way, why can I not do that with my public services?

If my banking app or shopping app shows me that they have a piece of information, they cannot take me to court or punish me because they don’t know it (or check).

Will the public services app have that promise? If the app knows that a carer was paid ££ last week on the screen that shows their PAYE entry from their employer, can DWP punish the claimant for not disclosing income to DWP via another screen in the same app? Will they do it anyway?

Whether sourcing your childcare or booking your driving test in a stress-free way.

In one of the interviews around the speech, one example used was free childcare – a benefit which, in order to be paid, the Government makes parents fill in a form every three months.

The three month interval was a Business Case choice to reduce the cost to HMT, and the digital service was forced to comply. HMRC already knows how much you were paid because it runs PAYE, yet parents are still being forced to jump through hoops to make a flagship Government policy cheaper.

As the app is rolled out, will parents who don’t have the GOV.UK app installed be unable to use the web service for this? Will they be punished every three months? Free childcare is but one example, several more are detailed in Annex 7 of our UC work: ‘Baby then bureaucracy: the paperwork of new parenthood’.

So the answer is investment over cuts and a new consensus over competition. What do I mean by that?

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<sup>1</sup> Because they’ll say that if their fraud investigators find people have underclaimed, they’re supposed to equally help them out. But what do the numbers show?

Indeed, what do you mean by consensus? Where is the outcome of the discussions that come **before** consensus, involving a broad range of stakeholders, which demonstrate that everyone understands what is being discussed and collectively agrees on the outcome? Because that is what consensus means.

If there was a consensus, key unanswered questions above (and below) would be in this speech. They aren't because there's no consensus on anything beyond the fact that something else could be better. It could, but will it?

How many more Windrush or Carer's Allowance scandals will this new consensus create? What is the process to make sure there are zero? What primary legislation will stop a future government punishing people for not submitting some information that's shown and visible in the very same app the government claims they did not submit that information through?

Investment has to be in wholesale digital transformation of the state, a new digital platform with the Gov.uk app being the front door.

So the app may be the "front door". But will it be the only door?

If the GOV.UK app shows you have provided some information to one part of government – say HMRC – can you be criminally (criminal court), civilly (court), or administratively (e.g. DWP sanctions) punished by another part of government for not providing it to them? In the app? In the *same app* that already shows it?

Is that defence statutory? Who decides? Will the Hillsborough Law apply in court cases? And in other investigations? How will CDL be sure that his "move fast and fix things" approach doesn't criminalise the very people he's trying to help? Again.

Public services that put you in control and are there when you need them, in the way you need them, at the time you want them. These public services will be cheaper to run in the future and achieve better outcomes than what we have today.

As I say, that in contrast to the offer from the populist to tear everything down and leave you on your own, I think, is a positive offer. It is also an important distinction to the conservative offer of just cutting back, cutting back and cutting back as we can't afford increasingly unsustainable legacy systems. So this pro-investment and digital transformation offer is, in my view, the only way forward.

We don't necessarily disagree that things must move forward – but there's very little detail on what's next, and a lot of warning lights are already flashing red.

A basic assumption in start-ups is that not all teams will (or must) work. Indeed, most small teams fail, and what the public sees eventually is steeped in 'survivorship bias'. Then there's the Andreessen Horowitz (a16z) approach of always backing founders and tech, even when they're actually wrong...

VCs are cheerleaders, not referees. Politicians, however, *need* to referee.

Customers and consumers have choices, but – as CDL says – citizens can't choose their police officers. Yet the logic of (Peter Mandelson protégé) Wes Streeting's argument that 'what's announced should be delivered' betrays a belief that teams will learn nothing in the process of implementation. So which is it to be?

But to achieve it, the public must want it. That will not be achieved by competitive forces, like it is in the private sector. And I don't believe you can falsely inject private sector forces into the public sector either, because let's be honest, I'm not going to let your local hospital go broke and you can't change your community police officer.

But I also reject the conservative offer that we should therefore let private companies run our public services and that that is the route to competitive forces.

Avoiding elections means you avoid the consequences of elections. Zuck and the Google bros made sure they never had to win an election or popularity contest by issuing B Class shares. Even Nigel doesn't do that (yet...)

There are however competing companies; Facebook is only a monopoly *within the Facebook boundary*. Zuck's power is absolute within it, and can never be touched – but Facebook is not the whole world, despite what Meta's political lobbyists would like you to believe. (Their competition lobbyists might however agree.)

That is wrong.

So instead, that's why I say we need to build a new consensus with the public about the future of our public services. Where we reimagine what the state does and how it does it to enable everybody to succeed.

Building a consensus is good, but will that consensus be informed?

Currently the digital ID cards programme can't give an answer on whether it is going to force people to change their name, or even how it will accommodate the entirely common practice of people using their maiden name alongside their married name.

When we've asked the programme about what the Government's published principles call "multiplicity", they refuse to give a straight answer – much less write it down.

Now some may say that's a nice idea, but can it be done?

I say yes, because we've done it before. Labour governments in particular have done it before.

The 1945 Labour government didn't stay in power for 40 years, but it did redefine what the public expected from its governments. Free healthcare at the point of need. A social security

and state pension system based on contribution. These things are in the DNA of my party to innovate and create new public services.

Based on current medical trials, it's possible that by the end of this Parliament a vet will be able to use an mRNA jab to cure cancer in your cat. It will be untenable that such a jab is possible for your cat but not for your grandma on the NHS.

Elections happen, all Governments end, and in a modern world the actions of 1945 are irrepeatable.

Not to defend the status quo, but to own the future.

From the NHS in the 1940s to the Open University in the 1960s to the short start centres of the 2000s, the Labour party builds public services that are there for you at the most important times in your life. Not just when you're sick or in need, but to give you the best opportunity to succeed, whatever your background in your own interests and in the interests of the country.

After the last Labour government, it was the gifted and talented programme which sought to give a leg up to academically able kids from more deprived backgrounds that found me and expanded my horizons.

That took me from sitting under the radar largely ignored to giving me the unexpected chance to beat the odds to get on in life and now to sit at the cabinet table of the Labour government.

I don't take any of that for granted. It is as a consequence of the decisions taken by a Labour government. But it pains me to know that for all the progress the last Labour government made, too many people are still being left behind.

One of the other lessons from what followed the last Labour Government is that the next government will do what it wants. That's democracy.

It's also notable that, for example, the shambles of the privatisation of the probation service required no new Conservative legislation and was done entirely under Labour's statutory framework.

While parties gain and lose power, the public is persistent; Ministers pass, the people endure.

These are missed opportunities, untapped potential.

A strategy not just for them, but for the country.

So let's talk about ID. How will the Government explain its ID intentions to the country this time?

A bungled announcement, with nothing much written down – followed by a 12 to 18 week consultation, then a hasty move to legislate within the year? No Green paper (as in 2002), response and next steps (2003), let alone a White paper and response (2004) before beginning to legislate?

Does this Government believe, as the Blair-government-in-exile so clearly does, that there's no need for proper debate or discussion; that only it is right, that any and all critics are wrong, and it's just about 'selling the benefits' while charging full steam ahead – where necessary 'piggybacking' previous (Conservative) administrations' efforts, claiming people are wrong or 'mistaken' when they correctly point out the continuity?

The Minister may want to "reimagine" our country, but government is paying at best cursory attention to democratic due process. Is this just a 'bug', or is it an intentional feature of the "rewired" state he and others imagine? If the Government wants "consensus", **how it gets there** is as important as any destination – imaginary, hallucinated, or otherwise...

An unfinished journey can earn a second term, a flawed journey does not.

That's why within the wars of Whitehall, we have to focus on you. As the parent, the patient, the student, the pensioner, as a taxpayer and customer of public services. Now that might seem like a simple thing to say, but it has not been the case to date. And it is for that reason why we've ended up with a proliferation of call centres, endless paperwork and need to tell your story multiple times to different parts of government.

i.e. user needs\* – and, to give him his due, the Minister correctly identifies who the user should be.

That has to change. We have to move away from interdepartmental arguments, internal policy papers, processes and discussions to that new digital state that delivers public services directly to you, the customer.

A state that uses modern technology to do the tedious admin that we spend so much time and energy processing right now and then frees up our public servants to have the human interactions needed with a child, a parent or a patient.

In essence, a state that can move fast and fix things.

Much of this speech has focussed on the public service delivery part of government, but those aren't the only parts of the State.

The Home Secretary said she wants to build a "Panopticon" state using AI, cameras, and biometric facial recognition – which raises obvious questions about the proposed ID system, based on digital credentials containing your facial biometric.

Home Office civil servants will equally be seeking to move fast and "fix" things, which may catastrophically undermine trust in the app when there are civil servants in HO

who will argue their lives would be infinitely easier if they could track the mobile phone of every person in the UK at all times – as the first iteration of the Covid app in 2020 tried to do (and failed).

There is someone in the Home Office whose job is to minimise sham marriages and domestic violence; their priorities would be entirely in line with a “move fast and fix lives” approach that tracked everyone all of time, and used features in the GOV.UK app to ‘minimise domestic violence’ via some ‘data analytics’.

Or is that not quite what was meant? And if not, who is going to monitor that into the future when these systems and powers continue?

The title of today's event. A purposeful reference to the can-do culture of successful businesses like what three words, who have seized the power of modern technology to create simple, cheap and convenient solutions to our problems.

[If you haven't done so already, you really should click on the three word links scattered throughout the Minister's speech. Some are quite illuminating!]

This is the approach the government will now take. It may require a more fundamental restructuring of Whitehall in the future.

As the Director of the Institute for Government, Dr White, puts it in her introduction: “Without setting up the people, institutions and processes of government for success, no government is going to deliver for the voters.”

The logic of the minister's statement is exactly the wrong way round. If you use a state that is acknowledged to be broken to build a new state, you'll most likely end up with (yet another) broken state. Doing things well and delivering lasting solutions is not where speed gets you!

Will HMG root out the toxic cultures, people and practices it clearly doesn't want to perpetuate, or will they continue? As the digital debacles become more pronounced, perhaps we should start naming them after the SRO for the decisions?

But in the meantime, I will direct Whitehall to move fast and fix the problems of today while building the foundations of the new digital state of tomorrow. First, to the changes we have already made.

This section to one the crowd is aimed at a particular group of you who like to talk about how the center of government works. You know who you are. One of the consequences of having too many layers of bureaucracy is that every decision requires approval from someone else.

We have created a system where everyone has a say but no one can act.

HMRC demonstrated that it turns off the money you use to feed your kids until you jump through its hoops. In line with the private sector analogies elsewhere in the speech, while Amazon can make you jump through hoops to make an order, you can

always just walk down the street to the shops. And while it's annoying when your bank blocks your credit card, they have mechanisms to fix it and regulators who step in when they don't. We may have pushed the Head of CDEI to resign in disgrace, but his OfQual legacy still pervades government thinking in DSIT.

HMRC simply assumed you were a criminal, stopped the money to feed your kids, and still claims that was fine (for HMRC). As of today it's the position of HMRC and HMT that an 71% error rate (and climbing) means their actions were justified.

Take the high speed two train line for example. The last Conservative government spent a decade talking about it, spent billions of pounds on it and we have no train in sight. How could that happen? One of the reasons is that building a train line takes lots of decisions. Who will build it? Where, when and how? But almost every decision was not just subject to HS2 limited internal assurance and governance checks. But then from the Department for Transport, then the Infrastructure Projects Authority, then the Cabinet Office, then the Treasury, one after another. One decision could take on average up to nine months with little to show for it at the end.

This is also an outcome of growth; success has consequences. The length of time it takes to build HS2 (or Phase 2 of New York's Second Avenue Subway, or California High-Speed Rail) versus the original Underground is due to the fact that it's no longer down to a handful of land owners who could agree between themselves what they'd impose, irrespective of what residents thought.

Nowadays many more people own their own houses, and freeholds, and so it's harder for someone to come and cut a railway through their garden. The balance we have now may not be right, but 'growth at all costs' led to smog.

HS2 complains about the cost of some tunnels, but the only neighbours who got tunnels were the constituencies important to the Government of the day – in the same way that the approaches to Euston and Kings Cross are in cuttings. The landowners who were consulted at that time could probably have been fed by two pizzas, if pizza had existed here then...

If you take power away in one place, you have to take it away everywhere to avoid any power that's capable of being used – which is how Whitehall ended up the way it is.

That's why when I was Chief Secretary at the Treasury I launched Project Reset, a program to slash the bureaucracy and enable civil servants to move fast. So from April this year there will be fewer repeated permissions required, giving those closer to real decision making more freedom and autonomy in return for more accountability.

We've already run a pilot of this new scheme with HMRC on their plans to modernise the technology they used to crack down on tax evasion and let people file their taxes digitally.

Was the Child Benefit fiasco with a 71% error rate for citizens also a pilot? Perhaps that was too fast...

The original plans had 40 different approval processes. Each one needing a time to write a paper, submit it, review it, feedback on it and amend it. This new scheme cut that from 40 to 2 and saved around three months in the delivery timeline. Fewer forms, more results, less talking, more doing.

40 different approval processes was probably not the right number, but clearly HMRC's decision-making is not the best on which to draw.

Cutting bureaucracy inside government has many merits, but streamlined decision making can cause as many problems and headlines as it solves – especially when accountability and justice are not 'speeded up' accordingly. (While you're at it, how about cutting bureaucracy for citizens?)

The 'making tax digital' programme to force people to deal with HMRC four times a year instead of once may seem like a wonderful idea in a meeting room at HMRC and HMT – and though it may even *objectively* be a good idea, many citizens will utterly hate the quadrupling of stress, hassle, and potentially expense that this cross-party administrative change is yet to cause.

And of course – exemplifying government's current definition of 'user needs' – the programme starts by focusing on things that ensure government gets more money, rather than on improving services that give people the benefits they're entitled to...

And these changes will be part of how we modernise the senior civil service too. To improve how we work today in the legacy state and equip civil servants to build the new states. Policy is an important part of how we understand a problem, come up with a solution and secure political consensus on how we go forward.

Consensus is going to be hard to find while there's a steady drumbeat of fuck-ups, with no evident consequences for those responsible...

But it is different to delivery and we often conflate the two. We should be honest with ourselves. The public do not care if we have drafted a beautiful policy paper that everybody agrees with. What they want to see is real change in their community and in the country.

On this we entirely agree. We'll come back to examples of "beautiful policy paper" thinking later... \*cough\* Time for BritCards? \*cough\*

That's why delivery with a clearer understanding of how government gets stuff done and whether change is really happening on the ground is so crucial.

Agreed. So why does government keep relying so much on Official Truth and not attending to ground reality?

Will it stop conflating fraud with error, hiding its own mistakes, covering up, and shifting blame onto others? If not, what will really change?

We have the technology and a lot of the data; what's been missing is the political will to change the culture. Significant portions of this speech suggest the political will is now present. The question is who this will end up serving – priorities of government or citizen needs?

So across the civil service the government will now promote the doers, not just the talkers. And I will do so by changing the hiring criteria for senior civil servants.

This means that with time at the top of the civil service we will have less experience of writing policy papers but more experience of front line delivery, innovation and from the private sector.

These sound like sensible moves.

The speech is about to crib ideas from Amazon's culture. One thing Amazon does is require all senior staff to spend a day working on front line support for the services they are responsible for. When was the last time the SRO for Carers Allowance had to answer the phone to someone who was phoning to figure out what had gone on?

Did the Child Benefit people at HMRC ever expect to hear from the families they harmed by abruptly stopping their Child Benefit to get them to call HMRC, prove they hadn't emigrated, and get the money they were entitled to? Do Ministers?

Will senior civil servants be seconded back to the front line on a regular basis too, to experience first hand the consequences of their decisions?

Now I know from working with many brilliant civil servants every day who work long hours that they are as frustrated with the system as the rest of us. They want to be the doers. Sadly they have too often been the scapegoats for political failures. Whether it's passive aggressive notes left on their desks or the easy attacks on the blob, I am not going to do that. And quite frankly the last government learned the hard way that they neither valued or respected the staff they needed to get the job done.

Speaking at a previous 'rewiring the state' event – [Government 2026](#), the week before the Minister delivered this speech – Baroness Casey's home truths about leadership, accountability, levers, and changing culture are as on point and incisive as they are unvarnished.

On "the blob", [Baroness Casey's recommendation](#) is entirely relevant: "We need to use less code, more clarity, and be more direct with each other. If people disagree, it's okay to disagree. Just do it politely, and do it with thought and care and kindness."

Our civil servants and trade union partners know though that we do need to change.

Trade union partners will also know that those who critique a policy that will harm people have to be listened to, respected, and have their evidence taken on board, not ignored.

Ministers can choose to ignore those harms, but they should make an informed decision on the full information, and not have those who would point out problems or harms be bullied or suppressed in the name of only reporting good news.

That's what they tell me and I will be working with them to make sure we do that. But for all of our excellent civil servants doing a brilliant job and given we know how many problems we face I find it hard to believe that only seven in 7,000 senior civil servants were reported to be on a development plan for under performance last year. Seven in 7,000 of the senior civil service and only two of them were dismissed for poor performance. Given the number of problems we face I just fail to believe that that can be true. And so quite frankly it's ridiculous we have a system where this poor performance is just not dealt with. So from now on top senior civil servants will have their performance marked against KPIs directly set by ministers and those under delivering will be held to account.

And if those civil servants are in denial about the consequences of their decisions, [Mr Couling](#)?

KPIs – and OKRs, [a topic that keeps coming up and failing for the same reasons](#) – are 'business thinking' that translates poorly into government; 'objective-driven' technology in government and the public sector can lead to adverse consequences that include lasting harm and [dead bodies](#).

Instead of the so-called sideways shimmy to another team or another department if you are not performing, if you fail to perform I'm afraid you will be sacked. But to reward the doers I'm also going to raise the bar that senior civil servants must hit to get a cash bonus. Bonuses at the moment are currently spread too thinly among the whole civil service for generally doing your job. That's what your salary is for. So from now on we will award higher but fewer bonuses to those exceptional civil servants who are delivering, innovating and going above and beyond. I want to make sure though that for all of the civil servants who want to be the doers that we help them with the right skills and training to succeed.

Changing incentive structures is fine, but must go hand in hand with transparency. And the proof of the pudding will be in the eating: will sackings-for-cause budge the statistics much above the current 0.03% the Minister quotes? And what about the toxic ones who will no doubt hit their KPIs, but continue to poison the well?

I'm therefore announcing the establishment of a new national school of government and public services. A new centre of world class learning and development within the cabinet office. The school is being paid for from existing budgets and crucially savings recently agreed across government to end expensive outsourced contracts for training. In the process we will not only establish the new school but we will save tens of millions of pounds of taxpayers money too. The new national school of government and public services will bring high quality training in house with a proper curriculum that will boost state capacity and give the skills needed to civil servants on technology and AI and strategic thinking that's needed to build the state of the future. Alongside training and rewarding our in-house civil servants I'm announcing today that we'll also go further in bringing in external expertise.

Will the school solicit case studies of failures, or just those that make Government sound good – and will it teach people (not) to ask the hard questions that can cause a programme a Minister loves to stop rather than collapse?

Perhaps civil society should write its own case studies...

Our Number 10 innovation fellows are a great example of this.

Inspired by the US presidential innovation fellows scheme I was thrilled to champion the pilot when I was chief secretary of the treasury and following that pilot set up by my predecessor Pat McFadden I'm delighted to confirm today an expansion of the programme.

This follows a highly competitive recruitment campaign based on problem solving and coding with a success rate of just 0.7%. If you want to have a go on the way out we'll make it available to you. We secure talent from the likes of CERN, NASA and Y Combinator bringing in the best and brightest in data science and AI to tackle problems in a completely new way.

For example, there would certainly be benefits to *some* patients from being able to feed every one of their GP documents (all visible in the NHS app today) through a private AI and to be able to ask questions about them, e.g. "Are there any followups that have been missed?". And Patient Initiated Follow-Up becomes AI-assisted PIFU for those who are unsure.

Patients might not want to bother a doctor, but they can bother a private AI running on their phone where the only cost is a bit of battery power. Equally, those who feel they've not been correctly diagnosed can feed their records and feelings to the AI and talk through all of their questions – in most cases that'll provide reassurance at a length no GP is able to provide under NHS constraints, and in some cases it might even suggest a test that's been missed.

None of the above is in the Department of Health in England's roadmap because it disempowers NHS England and empowers patients, and doesn't help with NHS England's waiting list problem. Instead, DH/E is building more barriers around the NHS app in the interests of what NHS England thinks best.

Diagnoses missed can be checked by the patient's device, yet Mr Streeting's Department of Health in England focuses on waiting lists being shorter – while cutting GPs and patients out of the loop.

By deploying these fellows into parts of government from justice to health we're building in-house solutions with a data-first digital first approach. This is not how government has traditionally worked but it is now how government will.

The "digital first" "Single Justice Procedure" leads to people having criminal records without having any indication they were even expected in court, in a case dealt with on the papers in a few seconds. We'll have more on this in due course.

NHS General Practice has had digital first for three decades. Meanwhile, DH/E decision making has gone from a competitive market in GP IT provision, to a duopoly which DH/E has decided it hates, and wishes to replace with a Palantir monopoly.

They've been unable to explain why they think that an American monopoly will go any better than a British duopoly with upstart competition – other than it's going better for them right now, at the first stage of the takeover process.

Our innovation fellows will be deployed on tours of duty lasting between 6 to 18 months working on a project by project basis. They will be able to break out of the normal rigid hierarchies of Whitehall and allow us to gain from their expertise whilst not increasing the overall size of the permanent civil service.

Technology means that we can do things quicker, easier and cheaper. This is the definition of productivity and it is the purpose of innovation.

But innovation best thrives in small dynamic teams, not something we're used to in the civil service.

A small dynamic team can't make it illegal to use an ad-blocker or a VPN; DSIT can write Statutory Instruments.

All a startup, or even a behemoth like Facebook, can do is kick you off their app if they catch you doing something they object to; Government can prosecute you as a criminal and throw you in jail... which would be an entirely different solution to various problems Facebook and Amazon have.

Government can use its monopoly on tax collection to do other things. The fact that those parents who claim their free childcare hours must revalidate every three months is not a law of nature, it's a consequence of Treasury.

When Amazon was scaling they applied the two-pizza rule. If you couldn't feed a team with two pizzas it was too large. I did think that rather raises a question about the size of the pizza and how much each person eats. But roll with it.

Those who got to eat those pizzas also had to see and listen to the customer support queries that came as a result of their decisions – they were not detached from that process or the effects of their decisions.

Two pizzas may be enough for a small team of committed individuals to do something **for** the population – where that thing is optional, and the population gets a say. It's nowhere near sufficient to do things **to** the population, especially when it can be imposed without choice. (Noting that, like 'optional' changes on Facebook, the GOV.UK app will be updated without choice...)

As noted above, in the Child Benefit debacle, HMRC simply assumed people were criminals and claims that was fine. Similarly, Carer's Allowance service redesigners weren't required to pay attention to the whole process, so continued on entirely

ignorant that the process they had designed was resulting in honest people being criminalised and having their life savings taken away.

Amazon can't put you in prison, you just buy from somewhere else. W3W sends lawyers after those who point things like this out, and Palantir sends a PR goon squad in a clown car. Government sends you to jail.

The theory is the larger a team gets, more time is wasted on updating and coordinating, rather than doing, and productivity falls off. More talking, less doing.

Hmm. So is the minister proposing *less* coordination across Government? How's that going with the Grid?

And this matters the most when you're dealing with the most important issues facing the public. Too often this approach of being able to move fast and fix things is only applied in a crisis.

Tech companies do pre-mortems, government can use the full force of law; care.data assumed it could take opted-out data anyway (and blew up); Carers Allowance just criminalised people who fell into the chasm between the old system and the new; DeepMind thought the law didn't apply to them (hi Palantir!); and the calculation of Ofqual's algorithm was that if anyone could fail then someone must fail.

Private sector engineers can eliminate such scenarios by simply not giving choices and not serving those customers; public sector ones can't do that. Could someone uninstall the Black app and still have rights and services? Singapore says not.

The same applies for the NHS app – currently you can simply log in to <https://www.nhsapp.service.nhs.uk/login> and get the same service as the app. Will that choice be taken away? And as things are rewired will the equivalent happen to <https://home.account.gov.uk/services-using-one-login?>

Building everything into a native app will force all services to build multiple interfaces, and they'll only care about the high profile ones; forcing them to use html pages and responsive design means that everyone's on the same platform. It also allows easy server side updates to interfaces, as during Covid, without everyone having to update their app but being forced to choose between deleting their baby photos and installing an app update that's just too big for their free space...

Like the brilliant passport office which only became brilliant after it spiralled into absolute chaos. Or the vaccine task force set up in response to the Covid pandemic and tasked with ensuring that all of us had our Covid jabs as quickly as possible. So how did they succeed?

The vaccine taskforce succeeded because the entire nation was focussed on doing one thing. There was no contradiction and few competing priorities.

That does not exist in peacetime, which is one of the main things that makes peacetime different to wartime – as the HS2 example illustrates (above and below).

The things that take time are where there is disagreement about what should be done. Political impositions like the Child Benefit decision can go catastrophically wrong when the decision is underinformed – perhaps the Chief Secretary to the Treasury should have resigned over that?

They were supported with quicker spending decisions, more autonomy to make well informed but higher risk bets than would normally be tolerated. They were staffed at pace with people that were really needed and they were given direct access to ministers with the ability to bypass slower departmental processes.

A small team working outside of the normal limits of their work environment to achieve incredible results.

NHS England wasn't wrong to use all available data to target Covid booster vaccines in 2021 – but then they used the data in ways they promised they wouldn't. When that fact came out, the NHSE staff response was to punish the people who noticed. The system does cover-ups.

The solution to this is absolute transparency that can't be cheated – otherwise the information the team gets will be no more reliable than the tractor factory statistics of the Soviet Union. The Hillsborough Law duty of candor must apply to everything provided to these teams if they are operating with Ministerial accountability, and whether it does or not must be stated to the House whenever such project teams are created.

So today I'm announcing that we will apply the vaccine task force model in peacetime, not just in a crisis. These will be focused on prime ministerial priorities and they will be tasked with bulldozing delivery obstacles, not spending time thinking up policy answers.

The PM's priority is growth.

Two canonical examples of why it's hard to grow both here and in the US<sup>2</sup> are HS2 and Crossrail 2. As explained above, one key reason such projects take so long to build is that many more people own their own houses these days and it's much harder to lay a railway through a home owner's garden than it was when a tiny handful of land owners could do pretty much whatever they wanted.

Similarly, HS2 *could* build its railway through woodlands and local people were not given any choice – so people who cared about particular woodlands focussed on helping the bats, and HS2 did the cheapest thing it could. Not cheap, but the cheapest. (If the woodland had been in a Tory marginal they'd have built an underground tunnel – the issue was that those in power didn't care about that constituency, but refused to say so.)

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<sup>2</sup> The energy hedge funds and US acolytes, who are looking for growth like their US exemplars.

Extending the analogy, digital and AI lets us do new things – like the  Fucked pub finder which went viral because all the creator had was a good idea, a vast AI budget, and his own eponymous politically-focused PR agency. Could be anyone!

They will be given the authority to move fast and fix things.

They'll be given the freedom to hire the best talent from within the civil service at pace and expedited approvals for short term appointments of external expertise.

They'll be given the freedom to procure with faster decision making than is normally the case and freedom to get on with the job with prioritised business case approvals and increased delegated authority limits from the Treasury.

The difference between this and the Covid procurement “VIP lane” is purely down to the intent of those outside government who are “offering their expertise”. Let’s hope lessons are learned...

At population scale, the uniqueness of someone’s life amounts to little more than complexity hidden in ‘rounding errors’ which will delay the entire project, which don’t fit in a(ny) business case – and no-one who can pick up the phone to the PM will think it important enough to do so.

It used to be that Mrs Thatcher’s favourite think tank thought through its output with rigour; when it failed to do so, Mrs Truss, her party and the country paid the price. The think tank bros munching two pizzas in meeting rooms at TBI clearly don’t care that your life breaks their nice ideal world.

What happens next is the fiasco around BritCard. Your life gets trampled because the think-tankers want to placate Treasury, and civil servants are incentivised for Success Now! – with failures delayed until they happen on someone else’s watch.

This will go hand in hand with the freedom and the instruction for greater risk taking. Supported by a direct line to the top of government within Number 10, the Cabinet Office and the Treasury and with direct ministerial sponsorship at task force level to get the job done.

Ministers will always remain responsible at the Despatch Box, while “consensus” and “risk taking” don’t tend to sit well together – especially around controversial policies.

Things don’t get ‘blocked’ because there’s a consensus on what to do – rather there’s no consensus on what to do, and there are unaddressed trade-offs.

If you truly want to fix things, you need Challenge. *Improvement*, not ‘novelty’. And also robust mechanisms to ensure that Principles, not just targets, are met.

Sometimes what you *will* need are two-pizza teams – teams empowered to roam around the system like white blood cells, proactively ensuring harmful elements are characterised and dealt with. Teams **to ask questions that have to be answered** throughout the delivery process, to ensure decisions by those with power and “added

autonomy" stick within agreed principles and coordinate properly<sup>3</sup> with similar but competing organs of the body of the State.

If you want systemic delivery, you need to demonstrate action and the will to follow through. "Rewiring" means replacing broken parts, and dealing with dysfunctional components whose cultures poison everything they touch – not simply setting targets (KPIs, OKRs...), fiddling with incentives ('bonuses'?), or sending people 'back to school'.

So the changes I've announced today on innovation, learning and development, quicker progression and higher pay for delivery expertise and the bulldozing of bureaucracy, I argue are not individual incremental changes as part of the legacy state but they are the start, the stepping stones that we must take to build a new state and fix things fast today.

"Stepping stones" that have guards and checks at each step. And if the 'type a share code into the Home Office website to check' part of the process doesn't work, you'd better hope that you're 'onboarding' to a job where they can check again in an hour – and are willing to! – not boarding an aeroplane where you'll be left at the gate.

The public are right to be angry about the state of our public services especially when as tax payers we are paying so much for them but the alternative futures are not what Britain needs. The failed Conservative party offered the past 14 years of public services increasingly unaffordable which you just cut back and get out of the way and the state of continued decline. The public have rejected that.

The public will look at all the outcomes, and assess everything.

The worst outcome is that your life is ruined because you fell into a digital blindspot, which could be as simple as continuing to use your maiden name after you're married, which the ID cards scheme looks likely to disapprove of.

That something works for the majority is not enough – the public will rightly assume that the worst outcomes could happen to them or their loved ones.

It's a bleak future where the algorithm of the state could prevent you from committing an administrative crime yet keeps track of all of them to ruin your life, and then the civil servant SRO says it's still your fault after the independent inquiry shows you to have been blameless.

Or the bleak future when you're on your own in a private market economy having torn down the public services and democratic institutions our country has been built on in response to the anger and division created by the populist parties.

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<sup>3</sup> The most obvious way in which such coordination breaks down is in the repeated headlines and harms caused to citizens by improper data sharing between Departments, of which there is a near-endless supply. That these continue unabated is a clear indication that the current system *does not learn*.

While every MP thinks every newspaper in their patch is just wonderful, one can look at the media landscape in neighbouring constituencies held by a different party and assess that perhaps commercial incentives have not entirely served those local populations well. (Assuming you can find the journalism behind the ads...)

Similarly, while one part of Government looks to reinvigorate high streets and local shopping precincts, of which anchor tenants are the GPs and pharmacies, that the Department of Health's policy is to close and move away.<sup>4</sup>

In its place a Labour offer that doesn't come from an old party defending the status quo but from a new Labour party owning the future. Investment to transform the legacy state into the new digital state of the future.

*Every state of the future will be digital. The real question is, what sort of a state will ours be? Not whether services will be digital – of course they will be – but what and how they deliver what citizens need. And whether there'll be choices: 'public services so good people choose to use them' or 'take it or leave it'?*

Creating an [Everything app](#) or an [Everyone database](#) is one vision of the future, shared by people as far across the spectrum as Elon Musk, Tony Blair and Xi Jinping. (Disregard the PR and presentation and the similarities are clear.)

Can we, will we do better?

A new consensus for a new approach to public services nothing short of a complete rewiring of the state a new state that is built around you and is there when you need it most. That frees up our public servants to be that human voice that had to hold in times of need.

A renewed state that can move fast and fix things to help you achieve the best life in front of you.

The NHS knows that services and programmes succeed when they do things **for** people, not **to** people. Even mental health confinement offers as much agency as possible within complex constraints. Whereas DWP and HMRC treat all of their "customers" as crooks, and punish them with criminal liabilities to make their own numbers look better – senior civil servants will have to earn their share of the bonus pool somehow...

So that together we can build that Britain that is richer, fairer and stronger that gives you hope and opportunity for the future of the country and for your family that gives you the strength and the skills to succeed so that through our collective endeavour our contribution to the national endeavour we each fulfil our potential and deliver a Britain renewed.

Those are grand visions. Few politicians say that things will be poorer, harsher and weaker – even if that is what their policies deliver. The real question is not what the

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<sup>4</sup> The footprint of a Streeting "Neighbourhood Health Centre" is about that of a Jobcentre, and his goal is to replace existing GP surgeries over the course of this Parliament in the name of progress and centralisation.

original ministerial intent was, but what the machine below does with that intent in practice. The Official Truth has to be simple, but constituents have complex lives.

We've been asking the question on Multiplicity in the ID scheme for months, and we understand there's no coherent answer that will interact well with reality. That may be civil service defensible, but it is not publicly defensible: Will the ID cards scheme force those who lawfully and legitimately use two names to abandon one of them? And will those (mostly) women who have a maiden name for work and a married name for home and family be forced by GDS local services to use just one name everywhere?

Giving autonomy to a small team that won't answer hard questions just means you end up with a broken small programme later rather than a stalled later programme now. Ask the victims of the Carer's Allowance scandal which they'd prefer.

Thank you very much.