

TIMES LETTER, January 7th 2020

“Sir, If some of Dominic Cummings’ s aspirations for Civil Service reform sound familiar to an older generation this is because they strongly echo the aims of what we called ‘The New Style of Government’ programme in 1970 – just on fifty years ago.

The objectives then, as now, were to reform Whitehall to meet the new technologies of the age, to break down inter-departmental barriers, to give the Prime Minister far more control over both strategy and ever-swelling departmental spending – as well as to encourage the beginnings of a stronger parliamentary committee system, to match the new pattern.

The outcomes were mixed, and in many cases watered down or plain frustrated – not least by the Treasury, but also by Downing Street being overwhelmed by other events and losing interest. But at least one positive legacy (although it took a most of a decade to mature) was to filter out a mass of unnecessary central Government functions , which could be performed better by, or in cooperation with, the private sector.

We are told that the collective memory these days in Whitehall is weak or non-existent. But my plea to today’s would-be reformers is to glance back at accounts of this past period, which have all been documented in detail. At least it might help them avoid some of the traps into which our plans fell.

David Howell (Lord Howell of Guildford. House of Lords ,SW1A 0PW. Mobile 07770697350)