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Keeping civil servants independent of Government

As a retired senior civil servant from a different age, I would say that Mr Blair's doubling of the number of Jo Moore-type political advisers (more accurately called party-political advisers) is a retrograde step. When a political party is elected to power and forms a government, its activities should be regarded as governmental rather than party activities. The public is entitled to know what the government is doing, and have its policies explained to them, but this needs to be done honestly, without party-political 'spin'.

The historian Sir George Otto Trevelyan characterized the use of patronage to influence legislation, and the awarding of posts to personal favourites of the administration, as a system which brought about the American War of Independence 'and made England sick, once and for all, of the very name of personal government'. With Mr Blair, personal government is back.

In the nineteenth century both Britain and America tried hard to move the civil service from the spoils system to the merit system. Britain succeeded, but America did not. For forty years after the revolution the founding fathers were able, in revolt from the former British system, to ensure that senior civil servants held office during good behaviour and were not ejected on a change of government or at government whim. It did not last.

Both countries established a system whereby recruitment and discipline were controlled by an independent Civil Service Commission. We still have one in Britain, but it seems to have lost its teeth. Otherwise the fate of Martin Sixsmith would be being considered by that impartial body rather than the permanent secretary Sir Richard Mottram operating under the beady eye of his Minister Stephen Byers.¹

¹ *The Times*, 1 March 2002 (lead letter).

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