# Civil service cuts debate reignited by biased BBC question amid warnings from US and Germany



The ongoing conversation around civil service cuts in the UK has resurfaced following a question posed on BBC Radio 4's "Any Questions" on 23 May, which asked which government department would top a hypothetical ‘DOGE’ list for cuts. This question has ignited a debate, with critics suggesting it carries an implicit bias favouring a downsizing of the civil service, undermining the vital roles these workers play in society.

This situation echoes recent events in the US, where Elon Musk's interventions in government departments have led to significant disruptions. Reports indicate that the dismissal of crucial personnel in the Social Security Administration has resulted in delayed payments for the most vulnerable, highlighting the potential risks of slashing civil service roles indiscriminately. Such consequences offer a cautionary tale against similar approaches in the UK. The underlying implications of the Any Questions question suggest a worrying trend towards diminishing the capacity of civil services— a trend many believe is misguided.

The notion of needing increased civil service presence is bolstered by historical examples. In 2015, Germany faced a massive influx of over a million Syrian asylum seekers, which overwhelmed its administrative capabilities. Rather than reducing staff, the German government opted to recruit an additional ten thousand civil servants to process the backlog effectively, a decision that yielded positive results in managing the flow of refugees. In contrast, the UK's asylum system has long suffered from inadequate resources, resulting in lengthy waiting times and considerable taxpayer costs as a direct consequence of insufficient staffing.

Moreover, the long-standing issues within His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) illustrate another aspect where increased staffing could lead to significant financial returns. Richard Murphy, an accounting expert from Sheffield University, reported that approximately 30% of corporation tax goes unpaid due to insufficient enforcement. His analysis suggests that a £1 billion investment in HMRC, particularly in hiring additional tax inspectors and reopening local tax offices, could potentially generate as much as £12 billion in revenue annually. This demonstrates that investing in civil service is not merely a cost but can be a strategic investment with substantial returns.

However, not all expansions of the civil service have been beneficial. The aftermath of Brexit has necessitated the creation of new administrative structures, resulting in the hiring of 3,000 civil servants initially, with projections for an additional 5,000. Critics argue that this represents a misallocation of resources, particularly given that an alignment with the European Union's single market and customs union could have alleviated some of this burden and reduced the need for extensive bureaucratic increases. The focus should be on formulating effective policies from the outset to avoid unnecessary staffing expansions in the future.

Ultimately, any discussions regarding the civil service should be rooted in pragmatic considerations rather than ideological leanings. The case made by advocates for a robust civil service argues that it should not be a topic for trivial debate on platforms like Any Questions—rather, it deserves a thoughtful, policy-driven approach that acknowledges both the benefits and the challenges of civil service employment in the modern state. With the spectre of austerity and neoliberal thinking looming over such discussions, it is essential to redirect the narrative towards a recognition of the civil service as a cornerstone of public welfare and efficiency.

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## Bibliography

1. <https://yorkshirebylines.co.uk/politics/civil-service-cuts-a-matter-of-policy-or-a-punchline/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data