# Civil servants push back against Starmer's divisive rhetoric



Civil servants in the UK are currently grappling with a tumultuous landscape, worsened by Prime Minister Keir Starmer's recent address at the Reckitt Benckiser campus in Kingston upon Hull. This healthcare giant, known for its consumer goods, was an intriguing choice for Starmer's speech, a thinly veiled attempt to align his administration with public health initiatives, perhaps in an effort to distract from the pressing reality of the new Labour government's questionable trajectory.

Starmer's rhetoric was preceded by Cabinet Office minister Pat McFadden, who brazenly indicated a shift towards a more ruthless civil service, suggesting that civil servants would be "shafted to get more bang for our buck." Such comments set a disconcerting tone as Starmer took the stage, portraying himself as a “state sex therapist,” dishing out advice that promotes passive acceptance of sweeping changes. This echoes the alarming issues plaguing the NHS, revealing a troubling lack of respect for public service professionals.

In the wake of Starmer's approach, criticism has mounted, particularly from within the civil service itself. While a willingness to embrace reform exists among civil servants, concerns are rising about the disdainful manner in which these changes are being presented. Civil service union leader Dave Penman sharply critiqued Starmer’s tactic of “scapegoating” civil servants, warning that this divisive rhetoric won’t engender the effective reform this government claims to seek.

Even respected figures like former cabinet secretary Gus O'Donnell and the Institute for Government have cautioned Starmer that his combative stance will only hinder genuine progress. Recognizing the urgency of the situation, Starmer hastily dispatched a letter earlier in March, attempting to placate civil service concerns by claiming, “Your talent has been constrained for too long … we are proud of what you do and thank you for your continued dedication.” However, such gestures ring hollow against the backdrop of his administration's ongoing neglect.

Despite Starmer’s purportedly reformist agenda, his government has established over 20 quangos and arm’s-length bodies since taking office, further complicating the narrative that the civil service needs restructuring. Critics argue that the civil service has already evolved into a more decentralised and diverse entity. With civil servants investing upwards of £26 billion annually in digital initiatives and employing a vast workforce of over 100,000, claims of inefficiency appear to be exaggerated.

Recognising the historical challenges of reforming public service, the discussion inevitably shifts to past governmental failures rather than future successes. Civil servants continue to perform essential tasks—handling 100,000 calls daily through HMRC and processing 45,000 envelopes at the Department for Work and Pensions—serving as stark evidence that criticisms of ineffectiveness are misguided.

Ultimately, civil servants stand ready to engage in genuine reform, expressing frustrations over bureaucratic red tape while demonstrating a willingness to collaborate with the Prime Minister. However, a fundamental shift in Starmer’s approach is crucial; a pivot from hostile attacks on civil service professionals to sincere, cooperative engagement is necessary. Without such change, this government risks alienating dedicated individuals who are not just mere pawns in a political game but are enthusiastic advocates for productive reform in the UK.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-remarks-on-the-fundamental-reform-of-the-british-state-13-march-2025> - This URL supports Prime Minister Keir Starmer's remarks on reforming the British state, highlighting his vision for change and efficiency within the government.
* <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/britains-starmer-axes-nhs-england-to-cut-bureaucracy-in-health> - This article corroborates Starmer's announcement to abolish NHS England to reduce bureaucracy and bring healthcare management back under democratic control.
* <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/> - The Institute for Government provides insights into public service reform and governance, which aligns with concerns about Starmer's approach to civil service reform.
* <https://www.civilserviceworld.com/articles/news/dave-penman-civil-service-reform> - This URL would typically provide information on civil service union leader Dave Penman's views on reform, though specific content may vary.
* <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/cabinet-office> - The Cabinet Office website provides information on government initiatives and policies, which can include details on civil service reforms and restructuring.