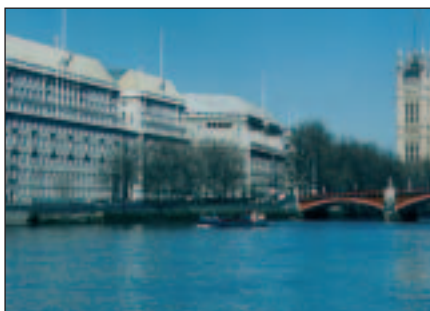


From MI5 to Whitehall the Civil Service has been overhauled and modernised and today its attracting some of the brightest and most ambitious stars in the country, says [VIRGINIA MATTHEWS](#)

# Chosen providers of a very good service



If your mental picture of a civil servant is a dull, middle-aged pen-pusher waiting to draw his pension, then you are at least 30 years out of date. For despite its old image as an employment graveyard for the terminally unimaginative, today's Civil Service is attracting some of the brightest and most ambitious stars in the country.

Be it a role in MI5, in education or the arts, in promoting good health, better food or a cleaner environment, the "Man from the Ministry" tag now encompasses every conceivable domestic or international issue. Far from being an employer of last resort, or something to fall back on when more exciting career plans don't materialise, the over-subscribed Civil Service is now able to pick and choose its staff.

## Modernisation of Whitehall

Just as local government has now shrugged off its mundane bin-emptier or rat-catcher image to offer one of the most diverse career paths in Britain, Whitehall too has been overhauled and modernized. Today's career public servant can now expect to play a key role in every aspect of the UK's political life – working alongside Ministers and MPs to formulate and, crucially, "sell" brand new secondary education policies or traffic management theories to a sometimes sceptical public and media.

As things stand, there are around 170 separate Government departments and agencies to choose from – some, like the

four-year-old Food Standards Agency are new to the Blair Government, while others, such as the Department for Work and Pensions or the re-named Department for Education and Skills have come about via a reshuffle or a merging of departmental responsibilities. With that sheer breadth of choice, school leavers and graduates looking for a career in public service can choose to specialize in domestic or international affairs across a whole range of fast-moving and high profile policy areas including intelligence-gathering at GCHQ or the battle against drugs trafficking spearheaded by the Home Office.

Although it is still politicians who chiefly carry the can when political policies go wrong, it is worth noting here that public servants can no longer hide under a cloak of anonymity when they foul things up. One of the downsides perhaps of the more glamorous reputation that Whitehall now enjoys is that like ministers and MPs, career public servants too can expect to be named,

**'Public servants can no longer hide under a cloak of anonymity when they foul things up'**

shamed and ousted from their job when things go badly wrong.

## Ethnic diversity

Despite the legacy of the male-dominated *Yes Minister* TV series, half of the country's 500,000 civil servants are now women and the vast majority work outside London rather than in the hot-house atmosphere of Whitehall itself. The

modern Civil Service is hot on the diversity trail and is very keen to recruit from a wide variety of ethnic and educational backgrounds.

While it would be naive to suggest that the "old school tie" and the "Oxbridge mafia" no longer exist in Whitehall, the whiff of the gentleman's club is now only obvious in the upper echelons of the Civil Service. For younger civil servants and for those lower down the career ladder, today's Whitehall prides itself on being a fairly even-handed meritocracy – with talent drawn from state as well as public schools and from a range of new universities and colleges as well as the red bricks. As one Environment Department recruiter puts it: "We need people from all walks of life in the Civil Service; just as long as they are talented and energetic. How else can we represent the views of modern Britain?"

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is no exception to the wave of anti-elitism sweeping through Whitehall, although it remains one of the Departments of State where a degree is usually a minimum qualification and where competition for a career as a diplomat or ultimately an ambassador is particularly fierce.

With an overall mission to promote Britain's national interests, and with specific responsibility for keeping up the flow of day-to-day information about world affairs to the Foreign Secretary, recruits to the Foreign Office or FCO need a demonstrable aptitude for languages as well as the "right attitudes and temperament to handle sensitive work," says a department spokesman.

For those looking for a career at the very heart of political life, the Civil Service Fast Stream offers the most direct route to



those coveted positions in the upper echelons of the Whitehall system. Open in theory to any graduate with a second class honours degree or above, in practice, as many as 90 per cent of applicants are rejected.

### Fast streamers

Successful fast streamers – and they number just 250 or so each year – are expected to stay no longer than 18 months in any one job as they move across the service as potential general managers or policy advisers in transport, health or the media. Economists, statisticians and scientists are among those civil service specialists who have their own fast streams for graduates who demonstrate outstanding self-motivation and communication skills as well as demonstrable leadership potential.

For non-graduates, the opportunities for a role as executive officer or junior manager are again varied; depending on the agency or department you choose to join. While non-graduate posts may, initially at least, appear to be less close to the political action and more concerned with backroom work, there are many instances of school-leaver entry civil servants rising through the ranks.

If a job in the Foreign Office conjures

up an image of a multi-lingual smoothie chatting up “Johnnie Foreigner” at a lavish ambassadorial party, then the cliché attached to MI5 or MI6 is one of intelligence agents bristling with guns and wire-tapping devices. Yet with the Security Service, as MI5 is properly known, running regular press and web-based graduate recruitment campaigns, the notion that it operates wholly covertly would appear to be misplaced.

The job of the Security Service is to protect national security, safeguard the economic well being of the UK and to support police and other law enforcement agencies in the prevention and detection

**‘Successful fast streamers stay no longer than 18 months in any one job’**

of serious crime. For the 2,000 or so civil servants employed by MI5, day to day duties tend to be more about updating files and sifting through reams of “intelligence” than actually catching spies. Key attributes, says the Security Service – which is keen to stress the sheer routine nature of the job – include decisiveness, initiative, integrity, resourcefulness and

common sense, rather than knowing how to use invisible ink or poisoned darts.

There is certainly a “secret” side to the organisation – MI5 recruits are not allowed to share the details of their work with family or friends and are expected to be highly discreet about any operations that are going on – but in other ways, the job is fairly ordinary. Recruits talk with enthusiasm about the gym, shop and bar located inside MI5’s HQ in Thames House, London, and even mention the good pension.

### First choice

According to leading opinion polls, a large proportion of today’s graduates and school leavers are turning their back on the profits-oriented private sector as they search for the opportunity to do something “worthwhile” with their lives.

With the modernized Civil Service now at the heart of political life and public service in Britain, the bad old days of excessive bureaucracy and form-filling are now at an end. For those bright enough to get in, Whitehall is now a first choice employer rather than a last.

*For further information contact:  
[www.mi5careers.co.uk](http://www.mi5careers.co.uk)*