

British Foreign Office Personnel Rules

by Andrew Levi

Introduction

The British Foreign Office - FCO ("Foreign and Commonwealth Office") - employs staff under a variety of different arrangements and legal bases. However, the main categories are: Diplomatic Service staff, both in the United Kingdom and at overseas posts; Home Civil Service staff, in the United Kingdom; and locally engaged staff at overseas posts, often foreign nationals, but also British people living abroad.

Her Majesty's Diplomatic Service (the formal title) is legally separate from the Home Civil Service. In its present form it was established in the 1960s by an Order in Council (one might roughly say a "royal decree"). It replaced several services which had existed before: the Foreign Service, the Consular Service, the Commonwealth Relations Office staff and so on. In practice, although there are of course some important differences in the work of the Home Civil Service and the Diplomatic Service, the basic pay and grading structures of the two services have paralleled each other closely. This means that interchange and hierarchical comparison between the services is in principle relatively straightforward. These factors are perhaps most significant when the FCO or one of its overseas posts has to interact with a domestic government department in London, or when a home civil servant is posted to an overseas post. In the latter case it is most usual for the official concerned to be seconded to the Diplomatic Service for the duration, at a grade equivalent to his rank in the home civil service.

The Diplomatic Service -- mirroring the Home Civil Service -- has for some decades used a system of grading which divides the policy and executive staff into two "streams" ("A" and "B", "fast stream" and "main stream" etc: the labels have varied but the basic idea has remained the same). The more senior stream has had faster promotion and focuses most on the policy questions; the other has slower promotion and focuses on more routine executive functions. For many years now the two streams have, in principle at least, merged at Diplomatic Service Grade 5 (Home Civil Service Grade 7), the key middle management level. In recent years there has been a move toward the abolition of grades, and this has in fact been carried out for all jobs above Grade 5. There is now a unified "Senior Management Structure" (SMS) reaching right to the very top level; each job in the SMS is given a 'job weight', a figure calculated on the basis of the management, policy and other responsibilities which it entails. A similar process is due to be carried out for jobs at Grade 5 and below.

In addition to the grades mentioned, the support staff are also graded. Job weighting could be applied to these staff too.

Structure

The main headquarters of the FCO is in London. All of Britain's Diplomatic Missions abroad are run by the FCO.

The cabinet minister in charge of the FCO, its actions and policies, is the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs. He is assisted by several "Ministers of State" and a "Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State". These ministers are not of cabinet rank. All of the ministers must either be elected Members of Parliament (House of Commons) or members of the House of Lords. The most senior official in the FCO is the Permanent Under-Secretary of State; he is also the Head of the Diplomatic Service. Under him comes a layer of usually about six Deputy Under-Secretaries of State. Together, these officials make up the "policy board" of the FCO which, as its name suggests, is responsible for providing policy advice to the Secretary of State; in practice, the volume of work means that much day to day advice is submitted to the Secretary of State without passing through the policy board or its members; delegation of responsibility to lower levels of the hierarchy is increasingly practiced. Below the Deputy Under-Secretaries of State comes a layer of Directors, each of which has several Heads of Department answering to him. The department is the principal functional unit of the FCO. Heads of Department are generally at the lower end of the SMS; their staff are at Grade 5 or below.

Diplomatic missions abroad are headed almost without exception by career members of the Diplomatic Service. Very occasionally a home civil servant may be seconded to head a mission; even less often is a "political appointment" made. The diplomatic missions are divided into the principal - or superintending - posts, and subordinate posts. The first category are generally full embassies, headed by an ambassador. The latter are generally consulates-general or consulates, headed by a consul-general or consul; they answer to the ambassador in the relevant superintending post.

A typical medium-sized embassy would be headed by an Ambassador about half way up the SMS, with a deputy at the lower end of the SMS, supported by a series of First Secretaries (Grade 5), some Second and Third Secretaries, and secretarial/clerical staff. The embassy would be divided into sections: political, economic, defence, commercial, cultural, press/information, consular, management/administration.

Recruitment

Recruitment to the Diplomatic Service -- and the Home Civil Service -- is by open competition. For the more senior stream ("fast stream") candidates must have a good university degree (second class honours or above) in any discipline. The first stage of the selection procedure, which is held annually, is a written intelligence and reasoning test, taking about a morning. There is no human interaction at this stage; the marking is automatised (there is only one right answer to each question, either a quantity or a multiple choice selection). The second stage is the Civil Service Selection Board. This consists of two working days of individual and group exercises, interviews and written tests. There is very little emphasis on testing specific knowledge. Instead the examiners are looking for the ability to reason, solve, influence etc. For each group of five candidates there are three examiners: a chairman, usually a retired senior civil servant; an "observer", a younger, middle ranking civil servant who tests the intellectual ability of the candidates; and a professional psychologist

The examiners work to a carefully constructed set of rules and check each other to avoid bias.

The last stage is the Final Selection Board, an interview lasting about 45 minutes in front of five (sometimes more) senior civil servants, including one or more academics, business people, trade unionists etc. The Chairman is the top civil servant responsible for recruitment, or a deputy. The Final Selection Board has all the results of the earlier stages at its disposal. It takes the decision whether or not to accept the candidate. Appeal possibilities exist. It is also possible to take the tests again the following year.

For the less senior streams the recruitment procedures are less elaborate and time consuming, but the underlying principles are similar.

Promotion

Promotion decisions are taken by promotion boards, not individuals. For the most senior jobs (Director and above) ministers usually have the final say: this does not always involve a promotion, but it can do. The promotion boards have at their disposal detailed information based on the annual staff appraisal system which is designed, among other things, to provide information about promotability.

A pilot project is just being set up for an "appraisal centre" system to be used for promotions from Grade 5 to the SMS in the Diplomatic Service. The main change involved is that candidates for these promotions will need to be appraised in person (face to face, a little like the CSSB) as well as on paper. The appraisal process will be more complex than simply an interview however.

Choosing ambassadors and other senior officials

Normally speaking the political heads of the FCO and other ministries (the Foreign Secretary and other ministers) do not get involved in personnel decisions. The professionalism and political independence of the Diplomatic Service and the Civil Service in general are the best guarantees to the elected government that their programme and instructions will be carried out loyally and effectively. Changes of government tend to involve few if any changes to the most senior official posts (and essentially none lower down the scale). However, in the natural course of things, officials move to new duties from time to time, others retire, and so on. Jobs then need to be filled by other officials, through sideways moves or promotions. At director level and above, and equivalent ambassadorial postings, the responsible ministers, or if necessary the Prime Minister, have the final say. When ministers get involved in this way they take very close account of the advice they receive from their Permanent Secretary, or if appropriate the Cabinet Secretary (even concerning the appointment of the next Permanent Secretary or Cabinet Secretary!). Promotion boards considering appointments to the top levels always include a representative of the relevant minister, if he wishes (often the head of the minister's office).

Ministers' offices

The British system involves relatively small private office staffs directly working to ministers. The private secretaries are chosen by the minister concerned, with the help of the personnel department and the Permanent Secretary. Clearly new ministers may wish to remove the

private secretaries of their predecessors, but as with the most senior staff there is in practice a very high degree of continuity.

Postings

The overseas postings system is based on a bidding process. Underlying this is an obligation on all DS officers to go wherever they are sent.

Although the details vary depending on the grade/level of the officer, the principle is similar for all: of the jobs available at the right level, in the right time window, officers bid for a prescribed minimum number (normally at least 5) including some "hardship" posts. The appropriate postings board (which usually meets monthly) decides which of the Candidates having bid for a given job is best suited for it. Assuming no other problems arise, that candidate gets the job. The process is applied to all the jobs which the board is considering at that session. The board can decide that none of the candidates are suitable. The decision is then deferred.

The personnel department has an influential voice on the board, and often recommends one candidate over the others. But the board is independent and quite often comes to a different decision.

Pay and overseas allowances

The pay and overseas allowances systems are complex in detail, but in outline the principles are straightforward. Pay is structured in the form of a "spine" consisting of ascending annual salary figures. An individual officer's point on the spine is determined principally by grade (or a band reflecting job weight) and seniority.

However, the seniority element presupposes adequate performance, as measured by the annual staff appraisal system: officers performing below the necessary level do not receive increased pay. Officers performing significantly above the required standard, and those performing outstandingly well, receive extra performance pay. Performance pay normally represents a relatively small percentage of overall annual pay. But sustained high performance year on year can accelerate a officer to significantly higher points on the pay spine than colleagues performing less well.

Overseas allowances combine cost of living, hardship and representational elements. They are calculated according to a formula agreed with the Treasury and vary according to post, exchange rate and individual officer's circumstances (grade, representational needs of the job, marital status, children at post, children in education etc). Allowances are also paid for language skills, varying according to the difficulty of the language.

Pensions

Pensions are paid through the Principal Civil Service Pensions Scheme. This is funded from current government revenue. The entitlements are based on the number of years of service and the final salary level of the officer. Typically, an officer with a full career of 35 to 40 years would be entitled to a pension of about half their final salary level. The pension subsequently rises in line with the inflation rate. There is also provision in the system for the payment of

pensions to widows (or widowers) of officers.

Laws and regulations, including "Diplomatic Service Procedure" and "Diplomatic Service Regulations"

Highly detailed requirements for the conduct of business (Diplomatic Service Procedure) and officers' conduct professionally and personally (Diplomatic Service Regulations) are set out in writing. These mirror Home Civil Service provisions. Officials work according to these rules, and are if necessary disciplined if they do not. The Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary can order changes to the rules, but would not do so without first taking advice from the Head of the Home Civil Service (the Cabinet Secretary) or the Head of the Diplomatic Service (the Permanent Secretary at the FCO), as appropriate.

Ministers conduct in government is regulated by a document called "Rules of Procedure for Ministers". Once again, the Prime Minister can order changes to this, but would always take close account of advice from the Cabinet Secretary.

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