

Shape the way the country is run

Sherin Aminossehe, new Head of Offices for Lendlease and recently chief executive officer at the Government Property Unit, Cabinet Office, gives us the private sector hitchhikers' guide to the civil service

It's been nearly seven years since I had to swim through a flood in Jeddah.

What is the relevance of that flood?

It is what made me question where I was working, and set me on the path that took me to the civil service. Just over six years later, I have ventured to pastures new in the private sector.

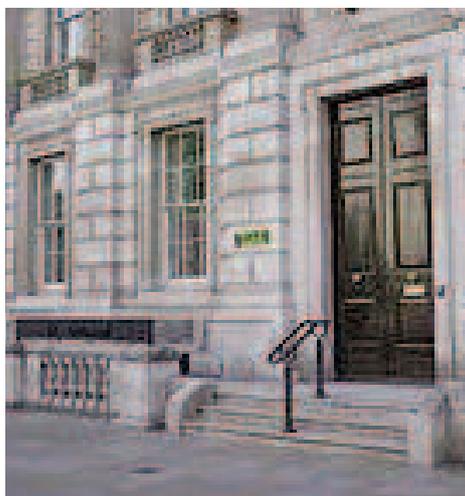
Reflecting on leaving and my time in the Cabinet Office, I remembered that I am frequently asked what I would tell private sector entrants into the public sector – who ask as if it were an exotic foreign country.

So here for the first time (with apologies to Douglas Adams), is the private sector hitchhikers guide to the civil service, in nice, friendly letters:

1) It's not that complicated (honest!)... you haven't just landed on an alien planet. People are people and deserve the same respect that you gave your co-workers in your last place. Everyone just wants to deliver a good job.

2) ...but realise that you're not in Kansas anymore and that it's not exactly the same. There is no real profit motive here, it is genuinely about the greater good of the country (what better motive than that?). Collaboration is the key word in Whitehall and persuading departments that your wonderful idea is really beneficial for their businesses too is how to get things done.

3) Then there are ministers... we hear about them in the press, we see them promoted, demoted, elected and also lose seats. They are not some special breed (see point 1) but coming from a service industry and dealing with clients helps – espe-



cially clients who call you at the weekend and suggest that you might want to radically change the project you have spent months refining. Speaking truth to power really does work though.

4) ...and acronyms... I once went from a CEX meetings to MfGRE to MCO then saw the NAO and the GIAA to talk about NPM becoming the GPA and discussing its relationship with DDCMS, DCLG, DWP, BEIS, CO, DEFRA and...I rest my case. If you're confused just ask someone to translate. People think civil servants use language to confound. No, it has become second nature and as easily as a bilingual speaker I slip between English and my mother tongue, you too will be able to go between English and Acronym Mandarin (AM) in about 6 months.

5) ...and bureaucracy... Yes things can move slowly, but there are legitimate shortcuts once you understand the system. Do always question if there is another way to get things done as there usually is. Remember that government is held to a different standard, and that rules are there for a reason and I have yet to come across a private sector firm who allows their employees to randomly spend whatever they want from their company coffers.

6) ...and numbers... lots of big ones in fact. I was proud to lead a unit that had oversight of £352bn of assets, identified a disposal pipeline worth £5bn to deliver housing, delivered £3.6bn in capital receipts, over a £1bn in cost savings and also worked with over 250 councils to generate 44,000 jobs, releasing land for 25,000 homes, raising £615 million in capital receipts from sales, and cutting running costs by £158 million.

7) Finally: diversity matters this isn't about lip service or recreating the same team you had previously or, even worse, recruiting identikit people. The civil service truly embraces difference and the talent and innovation it brings, good people are not just mini versions of you.

So you have got to the end of the list and you're still not put off. Congratulations, you're about to enter into a great workplace, where you will literally be able shape the way the country is run. I can guarantee that there is no other place like it.

Someday I may be back and until then, goodbye and thanks for all the fish. ■



Sherin Aminossehe was at the helm of the UK's largest land and property estate. She held the dual role of chief executive officer at the Government Property Unit, Cabinet Office and Head of Property Profession for the Civil Service.

As part of her work for the largest owner of real estate in the UK, Sherin was charged with leading, devising and executing the property strategy for the sitting government, which included working with government departments to look at how they could use their portfolios effectively to create efficiencies and growth. Through the creation of the One Public Estate programme, Aminossehe has also been a strong part of the Government's social change agenda with a particular focus on creating more homes and jobs.

She was previously a vice president at architectural firm HOK, leading large masterplanning, rationalisation and regeneration projects across the world.

She is currently Head of Offices for Lendlease, where she is in charge of shaping some of the company's largest regeneration projects, including the £2.4bn International Quarter London in Stratford.