Introduction

Since the 1980s the British civil service has undergone what amounts to a perpetual revolution (Bogdanor 2003) as both Conservative and Labour politicians have sought to make it more responsive and effective in the delivery of [their] programmes. Moreover, this period of unrelenting reform is set to continue as the Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition aims to reduce the financial deficit by cutting public spending. Currently, there are approximately half a million civil servants, with numbers in administrative, that is support and front line services, and executive or managerial grades split roughly 50–50. Senior civil servants account for only 1% of the total (Office of National Statistics 2010) but their influence on the civil service culture and the arrangements by which Britain is governed is considerable. Hence the focus of this chapter is on these higher level positions and their relationship with politicians. The most senior civil servant has, since 1981, also been Cabinet Secretary, the title by which he (and so far they have all been men) is usually known. In this capacity, he advises the prime minister and the Cabinet on issues of policy, as well as on the conventions, precedents, powers and limitations of ministerial office. He thus has a close relationship with senior ministers and a pivotal position within government. As Head of the Home (as opposed to the Diplomatic) Civil Service he is also the glue which holds the civil service together, as well as its protector and chief spokesperson, a role which, from time to time, puts him in the spotlight.1

All civil servants are servants of the Crown, which, successive governments have argued, means that for practical purposes they serve the government of the day (Armstrong 1986). Indeed, the civil service in
Britain has no constitutional personality separate from that government. It exists to advise and assist ministers in the formulation and implementation of policies, to manage and deliver government services and, as the permanent arm of government, to provide continuity and stability when political administrations change. The extent to which it also has a responsibility to serve the public interest is a matter of some debate, raising, as it does, the question of whether this interest corresponds with or diverges from that of the government (Norton-Taylor 1985). Proponents of the civil service see it as providing a high-quality service which not only sustains the government of the day but also supports the wider interests of society, acting as a constitutional check on those with elected power. Its detractors view it as an inefficient, unresponsive bureaucracy that works to protect its own interests rather than serving those of politicians and/or the public. Both views recognise that, for better or worse, the operation and culture of the civil service is informed by two separate but related elements: the convention of individual ministerial responsibility and the core values under which the service was established. It is these elements that underpin its relationship with ministers and the wider political community.

Ministerial responsibility and the civil servant/minister relationship

The character of the Civil Service was shaped by a view of parliamentary government, developed in the nineteenth century, which located political power in the ministerial, and hence elected, heads of government departments, and required them to be responsible to Parliament for the way in which they exercised these powers, holding office only for as long as they had the confidence of Parliament, most notably the House of Commons. This was encapsulated by the convention of individual ministerial responsibility which provided the required accountability of ministers to Parliament and accommodated the creation of the new civil service through the development of a chain of responsibility, whereby civil servants were responsible up the departmental hierarchy to ministers, and ministers alone were responsible to Parliament.

These apparently simple arrangements were intended to clarify the civil servant-ministerial relationship and through the protection of officials from public accountability, to enhance political, and hence democratic, accountability. However, even by the beginning of the twentieth century, there was concern that by enabling powerful senior civil servants to hide behind their ministers, these arrangements were