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Knives out for head of the civil service Sir Bob Kerslake as rumours that he will be sacked by Cameron grow

- Sir Bob Kerslake is taking the flak for the perceived failure of mandarins to modernise
- The civil service is understood to have lost the confidence of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Secretary

Doubts were swirling last night about the future of the head of the civil service, following rumours that David Cameron and Britain's top mandarin want him out.

Sir Bob Kerslake is taking the flak for the perceived failure of mandarins to modernise and their continued refusal to obey many instructions from ministers.

The civil service chief is understood to have lost the confidence of the Prime Minister and Sir Jeremy Heywood, the Cabinet Secretary.

This week a progress report on the Government's civil service reform plan found that only seven of 18 targets had been met since it was unveiled last year.

There are rumours Mr Cameron has asked Sir Jeremy to move Sir Bob aside amid fears he was not pushing the agenda hard enough.

Sir Bob has two jobs – he is head of the civil service but also permanent secretary of the Department for Communities and Local Government.

It has led to concerns that he does not have enough time to devote to both tasks.

Downing Street denied the rumours last night, and said Sir Bob had Mr Cameron's full support.

But other sources said that, although Sir Bob is safe for now, he could be given the chop as civil service head late on – while keeping his local government department position.

One source said: 'There is some disappointment about the progress that has been made on civil service reform.

'Progress has been slow and some have questioned whether the right leadership is in place.'

By a Guardian Reporter. Published: Tuesday 15 July 2014 15.48 BST.

Anger over 'political' departure of civil service head Sir Bob Kerslake

Whitehall mandarins 'undermined' by sudden announcement after whispering campaign and amid reshuffle

Civil service head Sir Bob Kerslake will be replaced by Sir Jeremy Heywood who will remain cabinet secretary.

Senior civil servants have expressed anger at the way the government has handled the departure of the head of the civil service after two and a half years in the job.

Sir Bob Kerslake is to resign in the autumn, to be replaced by Sir Jeremy Heywood, who will remain as cabinet secretary, according to an announcement on Tuesday, coinciding with the government reshuffle. The decision marks the end of a two-year experiment in which the civil service leadership was split.

But the way the announcement was made – following a year-long whispering campaign against Kerslake inspired by ministerial aides – has undermined Whitehall's mandarins, it was claimed.

Dave Penman, the general secretary of the FDA, the senior civil servants' union, said that Kerslake's abrupt departure following a year of unsourced criticisms had damaged the relationship between his members and ministers.

"The speculation around Sir Bob's position – and the off-the-record briefings that have accompanied it – will have done little to reassure civil servants of politicians' and ministers' understanding of the qualities of leadership, which MPs themselves are often so quick to accuse public servants of lacking," he said.

"If the new role of chief executive is to succeed and genuinely deliver the pace of reform that the government says it wants, then it will need the support of ministers in departments as well as at the Cabinet Office."

Penman's comments have been echoed by Bernard Jenkin, the Tory chair of the public administration select committee, who said the briefings against Kerslake were "totally unacceptable".

Jenkin said: "The committee warned that splitting the roles was unlikely to be a durable arrangement, and Sir Bob has had to face some exceptional challenges. The

backstairs briefings against him were totally unacceptable. He has maintained a reputation for integrity and professionalism throughout," he said.

David Cameron announced on Tuesday that a new chief executive role would be created to lead the government's reform agenda, paving the way for a major reshaping of the civil service in the runup to the general election.

Downing Street said that the recruitment process would begin shortly, with an announcement likely by the autumn.

A chief executive of the civil service will be sought, a new post that ministers hope will produce clearer lines of accountability.

Kerslake, 59, will also stand down as permanent secretary of the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) in February.

Known as "Whispering Bob", Kerslake started his career in the Greater London Council and later worked for Hounslow council. He became the most senior civil servant at the DCLG in 2010 and head of the civil service in 2012.

His departure follows a whispering campaign about his performance. Those close to ministers said he had failed to make progress on reform.

Reports last year claimed that he was due to be sacked then, after his job was offered to other people by senior ministers.

On Tuesday afternoon, there was speculation that the government was rushed into making the announcement of Kerslake's departure following a report on Monday's Newsnight programme which claimed that Kerslake had been sacked.

Some expressed surprise that a broad overhaul of the civil service was announced in the middle of a reshuffle, because it implied that Kerslake's departure was a political decision.

In a blog posted on Tuesday morning, Kerslake confirmed his departure, praised his colleagues and took a swipe at critics of the civil service in what appeared to be a criticism of ministers, including Francis Maude.

"The vast majority of civil servants work outside Whitehall, and one of the very best bits of my job has been travelling around the country visiting civil servants where they work.

Less brilliant have been the 'noises off' criticising civil servants and accusing them of being reluctant to change. Such criticism is deeply unfair and I hope that I have done my bit to challenge it," he wrote.

Heywood has been one of the most highly regarded civil servants for nearly two decades, serving both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

A No 10 spokesman said Kerslake had made a series of reforms to the civil service of which he could be proud.
