

Government Demands Civil Service Interns Come from Working-Class Backgrounds

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The UK Government now requires that Whitehall internship candidates come from working-class backgrounds, in a policy shift aimed at boosting social mobility within the Civil Service. The announcement forms part of a broader push by the Cabinet Office to address longstanding concerns about elitism in public sector recruitment.

Soon, departments offering paid internships through the central government will be instructed to reserve placements for individuals identified as working class under Cabinet Office metrics. These include criteria such as parental occupation, eligibility for free school meals, and attendance at non-selective state schools. Ministers argue the move will open doors to young people historically underrepresented in policy-making roles.

However, critics have raised concerns about the government's definition of social class and its implications for fairness and meritocracy. Some civil servants and commentators argue that the initiative risks excluding talented applicants who do not meet the socio-economic criteria, despite lacking other forms of advantage. Others note that regional disparities and the complexity of class indicators may complicate implementation.

The Civil Service has long been criticised for being dominated by graduates from top-tier universities and professional families. Recent data show that a disproportionately high number of officials attended independent schools. The new internship guidelines are part of wider efforts to diversify recruitment pipelines and reduce structural barriers.

According to Cabinet Office figures, only a few applicants to civil service internship schemes in the past five years came from working-class households. Officials claim that increasing representation from this group will improve policy outcomes by bringing a wider range of life experiences into public administration.

The change follows a review commissioned under former Cabinet Office Minister Jeremy Quin, who warned of “institutional groupthink” stemming from a lack of socio-economic diversity. His report recommended

targeted outreach and structural reform to ensure the civil service reflects the public it serves.

Critics from the centre-right have warned that the policy risks prioritising identity over capability and could entrench a form of positive discrimination.

While the government insists that selection for full-time civil service posts will remain competitive and open to all, this new rule adds a class-based criterion at the internship stage, a move likely to provoke further debate over fairness and equal opportunity in public appointments.