

annoyance at the manner of her departure from the civil service, Gray had been dismayed by the resistance from some quarters to her investigation into Downing Street's parties. This included telling her to sack an independent adviser and efforts to tone down or remove parts of her findings, neither of which she was prepared to do. Even so, she bears no grudge towards Whitehall – far from it – because she knows the government machine will be essential if a Labour government is going to achieve anything.

'It's really important for me to say loud and clear that I love the civil service. The majority of them are absolutely people with the right values, they live by their values, and they're in public service for those values,' says Gray. 'So it was heartbreaking, really, to see the behaviour during partygate. That wouldn't have happened a few years ago. The whole culture just became very informal.' In her report, she pointed the finger of blame for this directly at the 'lack of leadership' from Boris Johnson at a time when Britain's most senior civil servant was sending WhatsApp messages to colleagues saying he had never seen a 'bunch of people less well-equipped to run a country' than those then occupying Downing Street. It is no coincidence that one of the first changes Gray has instituted to Labour's internal processes is to limit the use of such forms of communication on serious matters. 'I don't want WhatsApp being used for policy,' she

problems. Even then there is no guarantee a new wind farm would be connected to the National Grid, which can take another five years. Starmer then got in touch with the National Grid, who told him that the rules of the electricity regulator are designed to prevent too much capacity, even though their assessment of how much there is includes projects like fossil fuel power stations that will never get built. Then, just when everyone is happy about new development taking place and the grid is waiting for the electricity, developers themselves delay projects because they don't want to be the first in an area and face having to pay all the costs of a connection. 'I'm not interested in dancing around issues, or just mouthing off about what I can do,' says Starmer. 'I'm impatient to roll up my sleeves to find answers to problems.'

One innovation specifically mentioned by Gray for Labour to look at are the citizens' assemblies introduced successfully by the Irish government with a model in which around a hundred representative voters and a handful of politicians meet to examine evidence in depth before putting a consensus proposal to the people in a referendum. She says the once socially conservative Ireland is almost 'unrecognisable' after using such innovations to thrash out answers on previously vexed issues such as abortion and gay marriage.

Starmer's team have begun work on how to use them to get agreement on constitutional questions such as further

says.

As those policies are developed for an incoming government, Starmer describes with unusual relish how 'we're already deep in the detail' of reforms to Britain's notoriously sclerotic planning system so that he can meet a goal of building 1.5 million homes in five years. He has also been pressing for worked-through proposals on 'knocking out the impediments' to unblock the electricity grid so that they can achieve his mission of carbon-neutral 'clean power' by 2030. 'I don't want a discussion in the first hundred days if we win the election,' he says, 'that we could be having now.' A member of the shadow cabinet says: 'Keir's not much interested in leaning back and having a long discussion about geopolitics, even though a few of us would probably like a bit more of that. He only really comes alive when we get on to the nitty-gritty of how to get things done.'

Starmer gives an example of this himself, as he describes sitting down with Greg Jackson, the chief executive of Octopus Energy, who told him his firm could build a new offshore wind farm in eighteen months. 'Why haven't you done it then?' the Labour leader asked him. Jackson told him that getting planning permission can take five years, then a developer can face another eighteen months waiting to import materials from overseas because the stop-start nature of government support has meant there are supply chain

devolution to the UK nations and regions, strengthening the powers of big city mayors, or building consensus for regional development plans including housebuilding which are sometimes blocked by institutional inertia. 'This is one way we can help resolve these questions by involving communities at an early stage,' explains Gray, who adds, with a slight glint in her eye: 'Whitehall will not like this because they have no control.' Gordon Brown's Commission on the UK's Future, the recommendations of which were accepted by Starmer in 2022, proposed using citizens' assemblies to decide the shape of a new democratic chamber to replace the House of Lords.

The Labour leader himself says Camden Council in his constituency tried a similar scheme with community groups and police to tackle knife crime, but he is reluctant to present models such as citizens' assemblies as a panacea that will fix everything. 'They've worked in some areas, not in others,' he says. His focus is always on outcomes rather than single headline-grabbing measures. Often, they will look a little dull. For instance, he has contrasted unworkable but eye-catching Tory schemes to 'stop the boats' with armoured jet skis or sending illegal immigrants to Rwanda against Labour's determinedly dour plan for what he describes as 'doing the basics better – the mundane stuff, the bureaucratic stuff' – by improving the speed with which asylum