

How Can Experts Help Governments Think?

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<https://lecturecapture.brookes.ac.uk/Mediasite/Play/66c1f45d3ef14173845b0f1cd1789f911d>

Introduction: have we really had enough of 'experts'?

Thank you very much. And thank you for coming tonight. I know that lots of you have travelled a long way to be here, and I appreciate it.

When I started to think about this inaugural, there was only really one place to start, and it was with the theme of expertise – because arguments about that concept have been running rampant through our recent politics, and it is also a topic I've been writing about for the seventeen years since I became a University Lecturer in the winter of 2001/2002. So if you'll allow me, I'll try to address both 'what experts can do for us', and also, more widely, how we can make public policy in better ways... or, perhaps, we might all sometimes be forced to say, in ways that are slightly less bad.

Our first point of reference here is of course now-Environment Secretary Michael Gove's intervention in the European referendum campaign on 2 June 2016. Mr Gove, speaking for the eventually-successful Leave campaign, was faced with a long list of economists who said that leaving the European Union would harm Britain's economy: he said in reply, and very simply, that we have all had enough of experts. It

is important to note, however, that he didn't mean *all* experts: he specifically singled out all those acronym-heavy international thinktanks and regulators who'd got the Great Recession so wrong, who have not always had the best record of getting specific forward indicators right, who were easily traduced as out-of-touch elitists who preferred their financial models to what I suppose Mr Gove imagined as the raw get-up-and-go patriotism he wanted to encourage. And to a certain extent – to go against received academic wisdom – he was right. The result bore out his opinion. Many among the British people really *had* had enough of experts, or at least all those liberal metropolitans supposedly huddled together in London (and Oxford, and Cambridge), welcoming immigration, embracing change, jumping around Europe with their burgundy passports, feeling altogether at home in the new and the different. Well, Mr Gove showed them, didn't he?

In truth, none of this is Mr Gove's fault. He's a politician. He took advantage of the wind he felt at his back. His success is a symptom, not really a cause, of our present malaise. Long-term trends have weakened the bonds, not just between economists and academics and the public, but between *all* governors and *all* of the governed. For many reasons: a more complex society; a flood of information from all sides, making it hard to see who's well-intentioned, let alone who's right; the decline of deference; the rise of an adviser class who seem very, very distant from Brexit Britain; international organisations who seem accountable and beholden to no-one. There are lots of reasons.

Britain's public policy disasters

To speak more specifically, one of these reasons is the list of acute public policy disasters that the British state has endured since 1945. We can divide these, fairly arbitrarily, into foreign policy debacles and domestic implosions. Here I should just say that when I mean policy failure, I mean those decisions that failed *even in their*

own terms, and over which there is little controversy. Most policies, of course, fall somewhere in the middle range between disaster and triumph, a situation I will address in a moment.

But let me introduce you to three such failures, just to begin with: the devaluation of sterling in 1967; the Conservatives' disastrous Community Charge, or Poll Tax, of the late 1990s; and another sterling devaluation, this time under a Conservative government in 1992. Let's start with the first. In November 1967 Harold Wilson, Labour's then-Prime Minister, had to admit to the nation that his pledge to hold sterling at the value of \$2.80 had totally failed. The economic guiding light of Wilson's first three years in office was gone. His assurance that the money 'in your pocket or purse, or in your bank' had not been devalued haunted him ever after. For a man who had always made his name as an economist, an expert statistician, this was a catastrophic reverse. For Wilson at least, it was never quite glad, confident morning again. Next: the Poll Tax. 31 March 1990 was the culmination of a period of civil disobedience protesting against the Conservative government of the time's new flat-rate local government tax. 113 people were injured, and 339 were arrested, in an anti-Poll Tax riot in Trafalgar Square. The conflagration in central London that day came to stand as an image of how badly the tax had gone wrong. It took down an entire premiership, which had looked unassailable just a couple of years before; and it did permanent damage to the Conservatives' 'brand', for many years up to this point stressing competence and results. Lastly, we have the *coup de grace* of that reputation for economic know-how: Norman Lamont on 'Black Wednesday' (16 September 1992) having to announce another devaluation, this time a float (downwards) from its peg to the German currency of DM2.95. David Cameron lurked in the background as one of Lamont's aides – not learning the lesson of touching the Europe issue at your peril. It was this single day that did more than anything else to bulldoze the Conservatives' polling leads on the economy, and which led inexorably to Labour's return to government in 1997.

More people usually get hurt when foreign policy goes wrong. As Britain retreated from its world role in the second half of the twentieth century, and as it became a mid-ranking European power with only limited ability to strike outside its own region, the reach of its mistakes shortened alongside the good it could do. But their number was still some way above zero. Three more very serious policy disasters immediately spring to mind here: the Suez Crisis of 1956; the Argentinian invasion of the Falklands in 1982; and the Second Gulf War of 2003 and its aftermath. During the Suez Crisis a mixture of delay, American economic pressure and deep partisan divides at home brought an Anglo-French invasion of Egypt to secure the Canal that Egypt's government had nationalised to an end. This did irreparable harm not only to the UK's diplomatic position in the Middle East, but its reputation worldwide. In early April 1982, Argentinian forces subdued the small force of British Marines stationed on the Falklands and seized the islands in a *coup de main*. The British had withdrawn the ice patrol ship *Endurance*, and their wider 1981 Defence Review had also encouraged the view in Buenos Aires that the British would not fight for the islands. The Foreign Secretary of the day had to resign; without very strong and immediate (as well as successful) retaliatory action, there is at least the strong possibility that the Thatcher government might have collapsed. Lastly, of course, we have the intensely controversial British decision, in 2003, to invade Iraq as part of an American-led coalition. Although the initial drive to Baghdad was successful at least in its own terms, post-war reconstruction and nation-building were appallingly ill-designed, with truly catastrophic consequences. The invasion ended up sparking a civil war within Iraq that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. Only a decade and a half later has Iraq come to look anything like a functioning nation-state, and the aftershocks of that war – in the West, as well as more importantly in Iraq – are still continuing.

We already know a great deal about policy failure

There is a thriving literature about policy failure, and this has spawned some classic books. The British planner Peter Hall's absolutely essential *Great Planning Disasters*, published in 1980, analysed some set-piece failures – the Anglo-French supersonic airliners Concorde, for instance. Reflecting on these, Hall drew on the public choice and game theory literature of his time to recommend much more comprehensive forward planning of the whole context around any project: in that case of Concorde, soaring oil prices that might have been at least provided for in the development stages. Most importantly, Hall showed how citizens' own expressed preferences might be taken account of, instead of being presented with a 'take it or leave it' approach based on what was assumed to be good for them (Hall, 1980).

Butler, Adonis and Travers' excellent 1994 work, *Failure in British Government*, focuses on the Poll Tax, showing in that case how a very limited roster of palatable choices can gradually funnel Ministers towards an end-point that they would certainly not have explicitly chosen in its own right. Local income or sales taxes were thought to be impracticable; continuing with a property rating system was seen as politically very dangerous if they eventually had to be maintained via a revaluation of each property it covered. That seemed only to leave a flat-rate personal tax – as it turned out, perhaps one of the most disastrous choices of all (Butler, Adonis and Travers, 1994). Richard Grossman's 2013 study of nine economic policy debacles, simply entitled *Wrong*, singles out inherited but outdated ideological predispositions for particular blame in this field, whether it was Britain's return to the Gold Standard in 1925 or the United States' adoption of economic protectionism in 1930 (Grossman, 2013).

The best example of successful work in this field is actually Anthony King and Ivor Crewe's *The Blunders of our Governments*, published in 2013: partly because it is so

comprehensive about successive UK governments' poor performance in delivering large-scale projects in recent years (King and Crewe, 2013). King and Crewe stress the way in which confused competences and crossed wires at the top create a culture in which, although one Minister will usually have initiated any big project, delivery is usually diffuse, confused and poorly managed. That allows the real providers – whether they are policy entrepreneurs, IT companies, security companies or building contractors – to utilise their superior access to knowledge and take advantage of central government's information deficit. Parliament is not usually able to push its way into any of these projects: moving too rapidly for anyone, Whitehall often simply ignores Westminster, and ends up in the inevitable blunders that a lack of accountability and oversight create. My own debt to King and Crewe will be very apparent in my remarks tonight. However, even superb work like theirs does not always succeed in creating a hierarchy of causation when it comes to governance failures – something which can hamper attempts to recommend priorities if we are attempting to navigate our way out of these systemic difficulties.

What are the real limits to progress?

In this lecture, I will without I hope too much presumption try to draw together some of the many threads that have often been left hanging, and identify some of the ways we can better analyse public policy if we are to move forward in slightly better order. By so doing, I hope to be able to resuscitate at least some of our faith in what we are doing – if not the past, and now properly neglected, reverence for 'expertise'.

My major themes will be the following. Any large-scale policy will involve hitherto unthought-of costs and spillovers. These all involve effects both near to and far from the policy field you were working in that are hard to track and trace, and which are then related to one another in more complex ways still. Harold Macmillan once compared this to a children's puzzle in which you were able to insert two or three

balls, but the third or fourth then popped out. Thinking of policy like a Rubik's cube might not be too far away from the mark.

Guided by numbers that will almost always turn out to be wrong (as they were during the 1976 crisis over the UK's loan from the International Monetary Fund), you will usually fall far short of your marks. You will not be able to do all the things that you thought you might, when you arrived as a bright-eyed and bushy-tailed Minister (or Prime Minister) on day one. You will get tired. Your senior civil servants will get tired. You will fail to understand some key briefings. You might doze off in a committee. You might fall ill. You may well become subject to one of those mild but performance-inhibiting middle-class pathologies, such as drinking slightly too much, on rather too many nights. Your mental health will probably suffer. And when you least expect it, a huge crisis will blow up during which you will say something stupid, and perhaps career-ending. For instance: in April 2018 the now-ex Home Secretary, Amber Rudd, ended up having to resign after telling a Parliamentary Committee that her department had no targets for deportations, when they clearly did – a tangle that has never been quite satisfactorily explained. All of this will slow progress, and perhaps derail it altogether.

None of this means that we can't move forward at all. Failing to understand everything does not mean that we cannot know anything. Missing targets does not mean that things cannot get better. Being tired and lacking support does not mean that the Cabinet cannot make decisions. The political science literature, and what historical examples we have before us, are both clear that policy failure and success should be seen on a wide spectrum, not as a binary, and that there are many things we can do to shift the dial away from the former, and towards the latter. In this lecture I want to go through just a few of those mechanisms.

The rule of unintended consequences

There is not the time, in just one lecture, to go through all of these systems. Let me instead bear down on just one of the themes I just mentioned, buttressed by another: the rule of unintended consequences, made all the more prevalent by the transient, fragmentary nature of all our data. In a highly complex developed society, any meaningful intervention in the economic or social system will have knock-on effects that you were not expecting, sometimes emerging far from the problem you were addressing.

Here are three examples of what I mean. I covered the first case study in my third book, *Governing Post-War Britain*, in 2012 (O'Hara, 2012). This is the case of Labour's Land Commission, set up under Wilson's 1964-70 government in order to reduce land prices – at the time, then as now, thought to be one key to the very steeply rising cost of housing. Labour's idea was this: by taxing and then deploying itself some of the planned betterment value of land zoned for housing, the Commission would be able to build up large landbanks that it would then build on itself, or lease out to developers. The problem was simple. The relatively high rate of this charge, combined with a vociferous opposition to the idea led in Parliament by a young Margaret Thatcher, meant that developers banked even more land than they had already – waiting for the day when the official Opposition became the government. Combined with the inevitably very slow operation of an entirely new type of land tenure, and the administrative start-up costs of the Commission, that meant that the idea foundered very quickly in the midst of what effectively became a development strike by private builders.

A more topical example is the rise of so-called 'sugar taxes' on products such as very high-sugar fizzy drinks. There is no doubt that reducing the intake of such drinks is very desirable from the point of view of health policy. But one recent study, applying

economic techniques to a database of 32,000 households in Great Britain during 2012-13, has shown that increasing the price of highly sugared beverages might increase the demand for lager – not exactly what policymakers were aiming at (Quirnbach *et al.*, 2018). Notably, this was mainly because middle income families increased their alcoholic purchases as very high sugar drinks rose in price: increasing the cost of rather less sugary drinks did not seem to have this effect. The authors quite rightly pose the puzzle of why this might be rather than settle on any one explanation, but the dilemmas involved in any policy initiative emerge very strongly from such data. Similar problematic tradeoffs are everywhere, even in just this one narrow field. Reducing consumers' intake of sugary drinks will raise the amount of sweeteners in people's diets, for one thing, while the effect of going too far towards 'encouraging' healthy lifestyles might discourage citizens who find it hard to live in that manner.

On top of all this, as the dilemmas of beverage policies demonstrate, is the problem of numbers – always an art in both construction and use, rather than a science. Another example arises from an article I wrote in 2004 for the journal *Twentieth Century British History*, in which I traced the panic that set in across Whitehall when the 1961 Census tabulation began to trickle in (O'Hara, 2004). A rising birth rate at that time implied that we would pass even our present population levels in the mid-1970s, a development that would basically require the still relatively new welfare state into a massive emergency expansion. That didn't happen – the second post-Second World War birth boom abated nearly as quickly as it arose – but the implications for public policy, over and above any improvements, were stark. Nearly a million new dwellings and over 100,000 new teachers would have been needed just to stand still, with no abatement of the need for social care focused on the elderly to make up for the enormous strain that all this would have entailed.

The main lesson here is simple: policy will always involve unintended consequences. Equipping yourself to see the suggestions of that already occurring should be part of all decision-making. As should the constant review of statistical demand, production and inference – a requirement that the Office for National Statistics is well aware of, but which is much more difficult in practice than it is in theory.

Why should we listen to you anyway?

You would be forgiven at this stage for asking: what allows historians to say any of this? What justifies their intervention? Part of the answer involves the possession of deep, rather than wide, knowledge – long and painstaking study in the archive, broadly defined, which allows historians just occasionally to come up for air and identify some general themes and answers. I've spent twenty years in those archives, and I've written four books about British public policy – first about economic, social and spatial planning (O'Hara, 2007), then about British maritime policy at its interface with seafaring identities (O'Hara, 2010), then as we have already seen about unintended consequences in post-1945 decision-making (O'Hara, 2012), and lastly about water policy (O'Hara, 2017) – covering even in just that last book disputes as broad and as narrow as decisions about cleaner rivers, safer beaches, flood defences, nationalisation, privatisation, rural water supply, and piping hot water into the domestic home.

I think, hopefully, that I can also narrow in just a bit further than simple 'knowledge'. In my own work, I've tried to mobilise the concept of *historical institutionalism*: a set of theories that hopefully allows us while explaining change to hold the ring between human agency, on the one hand, and deeper structural forces – economic, social, technological – on the other (Fioretos, Falleti and Sheingate, 2016). Politicians' decisions still matter, at the summit: but institutions, their ongoing and very

powerful legacies, their structures, processes, codes, guidelines and cultures, form the boundaries, the ways of thinking and the shapes of choice around them.

Analyse success, not just failure

It is important to balance out my previous emphasis on policy failure this by saying that most UK public policies undertaken since the Second World War have *not* failed. In fact, they have for the most part *succeeded* – and aided by circumstance and change, succeeded for the most part beyond the wildest dreams of anyone in 1945. But far too much contemporary commentary is still couched in terms of crisis. The perennial difficulties of the National Health Service are a ‘crisis’. Moral panics about young people, crime and the city – often based on inadequate information or poor acquaintance with the situation on the ground – are ‘crises’. Splits within the governing party or the Opposition – however minor, however ephemeral – are granted the same overblown label.

Several forces are at work here. First, a particular view of modern British history that my colleague Jim Tomlinson, of the University of Glasgow, has labelled ‘declinist’ (Tomlinson, 2009). One popular myth about Britain is that it has been in secular and perhaps inevitable decline since about the time of the First World War, falling behind newer Great Powers (particularly the United States). Its economy sclerotic, its workers inefficient, its infrastructure dated, British national life has been denigrated for a long time – since at least the late 1950s and 1960s, at which time it became fashionable to deploy the trope of Britain’s terminal decline or even ‘death’.

Other notable trends are a deep nostalgia for an Edwardian ‘golden age’ of liberal progress, perhaps updated now to a yearning for those post-war years of both high economic growth and welfare spending – strangely, harking back to the very same era in which ‘declinism’ emerged. Then again, intergenerational politics are

important here, as the population gets older and older, and increasingly labels and pathologizes young people as if they are more of an objective set of problems than an age group.

But we need to look at the reality behind these very familiar generalisations, since looking at what works is at least as important as analysing what does not. If we just start with life expectancy overall, it is clear that this very crude indicator of wellbeing has surged upwards – less rapidly since 1950 than between 1890 and the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, but very quickly nonetheless. On the eve of the First World War, life expectancy at birth ran into the fifty-somethings for both men and women; by the post-war era, that number had moved into the sixties and seventies; it is now in the process of moving into people's eighties.

Clearly the fact that most of us are living longer has all sorts of reasons – lifestyle, diet, medical intervention and the like. But if we look at some more policy-orientated areas of people's real lives where government intervention has had some effect, we can see that in the long run at least, governments have made an enormously positive contribution to national well-being. Deaths in the winter, mainly of course of older people, have been slashed by grants for home improvement, and (since a spike in the late 1990s) in part by winter fuel payments and attacks on pensioner poverty led by incomes-related Pension Credit topups to older people's pensions. There is no doubt that public health campaigns on such matters as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome – or 'cot death' as it was labelled in the 1980s – have helped cut infant mortality. Deaths on the road have been cut by seatbelt legislation, better regulation of car building standards, and government attacks on drink-driving. The risk of drowning – I wrote about this in *The Politics of Water* – has been cut by successive governments' commitment to teaching swimming (in combination with the charitable sector), as well as better planning and health and safety policies.

There is no doubt that the British are healthier, wealthier, taller, longer-lived, safer, even on some measures and as far as we can tell happier than they have ever been before – a fact that we ignore at our cost. For what did all those government interventions do? They pushed *with* the grain. Double glazing, central heating, much better knowledge about the health of unborn and very young children, falling alcohol intake and (less positively) fewer children allowed out to play unsupervised were also behind all these trends. Governments were steering with the wind. Consider the case of Britain's much cleaner rivers, to which life has been returning ever since they appeared completely dead, relatively starved for instance of the oxygen necessary for fish to thrive, in the 1960s. That was very clearly down to the cleanup that began in the 1980s: but it was also due to the decline of British manufacturing industry (as well as its haphazard move out of crowded urban areas), trends which hugely reduced the release of pollution into our rivers.

Now, this is not to say that everything is proceeding handily in this best of all possible worlds. For one thing, note that the very rapid improvements in many of these indicators that we can see in the 1980s and 1990s – the years when I was growing up – have now slowed or stopped. The easy wins may be over: one more clue as to why we are experiencing such a very angry and unfocused politics at this time. Clearly our society continues to face grave challenges, and – right now – pressing needs. Just to take one among many: the rise of homelessness over the last few years has been as avoidable as it is tragic. The number of rough sleepers in England alone – representing just the tip of the iceberg when we look at this problem – has risen for every one of the last seven years, so that in 2017 it stood at 4,751 (Butler, 2018). But it is still important to make clear that public policy experts can both bring news of great success, and use that information all the better to analyse policy with. Just looking at failure will not work: telling the negative side of the story, full of errors or perhaps structural failings, cannot alone build up a really comprehensive picture of how we can do governance better.

Focusing on ‘success’ and ‘failure’ is in any case probably far too stark, and much too binary. Most policies exist on the inevitable spectrum between outright disaster and complete satisfaction. Failures might happen at different levels, in different parts of the policy process, affecting the eventual shape of exact deficiency (McConnell, 2010). Whether objectives get turned back as part of *programme, process or politics* – broadly, as part of design, implementation or partisan dispute – really matters, and we also have to analyse where in that chain the successes and failures are happening. Even when objectives are not met, many policy studies academics point to the different forms of learning (and therefore future success) that can take place about why governments’ tools fell short.

Humility in a world of uncertainty

That is not to say that ‘experts’ have all the answers. They certainly do not, and one of their manifold failings is to write in too definitive, and too one-dimensional, a manner. The struggle to be ‘relevant’ – and, latterly, to build up case-studies of their metricised social ‘Impact’ more broadly – has led academics to think about their intent and audience. But what it has also done is draw them into a world of outsized and technicolour comment. Added to their own tendency to seek an answer, or *the* answer, this has encouraged us all to write and speak in terms that do not make enough sustained use of one of our advantages, and one of our jobs: the injection of nuance, uncertainty and granular detail into the picture.

Consider the UK General Election of 2017. One of the strands in my work up to now has been the analysis of data, including long-run trends using opinion polls and other political indicators, so I took a strong and public view of the situation at that time. Now, right up until three to four weeks before polling day, I would have confidently told you that Britain’s Labour Party was heading for a very bad defeat. You did not,

by the way, need to look at any opinion polls to reach that conclusion. Local and Parliamentary by-elections, canvassing data, focus group transcripts and the sheer weight of anecdote all pointed in exactly the same direction. But then, something very unusual happened. Labour leapt from its pitiful performance in the early May local elections to surmount 40 per cent of the popular vote in early June. They still lost, but they were not defeated in anything like the same manner predicted just weeks before. Why did this happen? There were at least three straws in the wind that we should have caught hold of.

One: campaigns do now seem to matter. Going into the 2017 General Election, most commentators were confident that the short campaign of three to six weeks or so doesn't really count. We were wrong. Labour surged, while the Liberal Democrats, Greens and UKIP sagged as the main Opposition party sucked up all the anti-Conservative oxygen in the room. Now we should have been warned about that by the Canadian federal election of 2015, at which the Liberal Party led by Justin Trudeau not only put on a very similar vote share to Labour's 2017 campaign gains, but came from third to first and added over 20 per cent and 150 seats to their disastrous showing at the previous election. Fortunately, I did note this at the time, wondering aloud in January 2016 whether we had 'got it all wrong' (O'Hara, 2016). But really that's to avoid the real point here: in conditions where party attachment seem to be weakening all the time, sudden electoral surges should not be as surprising as they were.

Two: the Leave electorate from 2016 did not constitute the General Election electorate. As we can see in work published by Matt Singh of Number Cruncher Politics, there was a very strong relationship between an increase in turnout and voting to leave the European Union in 2016 (Singh, 2016). Theresa May's electoral gamble was that she could ride to an easy, even uncontested victory on the back of Leave voters who wanted to make sure that we did indeed leave the EU. But both

she, and we, should have been more cognisant of the risk that these voters simply would not turn out again – allowing Remain Britain, in the majority at the 2017 polls, to take their revenge on her. The demographic and ideological composition of the actual electorate, it is clear, can be just as important as the movement between parties.

Three: we paid too much attention to headline Voting Intention numbers. Labour at their nadir, right at the start of the 2017 election campaign, returned some figures in the mid-20s. If they had stayed at that level, they would have been wiped out as a serious Parliamentary force that aspired to form a government. One other reason why that did not happen has to do with why their overall numbers were sagging. All data, as we have already noted, is a construct – in some ways art and judgement, as well as science. And what the main voting intention numbers were showing were that as many Labour voters in the raw data were saying that they did not know how they would vote as were saying that they would move over to the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats – 19 per cent, as opposed to 20 per cent reporting a preference to change their vote (YouGov/ *The Times*, 2017). In the first stage of the campaign, as the Liberal Democrats in particular failed to fly, these voters returned home, pushing Labour back towards respectability and then into a zone where they could compete. We failed to look deeper than the headlines. That's something else experts can do.

It is far better to express all mixes of certainty and uncertainty, all projections in the near- or medium-term, as a range of probabilities or chances. The Bank of England does this in terms of its narrow-band or wider-band 'heat maps' of where inflation is likely to go, even without significant changes in policy or external shocks. More relevant in terms of the electoral example we have just been talking about is the American elections expert and statistician Nate Silver, who has made a career out of mostly very successful electoral forecasting. Many people seemed shocked when

Donald Trump was elected President of the United States in 2016, despite the fact that some of them had been feverishly updating Mr Silver's 538.com website every few minutes for weeks. The very final update of his electoral model gave Donald Trump just under a thirty per cent chance of winning the Presidency (FiveThirtyEight, 2016). Many people seemed to think that thirty actually meant zero. But you would not, I guarantee, put a gun to your head with two barrels loaded and pull the trigger – an action that will be fatal in only a few more simulations (33 per cent as opposed to 29 per cent). Mr Silver was proved right, in his battle with those experts who gave Mr Trump a far, far smaller chance of winning: but the fact that his message often wasn't getting through anyway speaks to our difficulty in understanding what's being said to us in numbers, as much as it does about the failings of 'experts'. Even so, even he could only flag the danger. He could not provide precise certainty as to its size.

We're not at Hogwarts any more (and we're not in *History Today* either)

So, in this example as in others, we must accept strict limits as to what 'experts' can aspire to achieve. Politicians and civil servants have never, and will never, be able to take on board everything that public policy experts – historians among them – might be shouting about from outside Whitehall and Westminster's rather dense walls. They don't have time to do so, even if they had the inclination to listen. And, in any case, the efficacy of specific recommendations is very questionable. As A.J.P. Taylor once famously observed, politicians learn only 'from the mistakes of the past how to make new ones' (Taylor, 1963). One recent example: British politicians shied away from intervening in Syria's terrible civil war, in part because of their awful experience in post-Saddam Iraq. It is at least arguable that they were wrong to do so. And so on.

Recent social and cultural changes also make Professors' views even less likely to stick. The Hogwartian University, that disseminates information from eccentric dons, or moves esoteric knowledge around in the sense that it takes it from over

here, in the academy, and plugs it in over *there*, in your heads, was always something of a myth. The History Professors created by David Baddiel and Rob Newman for their *Mary Whitehouse Experience* television programme (1990-92), beloved of those born into shall we say a certain generation, were funny because they were grotesque. But grotesques have to reference some form of truth to be funny at all, and there was enough sharp observation in Baddiel and Newman's caricature to force the point about portentous and pretentious Professors.

All that seems increasingly old-fashioned now. The time has passed – and it has well passed, properly passed, if not quite declared done with – during which straight, white, staid, English, Oxbridge-educated, middle aged white men get to tell *you* what to do. That is unquestionably both a positive and a welcome reality. All we can do – if we can even do that – is advise and warn others as to their speed and line of march. In that spirit, I am now going to outline, in no particular order, six different themes or recommendations that I believe could assist in the administration of public life, and in reducing the number of public policy disasters.

Recommendation one: better legislation, more slowly

Firstly, we should at least make further progress towards treating legislation as an ordered, thoughtful, deliberative and above all restrained process. Not in the sense that it adheres to some non-existent world in which wise and all-seeing public guardians decide our future – I'll have more to say about this in a moment – but at least in a move towards making fewer, and better, laws. Since the 1980s, Ministers have been obsessed with delivering something, almost anything, as long as it looks like change. The compulsion is general, but its acceleration can be dated quite specifically. Mrs Thatcher demanded 'solutions', and not problems, be brought to her. The creation of executive bodies and spin-out agencies focused attention, welcome perhaps at first, on 'deliverables'. The transfer of some powers to the

European Union, and to the private sector given privatisation, helped to focus UK Ministers' minds on what they did control. These were for the most part public services – and, following in the late 1990s and early 2000s, even that measure of responsibility shrank to England alone. For all these reasons, legislating and 'reforming' became a key indicator in itself for Ministers' competence and likely promotion. There were far too many Criminal Justice Acts. Far too many Education Acts. Far too much change for change's sake.

It would be more useful to treat Parliament, at least in normal times, as an investigative body, a backstop and an arbiter rather than as an enabling all-purpose excuse or cover for huge omnibus laws that can't possibly be scrutinised under our present system. Let me give you three examples of what I mean. Firstly, as the late, great Tony King suggested in his short (but indispensable) Pelican book *Who Governs Britain?*, the composition of the MP teams who vet legislation in detail could be reformed (King, 2015). The expert Select Committees who oversee the work of each Department become more powerful all the time: yet the same lessons have not been read properly over into the Public Bill Committees that look at each law in embryo. Although many Bill Committees do contain plenty of MPs with some experience of each topic, it is too much to expect our MPs to equip themselves to look at projected legislation, in any field, every time the Government wants to act. Most Select Committees cannot usually be expected to take on this work themselves: they would become too overloaded. But a bespoke approach, that allowed those that do not handle very much legislation (as in foreign affairs) might sometimes take on some of this work. Limited numbers of Select Committees' members – or past members – should be able to move across and around committees in each specialist field, perhaps providing mentoring and leadership to other MPs just starting out in each area. Much more training and continuous Professional Development, and a reduction of the party Whips' role in the process of Bill Committee selection, would assist. Bolstering the construction of formal panels of Members with likeminded interests

and outside experience would help. In this way a bank of actual expertise could be built up – a limited, pragmatic but effective reform that is capable of rapid implementation.

Next, the House of Lords should be taken more seriously as a revising chamber. Again, simple one-size-fits-all solutions are not necessarily the best or right ones. Upper Chamber reform does not necessarily mean that its membership should be transformed, still less that it should become a Senate of the Nations and Regions, as many in the Labour Party propose. That may be desirable in the medium term. But more important here are that House's functions, and the extent to which it is taken seriously. The present government has very lightly staffed its Front Bench in the Lords, and appears to want to threaten and bully that chamber at every possible stage – hence the strange spectacle of the Prime Minister sitting, as an observer and as an implicit threat, while the Upper House considered Britain's Article 50 notification to leave the European Union. The reform of the Lords' membership should go hand-in-hand with more weighty though tightly-drawn powers, and a consequent rise in Ministers' consequential presence there.

Lastly, MPs still do not have enough resources to staff an office properly. They are probably not paid enough (a statement that I am aware will never be popular). But their office allowances are simply not enough to build up a real team of experts in the field they chose to monitor as a matter of their own particular interest. In short: Parliament should be both more serious, and taken more seriously.

Recommendation two: throw away your drafts

Many of the public policy debacles I have mentioned have occurred because Ministers simply cannot admit defeat. Take the example of the Conservatives' Community Charge, or Poll Tax, in the late 1980s. It became clear, fairly early on in

the Tax's implementation phase, that all was not well with the scheme. The Department in charge, and its Ministers – significantly including Chris Patten and Michael Portillo from both the Left and the Right of the governing party – signalled to Downing Street rather early on that it simply would not work. But they met with comprehensive resistance when they tried to take their case to Prime Minister and Cabinet. Making everyone pay the same charge – except students and the unemployed – held a superficial kind of attraction for the Conservatives of the time. The core of the scheme was an attempt to avoid ratings revaluation adjusting how each house was treated for the local property tax or 'rates', always politically explosive, as well as an effort to end the perceived injustice of smaller households paying the same, related to the value of their house, as larger families. There was also the intent – close to Mrs Thatcher's heart – to force Labour councils to be more thrifty once every voter could see the impact of local authority spending on their individual bank balance. Promoting individualism; helping elderly voters who had saved up for their retirement; hurting Labour: it all offered a kind of superficial logic. The only alternatives on the table – a reformed property tax, a business charge, a local income tax – clearly did not meet all these preconceived objectives. So on Ministers steamed, straight into a very large crisis.

They had not reckoned with implementation being very, very difficult – or with the scheme's inherent logical flaws. For one thing, councils administering the Poll Tax simply could not see into each household, especially in the privately rented sector, where individuals with very difficult circumstances might be living. Not only that, but tens of thousands of people now simply disappeared from the electoral register, hiding from a tax they had no intention of paying. Extraordinarily, in the end four million people eventually refused to pay the Charge, in whole or in part, and £5bn simply had to be written off. The Poll Tax could not carry the moral weight that any tax must lift: namely, to be seen as fair, transparent, well-designed, equally borne by all in some relation to their ability. Worst of all politically, Labour councils could

simply blame Conservative central government as the individual cost of the tax rose and rose between drawing board and doormat. It failed both the test of efficiency and the test of equity.

Initial experience in Scotland, where the Poll Tax was notoriously first implemented, should have alerted Ministers to the dangers. The responsible Department actually did. The Treasury under Nigel Lawson was very sceptical. Yet the Government ploughed on regardless. Why? Because the whole effort became a kind of virility test, a masochism strategy long before Tony Blair coined that phrase, a totem to rightness (and Rightness) long after most of its intellectual props had been kicked away. It was the single most important reason why the Thatcher government lost its way, and it helped to bring a dominant and over-mighty Prime Minister down.

Actually, admitting that you are wrong might work better. Consider Theresa May's absurd assertion that 'nothing had changed' following her Dementia Tax u-turn during the 2017 General Election. Nothing did more to burn the surface off the planet of her credibility. Nothing could have been easier to avoid, even after the disastrous unheralded policy had been allowed to creep out. All she had to say was 'I have listened and learned, I am responsible, I have thought and considered, I have changed my mind'. Voters are crying out for a little bit of honesty. Not too much, as Mrs May's outbreak of frankness over social care's likely costs proved. But at least a measure of it. Governments should give it to them.

Recommendation three: take the long view... and co-operate

There are only a limited number of policy crises that really fix and hold the attention for a very long time. Suez was followed by rapprochement with the Americans. Exiting the European Exchange Rate Mechanism in 1992 put Britain on course fairly rapidly towards a long period of non-inflationary growth, underpinned by a more

transparent and more effective monetary policy. Even so, the issues to which a long-run approach must be taken are multiplying and becoming more important, both in terms of social equity and the financial costs of error. Experts – and especially historians – can bring the very broad outlook of the long-distance runner to bear on these questions.

Consider the problems now before us. Why has British productivity growth been so weak since the beginning of the Great Recession? How are we to pay for the population's ageing, at least until greater numbers of workers gradually come on-stream during the 2030s? What about the crisis in private pensions, so vividly summed up by the crisis over universities' own USS scheme? How are we going to fund the huge increase in total student numbers that now lies ahead, given the rise in the birth rate during the early twenty-first century? How and on what financial basis can we update the UK's pitifully child-like physical infrastructure? I would contend that in all these cases much, much more than a single government's endeavours are in play.

One good example is the state of the social care sector, now deep in crisis in many parts of the country. Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Theresa May have now all tried to pay for much more generous provision, via various forms of deferred inheritance tax – charges that are likely to fall on citizens only after their death, when they are unlikely to mind very much that they are rather less wealthy, on better-off Britons (because it will be their houses that will be charged), and on younger voters' unearned inheritances. These efforts have for the most part been defeated by partisan opposition, first from the Conservatives in 2010, and then by Labour in 2017.

Timidity has also played a role, particularly in Mr Cameron's case, but the deep partisan divisions that now scar the landscape of our national life are threatening to

destroy rational public policy. It need not be like this. Both parties were committed to university expansion in the early 1960s. Both accepted Britain's membership of the European Union from the mid-1980s onwards. Social care is a good example of a policy that will only really be solved by the two main parties agreeing on at least some common ground. There must be a way to tax older, wealthier Britons, to make sure that the young – already very hard pressed – do not have to meet very uncertain and potentially very high costs for their parents in their old age. There must be a way to cap the liability of those older Britons who need prolonged help, either at home or in some form of sheltered care. There must be a way of sharing the cost between the state, the individual and the family. But our only chance of getting there from here is for the parties to agree that this most intractable and sensitive subject, touching both on most people's only source of capital (their house), and their long-term infirmity, is treated like adults would treat it: by agreement. I am afraid that I am not holding my breath.

Recommendation four: keep testing yourself, keep doubling back

Good policy is not made in one direction. It is certainly not made in straight lines. I think that our traditional models – how we think about the making of laws, for instance – has long been superseded. But that hasn't quite crept its way into all policymakers' minds yet. The old story runs something like this. Civic society in some way diagnoses some form of economic or social problem. Trade unions, parties, think tanks, academics and the like transmit that to Parliament and Government. Government resolves to do something about that problem. It passes legislation. That legislation is subject to controversy and amendment, but measures of some form are eventually passed. Then Government monitors those measures for their efficacy, before we start the whole loop again, with the institutions standing between government and 'society' – in inverted commas – also reporting back on what difference (if any) new legislation has made.

But actual government certainly does not work like that. There isn't a feedback loop that exists in one time and in one place. The policy space might much better be imagined as a set of jigsaws leaning against each other. I first began to think seriously about this issue when I read Jose Harris's classic 1970s book *Unemployment and Politics: A Study of English Social Policy, 1886-1914* (Harris, 1972). What Professor Harris showed there was that it is the administration of policies that can come *first* – that it can be the new legislation that can create the raw data that drags governments into new fields, new arenas. It is only *then* followed by all sorts of other policy actors catching up with government, constantly cross-checking with Ministers and officials about the results flowing from any new machinery or monitoring. The feedback loop, in its turn, does not happen (and indeed should not happen) at the end of any process, but continuously during its lifetime – something that saved Universal Credit from complete collapse during its so-called 'reset' phase in 2013-14. Had Ministers waited until nearer the end of any implementation phase, the disaster that Universal Credit had by that stage become would have been much, much worse.

So the key idea here is: continuously check your workings, all the better (as I noted under point two) to throw them away. Just a tiny pinprick of detail here: recently, the city of Bristol's troubled Metrobus system tested its first buses along the specialised guided busways that the city has built, at some expense. They didn't fit. The tolerances or likely size bandings of both the tracks and the guiding wheels on the bus came in at the extreme ends of the scale. So – back to the drawing board, as with so many elements of so many public transport schemes in the UK. Constant testing, in the laboratory, as well as in the building phase, might not have avoided this: but it would have increased the chances of reducing the delays involved. So just as GCSE and A-Level candidates are told 'keep testing yourself' – keep replicating your main points and ideas, keep reformulating them to answer different questions,

all the while deepening the impression they are making in your memory – all policy should be constantly tested at clear signposts, rather than during implementation.

Recommendation five: embrace chaos

There is, by the way, another reason why governance doesn't conform to the classical nostrums that we once found in textbooks. It is much messier, more chaotic, more contingent. I think of this as the BBC's chaotic and satirical political situation comedy *The Thick of It* in action, but with less swearing: as that show's cynical and emblematic spin doctor Malcolm Tucker's worldview made flesh. For those of you who don't know, his motto is really 'if someone can mess up, they will' – though the actual quote is rather longer. In social science terms, governments 'puzzle' as well as 'powering'. They are forced to inch forward into a maze full of fog, for all the reasons I've outlined. Experts differ. Statistics are wrong. We pass too many laws, to which we then become politically over-committed. We do not have enough cross-party working. We think that we can assess policy when it's 'working' (or not working), when in fact that is far too late.

But these inevitable hallmarks of governing at all need not cause us to lose confidence. In fact, accepting all this could make government rather better. For one thing, voters are I think ready for Ministers who say 'I am not sure', 'I don't know', or 'I have changed my mind now things are clearer'. Not too much, not too often, but sometimes. Secondly, accepting this level of uncertainty, this amount of constant movement, could well encourage all the ways of governing that I have been talking about. If we understood more clearly just how uncertain things are, we would pass fewer laws to try to control everything that comes at us, like some frenetic (and unsuccessful) game of Whack-A-Mole. We would subject our interventions to more constant testing. And we would listen to other people's point of view rather more.

Such an outlook, lastly, would also allow Ministers to give up power, as well as greedily keep hold of it – to which topic I now turn.

Recommendation six: cascading devolution

This brings me to my last, and perhaps most concrete, recommendation. And that is massive, continuing dynamic devolution across the United Kingdom. Scotland now has an enormous range of devolved powers, a situation which is likely now to remain a concrete and unmoveable part of our constitutional landscape. The Welsh governance situation is evolving, albeit slowly. The situation in Northern Ireland is at present very worrying, with the main parties unlikely to share power any time soon – though long-term trends, and the desire to actually make a difference in Northern Ireland itself, may one day force their hands. Across England, our governance structures are far too centralised, far too cramped, much too rigid. The ‘Northern Powerhouse’ of Conservative Chancellor George Osborne’s imagination between 2010 and 2016 often stayed just that – imaginative, but a slogan rather than a reality. The election of metro mayors in many of England’s cities, or of Police Commissioners, have completely failed to capture the public imagination (though directly-elected city mayors have done rather better).

What this means is that some big cities’ infrastructure is, frankly, pathetic. The aforementioned city of Bristol has almost no public transport system worthy of the name. Neither does, for instance, Leeds. The gains to civic pride, increases in urban legibility, guidance to land values and development, efficiency increases for businesses, increased tourism – all ignored in battles between different jurisdictions, and a simple failure to capture enough power as well as puzzlement. England’s city regions need an entirely new deal, with massive and hitherto supposedly impossible transfers of power to mayors and councils: including the ability to borrow much more, and to experiment with social and welfare services on a much grander scale.

The gains that Manchester is already making on all these fronts should stand as an (insufficient) example here.

Britain's physical structures, and transport systems, are a backward, near-childlike and bad joke compared to those enjoyed by many of our competitors. Being able to raise bonds to pay for better urban planning could unlock much of the potential of England outside London that is at present neglected. It might allow for bold experimentation in terms of localised policies – something that the United States for instance, though often excoriated by European social democrats, already enjoys. It might allow local authorities to co-operate with each other, without reference to Whitehall at all: the West-East axis between Liverpool and Hull, which has the potential if planned correctly to rival Birmingham, London and the Central Belt of Scotland, might particularly benefit. Such a plan might also allow us to see rather better what works at this level. For all these reasons a huge and ongoing programme of permanent devolution across the UK, but particularly in England, is more than pressing.

Teachers are their own lessons... and thank you

At this point, I want to break off for a moment and talk in a more personal manner. I think that you are usually allowed to do this in your inaugural, though I also hope to make some 'thanks yous' do some serious analytical work. I want to make an even wider point here than I've already been pressing – about the attitudes and beliefs demonstrated to me, among others, by the example of my teachers. That is far more important, as methodology, ethic, even aesthetic, than the narrow 'lessons' that we are also on the surface apparently engaged in.

Most people's first teachers are their parents, so I'm going to start there and run through chronologically. My mother has been the best guide to what you should and

shouldn't do that I could have wished. The core skill she has, and which has I hope been in at least some part transmitted to me, is the art of just pressing on – even when things are not easy. I remember, at the time of some particularly egregious reverse, looking up at her (and it must have been early on, because it's been many years since I looked up at her) and asking: 'what do we do now?' And the answer was the same then as I am sure it would be now: 'we will just keep going'. For that skill above skills, which has enabled the others, I want to say something very simple, which most of us should probably say more, if we can, while we can: thank you, mum.

Next, my schoolteachers – my A-Level History tutors, Jon Cook and Martin Cross. It's hard to overstate the very humanistic, and very kind, lessons these two men provided me with when I was first trying to grapple with this academic subject, and their contribution to my basic formulations of why things happen in the first place. As two very different men, I think that they complemented each other very well. Jon helped me see just how important laying the groundwork for any work at all really is. What are your theoretical and methodological presumptions? How are they ordered? What are the most important, and the least? Which evidence supports them, and which challenges them? Schoolteaching is hard – harder than teaching in Higher Education – and he made those basic building blocks look very easy. Martin was completely different. I suspect that he would ask, were he to write an A-Level textbook: what do you believe? What are your gut instincts? Most of all, how do you *feel*? 'Well, then', he might say: 'follow that'. Together, this was a jigsaw that all came together for me. I owe them both immeasurably.

As an undergraduate at Oxford, I was tutored with enormous aplomb and skill by Jesus College's two History Fellows of the time in the early 1990s: Niall Ferguson and Felicity Heal, though burdened by administrative and other duties of which I am only now fully aware, granted me so much time, and I suspect so much patience, that

they reformulated once again how I understood the craft of History itself. Niall and I clashed over politics from the very beginning – and certainly there was almost nothing on which we agreed. But what we did agree on was the light that could be shed on public policy by the study of History. He challenged me and my (what I thought was) sophisticated Marxism from every angle, relentlessly – from Left, Right, Centre, top to bottom – and I got used to the mental gymnastics involved in fending off the attack. That can be a trap, granting some graduates in this country a mastery only of the glib answer. Tested by Niall, I do not think that was the case, because his insistence on the links through from the theories you have in your head, to the evidence, to the implications now, examined mercilessly the links between all of them.

Felicity provided an antidote, just as Jon and Martin did to one another. Being sent back, again and again and again, to the interstitial spaces between people's public and private identities, and to the gaps within and between arguments, was a meticulous training in what it is to be a historian in the first place. On the surface, this was a less directly confrontational approach than that of many of my other tutors. But I came to realise that it was even more profoundly respectful of, and constructive with, myself and other students – because it suggested, probed, explored the argument. I was then, and I remain, profoundly in her debt.

My PhD supervisor, Kathleen Burk, was I think it is fair to say a hard taskmaster. 'Do it again' is somewhere and everywhere written on my academic consciousness. Or perhaps 'seared' is the term. Like many PhD students, I had a great deal to do at the same time as my Research Degree. But I wanted to rush through things, and Kathy stopped me. There was some ruthless editing, some bruising commentary. All of it was right. You have to slow down to do really good academic work (though no-one has ever slowed the formidable Professor Burk down very much). Kathy showed me how to do that, pulling each chapter to pieces again and again, and reformulating it

in line with the overarching argument that I couldn't yet reach. I can hear her when I supervise my own students, and although I cannot match the wide-ranging sweep and international scale of her writing, I hope I can help them just a fraction of how much she helped me.

It is traditional on these occasions to say that we stand on the shoulders of giants. Well, that's a cliché. I don't want to say that. My own debt to my teachers is much, much more important than that, and calls for a rather more significant – and fresher – tribute. The type of research I've been talking about tonight has not just been assisted by them. In a very real sense, it *is* them. Every sentence, every argument, every lead, every bit of narrative, every calculation, every graph, every chart, every table, every turn of phrase – it's them. It's all them. The faults, I must say, remain entirely my own.

This is important methodologically. Because the skills and values passed to me by my teachers, and that academics and other experts use every day, mirror and echo the kind of governance I'm talking about. Preparation. Rigorous testing. Meticulous examination. Thoughtful consideration, slowed right down to crawling speed if needs be. These are experts' values.

Anyone can take or leave individual policies. They come and go. I think that the example of great teachers – and you can probably all think of them in your own lives – is that they give you the tools both to start and finish the job. So, once again: thank you. There is no doubt that I am speaking up in your voice. I hope that I've caught at least some of your meaning.

At least experts aren't charlatans

To sum up: there are six ways of both thinking and acting that might help us make public policy. Puzzle, rather than power. Delete your old drafts. Take the long view. Test, measure and test again. Accept uncertainty. Enable others. Such approaches are much more persuasive, I think, than that of our present political leaders. To single out just a few for special treatment, as a random and probably not particularly fair list: the Shadow Secretary of State for Justice (Richard Burgon), one of the most Eurosceptical Conservative Members of the European Parliament (Dan Hannan), the now-ex Foreign Secretary (Boris Johnson), and the Shadow Secretary of State for International Trade (Barry Gardiner).

Now I am just putting forward these particular names as examples of two party leaderships that are currently trying to sell you two very unconvincing stories, which I might sum up as 'Brexit versus train nationalisation'. But their views on all sorts of things might help me make a wider point. I am genuinely sorry to say this, but I cannot stress it enough: these people are charlatans. And none of them is worse than the charlatan-in-chief, the darkly comic character often known only as 'Boris' – a man so bent out of shape by political ambition that he makes a plumb-line look like a pretzel. Such people are willing to say blue is red, and red is blue. That up is down, and down is up. On public spending, on trade, on Brexit, on their own parties' blind spots and prejudices, they seem to have no sense of shame itself. Whatever else experts are – academics, planners, educators, scientists, economists – they are not outright charlatans. That is a low bar, admittedly, but for the most part they handily clear it. Many of our political leaders do not. And though hard to quantify, it is unfortunately difficult to avoid the conclusion that this situation has got worse, not better, over the last three or four years.

One reason for this is our increasingly bitter partisanship. If you take a look at social media maps of present party political competition, for instance those assembled by the think tank Demos over the course of the 2017 General Election campaign, they show a very clear clustering by party, with little engagement between each group, but also – just as worrying – that the engagement gets less the further away each cluster is from another. So there is a little engagement between social media accounts run by self-declared Conservative and Labour supporters, but almost none between (for instance) UKIP and Labour, and especially UKIP and the SNP. Now, UKIP were much less of an electoral presence in Scotland than elsewhere, so that will explain some of the differential, but the consequences for a Parliament that could well have contained a few UKIP MPs – and did contain 56 SNP MPs – could have been very rancorous indeed (Smith *et al.*, 2017).

Recent days have injected into our politics a poisonous tone of hatred that was not quite there before – or, at least, did not contain the air of threat, the tightened atmosphere, that has pertained since the tragic murder of the Batley and Spen MP, Jo Cox. Her motto, ‘more in common’, is today observed more as pious incantation than real insight. Instead, rival tribes of Left and Right roam the political landscape, meting out justice to those they deem insufficiently committed to their questionable cause. Their shared techniques reveal them to in fact share much more than they would like to admit. Delegitimisation of their opponents – especially their internal opponents. The fanning of social media fury. The deployment of anonymous swarms of trolls and bots. Loyalty tests. A semi-sponsored (but deniable) ‘new media’ of alt-Right and alt-Left. A dark humour that dares others to draw the boundary between real statements and a self-knowing mocking set of poses. The employment of intellectual outriders who say what the leaders cannot say. And lastly: outright untruth.

Here is the reality. Extremists of both Right and Left are trying to pull this country apart. Right now, they are succeeding: so much so that British politics looks like Humpty Dumpty, broken to bits at the bottom of his wall. In part this is because their approach is superficially attractive, but actually sunk deep in philosophical error, a set of misconceptions about our collective life that exists at two levels. The first is that they claim to have an answer – *the* answer. On the Right, Brexit will solve your problems. Unemployment? Low wages? Record levels of immigration? Over-subscribed schools? Over-fishing? Let Brexit fix it for you. On the Left, the state will intervene. Your train is late? Your university is expensive? Social care is broken? Let the taxpayer fix it for you. I need hardly add that these approaches are likely to prove misleading.

It's not that they are necessarily incorrect, in detail. For instance: rail nationalisation probably would lead to some benefits emanating from the integration of services with track infrastructure. It's that the Ministers and Shadow Ministers talking in this way seem unaware of the way policy is actually made, subject to all the constraints of time and thought and energy I hope I have begun to detail here. To perhaps unfairly pick on Labour's plans: is the state really going to manage the backwash from Brexit, *and* nationalise much of the utilities sector, *and* completely reform England's Higher Education system, *and* launch a new state-led infrastructure programme, *and* reach much more ambitious housing targets, *and* fund the National Health Service so that it meets all our needs, *and* save social care? The answer is no. Of course not. No Labour government could possibly hope to do those things – a prelude to another round of public disillusionment, further deepening our current political malaise. The most profound objection is not that these pronouncements are disingenuous, or likely to be inefficacious – though they are – but that they are morally wrong. Because it is wrong to offer people not only that which you know will never be, but that which you know in private simply *cannot* be.

Because such leaders aim, secondly, at certainty, at control – at timeless end-points that are desirable in and of themselves and that live in a kind of eschatological forever-present, both millennial and millenarian, final states privileged and rarefied as if they are principles to be exalted rather than tools to help people progress. Unfortunately, no such public policy end-point exists.

Given these two very worrying trends in what might be termed the deep presumptions, the trigger motions and prejudices of those who seek to lead us – a fixation on certainty, and a focus on theoretical targets rather than paths towards actually better lives – it is hard to be optimistic about any set of recommendations today. Unless and until we ourselves, as voters and citizens, say ‘stop’, politicians will continue to act like this. Experts can warn all they want. Only politics – new demands on politicians to put their foot on the brake, before we become too divided – can effect actual change. It’s not about what I know. It’s about what you know.

Conclusion: if only there were people who could help

Experts can’t tell you what to do. But they can draw you a map, an aim that perhaps does not sound very ambitious, but may contain rather more hope than at first appears. To speak like a historian, for instance: we live at a very difficult time in our public life. But the long view tells us that things have been much worse, and also that they will very likely get better. It is not 1931. Our entire economic system is not teetering on the brink of dissolution. It is not 1940. Britain’s armed forces are not clinging to North-West Europe, betrayed by a near decade-long retreat in the face of the dictators. It is not 1976, with inflation surging and Britain forced to surrender its budgetary autonomy to the International Monetary Fund. It is not 1981, when a sado-monetarist drive towards inefficient so-called ‘efficiency’ wiped out a tranche of the UK’s manufacturing sector. Our situation was far more serious then, and we

recovered. All this can be done in a better way. We can put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

Tonight I have suggested a handful of ways in which we can negotiate our way out of some of those systemic malfunctions. Legislate at caution, and slowly. Rip up what's not working, rather than double down on your mistakes. Look ahead. Check your workings. Accept help, even from unlikely places. Embrace mess. Think. Analyse. Devolve. Because experts can at least sketch the alternative marching routes for both governments and voters. Tomorrow, like every other day, all sorts of people will get up and do just that. In universities, for instance, we will research, and write, and teach, and speak, and engage, and consult, as per usual. Maybe people should start listening a little more to the recommendations that are both implicit and explicit in universities' work. It can't hurt.

Perhaps all this amounts just to an emphasis on process. On administration. But I would bet quite a lot on the following: it doesn't seem like process if you've lived in the UK for half a century and you can't get cancer treatment on the NHS. It doesn't look like administration if the house your single mum rents is going to be taken away from you because your tax credits have been messed up, or if you're that single mum and your kids are crying and you don't know what to do. It's not a matter of mere detail if your Personal Independent Payment assessors say you can work when you can't walk out of your front door. It's not a little thing if you're eighty years old, and you need a hip replacement, and you need to take four buses to get to see your General Practitioner. It probably seems quite important.

These recommendations might seem small. They aren't. It is not 'technocratic' to insist that real people's services and lives get better. It is not bloodless to focus on delivery. It is not any sort of ideals-light 'centrism' to believe that what you say you will do will actually get done. It does not speak to a lack of commitment, or care, or

passion, if you reject the divisive politics of social media crowding. On the contrary: all of that might be found at least near the heart of a better politics that people actually feel they recognise, they own and they like.

Expertise can build both signposts and waymarkers. They can tell us all where we've been, and where we might be going. It can provide a link between the islands of what we know, and allow us at the same time to circumvent the *ersatz* or indeed false knowledge of what passes for our political leadership. Experts do not know much. But they can recommend how you travel along those some much-neglected, forgotten, overgrown – but far from hollow – ways.

Thank you very much for listening, and good evening.

Endnotes

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