

## Context

It was snowing in London. The dinner to raise funds for playing fields had ended, and it had been a long day. Usually I would have walked into Bank station and be home thirty-five minutes later.

My feet dragged. The Central Line, which carries 500,000 people a day, was closed. Some weeks before, a train had derailed in a tunnel after its engine fell off (no one knew why), injuring thirty-two passengers. My route home that night was overground to Chingford where I came out of the station at 11 p.m., and with no buses operating or taxis for hire, I walked for an hour through the beautiful, snow-covered Epping Forest.

Three months after closing, the line fully reopened.

Being a problem-solver by occupation and inclination, my frustrated mind turned to this: how on earth could one of the world's most advanced cities manage to disrupt its essential transport infrastructure, the lives of so many, and its economic activity so foolishly, and with such little interest from those in power? Surely keeping the engine attached to the train is a key task for rail operators. Who was responsible, first for trains with detachable engines, and second for sorting them out when they went wrong? And where was the sense of urgency? To whom did this matter?

The answers were fuzzy. Responsibility for London Underground at that time – 2003 – lay with the Department for Transport, which is of course run by civil servants, who value the 'clever generalist' and the ability to 'master a brief'. Because they are clever in an academic sense, these generalists believe they are capable of almost any of the hundreds of diverse tasks found in every government. But no one there had any operational experience of commuter railways, or of running a large organisation like London Underground, or of attaching engines to trains. Neither had the ministers, who were unable to interrogate the rail management

and challenge its decisions. In terms of public pressure, the chain of accountability was as strong as a cardboard bicycle lock. It wound its way from us, the users and voters, through to the national government and the election of a political party every four or five years, through its many priorities, on into a minister of the day with his or her agenda, onward to the civil servants and thence to London Underground. In other words, the next time the government might feel some heat over this issue was two years hence at the general election, by which time it would have been put to bed and politically forgotten. In effect, there was almost zero accountability of London Underground to the public.

In many modern countries, the metro is the responsibility of the city government run by executive mayors. These are politicians who, rather than having to work through unelected officials (who control most of what happens and are immune from public pressure), are elected to get things done – that is, to act in an executive capacity. The electors then know who to hold responsible. In local governments, non-functioning train lines become top priority very quickly. In national governments local issues are way down the pecking order.

When the Central Line was closed, London had recently elected its first executive mayor, Ken Livingstone. Here was another piece of the governmental jigsaw. Margaret Thatcher had abolished the Greater London Council in 1986. As it was expensive, grossly inefficient and irreformable – the culture lay thick in the walls – she was right to get rid of it. (During my brief time working there, we were well paid but had so little to do that some alleviated the boredom with afternoon trips to the cinema.) The problem was not that it was abolished, but that out of vindictiveness and revenge, Thatcher did not replace it with anything. (The UK system allows so much power to be exercised by the prime minister that she had become like an absolute monarch.) No city can function properly without sound local government, but that was London's fate until finally a new government did the right thing – in 2000 the Greater London Assembly came into existence, including its operational arm, Transport for London.

However, the government of Tony Blair – another of the 'absolute monarch' tendency – prevented the transfer of control of London Underground to the GLA until 2003, after itself

signing controversial, flawed and ultimately failed private finance initiatives for track maintenance. Why they stopped the transfer was as much to do with political and personal jealousy as contracts – the new mayor had stood for office as an independent against the wishes of his party's hierarchy. Even worse, he was popular and competent. Once he got hold of the Underground it started to be managed more for its passengers than for the rail union's officials and drivers. (Much of my commuting life had been spent at Leytonstone station where the line divides, waiting for an Epping train as a disproportionate number were sent in the other direction to Hainault. I always presumed that the drivers lived that way; only recently did I discover that the rail union's boss, Bob Crow, was based in Hainault. Was it he I should have been thanking for consuming so much of my life at Leytonstone station?)

As an executive mayor, with both the power and the responsibility to appoint his civil servants, he brought in hardened and experienced metro managers from New York. The service improved as the executive mayor delivered what he had been elected to do. It still has a long way to go. If the government system around it is further developed – developments we will identify in this book – then it will get there. Otherwise it won't.

Totting this all up, the underlying reasons that led to the engine dropping off were: an unaccountable London Underground; civil servants without the experience or idea of how to run a large metro service, nor interest, nor organisational motivation; no feedback or monitoring of results by Parliament; prime ministers with too much power, and with psychological flaws; and no executive mayor in control. Two political parties, three prime ministers, five governments and a herd of transport ministers had between them created, or allowed the conditions for, something off the dumb scale. And none of them meant to.

There was no single cause, no headline howler. It was the system – the System of government to, in this case, run the trains – that was at fault. Contrary to what many in power would have us believe – that the system we have is essentially the only one possible, that foreigners may do things in other ways but they wouldn't work here (why?), that you mess with our age-old democracy at your peril (how large is their vested interest?), or whatever other rationale for feet-dragging is trotted out – there are all manner of ways to run

governments and public services. The UK happens to have one way. The government system for running the Underground was changed. It now looks more like every other modern city's. Don't say it can't be done – it can; but not by using the thought processes usually employed by those within these government systems. A different perspective and discipline is needed across the board.

### **From Failure to Success**

The chances are that sometimes, if not always, you are frustrated with the standard of government we endure. As weird decisions emerge from behind the tinted glass, you too might wonder why on earth we end up with so much semi-competence. Is good government just impossible? Is excellence a foolish dream? Are we the victims of vested interests preserving the status quo and thus the roles and egos of the current participants? These interests have come to dominate and skew, be they Wall Street, oligarchs, corporate boardrooms, Civil Services, legal professions, party political establishments, or news media. Soft corruption has become normalised both through the informal institutionalisation of these influences and through the job, pay, and pension protection of those in government.

Government really doesn't have to be this bad. We don't have to be overtaxed, underserved, annoyed by semi-competence, spun into resignation, and excluded from power. Informed and aware as never before, some are no longer willing to accept crap service, opaque decision-making, and this rather shoddy mixture of vested interests found in every government. Some people's standards are higher than those their governments give them.

This book is about a design for successful government, called a Treaty for Government. A treaty is a formally concluded and ratified agreement between countries or groups, usually covering peace, an alliance, commerce, or other relations. In the context of this book, it is an agreement between the people – us – and government. My motivation for thinking about the Treaty came from a combination of personal frustration and a belief in the equality of people, and my organisational nose which can tell that our system is crumbling. Sooner or later things this bad go bang. And when governments go bang, there is a lot of suffering all round. Similar conditions

can be seen around us to those anthropologist Joseph Tainter finds as causes for the collapse of complex societies in past ages – more and more cost being absorbed by the complexities of government bureaucracy, the banking system, agricultural subsidies, and/or construction booms: ‘When the marginal cost of investment becomes noticeably too high, various segments increase passive or active resistance, or overtly attempt to break away.’<sup>1</sup> The list of today’s segments is long – from the Scottish National Party and UKIP to Occupy and simply not voting.

The Treaty seeks to redistribute power and establish essential disciplines via tamper-proof rules, including rigorous feedback on every arm of government and all of its policies and decisions; a ‘Resulture’ for government by results rather than by procedure and spin; a consequent abandonment programme of redundant or broken legislation, regulation and policy; rigorous vetting of policy, both to get better decisions and to prevent preferential lobbying by the rich and powerful; a revitalised and energised House of Lords with authority and a positive job at last; the Civil Service split in two with the traditional arm sticking to the apolitical ‘Northcote–Trevelyan’ role it can perform and the ‘new Civil Service’ run by a new breed of executive ministers and staff who know how to do the necessary jobs; effective supervision and regulation of public sector organisations and of companies delivering for the public; and a new set of duties for all working in the public sector, including one of straight-talking.

The Treaty contains a fairness and intergenerational deal to establish fair pensions for everyone, fair taxation, fair welfare, and fair terms and conditions, and to constrain the transfer of costs to future generations for pensions, debt, and climate chaos. A Congress for the Future would be established. Corporate behaviour would be redirected through company law changes. The Treaty would re-establish real local government – very different from what we experience today; introduce the right to referendum; end our bipolar political party disorder and introduce proper competitive democracy between the parties; and level the funding playing field by limiting donations and providing base state funding.

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1 Joseph A. Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (Cambridge University Press, 1998)

Who am I to try to come up with such a treaty? Firstly, I'm not a politician, or civil servant, or lord. My background is thirty-five years of experience of organising to perform – whether in the public, private, or third sectors – from voluntary bodies with no paid staff, to global corporates with turnovers measured in billions and staff numbers in the tens of thousands. My formal education was at Manchester University, Harvard Business School, and Oxford University, alongside countless programmes with specialist trainers and academics – from stress management to creativity, from project management to short-interval scheduling, from the Hoffman process to design. My early life in civil engineering taught me structured analysis, and perhaps most importantly for this book, how to design things so they don't fall down. I've learnt by doing, by teaching, and by making mistakes. Learning is in my veins and I hope never to stop – after all, surely the purpose of life is to learn.

I've seen government from every angle. First, like everybody else I experienced and judged governments as a consumer and citizen. Then as trustee and chair of the relationship agency Relate, with government as a major funder and with the coincident objective to reduce family breakdown. As a founder of a government-established family institute. As a think-tank author developing new policies, from criminal justice to public engagement. As chair and trustee of Demos. As an adviser to several government ministers. As a specialist on government task forces. As a consultant advising on and implementing first Thatcher's public sector reforms, then New Labour's. As a policy and organisational 'moderniser' during Neil Kinnock's leadership of the Labour Party. As the designer of the organisational blueprint for the party under John Smith and Tony Blair. As European head of entertainment and media consulting where government's role in regulation came to the fore and where industrial policy or its absence could be observed. Working with company boards, not least to remove their collective cataracts obscuring their futures. As a global and UK board director acutely aware of the impact of governments on our business in the UK, US and EU. As a member of compensation committees seeking to rein in executive pay (and yes, they are universally overpaid). As an overseer of a merger and the design of a global firm. I knew over half of the Cabinet for more than a decade. And I have a brother who had four big governmental roles.

For some curious reason people assume that you must be party to your close relative's thinking and decisions, and that you share responsibility for their acts. Periodically I would be attacked at a meeting for no apparent reason. Only later did a psychologist explain that what they were really attacking was some recent decision or statement made by my brother. No need to take it personally – they just wanted to lash out. Him not being to hand, I was the next best thing.

In terms of knowing his mind, no top politician – especially one who survived in Cabinet for thirteen years – says any more to anyone than is absolutely necessary. Every word can be a hostage to fortune. Phone calls were clipped and formal. Both of us had to maintain firewalls as conflicts of interest could be levied against us. My knowledge of his specific actions was strictly limited. He did not read this book before publication and may disagree with every word; but as a dedicated observer of organisations and of people and their motivations, I had unusual insight into the pressures, obstacles, choices and working life of a heavyweight minister. It was invaluable, and with my personal and several professional lives coalescing, I had acquired an external view as a recipient and experiencer of governments, and from the inside trying to get something useful to happen. Putting this all together looked like an unusual combination of experiences with which to dissect government, why it fails, and more importantly how to make it succeed.

### **The Basis of This Book**

To find answers takes an understanding of what a government says it is going to do and what it achieves. That all sounds quite simple, and expressed that way, it is. Yet life in government is extraordinarily multifaceted. What is going on, who is doing what to whom, and why? What motivates these people at the centre? At this point vast complexity and dysfunction come to the fore. To unravel the puzzle the analysis has to grasp the causes of policy, the causes of odd decisions, the causes of underperformance, the causes of good and bad leadership. The causes are, at times, almost as many and varied as the problems, and often stem from the psychology and motivation of those at the top. Mostly they are hidden from view.

The book uses analytic tools to assess government in a way that hopefully makes sense to people outside. The analysis holds a mirror to government for those that want to look (a challenge for some large and embedded egos). Government is an organisation – a very large one, but an organisation nevertheless. Organisational analysis shines a light in hidden corners, finds unexpected villains and fresh insights, and explains why government performs with such mediocrity. It is worse than you think.

Whenever something happens in any organisation, my first thought is why. Not the why on the surface but the hidden, organisational why. Why has one football club been consistently successful and one not? Why is this train late? Why have we run up so much debt? Why was the M25 built with a perpetual bottleneck at the A10 junction which wasn't removed until about twenty years later? Why is politician X trying to persuade me of Y?

Several types of analysis have been employed. In analysing policymaking, alongside my lifetime's experience in and around government, I examined fifteen policies from the mid-1980s to the 2010s as case studies. (Refer to the website [www.treatyforgovernment.org](http://www.treatyforgovernment.org) for details.) I also examined the ways in which old ideologies drive policies. Just where do policies come from? (You may be surprised.) Delivery of government services occurs through many channels, and here I wanted to identify the causes of failure or poor performance. Another key area to look at is the feedback on what any organisation is doing.

The largest analysis, though, has been of 'root causes' – specifically of the organisational reasons why the New Labour government lost the 2010 election. Flipping my mind from internal moaning at the state of things to investigating with a purpose, there in front of me was an obvious analytical place to start – the political party that I had played a part in modernising and which had become electable again, that had been a long-standing administration with many very able and talented people in and around it, that started with quite a bang, had run into the sand. What went wrong? Well that's pretty clear, is it not? They had the wrong leader, somehow they had engineered the largest mass immigration in the country's history without meaning to, and their miracle economics turned out to be apocryphal. But there is more to these causes than simply a wrong decision somewhere. Why on earth would a political

party go into an election with a leader it knew could not win? Why would a government pursue an immigration policy whose detrimental effects were becoming as apparent as its merits and which, on its own, was sufficiently unpopular to lose them the election? Why would a government of intelligent and motivated people (that started with such vision and impact) self-mutilate and display ‘initiativitis’ and not much else, finally losing to an Old Etonian? Why, by the end, were many of its activists so angry with their party that election campaigning felt false? Is all of this just the inevitable consequence of the political playing field or is losing an election wholly unnecessary? Should the new leader of the Labour Party just wait for the slings and arrows to wound the coalition and around the party’s turn will come? Or is there more to successful politics than politicking? Is it just possible that government could be made to work better and be more than the mixture of people, policies, practice, chance, events, the media, and public perception interacting to a conclusion? What can organisational theory and practice tell us of how government could reform to improve its performance sufficiently that losing an election would be pure carelessness?

The ‘why’ questions kept rolling. As I interviewed more and more people, my question went beyond why Labour lost. The underlying issue was why had its failures so outrun its successes – a far more complicated but potentially fruitful quest. And, by that point, the coalition government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats was accumulating its own roster of failures. And I could not help noticing that no government in the world appeared immune from failure.

It was quickly evident that thinking in the old ways was not going to provide the answers. Hundreds of politicians, civil servants, commentators, and academics are doing that all of the time. But the frame through which they view the system *is* the existing system. Their beliefs are that this system can be flexed here and there – chairs of select committees in the House of Commons can be elected by all MPs rather than being appointed by prime ministerial patronage, or hereditary peers in the Lords can be ended – but at heart the system has to remain. It is fixed, almost ordained. And, of course, all or most of these thinkers are in the system or dependent on it. It is impossible to see what is really going on from within.

Having spent a working lifetime with organisations of all shapes, sizes, and ownerships in many countries, and thirty years of working with and for and observing government from every angle, I started to look at government through an ‘organisational lens’ rather than from the usual perspectives of politics and their parties, of the positive and negative spin, of the dense bureaucracy, of legalese, of grand-sounding constitutional considerations, and of the ‘this is far too clever for the public to consider’ attitude that clouds so much of it. Within the world of government there is no awareness that an organisational lens will get to the answer.

Pursuing this line of sight some of what I found is obvious, some not. This book has emerged and become part analytic and part detective story – and a call to action.

Can an organisational perspective really come up with the answer? Well, this book provides mine – as objectively as I can. In reading it you will judge whether it is compelling. I think it is and that its conclusions and solutions are potentially profound for the way governments of all persuasions work and for the quality of government we receive. And in most countries. That’s a big claim. I hope by the end you are convinced.

This is not a book about what governments should do to us, but about what we should do to governments, wherever in the world they are – a quite different journey.

### **Definitions**

I’ve tried to write the book to be understandable by everyone, especially those without several degrees in organisational theory or political science. But we need some terms. So, what is meant by government, system of government, Civil Service, and the other elements of the machine?

Here the word ‘system’ means an organised collection of parts that are integrated in order to accomplish an overall goal. Our system of government contains several institutions and mechanisms to get things done, and to perform checks and balances on government powers. It uses information and debate. Accountability and incentives are vital components. Most significantly one part always affects another, and the whole is dependent on the functioning of each part and on their interaction.

The government is what we elect via political parties every few years to do all those things needed to run the country. This is called the ‘executive’ branch of the system. The legislature is the part with the power to pass laws – in the UK this is the Houses of Parliament.

The Civil Service can be split in two – essentially the central group of around 5,000 mainly in Whitehall in central London that administers the parliamentary, political and legislative processes and continues regardless of the party in power, the rest to be found in a considerable variety of public sector organisations (PSOs) doing things like tax collection, industry regulation, land registration. The Civil Service is not the government, although it often behaves as if it is (or as if it should be). Nominally it has no executive power. In practice it exercises much.

Power has to be spread. If all power is concentrated in the government then it is a dictatorship. In our system power is spread through laws that stipulate what governments may do, and the very separate branch of the judiciary to enforce them. The House of Lords exercises power by challenging proposed laws and sending them back to the MPs in the Commons for second thoughts. Power is further dispersed through semi-independent regulators with responsibilities to set interest rates or to determine whether a company has a monopoly, for example, because making these apolitical has been found to produce better decisions in the long run. Some bodies work best when they are political, and some when they are apolitical. This distinction is a running theme of the book.

Checks and balances are vital to good government. Select committees have powers of scrutiny to hold governments and their many arms to account, and to review decisions and see if they can be improved. Two heads are better than one. The Public Accounts Committee of the House of Commons regularly lambasts a public sector body for waste, inefficiency, or plain crassness. The drawback here is despite the public flagellations, little or nothing improves – these bodies are like memory foam, and after a brief flurry of press releases of news-speak, apology, or contradiction, they return to their old shape. This theme of continuous ‘unreform’ will also feature regularly in the book.

Underpinning these checks and balances is the National Audit Office (NAO) responsible for the accuracy of the accounts of all government bodies and for their value for money. The NAO is a product of Parliament and not the government of the day, and is independent – although also made of memory foam. A newish development has been the increasing independence of the Office for National Statistics to produce real and not massaged figures on government activities, from farm outputs to road casualties.

Finally there are what I call spreaders of best practice – bodies whose job it is to find out the best way of doing something, to publicise this, and to encourage all to do it that way. The now closed Audit Commission used to do this for all local councils, and had significant effect, despite limited powers of enforcement. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) is having greater impact as it scientifically assesses treatments for anything from diabetes to heart attacks to warts and all, and promotes application of this best practice by every member of medical staff. The establishment of NICE followed research in the US which found that it took seventeen years from the first use of a best practice to its near universal adoption. That's a lot of pain and death on the back of professional ignorance and ego.

People of many varieties work in the system. Their behaviour is as much determined by their particular employing organisation and its culture, as it is by the individual. Again this will be a continuing theme – how the system shapes the actions of the individual, and how we might like them reshaped.

If we then put all of that together – elections, their method, and political parties; the three branches of executive, legislature, and judiciary; the power-spreading, the checks and balances; the two-part Civil Service; the PSOs; and local government – then this is the System of government, and the subject of this book.

To set the scene further, we need to consider the context for the analysis – what is the place of politics and why it no longer works for us, how much can more or better democracy help, whether the proposed Treaty has an international reach that means it could apply to other countries, whether the degree of change it proposes is possible, and just what is this 'organisational lens'?

### **Will More Politics Fix It?**

Having started aged six ferrying voting records from the polling station to a neighbour's front room that was temporarily the local party HQ, I had always believed in the importance of political parties. My emerging political awareness coincided with increasing depression as the landed-gentry Conservatives governed for thirteen years in the 1950s and 60s. This was followed by the relief and exhilaration of the socially reforming Labour government and the then ground-breaking laws now taken for granted, for universal and free contraception, the legalisation of homosexual acts (as they were somewhat clinically known), and equal pay. Politics worked.

My first direct experience of the democratic meeting the political was sharing a platform with the then prime minister, Harold Wilson, during the 1970 election. 'Students for a Labour Victory' had organised a rally in Central Hall, Manchester and as president of the Students Union I joined him on the platform. The Vietnam War was in full hideous swing and the US had started bombing Cambodia to cut the Vietcong supply lines. My speech focused on stopping the bombing – by any standard it was wrong, and was proved so to be many times over by future events. It felt like politics could do something. When we weren't rallying for social reforms, we were demonstrating against the South African rugby team's tour, for which Mandela publicly thanked us years later in Trafalgar Square. When we weren't talking to open up a speaker's corner in Piccadilly Gardens, we were delivering leaflets and putting crosses on ballot papers for local and national governments. It was more than just a bunch of naïve and idealistic students with few lectures to attend – although we were certainly that; mighty injustices prevailed in the world and they could and were changed. We still benefit today.

Sitting in the green room after the speeches, Wilson said that the Conservative leader, Edward Heath, was his secret election-winning asset – Heath was socially gauche, sailed a yacht, and single. However, Wilson's sure-footedness had deserted him and Heath won, and the decade of alternating Conservative and Labour commenced. The most significant political act was entry to Europe. What followed was eighteen years of Thatcher and Co., who proved to be about a third very right, a third the usual

muddle, and a third destructively wrong. Is there a way of getting the right without the wrong, I wondered?

With election night in 1997 and the New Labour landslide, here it seemed was the new dawn without the old prejudices, with well thought-through policies, and a freshness I had never experienced. Much good happened. The 2001 election arrived with the certainty that the government would be re-elected, not least because of its triumphs, but also because the other lot were still living in the 1950s. But, disappointment was also around. With so much electoral and mood power, why had the really radical changes not been made? Where was the new democracy, proper proportional representation, the new legal system, the real public sector reform, the gripping of the Conservative's major privatisation mistakes in rail, water and electricity, executive mayors by the score, and the sorting of the hundreds of day-to-day problems? Discontent mounted, to the extent that come the 2010 election many Labour Party activists took to their armchairs waiting for the government to be put out of its misery.

Typically when in government, one party spends much of its time correcting the omissions and mistakes of the other, at the same time making a raft of its own, which are then there for the other party to correct once it gets back into power. And so on and on in an endless waltz – forward, side, back; forward, side, back. Crablike government. This is very expensive. And boring. In our minds we view the source of good government as the periodic competition between parties with the most-likely-to-do-better being elected and given the job. This contest for power should raise standards. Government should get better. But does this long-standing view stand up to apolitical scrutiny? Only if by chance a good minister happened to be appointed, and happened to last long enough, and happened to have a good bee in their bonnet, and happened to have some civil servants at hand who knew what they were doing, did any long-standing but not very visible problem get addressed, and even sorted. The longer a government stays in power the less it achieves and the more mistakes it makes. As citizens we sort of half expect this and are conditioned to disappointment, and are mightily relieved that we live in a democracy not in the callous dictatorships of the Arab and African states or the old totalitarian regimes of the Cold War, with no choice and the joys of informants, secret police,

and fear. Undoubtedly, the UK government's performance lies in the temperate zones compared with these frozen wastes. But do governments have to be passable and only better than the non-democratic alternative? Is there a better way? Could they be judged not by peering downwards at dictatorships but upwards at what is possible? Surely the existing constitutions should not be merely a means to avoid oppression.

Whilst many stick with party voting, others have concluded that it makes little difference to real lives. They have taken another route, which is not to vote. This may appear irresponsible but it contains a significant truth: it is entirely rational with a system of government that fails with such regularity. Political parties seek to distinguish themselves by their policies – by what they say. But the discerning non-voter judges them by what they achieve, and governments spend much of their time achieving little, often at high cost. The non-voter has a point. The point is that governments and their oppositions are often not worth the candle of the voter's time and attention. Political parties and their media bedfellows make an awful lot of just how different they are in objectives and philosophy, how much better they are, how much more they listen to the citizens. But, stand back and observe how much has actually changed on the ground, how little your or my life has been affected by a new government – as distinct from the ups and downs of the global economy.

The ranks of non-voters have been consistently swelling. I grew up with the belief that voting was a civic duty. Australia, where not voting is illegal, seemed to me to have got it right. But then an entirely responsible, highly educated young colleague at work shocked me by commenting that she did not vote. Why? It makes no difference, came the reply. And is it not emotionally sound to avoid getting mixed up in this flawed world of hope and disappointment, of vision and frustration? It's rather like listening to the news late at night – people who do are more likely to be depressed. So don't. Gradually I came to terms with the non-voters. Maybe they are the only rational people amongst us.

Dissatisfaction with the political classes is often registered by protest voting. After all, believing the failures of government are down to the political classes is not unreasonable. Apart from riot or a letter to the editor, voting for another party is really the only

manner in which a protest can be registered. So others have taken the middle way between voting and not, by supporting other parties – the Liberal Democrats, the BNP, the Greens, and most recently UKIP. This is called democracy. But in our system its effect is 80% diluted by first-past-the-post voting. The Lib Dems have managed to turn their support into noticeable parliamentary representation, but not the others. Protest votes are allowed but no significant power is taken from the two main parties. Our system places massive obstacles in the way of new entrants to the political marketplace with the consequence of major strands of public opinion being unrepresented. We are forced into the dismal choice of the Conservative/Labour duopoly – a market as rigged as electricity and banking. Any self-respecting competition authority in the world would rule it illegal.

But surely, you might say, the differences between the political parties matters most. ‘I vote for the party that best represents my beliefs as to what society should look like.’ Well, if that used to be the case, today it matters far less than how well a government functions. In a post mass-redistribution age, these differences are not what they were. Formerly, huge political differences existed – socialism versus capitalism, the mass of the have-nots versus the haves, social justice versus survival of the fittest or wealthiest. The purpose of one side was to transfer wealth and income from the established landowners, aristocracies and the advantaged to the disadvantaged and poor majority; and the purpose of the other side was to keep wealth in the hands of the elite. The same huge differences were true for the distribution of power and influence. So, too, were the differences in their preferred economic systems – free market capitalism on the one side and common ownership and control of the means of production on the other. The old heroic politics of left versus right, public versus private, either this or that, are no longer relevant to any modern purpose.

Today, each side has stolen some clothes from the other. One Labour Cabinet minister in the mid-2000s described the social democratic hegemony we are now in. This, in his mind, meant that they would go on in government for the foreseeable future. What happened, of course, was that the Conservative Party finally and belatedly migrated to the hegemony, the coalition was born and turned out in some ways more socially democratic than the

previous government. Thus modern politics occurs in a relatively small space. It is no longer realistic for politicians to take refuge in their historic belief systems, be they the left in the sanctity of a welfare system based on giving, or the right in the sanctity of the free market. Post mass-redistribution, the political playing field has become compressed. The space where genuine political judgements and preferences are needed to make choices is quite small. Just as science has progressively reduced the ability of religions to command our observance, so experience and facts have eliminated much political territory.

I have come to recognise the flatulence of the ‘four legs good, two legs bad’ debates – more state or less state, more private sector or less, right wing or left wing, high tax or low tax, generous welfare or tight welfare. These arguments only damage my psychological health. In fact, as difference has reduced, political cross-dressing has taken off as the parties seek to appeal to electorates from less prejudiced or ideological positions: we find the Conservative Party emphasising offender rehabilitation, whilst Labour is stressing prison works; Conservatives for gay marriage, Labour for vetting and kettling; Conservatives for universal personal pensions, Labour laissez-faire; Conservatives reducing police numbers, Labour increasing them; Conservatives for localisation, Labour for centralisation. Who is left and who is right in all of this? Do we care? Or would we prefer something to actually change for the better? Surely the objective is the right state, right government, right tax, right welfare, right answers, and right actions.

Consider for one moment this list of current problems in need of fixing or at least improvement: unsustainable government debt; corporate reward for failure; increasing and spectacular wealth inequality and decreasing social mobility; widespread ineffective enforcement on behalf of the public versus businesses; misplaced and counter-productive welfare; a loophole tax system; a candy-floss, ethics-free news media; a rigged market in electricity; failed regulation of pension funds that still pay themselves highly whilst producing derisory returns for pensioners; high-cost public sectors unsatisfying to work in, whose services are dissatisfying to receive; decisions consistently bent to the lobby power of corporates and well away from public interests; reams of rules for the individual and too few for governments; corporate entrapment of consumers,

from printer cartridges to phone contracts; rates of migration that add up for economists but not for the recipient peoples to adapt and absorb; self-serving banks with those in the US and UK having sent our money to the bizarre asset bubble of sub-prime mortgages, and those in continental Europe backing government bonds without hope and construction booms without demand; a single currency introduced with much commitment and many benefits, but without the rules and enforcement essential to making it work; climate chaos still warming the in-tray; a secondary-school system under permanent criticism; a health system under permanent reform; the serial errors of government procurement that are never cured – defence and IT most spectacularly; Britain's joke road junctions; and countless minor poor performances enshrined in the underground ticket hall and its queues at London Euston station.

These visible manifestations of failure cross the traditional political spectrum of left and right, of our party and theirs, of any attempt at moral distinction. Many are common across countries. Many are long-standing. What does that tell us? Certainly, that there is more to their solution than party politics. Indeed the main parties' objectives for each of these problems are often the same. In fact, the politics of most of these nonsenses is clear in that there is little. Does anyone *not* want to fix the banks? Or schools? Or the health system? Or social mobility? Or debt? Or taxes, the news media, government contracting, the pension funds, welfare, or the London Underground ticket hall? You could write the manifestos of most political parties in many countries now, and they would all be much the same. There is no massive philosophic triangulation to be gone through, just the complex task of implementation. Not *what* or *whether*, but *how*.

This 'implementation' or 'delivery' question leads us to another factor which compresses the distance between the parties even further. The parties rarely debate the 'how' of a policy or the best mechanics for making something operational, just the policy itself. The politicians do not see themselves as directly responsible for delivery, which is perceived as the remit of the civil servants and the many agency managements. Implementing pensions reform, for example – a political act if ever there was one – was never led by a minister for the whole of the 1997–2010 government. Delivery is political in that voters make judgements as to what

has actually changed for them, and vote according to results, not promises; but politicians of all hues appear not to see this clearly, yapping on about the worth of their policies.

In practice, then, political differences are much smaller than they used to be. What has a far bigger impact is a government's ability to bring about beneficial change on the ground. This is a matter of organisation. The irony is that organisation of government does not register with most politicians as a force. Politicians see and use power, politicking, and the media as forces for change, but few grasp the importance nor have the understanding of how to use organisation to achieve beneficial change for the citizens and for the country – which is their job, after all.

But the political classes are only products of the system. This is a fundamental truth of organisational behaviour – we may think that what we do at work is entirely of our own volition, that right-minded staff and management will do the right thing. What is actually most powerful in channelling and controlling out behaviour is the culture, the role models, the rewards, the means to promotion and what is measured. In my life in organisations of all types from companies to charities to governments, I have usually trodden an independent path. This has given me integrity and support – and I've been branded a maverick, or sidelined, or evicted. On one occasion I was told I was too moral. Any organisational culture demands at least some FIFO – fit in or fuck off. Organisations control our behaviour, and organisations of government are no exception. Indeed with all that personal politicking around they are a prime example.

So in totting up how we seek traditionally to improve government through the process of periodically electing political parties, where have we got to? We have copious government failure that is not being solved by political party or leader competition, the two main parties here in perpetuity but with a steady decline in support – our bipolar political party disorder, protest and third-way voters on the rise but with very limited real power, non-voters becoming the majority and opting out, and the traditional political playing field shrinking to such an extent that parties are cross-dressing to find some distinctive space. Evidently party politics, as we know it, cannot provide consistently successful government in today's world. This is not looking hopeful. One might as well vote for a bearded comedian.

But what if you could do something about government? What if there is a reason why it makes so many mistakes? What if most often the reason it fails is not because of some ministerial halfwit but because of a system that makes halfwits of the competent and heads-in-the-sand of the visionaries? What if the system attracts the wrong kind of talent? What if the system is doomed to fail because it was never designed to succeed?

Let us move on and see if we can find a more productive arena than party politics. Will we find the answer to the problems of government through more democracy?