

# What's Wrong

The system of government has more wrong with it than you can possibly imagine. It groans under the weight of its own contradictions, but is shored up by the weight of opinion of its beneficiaries – from the adversarial industries of political parties, the news media and the law, to the senior Civil Service and some large public service organisations, to the banks, pension funds, corporates, and others who win more than their fair share of the cake through lobbying. This is not a system for you or me.

As you read through you may:

- Thrill to the way decisions are taken and policies made – a bodger's paradise where only a fraction of what is intended translates into beneficial change for us as citizens and consumers.
- Marvel at dodgy delivery – the means government uses to turn what it says into what actually happens (or most often doesn't happen).
- Wonder at governments flying blind without instruments, rarely knowing where they are, and with no systematic examination of whether policies have achieved their objectives.
- Rock to irrelevant ideologies, developed decades ago for societies long gone, but still able to get party activists on their feet stomping in the aisles.
- Catalogue the psychological flaws and ponder an insider/outsider's perspective on how the psychopathologies of power brought an end to one government's time in power.

- Gasp—if that’s the right word—at the nineteen underlying reasons why one government lost an election and what this means for current and future governments.

Here is the truth about the inside workings of government, and why they fail so often – judged by our expectations and by their intentions. And why no one in government can do anything about it – and are often as frustrated as you and I. There are so many fault lines:

- Policy choices are bent to the most effective lobby – typically the one with the most money or influence, be it an industry, a profession, a company, or a PSO like the police – at our expense.
- Most policies/decisions do not produce the intended results. Often they generate waste on a grand scale, and at worst they exacerbate the problem that gave rise to them in the first place.
- We are locked into the enormously expensive cycle of one government correcting the mistakes and prejudices of its predecessor, only to make its own, followed by the next government repeating this ridiculous zigzag as the canoe of state careers from one bank to the other with near superhuman waste, all for the sake of political differentiation.
- We are living through an ideological hangover in a post-ideological age, a problem that is made worse in two-party systems.
- Usually policy failure becomes absorbed into the role of some institution or other, and no one has the time or expertise to call a halt.
- Politicians invariably suffer from economic-theory addiction, selected according to their personal psychopathologies, which ends in a bust of one sort or another. Economics bites the hand that feeds it.

- Real accountability of and effective means to improve the performance of most public sector organisations are largely absent, despite governments trying harder and harder. Performance varies – some is professional, some is truly inept, most is mediocre. Public sector productivity remains static. In desperation governments resort to blunt instrument ‘reform’. The dominant method – New Public Management – has largely run out of road, but continues to be applied regardless. Proceduralism and managerialism are now rife and act as substitutes for any genuine outcome.
- The balance of power between the individual and government organisations is weighted very heavily in the latter’s favour. There’s a lot of noise in the relationship between government and the citizen. Complaint channels are difficult to use and mostly ineffective.
- As more and more delivery has been privatised or contracted out, the critical roles of effective regulation and professional contract management are performed to such low standards that much of the theoretical benefit of using the competitive private sector is forfeited.
- The political classes are selected mainly on their campaigning and political skills, when most of the job is about getting things to work – from schools to banks to energy markets.
- Civil servants are wholly unqualified for delivery and largely unqualified for policymaking, and operate in organisations that are not fit for their modern purposes.
- The feedback that would tell whether a policy, a law, a regulation, or a PSO is or is not working and how well or badly, is limited at best, usually totally absent, and always far too late. The subsequent mass politicisation of results is akin to leaving the scores of sports matches to the coaches to argue over. One consequence is that spin rules.

If governments frustrate you, you are absolutely right. It's a wonder that anything beneficial happens.

Parliament is not entirely blind to all of these flaws. Changes are made to the way things are run, invariably by new governments, but at the current rate we would be lucky to get decent government by the twenty-second century. Proposals get stuck because, for example, Civil Service reform means giving more power to the government and prime minister when too much is there already. Consequently, although absolutely essential, it is strongly resisted. House of Lords reform falls at the same hurdle – making it elected under the current arrangements simply means turning it into another prisoner of the bipolar political-party disorder.

The system of government limps on with its mixture of muddle, error, howlers, and the occasional success. Politicians rarely work out before getting into power that it's bust. Politicians arriving in their ministries are anxious to get on and 'change' things as soon as possible. Their horizons are short – their work lives are remarkably insecure. There's a manifesto to fulfil, news media baying for action (any action), and our expectations. So they try and often then have to fall back on spin to make it appear as if it worked. (If you've ever wondered why so much effort and time goes into spin then it is as much about convincing themselves that they are useful human beings as it is about convincing us that they are effective and in control.)

One answer to what's wrong is very simple: governments fail when they make the wrong decisions/policies, or the right decision/policy does not get put into practice. In the following pages I have attempted to convey the complex answer, here categorised under the four chapters: Policy Failure; Dodgy Delivery; People Failure; Feedback Failure. Inevitably these overlap, but I think you'll get the picture.