

Dominic Cummings Should Read the Research

August 14, 2020 [Martin Stanley](#)

Whitehall is to have ‘a NASA-style mission control centre ... with the aim of imposing the government’s will on the officials with whom it has often clashed [and featuring] television screens displaying ‘real time performance data’[\[1\]](#).

This is all consistent with Dominic Cummings’ thesis that the government needs much better policy and project support, informed by input from those with an ‘Odyssean education[\[2\]](#)’, assorted ‘weirdos’ and data scientists[\[3\]](#), supported by a rather different civil service. It is also consistent with his determination to establish a strong strategic centre that can overrule both a weak Cabinet and a compliant Parliament – and if possible a weakened judiciary.

I must admit that I rather like mavericks, and I welcome many of Dominic Cummings’ innovations, as well as sharing his concern at ‘the elevation of the *courtier-fixer* at the expense of the thinker and manager’[\[4\]](#). But if he really wants to reform British policy-making then he should follow his own advice and start by reading the wealth of data and analysis provided by those who have studied UK government over many decades. It would point him in a quite different direction.

I’ll turn to the research in a moment but let me first point out that better data or analysis would not have helped successive governments tackle the many ‘wicked issues’ such as how best to fund Social Care. As Richard Johnstone has commented, we keep repeating this question rather than engaging with the answer[\[5\]](#).

Nor would it have helped various Chancellors withstand pressure to abandon the Fuel Duty Escalator (despite concerns about Climate Change) and overdue property revaluations (which have led to much unfair local taxation). And I cannot imagine that a mission control centre could have stopped the ministerial panic that has characterised much of their response to Covid-19[\[6\]](#) – not to mention their handing of this years A Levels.

The reasons why ministers make so many poor decisions lie much deeper than lack of data and out-of-touch officials. Report after report (summarised in the annex to this blog) reach similar conclusions. They point to:

- Poor pre-legislative consultation.
- Weak parliamentary oversight including weak scrutiny of legislation.
- Ineffective checks and balances within the executive (including the Cabinet) which allow mistakes to be made and encourage groupthink.
- Political hyperactivism – when politicians individually and collectively gain ‘points’ from making new initiatives almost for their own sakes.
- Whitehall arrogance, including serious weaknesses in the senior civil service.
- High turnover of both ministers and senior officials.
- A culture of haste and determination to ‘deliver’.
- Over-willingness to recreate policies and organisations rather than seek continuous improvement ...
- all exacerbated by failure to learn from past mistakes.

In short:

- “successive UK governments have attempted to do too much, far too quickly and without paying sufficient attention to the ‘do-ability’ of their policies”.

Sadly, therefore, much of this analysis suggests that the Johnson/Cummings partnership is making a terrible mistake as it strengthens the centre, emasculates the Cabinet, and ignores Parliament. This will lead to less scrutiny, less debate, more groupthink and more mistakes.

I'll leave a near-last word to Giles Wilkes who commented as follows on Dominic Cummings' thinking^[7]:

"Alas, the world is both much simpler and more intractable. Few leave government really dumbfounded by the lack of a policy answer to a problem—most are instead worn down by the sheer political impossibility of doing it.

To quote a Twitter Guru^[8] "‘Difficult’ problems are ‘difficult’ because their small number (usually very obvious) solutions are all unpleasant to someone."

Or in the words of Jean-Claude Juncker, "We all know what to do, we just don't know how to get re-elected after we've done it."

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ANNEX

Here are summaries of the most accessible commentaries on significant UK policy failures.

The theme of Patrick Dunleavy's 1995 *Policy Disasters: Explaining the UK's Record* is that the UK is a state unusually prone to make large-scale, avoidable policy mistakes^[9], which he defines as mistakes made when decision-makers systematically choose to ignore an abundance of critical or warning voices in order to persevere with their chosen policy. Contributory factors include:

- Weak regional government and highly centralised social security and health systems.
- Weak parliamentary scrutiny of legislation.
- Political hyperactivism – when politicians individually and collectively gain 'points' from making new initiatives almost for their own sakes.
- Whitehall arrogance, including serious weaknesses in the senior civil service.
- Ineffective checks and balances within the executive which allow mistakes to be made and encourage groupthink.

Michael Moran's *The British Regulatory State*, published in 2003, analysed six high-profile fiascos^[10] and concluded that they were caused by (amongst other things) 'club government, evidenced by a devaluation of formally acquired skills and explicit knowledge at the top of government and the craze for downsizing'.

Anthony King and Ivor Crewe's 2013 *The Blunders of Our Governments* summarises 12 highly readable policy (and implementation) horror stories. They point to failures of deliberation, accountability and restraint in UK policy-making. Their examples of deficient deliberation include lack of pre-legislative consultation, and inadequate parliamentary involvement. Other problems include the high turnover of both ministers and senior officials and a culture of haste and determination to 'deliver', all exacerbated by failure to learn from past mistakes.

"It's a series of lessons with one overarching theme – that successive UK governments have attempted to do too much, far too quickly and without paying sufficient attention to the 'do-ability' of their policies".

Undeservedly receiving much less attention, Richard Bacon and Christopher Hope's *Conundrum: Why Every Government Gets Things Wrong – And What We Can Do About It* was also published in 2013. They identify similar problems to other commentators but are less critical of politicians:- "If we are to have a democracy, then we need to take it warts and all ... By all means let us have [more expertise] but let us not suppose that this will yield a clear answer to every question. And they are more ready to ask: "Are Civil Servants Up To The Job?". Their answer to this question is that ...

Ministers have a nearly impossible job. And for civil servants the outlook might seem just as unpromising. Civil servants need to be god managers to do their job properly but for 150 years they have been recruited on their ... analytical abilities ... not for their ability to make things happen. ... most top civil servants don't want to be managers – they have culturally disdained 'management' – and they also know that becoming a top manger will not guarantee their promotion to the top.

The Institute for Government's Report *All Change Report*^[11] draws attention to Ministers preference for reinvention rather than continuous improvement.

"Government has a tendency to recreate policies and organisations on an alarmingly regular basis. New organisations replace old ones; one policy is ended while a remarkably similar one is launched. In this report, we demonstrate this through an in-depth examination of three policy areas where change has been especially acute: further education (FE), regional governance and industrial policy.

In the FE sector, since the 1980s there have been 28 major pieces of legislation, 48 secretaries of state with relevant responsibilities, and no organisation has survived longer than a decade. In the industrial strategy space, there have been at least two industrial strategies in the last decade alone – and we are now moving onto a third."

As recently as 2019, Bob Hudson has argued that "*We need to talk about policy failure – and how to avoid it*"^[12], listing four broad factors leading to policy failure:

- Overly optimistic expectations
- Dispersed governance
- Inadequate collaboration &
- Vagaries of the political cycle.

Ministerial propensity for delay was rather nicely highlighted by *David Lammy's reaction to Boris Johnson's recently announced Racial Inequality Review*:

- "There are 35 recommendations in the Lammy Review. Implement them.
- There are 110 recommendations in the Angiolini Review. Implement them.
- There are 30 recommendations in the Windrush Lessons Learned review. Implement them.
- There are 26 recommendations in Baroness McGregor-Smith's Review: Implement them."

Last, but not least, I strongly recommend *Geoff Mulgan's February 2020 "Bluff, Bluster" blog*^[13]. In short:

"There are four missing parts of the Cummings diagnosis and prescription. Politics, systems, practicality and failure to learn."

[1] The Times 13 August 2020

- [2] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/feb/06/inside-the-mind-of-dominic-cummings-brexit-boris-johnson-conservatives>
- [3] <https://dominiccummings.com/category/economics-finance/game-theory/>
- [4] <https://dominiccummings.com/tag/heywood/>
- [5] <https://twitter.com/RichRJohnstone/status/1282995840055992326>
- [6] <https://www.civilservant.org.uk/skills-crises.html>
- [7] <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/dominic-cummings-naive-faith-in-the-power-of-the-state-whitehall-number-10-civil-service-spads>
- [8] <https://twitter.com/dsquaredigest/status/1212855352783491077>
- [9] <https://www.civilservant.org.uk/library/1995-Patrick-Dunleavy-Policy-Disasters-Explaining-the-UKs-Record.pdf> Professor Dunleavy's list included the Poll Tax, social security reforms 1985-8, the Child Support Agency, botched entry into, and forced exit from the Exchange Rate Mechanism, the 1987-9 recession and the Trident nuclear missile program.
- [10] The Millennium Dome, Rail Privatisation, The Community Charge (aka Poll Tax), The Barings Bank collapse, BSE (aka Mad Cow Disease), and various IT Fiascos.
- [11] <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/all-change>
- [12] <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/policy-failure-and-how-to-avoid-it/>
- [13] <https://www.geoffmulgan.com/post/bluff-bluster-brilliance-and-brains>