INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT

What's wrong with Britain's government

IfG final director's lecture

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I'm delighted to be here, except for the sadness in this being my final talk at the Institute for Government; I'm moving on after six years here to become director of Chatham House in September. I wanted to take my last chance as director to say what I make of the problems of the UK's government and what should be done to solve them.

I might thank the prime minister for making this speech easier – not just for illustrating some of the things that are wrong but for resigning in time to let me to take a clear look back at this exceptionally turbulent period in British public life.

Let me make one point at the start. One of the things wrong with British government in the past few years has been Boris Johnson. There is no code or constitution that can immediately stop someone who is prepared to lie and break the fundamental rules and conventions. The damage that causes is huge. The rules and constitution won, in the end, but he illustrated how vulnerable they are.

Had he chosen to try to call a general election, appealing to voters over the head of his elected MPs, we could have been in a constitutional crisis, which people have rightly compared to the one Trump caused in the US. He would have been defying the ability of parliament to sack the prime minister if he loses MPs' confidence, and angling for the presidential system that Jacob Rees-Mogg asserts that we already essentially have, where voters elect someone directly to the top job.

What is more, Johnson says he got the big calls right. No, he didn't, despite the vaccine rollout. The cost of Brexit is now becoming evident. The OECD projects that the UK will have the lowest growth in the G20 (a group that includes every EU country) – apart from Russia. Peace in Northern Ireland is strained. International allies mistrust Britain. It's a sign of the political culture that the new education secretary, Andrea Jenkyns, raised her middle finger to the crowds outside Downing Street. We must wait to find out what other things she thinks Britain's children should learn.

I'm going to talk about this culture and about these constitutional strains. But I'm also going to talk about the more ordinary reasons why government just doesn't work well – and how that too strains the bond with British people. You hear the incredulity, resignation, anger about this all the time. Passports. Driving licences. Tax returns and rebates. Terrifying smart motorways where it takes too long to close a lane.

If there's a positive point it's that people are very exercised by the question of how they are governed. They're talking about it. Not just about Johnson. But mayors. First ministers. The monarchy. Nor have they given up on government – as we saw in the pandemic, people are prepared to accept enormous intrusion by it into their lives. More than in many countries, people trusted the government when it exhorted them to get vaccinated.

And a lot does work well, I should also say at the start. There are terrific people in the civil service and in politics – a tough, tough, line of work which in my experience most people enter out of desire to make other people's lives better.

But many aspects of British government and its constitution do need urgent repair. This is the IfG's mission – illustrated by our conference on civil service reform last week. I've picked here four problems which seem to me at the heart of it, degrading the culture of public life, undermining Britain's role in the world and destroying the ability of any government to improve things.

1. Cronyism

I'm going to start with cronyism and its pervasiveness in British government. Crony is almost a cosy word, making it sound as if it's just about being a bit too nice to your mates. In practice, it is indistinguishable from corruption.

Robert Jenrick's rush to approve Richard Desmond's development in Tower Hamlets, saving Desmond £45m in taxes otherwise due to one of London's poorest boroughs. Two weeks later Desmond gave £12,000 to the Conservative Party. Johnson's appointment of Peter Cruddas to the House of Lords, followed three days later by Cruddas's donation of £500,000 to the Conservative Party (he has given £4m overall). Johnson's attempt to change parliamentary lobbying rules to save the career of Owen Paterson, one of his MPs and a passionate Brexiteer who the standards commissioner found to have undertaken "egregious" paid lobbying for three companies. The awarding of PPE contracts; according to the National Audit Office, those with political connections were directed to a VIP lane where their bids were 10 times more likely to be successful than those without such connections.

How is this different from corruption? It's not obvious to me – or the rest of the world. It appears to be the simple trading of favours for cash. Johnson made this the breath of everyday life in No.10 but he was not the first. The shadow of cash for honours still hangs over Tony Blair's premiership. David Cameron promised to clean up politics but has been exposed to be lobbying former colleagues over Greensill.

You could add to this the threat of corruption in local government where since the almost casual abolition of the Audit Commission in 2010, councils can pick their own auditors. Occasionally a case like Liverpool triggers formal charges. But given the financial pressures on local councils, the threat of more problems is rising.

These cases hurt Britain's reputation. It is delusional to think they don't. Those in British government like to bask in imagined compliments for good government when that isn't what others see. A current joke about Britain in Italy, a country which at least at the moment is rather well run under prime minister Mario Draghi, is that at least Berlusconi bought his own wallpaper.

It isn't as if there aren't ethics panels and advisers. There are. There is the ministerial code, too. But there are no teeth to these – and none that can get purchase on the prime minister when he is the offender. We urgently need to correct that.

2. Lying, bending the truth and self-delusion

I'll extend this point to a related one about lying and bending the truth, and the self-delusion to which these also lead.

Again, Johnson took this to characteristic lengths. Not just his lie about Chris Pincher – blasted open by Simon McDonald, former permanent secretary of the Foreign Office, who also exposed a week of floundering, misleading statements from the Downing Street press office. You could add to that Johnson's repeated false statements about employment. In January this year, according to the excellent fact checking organisation FullFact, he claimed for the fourth time that there were 420,000 more people in employment than before the pandemic, whereas, including the self-employed, there were 600,000 fewer. And If I were to start on misclaims about Brexit, I could give this talk just on that.

Again, Johnson was not the first. Of all Tony Blair's mistakes over Iraq, one of the most egregious was the "sexed up" dossier about Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction used to justify the invasion. Gordon Brown did a lot to destroy confidence in spending claims from the government, winning a reputation for dressing up old money as new.

But it matters more now in era of social media and given the assault on people's confidence from the world of "alternative facts".

It also leads, more subtly, to self-delusion, and that is, I feel, one of the pernicious problems of British government. Delusions of grandeur, certainly, about Britain's place in the world, underpinned by a lack of understanding of the basis for other countries' success, such as that of Germany and Japan. Delusions about our history; I saw officials in Iraq and Afghanistan too happy to court compliments for peace making in Northern Ireland, and ignorant about historic defeats in Afghanistan. Delusions of intellect; it is one of the unspoken beliefs in the civil service that Britain is really good at policy making, just bad at delivery. Actually, it often falls short at both.

Politicians and civil servants both need to resist this. Civil servants have done their best and their impartiality and the strength of that principle and the culture that upholds it has come through – as in that letter from Simon McDonald. But there are no sanctions that can really enforce this if public and parliamentary opprobrium is not enough, which is why upholding a culture of truth telling rests on everyone in public life.

3. Lack of skill

The two problems I've mentioned are real offences. The next is not: it is the lack of skill and knowledge of many officials and ministers. But it is one of the main reasons why things "just don't work".

There is a much greater recognition in the past decade – which the IfG has championed – that modern government needs professional functions such as HR, digital standards and finance. But there is still a lack of the right skills and specialist knowledge in the civil service and among ministers.

That is mainly the result of the speed with which people move between jobs. There is a huge turnover of officials and ministers – and prime ministers. It leaves other countries incredulous.

Modern government is complicated. It is impossible to master these subjects quickly. You still run into people in the civil service who defend the principle of the bright "generalist". Those qualities have their place – but are overrated. It leads to improvisation and of shallow answers, and does nothing to combat magical thinking about what can be done. Delivery always takes patience and skill but sometimes the problem is with the policy itself, which is undeliverable. The Northern Ireland border since Brexit is one example, and there is a lack of real understanding of Northern Ireland across Whitehall which means it is often left out of the discussion entirely. It is not a fluke that the academies programme has matured so well. It has had years of consensus behind it.

I often think that the very verbal nature of this country lies behind this weakness. A facility with words is one of Britain's luminous strengths – you couldn't, reading the combined literary output of the cabinet and ministerial team last week, say the country doesn't do a good resignation letter. Although that is not going to feature in the GDP statistics or the trade figures.

But it sometimes seems that people think that words in government are a substitute for action. You couldn't make that confusion in business. Things work or they don't, in business; customers are persuaded to stay or they go. It's part of the way that the disciplines of business don't always seem to seem real to those in government. I'm thinking of the way business leaders were invited in to explain what a no-deal Brexit would mean for them and then left for months with no communication.

As John Kingman has pointed out, it is hard to recruit scientists into government. He was speaking both as former second permanent secretary to the Treasury and as the first head of UK Research and Innovation. It's often the 'words people' who go into government. The 'numbers people' go elsewhere – for more money. Including to other countries. That may have contributed to the lack of understanding of the implications of Brexit, and of what the loss of 4% of GDP as a result, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility, really looks like.

4. Lack of accountability

The final problem I'm going to mention is the lack of proper accountability of ministers, officials or public bodies. The DVLA and the Passport Office seem detached from any sense of accountability to the ministries that supervise them. There is too often an attitude of "get this off my desk, and then I don't care". This takes advantage of the fact that citizens cannot quit their government, the way they can switch mobile phone operator, for example.

There is, too, a palpable defensiveness when things go wrong. Jeremy Hunt recorded many stories of this in his recent book on the NHS. The health workers had unquestionably gone into their profession out of a desire to help people, he felt. But when something went wrong, their instinct was to cover it up. We get it quite a bit at the IfG. I'm thinking of recent requests from two departments to scrap the projects we had done on problems within them. Both had refused to talk to us formally (although many officials still did so); they then asked at the highest level for the reports to be frozen – one until the end of the public inquiry on coronavirus. Which could be years. (We said no, adding that of course we would still represent their views if they chose to share them).

Much of it, though, stems from lack of leadership right at the top. Those in Rishi Sunak's campaign team now ask why, having given the NHS more money, the prime minister's team did not stay on the case with meetings constantly asking where the 40 hospitals he promised were (one has been built and only seven more are underway). That is a good question.

In a report just six weeks ago on the Afghan exit called Missing in Action, the Foreign Affairs Committee produced a more scathing verdict than any committee verdict I can remember. It blamed the Foreign Office, the national security adviser and ministers for a fundamental lack of planning, grip or leadership which led to Britain abandoning its allies and damaging its interests. It said there was no clear line of command within the leadership of the government.

The result of all these problems is that it is harder for governments to persuade voters of the need to make uncomfortable choices. The more that mistrust grows, the more our politics will be vulnerable to politicians who over promise in search of wider coalitions among a sceptical population.

What should we do?

So what should we do? The Institute has a lot of recommendations for such problems. Many are technical. Such as changing rules of promotion in the civil service so that officials don't switch jobs so often. More authority for the cabinet secretary to set standards.

But these don't answer all these points. So my recommendations go wider than these.

The culture at the top of government does need to change but exhortation is not enough. We need to formalise what has been informal. There need to be clear rules about awarding of contracts and public appointments. There needs to be a truly independent ethics adviser with the ability to initiate investigations. More powers for standards scrutiny in parliament.

Even more transparency about party funding, and probably, more restrictions. That is a staple of political science courses but the outrage about it is well-founded.

I find it hard to think, though, that you can transform these points without changes to the powers of parliament and other checks on the power of an over-weening prime minister. At the moment, as Jonathan Sumption, former Supreme Court judge, pointed out in an article yesterday, parliament is the only real check to authoritarianism in the prime minister. We are working on these questions in a review of the UK constitution with the Bennett Institute for Public Policy at Cambridge – and it couldn't be better timed.

To my mind, that includes looking again at the voting system and at the legitimacy of the second chamber. First past the post and the adversarial system it produces is running out of use in a big complex country of many different people where cross-party agreement on policies that persists for years is needed if the country is ever, for example, going to have an energy policy.

Jonathan Sumption suggested, interestingly, that the Privy Council which exercises the monarch's prerogative powers should get more of a formal role to give independent advice on the limits to the prime minister's authority. That is worth exploring – because these challenges to constitutional conventions are going to come up more now that we are moving beyond the ability of convention alone to act as enough restraint.

Of other remedies, more devolution – in itself a desirable goal – would help a bit in providing a check on Westminster. But it is not a panacea unless it is itself subject to more accountability in turn. There is too little scrutiny of devolved administrations, which have only one chamber of parliament, and even less for local councils.

The media is essential in all this – and local media is far weaker than it used to be. The BBC licence fee may be hard to defend in the future but the Johnson government's pursuit of an upheaval in its financing and the privatisation of Channel Four without support even from Conservative MPs smacks of vindictiveness. One of the more disturbing reported comments by the prime minister is that he believed he could survive if only Twitter had been shut down.

I'd add a final point that is not directly about government but addresses some of the over-fluent culture of words-as-sufficient that I've been describing. As it happens, it is one that David Sainsbury has devoted a lot of passion to, quite separately from his backing of the IfG, and that is the cause of technical, scientific and indeed business education. It needs to be part of the culture of the country.

Boris Johnson has made the problems of government – and of the country – worse than they were. But he is a symptom, as Donald Trump was (and may yet be again), of the difficulty in a modern country of uniting a lot of different people, of forging these huge political coalitions, and the temptation of doing it with promises that cannot be kept. He has illustrated how inadequate the conventions are for keeping a prime minister in line.

Conclusion

I took this job as director of the Institute for Government because I had seen, as a foreign correspondent and editor, how in many troubled countries there really is such a thing as wasting all the effort for improvement and all the money if there is no good government. My only reservation in accepting David Sainsbury's invitation to be the next director was that I thought Britain's problems weren't as serious.

I'm now convinced I was wrong. These are my thoughts on what is most urgently wrong with Britain's government, and what needs to be done.

Thank you.