

COVID-19 has revealed our governance system lacks capacity, but will we do anything about it?



COVID-19 has revealed that UK governance is not just prone to the occasional disaster, it is fundamentally flawed. [Gerry Stoker](#), [Will Jennings](#), and [Jen Gaskell](#) outline some of these failings and argue that the pandemic should be followed by a public inquiry into the system.

Everybody knows about our governance system's capacity for fiasco and failure. Studies of British government recount in gory detail its capacity for repeated policy catastrophes from the poll tax to the Millennium Dome. Building on that tradition, earlier in the year we, like many others, [added the handling of COVID-19 to that list of government blunders](#). A cross-national survey reveals that the percentage of citizens who think the UK government is handling the issue of COVID-19 well or very well has dropped from the low 70s in late March to the low 30s in late October. Only the French and USA governments have similarly low ratings and the UK also has the [steepest decline](#).

The prospect of an effective vaccine offers some hope that we may yet stagger to the finish line in the months ahead. Our fear is, however, that if we do reach a position that enables us to put the pandemic behind us, in the rush to return to 'normality' the substantial and sobering evidence of lack of capacity in our governance will be met with a collective shrug of the shoulders.

COVID-19 has revealed that our governance system is not just prone to the occasional disaster; it is fundamentally flawed. It is because our state lacks capacity to mobilize resources to meet our needs. To put it bluntly, we have a governance system that: (1) undermines effective communication between state and citizens; (2) lacks the capacity to coordinate and bring together sectors and actors to meet common goals; and (3) consistently fails to share power effectively and distribute resources fairly.

These are not minor failings, and they can no longer be overlooked. All countries have weaknesses in their governance systems, we concede. But a combination of political malpractice, sustained shrinking of the state, constitutional change, and *ad hoc* management reforms have produced a unique cocktail of ineffectiveness that has been brutally exposed by COVID-19.

Communication Failings

Citizens have only limited trust in government and that trust has [significantly declined](#) over the last four decades in the UK. This observation is not true of all other liberal democracies with developed economies. At the start of 2019, trust in government was generally high in Nordic countries and many smaller democracies. The UK had trust levels [below the average](#) in OECD countries as did the USA and France. Lack of trust matters, as it turns out. The pandemic experience so far suggests that confronting a major societal or economic crisis in the absence of trust [makes effective governance considerably harder](#). An initial surge in support for the government has melted away and the compliance of citizens required for the efficacy of policy responses is substantially undermined. The bond between trust and compliance is consequential for willingness to be tested for the virus, to self-isolate when instructed or to get a vaccine. To trust, [citizens demand some level of competence, authenticity and transparency](#) – a coherent and convincing narrative of what we are doing, how we are getting along, and how we will get out of the mess that we are in. Our governance system could not deliver it. The management of COVID-19 now operates in the context of a general sense of hopelessness and cynicism about a government that lacks capacity, has lost any claim to leadership, and seems distracted with infighting.

Political news management stemming from the PM's office and other parts of government remains adept at the art of spin but has proved hopelessly incapable of clear public health communication in the context of a pandemic. The PM's own speeches have become a focal point of ridicule. Research suggests trust in the government as a source of information about COVID-19 has dropped dramatically, and as the UK experiences the second wave, a large minority of the public – an estimated 20 million people – do not feel that the news media and/or the government [have explained what they can do in response to the pandemic](#). There are limits to the explanatory power of three-word slogans. Spin and the symbiotic relationship between mainstream media and senior Westminster politicians provide political drama and entertainment in 'normal times' but COVID-19 now reveals that the centre of government has limited capacity for speaking clearly and communicating effectively. When it was needed the most, communication from government to citizens generated confusion rather than clarity, suggesting something significant is broken in how the state projects itself.

A failure to bring things together

There is no doubt that in a crisis, [government needs to provide](#) a co-ordinating drive, bringing together the efforts of different layers of government, private sectors, and civil society. During the coronavirus crisis, this quality has been conspicuous by its absence. All that has been heard are claims of lack of consultation, last-minute changes to policies, non-communication and little in the way of either collaboration or lesson-learning either from mistakes or from those battling COVID-19 at the frontlines. 'Whitehall knows best' and 'one size-fits-all' tendencies were manageable in normal times as other actors quietly worked to circumvent its worse effects and impacts. But in the context of a crisis, we have experienced the full inanity of those mantras.

Contracting out to private sector providers and procurement by government has not always delivered the promised benefits or value for money, as for example some defence or rail contracts have illustrated. But the COVID-19 experience suggests the problems may be both more systematic and far deeper. Deals to deliver vitally needed PPE failed. Asking private sector consultants and providers to manage test-and-trace has proved problematic. Big IT projects have blown up, not for the first time. Even the development and distribution of a vaccine may be under threat from contracting failings. The issues reflect in part the complexity of the tasks being managed and weaknesses in global supply chains but at the very least it raises questions about claims of private sector involvement [automatically generating efficiency](#) in public service delivery. Rent-seeking behaviour by vested interests is not a good look for any governance system and ours appears to be rife with it. At best, it has compromised effectiveness, value for money, and transparency for rapid execution; at worse, it has squandered public funds while giving off more than a whiff of corruption, as personal networks and political connections [appear to have played a part in decision-making](#).

A lack of power sharing

Devolution exists but is barely acknowledged in practice by Westminster and Whitehall. The devolved governments of Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland hardly seem to figure in the judgments of the Treasury and the PM's Office. Add to that the picking of fights with Northern mayors and leaders in England and this is a centre that seems to disregard that it is now operating in a devolved governance system and lacks either the tools or respect to manage its relationships effectively.

Regional disparities and the fault lines of deprivation [have again risen in clear view](#) through the impacts of COVID-19. The poor, those in less stable employment, and ethnic minorities have suffered disproportionately from the crisis. Regional differences and impacts mean that claims of 'levelling up' between London, southern regions and other areas are even further from coming to fruition, repeating a tendency to create the impression that it is London and the South of England that matter to Whitehall and Westminster with the rest of the country, a lesser focus on attention. COVID-19 has reinforced the North-South divide in our governance arrangements.

What should happen next?

Prior to the arrival of COVID-19, our tradition of muddling through gave many a belief that our core system of governance appeared to be *good enough* – not perfect, but in a crisis it would find ways to do what needed to be done. Some may argue that given the challenges and complexities caused by the pandemic our governance system again displayed a few missteps and mishaps, but we got through it.

We offer an alternative course of action. COVID-19 has exposed the ways our governance system lacks capacity, and we should honour those who lost their lives and the many more who have suffered by addressing those weaknesses. We propose a one-year inquiry, funded by government or an independent body, drawing on evidence that is not focused on blaming individuals but instead asks fundamental questions about our governance system and its failings. Following a tradition of public inquiries into policy failure, this should not be a partisan exploration as an effective state is an aspiration that cuts across political divides. We cannot kick the can down the road until the next crisis. There will soon enough be another pandemic or some other social or economic shock that tests our resilience to the limit, and next time it could overwhelm us. 'Everybody knows it's now or never'... as the Leonard Cohen lyric goes.

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