

Why this government may never regain the trust of the people



Recent media reports have stated that the government is looking to regain trust from the electorate by changing its approach, following the departure of Dominic Cummings and other leading advisors. [Jacqueline Baxter](#) argues that trust in government is influenced by a number of factors and that Whitehall's desire to 'reset' may be far more difficult to achieve than they anticipate.

Since the start of the pandemic, the UK Government's decision-making has tampered with the trust of the British people on numerous occasions, including by [U-turning on decisions at the last minute](#); giving contracts [to personal contacts](#) without recourse to due process; and [those contracts subsequently failing to deliver](#). The U-turns may not have been so inimical were they not done after [categorical statements](#) indicating the exact opposite of previous proclamations – for example, Boris Johnson, announcing on 5 January that schools would stay open and then, 24 hours later, announcing a month-long national lockdown.

Perhaps one of the most divisive and politically puzzling moves in recent political history, was the failure to sack Dominic Cummings, following his blatant and flagrant flouting of rules in the first lockdown. Following this, the government, purportedly realising that they had lost the trust of the electorate (based on media reports, polls, and advice from 'senior Tories') announced their intention to 'reset' - to win back the trust of the electorate, assuming that they could wipe the national memory and initiate a 'tabula rasa' style reinvention in which the public would regain trust.

Good governance and accountability not only require trust, [they also promote it](#), particularly in establishing generalised trust – an abstract trust attitude that is directed towards people in general, including strangers. Trustworthiness of the state is the most important condition for such generalised trust as it generates interpersonal trust and determines the amount of social and economic capital in a society. This, in turn, affects the state's capacity to govern. In essence, trust is absolutely crucial to a government's ability to govern effectively. Research into how systems function effectively and the converse highlights several factors that are key to undermining trust:

The first is *corruption* – real or perceived. Influential organisations such as [Transparency International](#) measure corruption by a perception index; the higher the perception of corruption within a society, the lower the trust. Put simply, citizens must have [confidence](#) that the state operates in a transparent and fair manner. The second element is the *competence* effect – if governments continually U-turn, or, as in the case of the British Government, issue proclamations of excellence that are then overturned by evidence indicating abject failure as [in the case of the Test and Trace system](#), public trust is undermined. The third element is *lack of accountability*: in order for governance to function well, there must be effective checks and balances indicating that individuals and organisations, particularly [those funded by the taxpayer](#), can be held accountable for their actions. As illustrated by the following examples, the government have failed spectacularly on all three counts.

Differentiating between corruption and nepotism is challenging, but both elements, particularly when they infuse societies at government level, [undermine](#) social capital and trust in government. When public positions are filled without due process, and contracts offered without having to tender, societal perceptions of corruption rise. When [these public contracts are linked to private investments](#), perceptions of corruption and cronyism undermine trust that government is functioning effectively and with integrity. Added to this, some of these contracts in the context of the pandemic have resulted in spectacular failures, such as the Test and Trace system.

When an individual trusts another or an organisation, they take a risk that this trust will be betrayed. For example, if I pay my taxes because it is the law, I trust that everyone will do likewise: concomitantly, my trust soon diminishes if I find out that, in reality, I am one of the only ones in my circle that pays out. This, in turn, will lead to my lack of trust in the system of taxation, and to feelings that the system can easily be circumvented, after all – why should I pay if no one else does? This, in essence, is what happened when Cummings failed to abide by the rules set by the government. This breach of trust was all the more potent because it undermined it at both an interpersonal and system level: Cummings's transgression became a metonym for the government's 'them and us' attitude to rules. It was also a breach of procedural justice. The procedural lack of fairness of many government decisions since February 2020 has led to a lack of citizenship behaviours amongst the electorate – as [Mark Warren](#) points out, when people lose trust in government, they simply opt out. This has been noted in terms of the second lockdown, during which infections skyrocketed.

So, although the government would love to reset the collective memory of the electorate in order to win back their trust, research indicates that, once lost, trust is very difficult to regain; when trust has been breached in myriad ways, this renders it all the more so.

About the Author



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