

'Why don't they do something about it?' The politics of doing nothing



Bob Hudson discusses the types of political inaction currently at play in the UK, in order to explain why some policy domains are characterised by stasis and resistance to resolution, despite the government claiming it is doing everything it can.

Despite a huge parliamentary majority, the UK government is finding it difficult to resolve the major political dilemmas confronting it. Some of these are long-standing, such as climate change, reform of social care, regional inequalities, social immobility, and housing supply. On top of this there are now the newer 'ABC' challenges in the shape of Afghanistan, Brexit, and COVID-19. Only the activist vaccination programme could be said to have yielded positive results; the rest are largely characterised by an *absence* of government action rather than a *failure* of any such action.

How can we explain this failure to act? One long-standing explanation in the academic literature is that of '[path dependency](#)' – the idea that some policy domains are characterised by stasis and resistance to resolution. The failure of social care to be treated as anything other than a residual means-tested service, for example, has been used to explain decades of neglect. Another is the notion of 'wicked issues' – those considered to be so complex and multi-causal that it is difficult for governments to grasp what exactly the problem is, let alone tackle it. Health inequalities are often said to fit into this category.

A more [recent line of exploration](#) is the policy inaction or 'the politics of doing nothing' – an absence of action that can arise *despite* the availability of plausible interventions and often while a government is simultaneously claiming it is doing 'everything it can'. The authors identify five types of policy inaction:

- **Calculated:** inaction that is deliberate, strategic and tactical such as awaiting the availability of critical evidence.
- **Ideological:** inaction arising from stances about the role of the state versus other mechanisms of public problem-solving.
- **Imposed:** inaction arising from a lack of power, such as inadequate political, financial or legal leverage.
- **Reluctant:** inaction rooted in the unavailability of resources, manpower or other inputs.
- **Inadvertent:** inaction arising from the failure of policy makers to comprehend the data and information available to them.

All these types of inaction are currently at play in the UK. Calculated inaction has often been seen in the way the government has claimed to be awaiting vital scientific data on COVID-19, even though the policy implications of these data are frequently ignored. It is sometimes hard to tell if this failure to act is then calculated or inadvertent. Indeed, when Boris Johnson says he is '[keeping an eye](#)' on a potential third wave but plans no fresh restrictions, it is likely that a multiplicity of grounds for inaction are at play.

Ideological stances have resulted in the favouring of market solutions over other alternatives in most policy domains. Currently, for example, ministers [are telling the business community](#) to sort out their own skills shortage problems, and the Prime Minister is reported as saying he has 'no interest' in the lorry driver shortage. Even where there have been successful state interventions such as the furlough scheme and boost to Universal Credit, the government's priority then seems to be [to dismantle these](#) as soon as possible and return to inaction or less action. Inadvertent inaction might help to explain the failure of the government to act on intelligence relating to withdrawal from Afghanistan, [though some would see](#) imposed inaction or a failure of leadership as better explanations.

Given the massive powers assumed by the government in the [Coronavirus Act 2020](#), it seems unlikely that imposed or reluctant inaction have constituted significant domestic drawbacks. Calculated inaction, however, can conceal a multitude of sins. While it might be cited as legitimately awaiting the necessary evidence to act, it can also be a more nefarious ploy. In a [revealing blog](#) on two decades of government failure to make decisions about the future of social care, for example, Sally Warren of the King's Fund quotes the former Chancellor, George Osborne as saying: 'The political consequence of fixing social care is incredibly unpopular. It's much more straightforward politically to keep kicking the can down the road.' For Osborne then, the political cost of not acting was deemed less than the political cost of acting – a judgment that conveniently ignores the fact that inaction on his part had huge effects on the life chances available to those in need of care and support.

Looking for a better way of responding to difficult policy dilemmas requires addressing the bigger questions around strategies of governance. At a minimum, this assumes an effective administrative structure, but the UK has a [dysfunctional hybrid governance system](#) instead.

A more fundamental rethink requires going back to some of the issues discussed by Alasdair Roberts in his seminal book [Strategies for Governing](#). For him, the first step is to acknowledge that the fundamental unit of political organisation in the modern world is the state – a truth that is not necessarily grasped by many politicians in Westminster. Whatever the goals and priorities decided by government, whether wide or narrow, the state is the means by which they are put into place.

All of this requires an effective and efficient machinery of government, a requirement that seems to be of little interest to our current political leaders. As Roberts notes, governing is hard work; knowledge must be absorbed, and careful judgements formed about large and complicated questions. Day-to-day political survival – the hallmark of the Westminster government – is simply inadequate for the scale of the task. The personal qualities of leaders inevitably come into play here. For instance, while the wartime Beveridge Report assumed the existence of a National Health Service, it was down to Aneurin Bevan [to provide the leadership necessary](#) to overcome internal and external resistance to its creation. On the other hand, Roberts notes (of the USA) that 'the process of strategy-making is not easy when the leader' is inept – an observation currently with some resonance in the UK.

A remarkable absence here is the study of public administration: the art of good governance. The days when academics, senior civil servants, and politicians shared a common discourse on how to improve public service delivery have largely vanished, [as evidenced by](#) the demise of the Royal Institute for Public Administration, the closure of the Civil Service College and the decline in the study of 'government' in our universities. As the state increasingly shifted from direct service provision towards the use of market mechanisms in the public sector, so concerns about the administration of the public realm came to be seen as outdated and unnecessary. We now know this is false. Policy fails too often, whether through flawed action or a lack of action. It is way beyond time to revive the study and practice of public administration, to rediscover our curiosity in 'what works' in public policy – to study the nature of beneficial action rather than disinterested inaction. This [has been described by authors as](#) 'an invitation to walk on the bright side'. As they say, 'we may not always like government but we cannot do without it'. And if we cannot do without it, then we need it to work well.

About the Author



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