

Anticipatory policymaking for a thriving future

*A lot of policymaking focuses on solving short-term problems, in sight of the 3-4 year electoral cycle. But big crises are never too far off. **Alexander Evans** argues that social science can help with anticipatory policymaking, necessary for dealing with the longer term challenges of politics.*

In a crisis, our time horizons shrink. We focus on what's immediately in front of us and pivot to deal with it. Britain has been facing multiple years of crisis as successive governments have grappled with Brexit, Covid, illegal migration, a cost-of-living crisis, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and more recently the conflict in Israel/Gaza. It's little wonder that politicians and officials spend much of their time fire-fighting rather than looking ahead at the significant strategic challenges Britain faces. Longevity, declining productivity and failing public services are just three of the long-term challenges the country faces. Social science research can help avoid the pitfalls of short-termism, situating policymaking within a broader historical and geographical perspective.

Three challenges for the future

Britons are living longer. My seven-year-old daughter has a 25 per cent chance of living to 100 (according to actuaries, who are often – but not always – reliable). My own chance of making it to 100 is vanishingly slim. Longer lives, on average, raise plenty of public policy questions. A longer life may not necessarily be a [healthier](#) one. We will see growing demand for social care and increasing pensioner poverty as many of those living longer also realise they will live on less. This will be particularly true for those without “gold-plated” defined benefit pensions, or those who depend largely on the state pension for their retirement income. Citizens living longer will also likely have many other needs: social contact, a built environment that can allow for reduced mobility, and NHS and social services tailored to fit longer lives. As the [International Longevity Centre](#) points out, “between 2000 and 2050, the number of people in the UK aged over 65 is expected to double, and the number aged over 85 to quadruple, while the ‘working age’

population (20 to 64) will only increase by 20.1 per cent”.

With a smaller percentage of the adult population in work those left working will likely need to pay more in taxes and boost their productivity for the economy just to stand still.

In connection to the longevity problem, productivity and [economic growth](#) will matter even more than they do now. With a smaller percentage of the adult population in work – squeezed at one end by students staying in full-time education for longer, and at the other by a bigger pool of retirees – those left working will likely need to pay more in taxes and boost their productivity for the economy just to stand still. And that’s hard in a wider economy heavily dependent on services and likely to be disrupted by AI, even if we can’t quite anticipate exactly how.

Public services, already stretched and rationed via the means of waiting lists or poorer provision, are facing a double-whammy of greater citizen demand coupled with often lower quality of services and [squeezed resourcing](#). Whether it’s NHS waiting lists, the hunt for a dentist, or accessing quality local government services, all of this will cost money against an ever-tighter fiscal environment. If funding does flow, it’s more likely to go into short-term fixes, such as in boosting wages rather than supporting the long-term

reforms that can pave the way towards better future public services.

This all assumes spending in other areas will remain relatively stable, something that may be deeply misleading. The defence debate in recent years has been whether to reach (or exceed) 2 per cent of [GDP](#). Set against the growing levels of geopolitical risk and live conflict, including in Europe following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, policymakers should perhaps be factoring in the potential for a higher defence baseline, with all that means for wider public finances.

Anticipatory policymaking for our long world

Almost every public policy issue has a long-term dimension, but it's tempting to take the near view rather the long-term perspective. Electoral politics accentuates this, as do 1 to 3-year funding cycles in the public sector. But this short-termism isn't unique to democracies. It shapes policy and decision-making in authoritarian states too. Signature policy announcements of the moment have greater political value whether you're an elected politician or dictator.

So what can be done to change the approach to public policy in Britain? Is it possible to reduce the political frictions around big-ticket changes that are likely much needed, but politically difficult to deliver?

There is a particular value in bringing historical perspectives to bear, not least those drawn from multiple countries and moments in time.

Universities can play a helpful role to stretch time horizons. At LSE's School of Public Policy we teach a course on [Anticipatory Policymaking](#), deliberately bringing the long-term perspective to live policy issues. We look at the past to inform current policy debates with historical depth, brought to life through archive documents that illustrate past dilemmas (or generational buck-passing). We look at the future to better understand the common traps of short-termism, from underinvesting in infrastructure maintenance to strategic miscalculations about the potential for surprise, crises and wars. And we try to import classic academic values into the decision-making space: evidence, absences, doubt – and challenge.

There is a particular value in bringing [historical perspectives](#) to bear, not least those drawn from multiple countries and moments in time. What these case-studies expose is

the universality of short-termism in the policymaking, the wide reach of biases in decision-making – including ‘temporal’ or time-based biases – and the frequently localised nature of historical memory, forgetting and institutional advice and decision-making. One exciting aspect of doing this at the LSE is the ability to bring applied history into a public policy school, whilst training the next generation of policy-makers.

From now to tomorrow

The future is ultimately uncertain. [Radical uncertainty](#) shapes much policymaking, and surprise is a perennial feature of government. And yet research and teaching about surprise and crises is not enough. We need to have a better understanding of temporal illiteracy in policymaking; what it means, how it manifests itself, and what can be done to mitigate it. We can never escape our generation because we each live within an envelope of shared culture, history and institutional shaping. But using history, global comparative examples, and imagination we can stretch our perspectives beyond the immediate and the local. And this is where excellence in social science, applied history and a properly global curriculum can build a cohort of graduates who may not escape history, but who can bring history into the room as they develop, advise on and determine policy.

All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE British Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Image credit: [Texturemaster](#) on Shutterstock