

The vulnerability of the British state – deeper lessons from the urban riots

As Parliament reassembles, [Patrick Dunleavy](#) argues that MPs and government ministers need to take some deeper-lying lessons of the last week to heart. Governance is difficult and needs to be taken seriously. All of modern society relies on the effective operations of the state, with the consent of the governed. Once the state is enfeebled or consent is withdrawn, by any significant group, the costs and risks of governing rise at an exponential rate.



What was David Cameron thinking on the plane back from Italy to chair the COBRA meeting on stopping London burning? How did Boris Johnson while away the hours while returning so late and so reluctantly from Vancouver? How did Nick Clegg feel as his planned Birmingham walk-about ended in confusion, surrounded by angry citizens inviting him to get lost? Let's hope that all of them mused and reflected on the vulnerability of the British state to sudden shocks and unexpected crises.

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For after the phone-hacking scandal had already kept Parliament in London for two unexpected extra days in July, now the Commons will meet again in the deadest of all political months to do that most difficult of all things – trying to jam the (evil) genie back in the bottle after someone, somehow, let it out. We have discussed already the circumstances that [triggered the whole crisis](#) last weekend, but the lesson-drawing must go far wider than that.



For a Conservative party that had been out of power since 1997, the return to government was always going to be difficult. But it was hugely compounded in their case in 2010 by the culture that developed amongst the resurgent Tories, contemptuous of the Brown government as it became mired in economic crisis and the PM lost touch with the electorate. Senior civil servants have told me repeatedly that what astonished them about Conservative ministers coming into office was their combined confidence and complacency. The Tories had convinced themselves that governance was easy, both ideologically because they wanted a smaller state and minimal public services, and in personal practice. Liberal Democrat ministers were more nervous and earnest – they'd never done this before – but later bought into the whole Tory ethos in catch-up mode.

So far-reaching decisions were made in a relaxed, almost recklessly confident way. Everything in the coalition agreement between the two parties began to be implemented in a no-questions-asked manner – what was written must get done. The Number 10 political machine was staffed with inexperienced folk, who let ministers wander off and do almost what they liked, before waking up months too late to some of the implications. The government decided to reorganize the whole NHS almost casually and with little debate.

Ministers froze public sector pay for two years, because it helped fix the books, and then publicly pilloried every high paid public servant. There was no consideration that perhaps the government would need allies on their side. The Chancellor and Chief Secretary enforced unsustainable cuts of up to 40 per cent in departmental budgets over four years, including radical surgery on the police budget. Ministers tripled student fees and scrapped the Educational Maintenance Allowance, which millions of teenagers at school and college had come to rely on. When those affected protested, ministers smiled knowingly – they knew that 'special interests' would wail and moan, but these things were do-able. The government would face down its critics and resolution, political élan, would win the day.

In her excellent (and entertaining) book [The March of Folly](#), the historian Barbara Tuchman dwelt on the quality of 'wooden-headedness' in political leaders – the capacity to rack up political fiascos in the face of (lots of) advice to the contrary. The recent collapse of public order across London, and its threatened or near collapse in every major city of the country, will be an object lesson for political science students for years to come in how close a government can come to creating a crisis out of almost nothing, through

inattention and neglect of the complexity of governance.

This is not the first time that the potential fragility of the British state has been suddenly exposed on a new flank. Famously Margaret Thatcher's government was rocked by riots in 31 British cities, from which sprang the Heseltine-lead fight-back against her hard-line policies that eventually scuppered her nine years later, following a second wave of poll tax riots. In 2000 the Blair government was suddenly beached out of nowhere, helplessly flailing for a week in the face of a nationwide protest over fuel prices that almost caused the fuel to garages to run out.

What ministers need to realize is that modern government, in Britain more than almost any other western state, runs on fine margins. Everything that government does, everything, relies on the active consent of the governed. Decades of 'new public management' (NPM) policies implemented by Conservative and Labour governments have left us with an administrative machine that is fine-tuned to run at minimal cost, so long as things go on as expected. But as soon as that ceases to be true, an NPM state is incredibly fragile – it can grind up very swiftly in the light of new events for which there is no reserve of slack resources, no defence in depth.

We do not have enough tax inspectors to make people pay tax if they don't want to. We do not remotely have enough future tax revenues coming in to back up or bail out the liabilities that UK banks have incurred. We do not have enough police to maintain order in any of our cities, if just enough people foregather in the same place bent on looting. We rely on a whole nexus of fragile social ties to keep the show on the road, some apparently tenuous or intangible, but nonetheless vitally important. We also rely to a high degree on the 'mission committedness' of many public service occupations.

Writing nearly a year ago now, I pointed out the extent to which Conservative ministers were practicing a form of ['zombie new public management'](#) dating from when they were last in office in the mid 1990s, and I forecast that it was doomed to fail. I also argued that every government needs allies and lots of goodwill within the public services, if they are to get change done, or even keep things running. Since then the NHS reforms have crashed and burned; the privatization of UK forests has been reversed; economic growth has ebbed away into the sands; and public order has spectacularly collapsed.

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When Parliament reassembles tomorrow to debate the riots, it is important that MPs of all parties try to renounce ideological simplicities and grapple in grown-up ways with acutely difficult governance problems. 'Sheer criminality' is a good description of the riots, but the potential for the self-same 'sheer criminality' has always been with us. Why did it happen at this time, on this scale, when it did not happen before? Once it has happened, on this scale and with additional scary complications such as the casual arson of cars and buildings, how can the recurrence of future outbreaks be prevented? Watching Michael Gove blustering and posturing [on *Newsnight* last night](#) (from 11:00 onwards), there was little sense of a Cabinet minister who had yet even begun to take his responsibilities seriously.



Nor is the forthcoming political year going to be an easy one for the government. Cuts to police forces are likely to be frozen, and later quietly abandoned. The cross-public sector pay freeze must end in real wage negotiations again by spring 2012. Public sector trade unions whose members' living standards have been slashed by 10 per cent or more will be looking for a catch-up pay rise, and their members will be almost unanimous in backing them. A 'spring of discontent' could lock down the economy in the run-up to the Olympics if ministers try to defy the inevitable need for normal wage-bargaining to be resumed. The economy looks like it will flat-line anyway, and even the Olympics may have negative net economic effects.

So ministers are living in interesting times. They need to recognize that the British state operates on fine margins and is acutely vulnerable to a withdrawal of consent, by any group. They need to start listening harder to messages they are disinclined to hear. They need to [build allies across government](#) and across civil society, and to do it quickly before it becomes impossible. They need to do more evidence-based, sophisticated policy-making. The alternative is keep 16,000 police up every night of the year to police London, and that is a route that could be very expensive indeed.

Patrick Dunleavy has written (with John Dryzek) [Theories of the Democratic State](#) (2009), and commented recently on anti-statism in modern politics in ['The backlash against the state'](#) (2011).