

## Can Democracies Address Long-term Issues?

Roger Heppleston, 30<sup>th</sup> April 2025

Amongst all the problems of the modern age, as a country, we face at least two critical issues in the next few decades: global warming and an aging population. To solve the first requires a complete overhaul of our energy supply system. It means investment in wind farms, solar panels, nuclear power, and an extended supply grid, as well as carbon capture technology. The second implies a dramatic increase in the requirement for health and social care. Both these issues will place considerable demands on the country's finances in the decades to come. To solve them will require long term planning and consistent leadership. The question I would like to address is whether, in its current state the British system of democracy is capable of achieving these goals.

I have been reading *How Westminster Works . . . and Why it Doesn't* by Ian Dunt and *Failed State: Why Nothing Works and How We Fix It* by Sam Freedman. They present a very worrying picture of the state of British democracy. Once the envy of the world, it has failed to adapt and develop, becoming increasingly characterised by short-term thinking, lack of expertise and a failure to delegate.

New ministers often don't have any formal expertise or training before they assume their posts. However, from day one they are expected to know and be accountable for every issue that arises in their department. But they have no time for reflection, they are immediately overwhelmed with a daily workload of 'red box' decisions – typically 30-40 a day. Part of the problem is that the role of local government has been continually reduced over the past few decades. Successive governments have overcentralised decision making and the centre does not have the resources or expertise to manage local problems.

If Ministers are any good, they are likely to get promotion to a different department with a different set of challenges. During the last Conservative administration, Grant Shapps held the distinction of holding five different positions in a year. Such a rapid rotation of disparate roles would never happen in any sane business.

This lack of expertise is not alleviated by the civil service; they tend to be arts graduates. There are few scientists, businesspeople, or IT experts. There is a cult of the gifted amateur. They are good at papering over cracks without the knowledge to make fundamental change. If by accident they acquire some expertise and become good at their job, this is not appropriately rewarded. To get promotion they must move onto another department. Senior civil servants are in post a similar short length of time to Ministers.

Because of the lack of expertise in the Ministries there is an overuse of consultancy and outsourcing. Much control has been handed over to profit seeking conglomerates: – social care, childcare and children's homes have all been left at the mercy of unguided markets.

The Prime Minister has unlimited power but not the resources to exercise it. The size of his office is limited by the size of 10 Downing Street. He is essentially trying to run the country from a private house. Successive Prime Ministers, wedded to history and tradition, have refused to set up a more appropriate office elsewhere.

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As Harold Macmillan famously replied when asked about the greatest challenge of being a statesman, "Events, dear boy, events". These days with social media posts and 24-hour news coverage, ministers are expected to respond instantaneously to every issue, scandal, and diplomatic storm. There is little time for planning and reflection

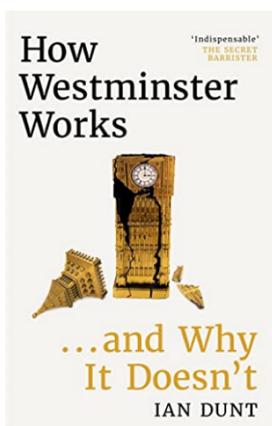
Indeed, there is little incentive to deal with the long-term. Parties have just over 4 years to prove their mettle to the electorate. Any policy that involves short-term pain for long-term gain will always be difficult to implement. A recent example was the ULEZ extension in Greater London. Labour lost the 2023 Uxbridge by-election because of the unpopularity of its implementation. Another example is Heathrow expansion. The Labour Government first proposed this in 2002. Successive governments have supported the idea, and the current Labour government has reactivated the concept twenty years later. However, as yet, no government has ever had the will to overcome local opposition to implement it.

Britain has been stagnating for years because the political system isn't working. Ministers lack management talent. There is little expertise in Government, and the focus is on short term achievement. There is a desperate need to improve the systems for both governance and representation. However, because any change in the political system will only be effective over a longer period and therefore will not improve re-election chances, no political party is interested in radical change.

It isn't just the UK that has this problem. US democracy, corrupted by money and inter-party strife, has been in trouble for decades. European democracies are struggling to cope with the pressures of immigration and relative economic decline. Europe once at the centre of the world is failing to compete economically with China and the USA.

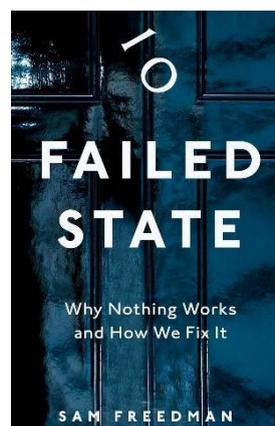
If democracies don't address long term issues, the electorate will see failure and reject the party in power, leaving the opportunity for non-democratic organisations to succeed. The future of democracy as a system of government itself is under threat. Backed by business interests new 'strong men' have hijacked the democratic system: Orban, Modi, Erdogan, Netanyahu, Putin and now Trump. These are worrying times.

## Recommended reading



***How Westminster Works . . . and Why It Doesn't***

by ***Ian Dunt***



***Failed State: Why Nothing Works and How We Fix It***

by ***Sam Freedman***