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archive...

In 2014, Professors Anthony King Ivor Crewe published *The Blunders of our Governments* – one of the best political books ever. If ever there was a powerful case for consultation, this was it. The case studies may now be old, but the analysis remains spot-on

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Lessons from screw-ups

A new book (2014) sheds light on Government blunders – and concludes we need “more deliberation”

Anthony King and Ivor Crewe are two of the most respected academics in the country, both having been Professors of Government at Essex University. They have just published a book called *The Blunders of our Governments*, and it should be compulsory reading for every civil servant and every politician.

Its analysis is totally non-partisan and its thesis is that the UK has become more prone than other countries to avoidable mistakes – and that we have systemic failings in our democracy that explain this trend. The case studies relate to Governments of all shades but they share many common themes. Although they come from a national political perspective every single public body - big or small - will recognise behaviours and characteristics that suggest they too risk some of the same disasters!

The Blunders of our Governments
explores detailed case studies including

- The Community Charge (Poll tax)
- Mis-selling pensions
- The Child Support Agency
- The Millennium Dome
- Individual Learning Accounts,
- The Assets Recovery Agency
- Modernising London Underground
- Payment of Tax Credits
- The great NHS IT project
- Payments to farmers
- Identity Cards

Not all these blunders were contentious public policy decisions taken at the highest level – though the Poll Tax clearly was in that category. The Child Support Agency, for example had broad bi-partisan support. Ditto the Millennium Dome or the ill-fated Public Private Partnership that was created to finance the Tube’s investment programme.

What went wrong in these blunders – and in countless others – was a failure to deliver that which was sought by the politicians. Some of the stories are distressing; people have been seriously hurt and immense damage has been incurred to the credibility of public services. Many of them have been the subjects of damning Reports by Parliamentary Select Committees or by the National Audit Office. Lessons should have been learnt. And yet, these fiascos keep on coming. The book only covers the period up to the last General Election (2010), but under the Coalition we have already had the ill-considered sell-off of

the Forestry Commission, the scandal of the West Coast Mainline re-franchise, the withdrawn plans for the English baccalaureate, the dismal election of Police Crime Commissioners not to mention the NHS re-organisation and maybe Universal Credits. Blunders continue.

So what goes wrong?

King and Crewe identify a host of plausible reasons:

- **Cultural disconnect** – where those that decide and plan have little understanding how the rest of us live!
- **Operational disconnect** – where decision-makers have little interest in implementation issues
- **Group Think** – where those planning a change or a policy resist intervention from outsiders
- Where **ideology and prejudice** triumph over practicalities and pragmatism
- **Overemphasis on symbols and spin** – leading to inappropriate or unrealistic expectations

These, they argue thrive in an environment where:

- Prime Ministers & **the Downing Street machine is too weak** to prevent Whitehall departments making mistakes, fighting each other or compromising in battles with the Treasury
- Ministers and Civil Servants **change jobs** too frequently; too many are learning their jobs at the same time and too inexperienced to see the 'elephant traps'
- Everyone **being in a hurry**, and keener to gain short-term credit than solve long-term problems
- The Westminster **Parliament being totally hopeless at scrutinising** such programmes until it is too late; the Scottish Parliament is much better because it is more consultative.
- An **imbalance in the skills and expertise** of civil servants and policy-makers when compared to other key stakeholders – leading to horrendously disadvantageous contracts etc

But their main conclusion is one with which the Institute agrees 100%. They say that there is a **deficit of deliberation** – meaning that not enough thought is given to the administration or the implementation of major decisions. They call for more and better consultation, citing that current practice deprives key people of important evidence at critical points in their decision-making. They fail to consult, or do so half-heartedly either because they are so certain they know all the answers – or because they want to do everything in record time. In this context, ***Speed kills*** for it discourages policy-makers from listening.

Over the years there have been many attempts to make the case for serious consultation – notably from the Institute itself. But never has there been such an authoritative and persuasive demonstration of the dangers when this important evidence-seeking is overlooked. This book is welcome and timely for it provides effective ammunition for everyone who argues for better engagement with stakeholders. That's us!

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