

Governing the climate

We live in turbulent times. Some eight billion of us live in an increasingly connected world. The pace of technology-enabled change is accelerating. This can be both exhilarating, as new opportunities and experiences become accessible, and intimidating, as familiar places and relationships are transformed beyond recognition.

This accelerating pace of change puts pressure on all our public institutions and services as they struggle to adapt to changing public needs and expectations. It also presents a particular challenge to all levels of government, as guardians of the security and prosperity on which social cohesion depends.

In recent years government has been seen by some to be more of a problem than a solution. The pandemic has been a powerful reminder of just how important government is when societies come under stress. Climate change is now adding a stress multiplier to all the other drivers of stress in our increasingly urbanised societies.

We mostly forget that all governments consist of two principal components: political and administrative. For most of us our daily contact with government is through its administrative element – that bit of government which collects taxes and pays benefits, for example. We rarely have direct contact with the political element – the bit that decides what the administrative element should do.

In recent years politicians have become increasingly quick to blame civil servants for policy failure. Their complaints have found a ready echo in some parts of the media, often amplified these days by social media. 'Unelected' bureaucrats are an easily demonised target for politicians under pressure.

This is both unfair and dangerous. It is unfair because

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civil servants are unable to defend themselves publicly from these accusations. It is dangerous for two reasons. First, because it damages the relationship of trust between politician and civil servants that is essential if government is to work. Second, because it distracts public attention from the real cause of policy failure.

The theory, and practice, of government is that politicians are accountable to the public and civil servants are accountable to the politicians. In the famous words of a former very senior advisor, 'advisors advise and ministers decide'.

If, as they certainly do from time to time, civil servants give bad advice, ministers should reject it. If they accept and act on it because they failed to spot the errors that is their responsibility and they should accept it without blaming others. If ministers continually avoid their responsibility for policy failures, they undermine public confidence in government.

This matters because, at least in this country, we can hold governments to account if they aren't taking the action needed. If politicians can successfully duck and dodge and avoid their responsibilities we are deprived of the opportunity to punish them at the ballot box.

This is more important than ever because of the seriousness and urgency of climate change.

It is not right to say that climate change threatens the extinction of the human race. It is right to say that, unchecked, it will make prosperity and security unavailable to all eight billion of us. What is more, this is a problem we can solve. We know that if we stop burning fossil fuels by the middle of the century, we will have a changed climate but one we can live with.

No one should underestimate the difficulty of decarbonising the global economy in less than 30 years. But it is important to fully understand the nature of those difficulties. The technologies to deliver affordable energy to everyone exist but they are a long way from being available. Furthermore, technology change on this scale will create enormous social change and this, too, must be managed successfully.

For this to be possible both parts of government must be able to provide a confident, predictable and effective lead to all of the other elements of our societies that must change if we are to succeed. This will not happen if politicians continue to blame 'bureaucrats' for their own failures.

If our politicians do not feel up to the task of keeping the climate safe they should get out of the way and leave it to others. If they do feel up to it then they must be willing to accept responsibility for their errors. And there will be many. There is no error-free path to a safe climate and very little time to learn from our mistakes.

We have perhaps five or six opportunities left to throw out governments that are getting it wrong on climate change before we move into an era of unmanageable change.

For everyone under 40 the price of failure will be both personal and permanent. Politicians who conceal their errors and avoid their responsibilities are stealing your future. If you do not vote, you are letting them get away with it.