# Heywood Quarterly

## Time to deliver

Winter 2025-26

6th Edition

# Contents

# Editor’s Letter

It’s almost a quarter of a century since the Downing Street Delivery Unit was set up under New Labour, based on a proposal drafted before the 2001 election by Michael Barber, Jonathan Powell (Tony Blair’s Chief of Staff) and Jeremy Heywood (then Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister).

Given the ubiquity at Westminster and in Whitehall of the word ‘delivery’ these days, it’s hard to believe that, until a generation or two ago, responsibility for delivering specific public service outcomes was not viewed as a traditional role for senior civil servants.

How times have changed! A quick search of Hansard shows that mentions of the words ‘deliver’ and ‘delivery’ in Parliament have increased exponentially over the previous two decades, with 2025 an all-time ‘bumper’ year.

In the Fifth Edition of Heywood Quarterly (Autumn 2025), we drew attention to low levels of public trust in government and offered some ideas on how this fracture might be repaired. In this issue it seemed appropriate to shift the focus towards delivery, not just because it’s fashionable but because repeated and persistent delivery failures are among the public’s principal reasons for lack of faith in their politicians and bureaucrats.

Delivery includes not just everyday services, of course, but the completion to time and to budget of infrastructure projects like aircraft carriers and rail networks. This was most recently criticised in a report launched by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Project Delivery (APPGPD) last November, drawing attention to competing (and conflicting) interests, delays, overspending, short-term decision making and lack of skills.

Let’s hope that today’s Delivery Unit, brought back in 2021 after being abolished in 2010 and now under the new leadership of Axel Heitmueller, with Sir Michael Barber as an adviser to the Government in this area, can recapture some of the undeniable magic of the early years and channel many of the imaginative solutions being put forward by enthusiastic proponents inside and outside Whitehall.

In this context, I hope the reflections of the contributors in this quarter’s line up will provide some stimulating reading.

Everyone’s jumping at (or, in some cases, feeling jumpy about) the opportunities for AI in government, not least to improve and potentially one day take over the delivery of our public services. But the article by Professor Sir Anthony Finkelstein, formerly Chief Scientific Adviser for National Security and now President of City St George's, University of London, should dampen at least a little of the euphoria. A self-confessed techno-optimist, Anthony argues that the improvements AI undoubtedly promise in the longer term – both in the delivery of services and the development of policy – will be hobbled if we do not first tackle the state of digital systems across government and the public sector. Before rushing to create a plethora of new AI ‘tools’, we need to address what he calls our collective

'enterprise tech debt', an accumulated liability that has been created through sustained underinvestment in software and systems and is manifested in, amongst other things, outdated systems and frameworks, piecemeal changes, inadequate testing and hasty compromises.

Fixing the architecture is one type of challenge; how civil servants behave and perform on the front line is another (and vividly highlights that link between delivery and trust). As David Robinson, Rich Bell and Ray Shostak (another former head of the Downing Street Delivery Unit) point out in their article on pp 13-18, building strong relationships – of both the public servant-citizen and citizen-citizen varieties – is vital to improve decision-making within government. "Making relationships the first step rather than the extra mile should be regarded as at least as foundational to 21st century government as the strategic use of data or digital transformation", they conclude.

Peter McDonald's interviews with prominent government leaders have been a notable feature of the Heywood Quarterly thus far, and Peter's conversation with the business executive-turned Cabinet Office permanent secretary John Manzoni (from 2014 to 2020) once again hits the mark. John was brought into the Civil Service with a strong delivery mandate in mind, and as *Civil Service World* observed during his tenure "you can't go long talking to Manzoni without the words 'functions' or 'delivery' escaping his lips." In discussion with Peter he is as robust as ever, recalling efforts to complement line leaders (departmental permanent secretaries) with cross-government horizontal functions, and insisting that meaningful change in the Civil Service can be driven from within the system itself as well as from outside.

If changing people's lives for the better is one of the strongest motivations for *individual* civil servants, Bowie Penney's short analysis of the English Index of Multiple Deprivation 2025 should be a useful primer. Containing place-based insights and data on the most deprived neighbourhoods in the country, Bowie explains how this resource can be used well beyond the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to shape and implement different funding projects, as well as underpinning the annual Local Government Finance Settlement.

We serve up a little light relief on pp 33-34 in the excerpt from Peter Cardwell's book on Political Animals which chronicles Jeremy Heywood's battles with the Cabinet Office cats Evie and Ossie (and involving occasional 'deliveries' of an unwelcome sort).

In one bound we then move from this domestic drama to a fascinating retrospective on her time at the United Nations (pp 35-39) by former UK Permanent Representative Dame Barbara Woodward, who ended her five-year term in New York last November. Many outside commentators believe the UN to be increasingly sidelined by growing international disorder but 80 years after the UN's creation, Dame Barbara, while acknowledging that the organisation must change, offers a strong assertion of its importance to UK foreign policy.

The last two articles in this edition both concentrate on the work of Lucy Smith, last year's Heywood Fellow, and her team at Blavatnik School of Government, Oxford, on long-term government strategy. In her own short essay (pp 40-42), Lucy nails the myth that short-termism and incrementalism are inevitable costs of a democratic society. And in a longer analysis, her colleague Philip Bray presents compelling evidence from Japan, Korea, the Netherlands and Spain (democracies all) that it's possible, and desirable, to do things differently.

At the end of this edition you will also find a short round-up of interesting snippets from other publications and sources (pp 55-56), and a selection of books on public policy and related topics (pp 50-54) recommended by Heywood Quarterly contributors.

**Tim Dickson, Editor in Chief.**

# Why AI exposes our digital shortcomings

## Anthony Finkelstein argues that the UK needs stronger tech foundations to reap the benefits of artificial intelligence

This article offers a deliberately sober form of techno-optimism. It argues that, whilst artificial intelligence (AI) holds real promise for public services, the decisive factor will be whether government is prepared to confront its accumulated, and accumulating, ‘enterprise tech debt’ and rebuild the digital foundations on which meaningful AI deployment depends. It sets out a practical path for managing tech debt and realising the strategic benefits of AI.

I believe firmly in the potential of AI to provide significant improvements in the delivery of public services and in the development of policy. Whilst I am not blind to its limitations – limitations that are for the most part inherent to the technology – I judge them to be substantially over-played. There are important near-term opportunities, some of which have been usefully highlighted in previous Heywood Quarterly articles (most notably those by Laura Gilbert and Michael Padfield).

Our ability to gain the greatest advantage from AI, however, is critically inhibited by the state of digital systems across government and the public sector. We are weighed down with legacy technology and, more importantly, by the legacy of our approaches to building and sustaining these systems.

## Securing value

The key benefits from AI can be secured: first, by leveraging the extraordinary data resources we possess as a basis for learning; second, by using AI to orchestrate and supplement adaptive and goal-based workflows (technically known as 'Agentic AI'); and third, through dynamic AI-mediated interaction with services. Each of these require significant technical and organisational integration but deliver, by far, the greatest payoff.

None of the benefits, though, can be achieved without plotting a path to confront and address our collective 'enterprise tech debt'. Enterprise tech debt is best defined as the accumulated liability created through sustained underinvestment in software and systems. The debt manifests itself in, amongst other things, outdated systems and frameworks, accumulated piecemeal changes, inadequate testing, quick hacks (or shortcuts) and hasty compromises.

## Confronting systems realities

The starting point for digital change is therefore our current systems landscape, as it presents us with a set of structural constraints that materially limit what can be achieved.

Our data is weakly managed and of highly variable quality, locked in silos. Our workflows are hard-coded and often stitched together across systems thanks to temporary or imperfect solutions. Our systems are too often closed, without the technical interfaces required to access their functionality. Worst of all, we frequently do not possess the information necessary to understand what we already have. Systems were built by contractors now long gone, and under commercial relationships that have since ceased to operate.

This is, of course, not a universal picture. There are islands of good practice where we have some opportunities but, as a generality, we are locked out of the advantages we should enjoy.

In what follows, I briefly examine how this came about, what we can do – recognising that simply ripping things up and starting again is not an option – and finally, how we can accelerate the path to more substantial AI benefits.

## How this came about

Failures in budgeting, repeated bouts of costly organisational transformation, and shifting priorities can all lead to periods of underinvestment. Organisations like government departments that operate with annual budgeting cycles and have limited capacity for strategic technology planning are, in my experience, particularly prone to this.

These periods of underinvestment do not need to be prolonged to seed serious problems. Missing even a single technology cycle can be enough. Once that happens, the accumulation of tech debt becomes rapidly harder to stop. As operating requirements continue to evolve, the response is to make immediate, tactical fixes simply to sustain operations and keep the show on the road. New requirements, additional data and ever more complex systems integrations are layered onto an already fragile foundation. Each change increases overall system complexity and the cost of change rises accordingly.

This creates a vicious cycle. The growing cost of maintenance and adaptation consumes any residual budget that might otherwise have been used to pay down tech debt. Investment is progressively skewed away from renewal and innovation

and towards survival. The problem is therefore not merely running to stand still but running in order to fall further behind.

In the best-case scenario, sufficient system knowledge and capability will have been retained to make changes. In too many cases, though, failures to retain system knowledge emerge cumulatively through staff turnover, outsourcing, organisational churn and crisis-driven change. Leaders leave and take design intent with them; delivery is pushed to suppliers that lack incentive to preserve architectural understanding, let alone render it accessible; and repeated restructurings break continuity of ownership. As systems become fragile, the effort shifts from learning to simply keeping things afloat, fixes are made under pressure, and documentation decays or is not produced at all. Over time, skills atrophy, technologies fall out of favour and the capacity to reason confidently about one's own systems is lost. At that point tech debt ceases to be merely technical – rather, it morphs into a wholesale loss of operational capacity to act.

### Case Study 1

A UK Government department with a nationally-focused mission relies on a complex set of legacy digital systems inherited from predecessor organisations. Over time, these systems have required continual maintenance and modification to reflect changing operational demands. The cumulative effect has been increasing complexity, fragility and cost. The department does not possess a complete or reliable picture of its current digital architecture. As a result, leaders cannot readily assess the impact of proposed changes. Digital delivery is skewed towards short-term stabilisation. Locally developed capabilities cannot easily be absorbed into the core platform. Investment decisions are made without a clear view of the total cost of ownership, or the long-term architectural consequences. The capacity to deploy more advanced digital capabilities, including AI-enabled approaches, is limited.

Few commercial organisations are wholly immune from these challenges, but most are compelled to act, if for no other reason than the market pressure exerted by more agile competitors. Estonia, Singapore and South Korea are amongst the very few countries that have systematically addressed these issues.

## What we can do

Enterprise tech debt is a consequence of management choices, even though it manifests as a technical problem. It should, however, be treated as a strategic liability and governed alongside finance, risk and operational performance. That means making it visible and governable. At a minimum, it requires a shared map

of both the ‘system-as-is’ and as it is intended to become – the ‘system-to-be’. This provides a common basis for decision making.

A ring-fenced allocation of budget and time for simplification, renewal, and ‘tech debt’ reduction is essential, particularly in fiscally-constrained environments. Short budgeting cycles, unrealistic programme horizons and success measures that focus solely on delivery will bias decisions towards what may appear to be expedience. The emphasis should be on reducing complexity and decreasing the cost of change, even when these deliver no immediate functional benefit.

Ownership must be restored and sustained. That requires clear accountability for systems over their full life, continuity of responsibility in the face of change and deliberate steps to develop and retain architectural capability. This is ultimately a stewardship challenge.

Technical interventions matter a great deal – reducing unnecessary complexity by decommissioning, removing duplication, standardising platforms and simplifying integrations. A key part of this is to reduce systematically the cost of change, principally through the design of interfaces so as to deliver incremental improvements, plug in new systems and build services quickly and safely. The process of simplification can be used as a basis for deliberately building system knowledge. The new architecture should be documented, kept current and treated as operationally critical. Knowledge should be embedded through shared ownership and design review processes. Tech debt reduction must be made part of delivery, not deferred to the next speculative stage of an extended digital transformation programme.

There is some good news. AI makes much of this technical work materially easier.

## Case Study 2

The UK government department in the example above began by establishing a clear view of its digital platform. The existing architecture is being documented, including systems, interfaces and data flows, with targeted reverse engineering where knowledge had been lost. This information is treated as operationally critical. Decision-making has been simplified. Roles and accountabilities for digital governance are mapped, including a strengthening of independent challenge. Investment decisions are now aligned to a coherent digital strategy and an explicit target architecture, rather than to disconnected projects or funding lines. A ring-fenced allocation of capacity has been created to support simplification, stabilisation and the transition to a supported operation. These steps are creating the conditions for sustainable change by lowering the cost

and risk of future decisions.

## Path to AI benefits

Once tech debt is under control, the opportunity to secure the larger benefits of AI opens up. If we are serious about this, it requires a deliberate shift.

First, the basics. Scalable computing generally delivered through cloud or hybrid services is a prerequisite. Security and identity must be built in from the start. AI should be developed and deployed as an 'enterprise capability'. Though experiments and early pathfinders have their place in building understanding and capacity, AI stacks (layered assemblages of technologies) should not proliferate. A unified AI platform, providing access to models, orchestration, lifecycle management and monitoring will support consistency and control.

Data is a strategic asset, to be managed for long-term value, rather than simply for immediate operational needs. Leveraging data resources already held across the public sector means more than aggregation. It requires curation, semantic coherence and, of course, trust. Data must be discoverable and governed in ways that permit reuse across boundaries.

AI creates value when it is embedded directly into workflows. Standalone tools rarely yield the larger benefits we are seeking. AI that operates inside case management systems, operational platforms or professional tools, supporting decisions at the point they are made, is how transformation occurs.

If AI is to act as an intelligent intermediary between users and services, then those services must be exposed cleanly and consistently. Legacy systems tightly bound to interfaces, hard-coded policy logic and informal exception handling are structural blockers. Only modular, callable and observable services can be orchestrated dynamically across systems in real-time.

Agentic systems function most effectively where objectives are made explicit. That demands the surfacing of what is often implicit: decision criteria, tolerances, success conditions and escalation points. In practice, this means redesigning processes so that AI systems pursue defined goals within constraints, while handing off to human judgement where authority or legitimacy requires it. Clear escalation paths, explainable outputs, override mechanisms and auditable decisions must therefore be part of the technical design. They cannot be a policy or governance bolt-on. The same is true of model approval, monitoring, compliance checks and the application of ethical constraints.

To date much of the focus in government has been on AI skills and familiarity; these are undoubtedly important but insufficient on their own. Architectural and systems thinking are foundational. We also require greater expertise in process redesign, service and interface design and an understanding of decision-making. Where these skills are absent, progress will be limited.

### Case Study 3

Prior to the initiation of the programme described above, our exemplar government department launched a pilot to use AI for an important operational task. The model itself performed well in testing but the failure came elsewhere. Case data was spread across multiple systems with no authoritative source of truth. Key decision steps were embedded in legacy workflows, some hard-coded in software, others executed through informal temporary workarounds. There was no reliable way to expose the end-to-end process as a callable service. To deploy the AI tool in live operations would have required changes across several interdependent systems. No one could state with confidence what those changes would break, how long they would take or who ultimately owned the risk. The pilot was therefore left running in parallel, producing insights that could be admired but not acted upon. The problem was not trust in AI outputs. It was the inability of the digital estate to absorb the required change. AI revealed the limits of the organisation’s systems far more clearly than it delivered immediate benefits.

## Strategic payoff

If we get all of this right, the prize is substantial. We move from brittle systems that constrain policy and delivery to adaptive public services that learn, improve and respond intelligently to changing needs. Decisions become better informed, faster and more consistent, without displacing judgement or accountability. Services become easier to access, easier to adapt and cheaper to change.

AI gives us an opportunity to rebuild government digital capability on more sustainable foundations. Doing this requires us to make choices that privilege long-term capacity over short-term expedience. That is a familiar challenge necessitating clarity of purpose and a stewardship mindset, something that would certainly have been recognised by the late Jeremy Heywood, after whom this publication is named.

**Professor Sir Anthony Finkelstein, an engineer and computer scientist, was Chief Scientific Adviser for National Security to the UK Government until 2021. He is President of City St George's, University of London.**

# The role of relationships in modern government

## Ray Shostak, Richard Bell and David Robinson explore the power of human connection in public services

Frontline services are, as their name suggests, delivered at the frontline – in communities. As a result a person's experience of government is shaped as much by the quality of the interactions they have with doctors, nurses, police officers, teachers and social workers as it is by the institutional structures and processes which are the stuff of policy briefs. Yet when public servants and frontline practitioners listen, empathise and connect with service users on a personal level – as a great many do – we are slightly surprised and praise them as having 'gone the extra mile'.

The reality is that empathy and trust should be essential building blocks of effective public service delivery – especially when, as the digital government innovator Richard Pope has shown in his book *Platformland*, a service is seeking to meet a complex human need. Without the capacity to interpret and respond to emotional and contextual cues, those responsible for designing and delivering services cannot hope to identify – let alone address – the causes of deep-rooted social and economic challenges. Without trust, public servants and citizens can't work together effectively, even towards shared goals.

How can public services be optimised for empathy, trust or the human relationships which grow and sustain them? By the same token, how can 'relational value' be prioritised in the development of policy and the practice of governance?

In this article, we explore how a guiding focus on relationships might be woven into these core dimensions of modern government – and consider how this could lead to better outcomes for everyone.

### Relational services

Over the last decade, a growing number of policymakers and practitioners within local government have begun to develop and apply models that prioritise relationships and responsiveness.

Wigan Council has redesigned adult social care services to allow care workers to have open-ended conversations with service users – coming to know them as people and to understand what matters to them – and to identify the personal capabilities and community 'assets' that they might draw on to live healthier, more

independent lives. Camden Council has developed a children's social care model in which building bonds of mutual trust with children and families, and empowering them to shape their own journeys, takes precedence over meeting narrow performance metrics. Through the *Changing Futures Northumbria* initiative delivered by Gateshead Council and its local authority, health and voluntary sector partners, caseworkers work in a high-discretion, 'liberated' manner with adults experiencing multiple disadvantage. They are thus able to forge relationships of trust that allow them to co-design a bespoke support plan with the individual, rather than attempting to funnel them into predetermined service pathways.

Green shoots are also emerging in Whitehall. One is evident in the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), which plans to expand the Community Health and Wellbeing Worker (CHWW) model through its ten-year plan for the NHS. CHWWs are specially trained members of primary care teams who visit every household within a defined geographic area at least once a month and get to know community members. They spot health issues, signpost people to community spaces and services and provide support directly to those experiencing loneliness or low-level mental health problems. Further promise can be found in the Cabinet Office's *Test, Learn and Grow* public service reform initiative, which has been designed to put the transformative potential of relationships at the centre of service delivery.

Building on this trailblazing work will require more empowerment of frontline service workers – decentralising decision-making and establishing supportive permission structures. Competitive tendering practices which lead to churn among service providers, disincentivising them from becoming embedded within communities, must also be reformed. And we need 'feedback loops' to enable insights from frontline workers and service users to be incorporated into the design of programmes and services.

Accelerating this trend will, furthermore, necessitate action not just to create the conditions in which those responsible for designing and delivering public services might harness the power of relationships, but to actively support them to do so. Policymakers should be trained to interrogate when transactions are not sufficient to achieve their goals, and to redeploy resources freed up through doing so. This would in turn enable those on the frontline to build relationships where they will make the most difference (a practice we call 'relational offsetting'). Frontline workers need support to develop core 'relational skills', such as listening deeply and fostering psychological safety.

## Relational policy

Each of the examples highlighted above relate fundamentally to relationships between public servants and members of the public. Policymakers, though, in addition to building these relationships, must also develop measures and strategies aimed specifically and directly at nurturing relationships *between citizens*.

These measures and strategies often do not relate exclusively, or even mainly, to the design and delivery of public services, but rather to public policy more broadly. Indeed, the policy thinker James Plunkett has suggested that we should consider the "relational capacity" of the state – its capacity "to do things with people, or to enable people to do things with other people."[1] A recent initiative which illustrates the potential impact of policy designed to facilitate the formation of good relationships between citizens is the *Homes for Ukraine* programme, which matched Ukrainian refugees with UK residents who hosted them and provided an intensely relational form of support. Studies suggest models that enable private citizens to play an active role in supporting refugees to settle in their areas deliver better integration and cohesion outcomes than those that locate that responsibility exclusively with the state.

In fact, interventions aimed at supporting people from different social and ethnic backgrounds to build cross-community ties have been a central pillar of cohesion policy for decades. As other social problems stemming from a lack of trusting and productive relationships within communities have risen in prominence, however, policymakers have begun to extend relationship-centred approaches into other policy domains.

Take health and care, for instance. The neuroscientist Julianne Holt-Lunstad has repeatedly demonstrated that social connection is among the most important determinants of our overall health and that chronic loneliness constitutes a risk factor comparable with smoking and obesity. It follows that pivoting from treatment to prevention will require policymakers to tackle isolation and build preventative networks of community and connection.

The best-known health policy approach with this objective is 'social prescribing', through which 'link' workers refer individuals from GP surgeries to community services and activities which might meet their emotional needs.[2]

Within local government, Ealing Council's *Let's Go Southall* initiative leverages active-living and community programmes as opportunities to foster bonds within

[1] Plunkett, J, 'A new how: what new types of state capacity do we need?', Renewal, 25 June 2024
[2] National Academy of Social Prescribing (2023). *The Future of Social Prescribing in England*

and across communities, improving public health in multiple ways. Barking and Dagenham council and North East London NHS Foundation Trust have co-founded a community interest company, Care City, which supports those recently discharged from hospital to connect with others who share their interests or passions. Helping these individuals to attain a sense of emotional security and develop new routines reduces the likelihood of their being re-hospitalised or experiencing health problems associated with isolation.

Such policy approaches have the potential to meet a wide range of social needs. Reflecting in 2023 on a career which had even then encompassed high-level government service across multiple departments and two countries, the now-Defra Permanent Secretary Paul Kissack wrote that "so many of the public services we were working on were clearly trying to patch up tears in the social fabric. We were building services where relationships should be." And the former Bank of England Chief Economist Andy Haldane has argued in a series of recent reports and lectures that social capital ("connections among individuals… and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them") is vital to economic growth, dubbing human relationships "the hidden wealth of nations."[3]

Policy can create the conditions for relationships to develop without itself being relationship-centred. Nonetheless, it has now been nearly three decades since the Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam first thrust the concept of social capital into the policy spotlight on both sides of the Atlantic.[4] In that time, politicians and government officials have largely struggled to develop a convincing account of what the state could and should do to generate it.

Embracing the notion that the purpose of policy can be to cultivate good relationships between citizens will be key – as will be taking active steps to grow the UK state's relational capacity. The Treasury's recent Green Book Review suggests that the potential impact of interventions on social capital may soon be more explicitly incorporated into its appraisals and decision-making. The Government should build on this by introducing tools to enable officials to assess how policy measures might affect relationships within communities; deploying frameworks to help them identify opportunities for, and roadblocks in the way of, building or strengthening social connections; and deepening their understanding of the conditions under which different forms of social capital develop.

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[3] Haldane, A, and Halpern, D (2025). Social Capital 2025: The Hidden Wealth of Nations, Demos; Haldane, A, 'Counting the Costs of Bowling Alone - annual Chief Executive's Lecture', The RSA, 21 January 2025

[4] Garcia-Navarro, L, 'The Interview: Robert Putnam Knows Why You're Lonely', *The New York Times*, 13 July 2024

## Relational governance

Building strong relationships – of both the public servant-citizen and citizen-citizen varieties – should be understood as vital to improving decision-making within government.

A wealth of evidence suggests that meaningfully involving citizens and stakeholders in policy-setting and the design and delivery of public services leads to better outcomes, drawing on experiences and voices that would otherwise be missed. The result is a stronger sense of shared ownership over decisions – deepening commitment, opening up new opportunities for partnership-working and generating efficiencies.

At the local level, the use of both participatory budgeting exercises and citizens assemblies and juries is increasingly common. At the national level, the current Government's focus on empowering people within communities is producing new collaborative governance structures – arrangements that formally transfer a degree of decision-making power to stakeholders, including local residents.

Most notably, the intention is to administer the Government's *Pride in Place* economic regeneration programme through Neighbourhood Boards comprising local people, community organisations, local businesses and faith leaders as well as ward councillors and the area's MP. A similar focus on co-operative decision-making flows through plans for a layer of new neighbourhood governance arrangements to be established across England; the new Civil Society Covenant and 'Covenant Partnerships' being assembled to bring it to life it at a local level; and the aforementioned *Test, Learn and Grow* work, which has been explicitly designed on the principle that communities understand the challenges they face better than Whitehall.

Policymakers sometimes describe these sorts of initiatives as 'place-based'. Perhaps a better description would be 'relationship-based', as what enables them to promote fruitful collaboration isn't only their geographic scale but rather whether they are underpinned by – and designed to enable the formation of – trusting and productive relationships.

Many of the Neighbourhood Boards formed to administer the *Pride in Place* programme will, for example, need to address not only the underlying tensions and latent conflict within their communities but also a lack of trust and understanding between local people and the local authority.

A government committed to harnessing the power of relationships should ensure that these boards and various other governance structures are shaped to represent the diversity of their communities, foster open discussion and enable

collaborative decision-making. It would also support those involved to develop the skills and capabilities required to navigate power imbalances, bridge differences of background and perspective and harness conflict as fuel for change.

Finally, it would recognise that a culture of citizen participation and collaboration cannot simply be retro-fitted onto the system in its present form. It would, then, launch a drive to enable officials to become skilled in the open and empowering ways of working and co-production techniques required to deliver on this ambition.

## Conclusion

Relationships between frontline service workers and service users, as well as between citizens themselves, are a powerful yet underutilised engine of change. Cultivating good relationships within communities should be a key objective of modern policymaking. Effective collaborative governance structures must be anchored in relationships of mutual understanding and trust. Relationships can, then, serve as both the means and ends of public policy – "the root and the flower."[5]

Making relationships the first step rather than the extra mile should be regarded as at least as foundational to 21st century government as the strategic use of data or digital transformation.

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**Rich Bell is a policy professional with a focus on issues of social capital and an adviser to The Relationships Project.**

**David Robinson is a founder of The Relationships Project and previously led the Prime Minister's Council on Social Action.**

[5] Weisman, J, 'Is the Partisan Divide Too Big to Be Bridged?', *The New York Times*, 16 January 2024

# In conversation with… Reflections of a top Delivery Man

## John Manzoni, business executive-turned Civil Service CEO, talks to Peter McDonald about changing government from the inside

In 2014, the Civil Service appointed its first Chief Executive, John Manzoni, a joint billing with the then Cabinet Secretary, Jeremy Heywood. For the first time, the service had someone at its head who was both an outsider and focused on the inner workings rather than the ministerial machine.

John was well-accustomed to business leadership, having spent 30 years in the oil and gas sector before joining government. His tenure as CEO of the Civil Service then lasted until 2020, when he returned to industry. Five years after leaving the public sector, he reflects on his personal missions at the time, what he learnt about delivery in government and where he believes we can improve the system.

### Horizontal functions

When John entered government, he recognised two longstanding issues. The first was the cultural bias of policy formulation over delivery. He keenly felt the career structures, rewards and incentives of the Civil Service were all geared towards advising on policy rather than making that same policy happen in the real world. The second was Whitehall's classic vertical architecture, marked by departments operating as self-contained units with relatively little cross-government scaffolding.

His response to these structural concerns was the creation of 'functions' – cross-government professions to define, own and improve specialist capabilities across departments. As he puts it, the idea was that they would have their own leaders of suitable seniority, charged with "bringing the right skills to the right places at the right time." Borrowing from corporate models, the professions went beyond traditional services – HR, finance and legal – and extended to the full span of delivery disciplines, including commercial, property, procurement and digital.

Overall, John's mission was to rebalance the operating model of government, strengthening the structure of delivery to complement the traditional structure of policy advice. Departments would remain vertically accountable for decisions and outcomes, but the functions would provide horizontal heft.

"It was obviously needed," John reflects. But it took a crisis to prove the merits of what was an unfamiliar model (to Whitehall, at least). This came in the form of Carillion, a major supplier of services across the likes of health, education, transport and justice. In 2017, when alarm bells were sounding on the company's finances, the nascent central commercial function was tasked with corralling information from across government to assess taxpayer exposure – and the

options for addressing potential business failure. “Carillion was the first time we could really see across government,” he recalls. This mattered, “because the company didn’t know – and nor did any single department.”

The situation deteriorated rapidly. “We were in with the lawyers and it came down to the wire on a Sunday afternoon,” he remembers. The question was whether to let the failing company go into insolvency or inject more public funds. Because there was a cross-Whitehall view, contingency plans were already in place, “so we were able to say ‘no’ to a bailout.”

Responding to an emergency was a start, but there were bigger cultural challenges to overcome. “Getting the functions going was one thing,” John says, “but having them impact at the top table was another.” He explains how, in the corporate world, large businesses would usually have ‘line’ leaders and core functions sitting around the boardroom table together. But he found this proved tricky to replicate in a government context.

In this setting, departmental pPermanent sSecretaries were the established line leaders. There was no defensiveness about the presence of new functional players, just uncertainty on how it could be made meaningful. “The agendas for the meetings were really hard to get right,” he recalls – by which he means finding purposeful ways to bring the vertical and horizontal leadership group together around collective issues. For John, the challenge simply reinforced the need to persist: “I said to Jeremy [Heywood] that we had to keep trying. And so we did.”

**Alt text:** Sir John Manzoni leaning against a window.

## Counting the whole cost

One purpose of establishing cross-departmental functions was to understand what it would really take to deliver the government's priorities. John's ambition was that a genuine 'whole of government' costing for delivering a particular policy could be best developed if function leads supported departments. This reflected the complex reality of government, with costs and levers spread over multiple departments.

This ran counter to the traditional approach of each department being responsible for its own elements – and assigned budgets accordingly. However, he argues that a bilateral allocation process between the Treasury and individual departments does not adequately reflect the cross-cutting nature of modern government – "we still fund things in silos instead of asking what it really takes to deliver."

To be fair, multi-year Spending Reviews are intended to address these very considerations. Moreover, the Treasury must carefully control aggregate spending across departments within the system of pParliamentary accountability. This role is more important now than ever.

"Because of the way we run the system, we waste less public money than we would otherwise waste," he acknowledges. "But because of the way we run the system, we don't deliver change as fast as we could." So John encourages us to push the boundaries.

In his view, better cross-government assessment and expertise is vital. "We got close to the place where, if you knew how to listen to the functional structure, you could properly 'cost' a policy outcome." He illustrates this with the example of bringing property and commercial experience to the then Prime Minister's commitment for 20,000 additional police officers – "we were able to show it was also going to need three new prisons."

Overall, John's challenge is to make financial decisions grounded in a full assessment of what it takes to do something. To deliver on a specific cross-government outcome, his ideal model would be to provide a 'whole government' allocation to one single place and then make a single person accountable for delivery.

## To govern is to choose

Assessing the cost is one thing, deciding what to prioritise is another. Of course, this is ultimately a political judgement and so rightly rests with ministers.

All the same, John wanted the functional structure to better equip the Civil Service to support such prioritisation. However, the turbulence of Brexit, Covid and political transitions made this hard for him to pursue. "One thing I worry about," he says, "was that we were not really able to connect a stronger civil service to the politics of prioritisation."

This mattered because, in John's analysis, the greatest reason why government struggles is its overcrowded agenda. This is a broader point than doing more – or better – Spending Reviews; it is about coming to terms with the real constraints on the capacity of government. In this context, he finds it interesting to reflect on the current government's original five missions. "If these are to be the hard choices, the idea of truly focusing on the missions has the potential to be hugely valuable," he remarks. "But they cannot be broadened to be everything for everybody," he cautions.

One way into this is for the Civil Service to plan better and with greater coherence. This was his rationale for introducing so-called 'Single Departmental Plans', an attempt to replace an array of strategy documents with one statement of each department's objectives that linked directly to allocated resources (people and money, in particular). This was not, of course, the first time departments had compiled plans. But it was an attempt to establish a single version of the truth for each organisation, with a transparent mapping of inputs to outputs – something the functions could then support.

Although defined in terms of the same vertical structure he sought to soften, it still proved a significant challenge in itself – "they were really hard to do because we hadn't done them before." The first versions, he concedes, were more of an aggregated list – and a long one at that – rather than real prioritisation. Mapping these intended outputs to financial inputs was the hardest part, even though, "by definition, funding was the other side of the same coin." Nevertheless, the plans laid the foundations for what has since been built upon.

## Delegating the right way

Once costs are understood and priorities set, it is then a case of empowering the right people to execute. In business, John was used to accountability flowing clearly down the chain of command. But he was surprised by what he found in government, where he often saw it effectively reversed. "Delegation was going upward – completely the wrong way round."

He draws a clear distinction here between policy and delivery, noting that it is entirely appropriate for civil servants to elevate policy decisions to democratically-elected politicians. But when delivery decisions are escalated to ministers, it slows things down and blurs the accountability of officials – "it's the antithesis of how you get stuff done."

Of course, ministers are ultimately accountable to Parliament; all actions are in their name and they are the 'public face' of performance. So is the UK's constitutional model a constraint? John argues there is no inherent barrier; it is more a case of culture – among both officials and ministers. True delegation, he suggests, relies on two-way assurance: ministers confident enough to empower and civil servants confident enough to take ownership.

With delegation in mind, John reflects on working with arm's length bodies (ALBs) established to deliver specific parts of government away from the central machine. Many such bodies emerged from the 'Next Steps' reforms of the Thatcher and Major eras, intended to hive off major operational parts of the state and improve their management.

"In many senses, it was a great idea… but then control crept back," he reflects. In other words, the arms of government tended to retract over time. He describes the risk of a reinforcing cycle between weaker ALB leadership and greater central government control – "you can get the worst of all worlds."

But John sees a significant opportunity if the bodies have people with the right experience in strong positions. "The boards of arm's length bodies are absolutely crucial," he says. They also need strong sponsors – not in terms of control, but in terms of strategic empowerment and trust once the right people are in place. Give them a remit – ideally over several years – and let them get on with it, he advises.

## Valuing experience

A clear thread running through these reflections is the need to think differently about policy and delivery. This applies especially to culture and skills. "You can't do policy without intellect," says John, "but neither can you do delivery without experience."

"There is a whole generation of civil servants whose careers depend on progressing in the policy environment," he argues. That, in turn, shapes how they lead and what they value in others. His view is that success is still too closely associated with proximity to ministers, even though real delegation involves time away from the centre – "not every career needs to rest on what's happening at the very top."

"The underlying logic of the functional structure," he adds, "was that people could have a career which depended less on ministers." Their professional pathway, particularly early on, could be driven by competence in a specialism rather than anything else. He argues it should be an enticing prospect as civil servants can gain more experience in government than almost anywhere – "government just does more of everything."

In John's case, the principle was applied at the highest level, reflecting how Civil Service leadership was shared between him and Jeremy Heywood. This required both a personal connection – "we just got on very well" – and a mutual respect for each other's skills and experience. "He knew what he didn't know – and so did I," John recalls. While he observed Jeremy continually in and out of Number 10 attending to the live issues of the day, John deliberately focused his time on structural reform inside the Civil Service.

In the end, he wanted to nurture a cadre of people who could perform the delivery equivalent of 'truth to power', a familiar concept but usually applied in a policy context. "It is ultimately a cultural construct," he remarks. As with effective

delegation, there is no institutional reason it cannot happen. But it sometimes requires people who have done hard things to tell the hard truths – “the only way to be heard is to have the backing of experience.” John himself felt more able to do this because his reputation was anchored in the outside world – a place to which he intended to return.

## Bouncing in and out

While John drew on his business experience, he is firmly aware that the private and public sectors are different animals. “Government is an order of magnitude more complex than running a company,” he says. In particular, the blending of social and economic concerns is harder than anything most companies face – “the objective functions are more complex and less clear.”

Even so, the private sector remains a vital source of delivery expertise for government. “But we never cracked interchange,” he admits, noting that outsiders are sometimes co-opted for optics rather than genuine operational impact. “You need people from the outside doing real jobs, not limited to being symbolic ambassadors,” he says. That means owning major delivery responsibilities, not necessarily correlated with time spent in Downing Street.

In his experience, incomers had to get to grips with a larger, more complex system and lead accordingly. This was different from how they might have led in the private sector: “government requires proper systems leadership which you rarely get close to, even in the largest companies.” For understandable reasons, it was often hard for them to adapt to working with fewer levers in a bigger system. Equally, the ‘system’ itself did not always embrace them. He saw many people ‘bounce in’ but then ‘bounce out’.

Nevertheless, he would like to have done more to enable a more permeable public sector. His desire went in both directions, including for central government officials to spend parts of their career elsewhere. This could be either in the private sector or indeed in local government; both are places geared toward getting things done. “If you go out and have a different experience,” he says, “I promise you’ll be better for it.”

## Frustrating and fascinating

John’s focus on the fundamentals of delivery echoes a longstanding analysis of the Civil Service. A case in point is the 1968 Fulton Report, which argued for moving away from policy generalists, encouraging more specialists into government and bringing a greater delivery focus to policy.

It is telling to hear these themes more than 50 years later, from someone who was within the system and sought to change it from the inside. John’s reflections demonstrate his particular perspective and desire to challenge habits that can seem embedded. While much cCivil sService reform has historically arisen from external sources, he reminds us that meaningful change can also be driven from

within the system itself. As he himself puts it, “government can be frustrating, but it is fascinating in equal measure.”

**Peter McDonald is the Director of Transport and Digital Connectivity in the Welsh Government and a member of the Editorial Board of the Heywood Quarterly.**

# A new data set to build better policies

Bowie Penney explains how civil servants across government can use the latest research on deprived neighbourhoods

In October of last year, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) published the **English Indices of Deprivation 2025 (IoD25)**, the first updated dataset and Accredited Official Statistics release on this topic since 2019.

The IoD25 is the most complete place-based insight into deprivation at a neighbourhood-level, ranking all 33,755 Lower-layer Super Output Areas in England. LSOAs, a statistical geography produced as part of the 2021 Census, represent an average population of 1,500 people, roughly covering a similar area to a postcode.

This short article explains the methodology of the IoD25, the top line results and (most importantly perhaps) the uses to which civil servants across Whitehall, officials in local authorities and in other parts of the public sector can put the data in future.

## Methodology

It's important to draw a distinction between deprivation and poverty. People may be considered to be living in *poverty* if they lack the financial resources to meet their needs. People may be regarded as *deprived* if they lack any kind of resources, not just financial (e.g. diet, housing, or work and social conditions).

The IoD25, significantly enhanced following extensive consultation in 2022, is based on 55 separate data sources, termed indicators, organised across seven distinct domains of deprivation – income, employment, education, health, crime, barriers to housing and services and the living environment (Figure 1). The majority of these are sourced from administrative data across government. The seven individual domains are then combined and weighted to create the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), the official measure of deprivation in England. Two supplementary indices measuring income deprivation affecting children (IDACI) and older people (IDAOPI) are also produced, creating a suite of 10 stand alone indexes.

# The English Indices of Deprivation 2025 (IoD2025)

***The Indices relatively rank each small area in England from most deprived to least deprived***

**1st most deprived area**

**33,755th least deprived area**

*There are 33,755 small areas (Lower-layer Super Output Areas) in England, with an average population of 1,500*

***There are 7 domains of deprivation, which combine to create the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD25):***

**Income** *(22.5%)*

Measures the proportion of the population experiencing deprivation relating to low income

***Supplementary Indices***

**Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI)** measures the proportion of all children aged 0 to 15 living in income deprived families

**Income Deprivation Affecting Older People Index (IDAOPI)** measures the proportion of those aged 60+ who experience income deprivation

**Employment** *(22.5%)*

Measures the proportion of working age population involuntarily excluded from the labour market

**Education** *(13.5%)*

Measures the lack of attainment & skills in the local population

**Health** *(13.5%)*

Measures the risk of premature death & impairment of life quality through poor physical/mental health

**Crime** *(9.3%)*

Measures the risk of personal & material victimisation at local level

**Barriers to Housing & Services** *(9.3%)*

Measures the physical & financial accessibility of housing & local services

**Living Environment** *(9.3%)*

Measures the quality of both the 'indoor' and 'outdoor' local environment

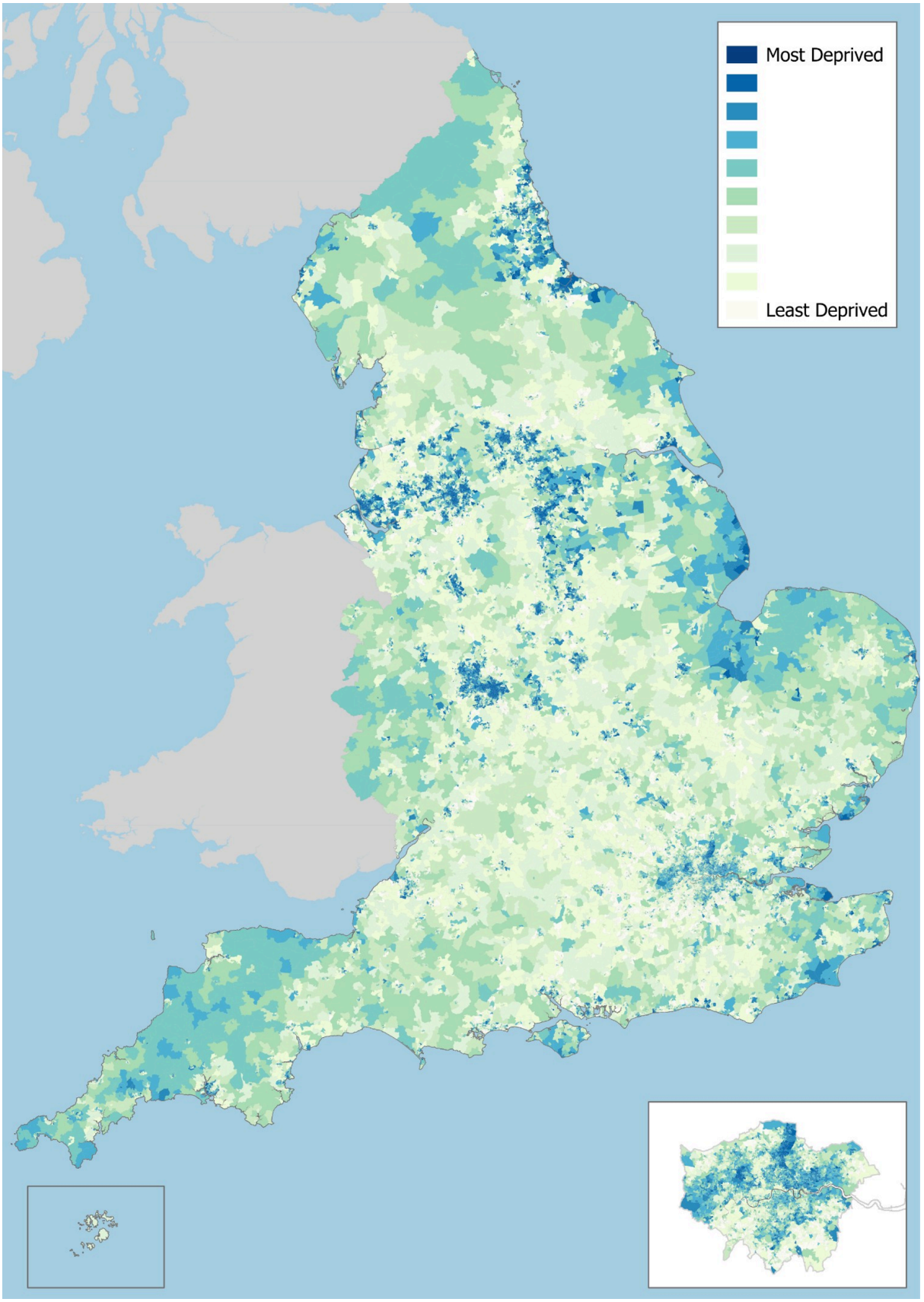
## How can the IoD2025 be used?

- ✓ **Comparing small areas across England**
- ✓ **Identifying the most deprived small areas**
- ✓ **Exploring the domains (or types) of deprivation**
- ✓ **Comparing larger administrative areas e.g. local authorities**
- ✓ **Looking at changes in relative deprivation between iterations (i.e. changes in ranks)**
- × **Quantifying how deprived a small area is**
- × **Identifying deprived people**
- × **Saying how affluent a place is**
- × **Comparing with small areas in other UK countries**
- × **Measuring absolute change in deprivation over time**

Figure 1. **Alt text:** An infographic explaining the English Indices of Deprivation 2025. there are 7 domains of deprivation within this: income, employment, education, health, crime, barriers to housing and services and living environment. The IoD2025 can be used to compare small areas across England, identify the most deprived small areas, explore the types of deprivation, compare larger administrative areas and look at changes in relative deprivation between iterations. It cannot be used to quantify how deprived a small area is, identify deprived people, say how affluent a place is, compare with small areas in other UK countries or measure absolute change in deprivation over time.

## Results

Map 1 shows the granular results across the country as a whole, ranging from the most deprived LSOAs in dark blue to the least deprived in pale green/white. Map 2 zooms in on areas around Essex and Suffolk to illustrate the complexity at a regional level.

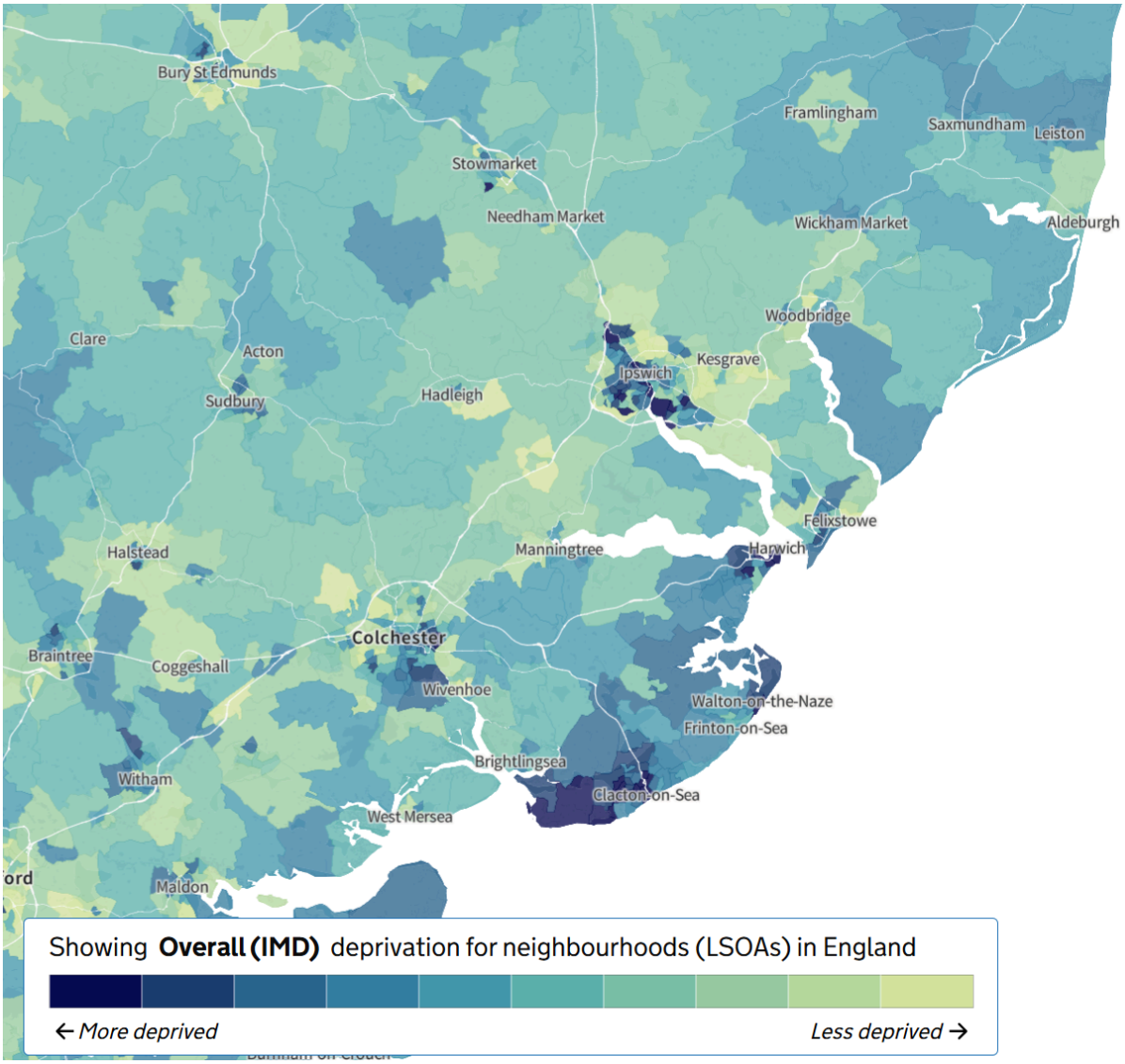



Map 1: Distribution of the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2025 (IMD25) by LSOA in England. **Alt text:** Map of England in shades from dark blue to light green,

showing areas of deprivation. Dark blue indicates the most deprived regions, and light green the least. A small inset shows London with similar colour coding.

Deprivation is particularly concentrated in large urban conurbations (such as Birmingham, Liverpool, Greater Manchester and parts of Teesside), areas that have historically had large heavy industry manufacturing and/or mining sectors (such as Bradford, Nottingham, Blackburn with Darwin) and connected rural villages, coastal towns (such as Blackpool, Hartlepool and Hastings) and parts of East London.

The most deprived neighbourhood in England according to the IoD25 is to the east of the Jaywick and St Osyth area of Clacton-on-Sea in Tendring. Neighbourhoods in Blackpool account for seven of the ten most deprived neighbourhoods nationally, with one area in Hastings and one in Rotherham making up the rest of the most deprived ten.




Map 2: Distribution of the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2025 (IMD25) by LSOA across parts of Essex and Suffolk. **Alt text:** Map depicting levels of deprivation in

East England neighborhoods, from dark blue (more deprived) to light green (less deprived). Parts of Ipswich and Clacton-on-Sea show higher deprivation.

Three neighbourhoods rank among the most deprived 100 LSOAs on each Index of Multiple Deprivation update since 2004 – an area of central Rochdale, a neighbourhood of Ayresome in Middlesbrough, and part of Bidston Hill on the Wirral.

At local authority level, Middlesbrough, Birmingham, Hartlepool, Kingston upon Hull and Manchester have the highest proportions of most deprived neighbourhoods in England.

## Uses

As a resource, the Indices support a wide range of analytical work across government and beyond – from community integration projects and models for public service funding allocation, to policies for improving local areas, highlighting disparities and identifying how they might be addressed. At a local level, the indices also provide a consistent tool to assess relative deprivation, enabling stakeholders to identify priorities for improvement and work with communities to generate local solutions. They are also widely used across academia, charities and third sector organisations. Given its Accredited Official Statistic status, the Indices meet the highest levels of trustworthiness, quality and value for users.

A prominent case is the *Pride in Place Programme (PiPP),* a UK-wide, MHCLG-driven programme providing up to £5 billion of investment to disadvantaged neighbourhoods over 10 years. In England, its various phases draw neighbourhood-level data from the Indices, rescaling and combining that data with complementary measures to provide a view of areas with the poorest social and economic outcomes.

The Local Government Finance Settlement, the annual determination of funding to local government led by MHCLG which allocated close to £70bn in 2025-26, is another example. Indices data is drawn on, augmented and incorporated into various elements and detailed formulae, aiding the assessment of need at a local level. The overall IMD measure, given its combination of seven distinct types of deprivation, and the IDACI feed prominently into specific allocations.

Across Whitehall, at the Department for Education (DfE), Indices data are used in a variety of school and pupil-level analysis including the National School Funding Formula, pre-16 school and 16-19 education funding, 19+ funding and the School Health Needs Index. More specifically, the IDACI is used to help provide more support for pupils from deprived areas, whilst the IMD is used to help allocate student support and programme funding. The combined measure is also used as an indicator for economic disadvantage in adult education provision, combining with other data to help distribute resources.

At the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), there has been longstanding interest in understanding more about deprivation in rural contexts, how this may differ from other types of area and how that can be more specifically measured or considered in a policy context. As part of the IoD25 release, a Rural Report, produced in collaboration with Defra, considered these questions more deeply, outlining how rural deprivation has been explicitly considered in the development of the latest release.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) also regularly draws on the Indices in various ways – from analysing the intersection between measures of healthy life expectancy and deprived areas, tracking the price of the lowest-cost grocery items across England and understanding correlations between smoking and levels of deprivation across England and Wales, to a wealth of Covid-related analysis and reporting.

## Collaboration

Given the range of data incorporated, there is scarcely a Whitehall department which hasn't been involved in the compilation of the latest indices – many producing bespoke datasets for inclusion, others engaging on development and changes, more still in using and augmenting data to produce policy-specific analysis. It's a great example of what can be achieved by working together.

The IoD25 suite of resources includes a National Statistic Release, covering headline findings and commentary, a Research Report providing guidance on how to use and interpret the datasets, a Technical Report detailing the conceptual framework, methodology and data sources used and a Rural Report, produced in collaboration with Defra.

Our Local Deprivation Explorer allows users to look up and download deprivation data for their area (including specific postcodes) and explore comparisons across England using an interactive map.

If you'd like to discuss your work, or have any questions about the Indices, just get in touch – indices.deprivation@communities.gov.uk

**Bowie Penney is a Statistician at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.**

# Whiskers in Whitehall

## In this excerpt from his book Political Animals, Peter Cardwell describes Evie's and Ossie's existential battle with Jeremy Heywood

Mother-and-son duo Evie and Ossie patrol the corridors of the Cabinet Office, the central nervous system of government. This is where the boss of the whole civil service has his empire. That boss is sadly not a cat but a human being: Sir Chris Wormald. He's also the Cabinet Secretary, sitting beside the Prime Minister at Cabinet next door in 10 Downing Street and guiding him through the process of governing.

But when Evie and Ossie arrived in November 2016, it was Sir (later Lord) Jeremy Heywood who ran the show. The slight issue was that Heywood was no fan of cats. Indeed, his antipathy was such that, on one occasion, he sent an email to his chief of staff, Kata Escott, outlining his displeasure with a particular habit of Evie and Ossie's. Escott then forwarded the email to the cats' biggest fan – and, as she had brought them into the building, their effective 'mum' – senior civil servant Sue Gray, who would later become Sir Keir Starmer's chief of staff.

The subject line was 'Cat Faeces' and it was written in a style Gray remembers as being 'the classic civil servant… while obviously not being happy!' Heywood wrote: 'Can I just say that I have had enough of walking past CF on the staircase? This is a place of work, not a zoo or pet shop. Final warning.'

'It was a very Jeremy email,' Gray tells *Political Animals*. 'So I messaged him back to say, who's the final warning for – me or the cats? He couldn't stand them. And yet, he kept his room
really hot, it was like a sauna, so they would gravitate to his office, lie on his desk and he was really not happy.'

Suzanne Heywood, Jeremy's wife and the author of his biography, *What Does Jeremy Think?*, mentioned the email in her eulogy at his funeral in 2018. 'We were all in stitches,' chuckled Gray, remembering her former boss with affection.

Suzanne Heywood confirmed to Political Animals that cats, along with 'karaoke, helicopters, rats and urban foxes', were amongst the things her husband most detested. However, she emphasised that Evie and Ossie were still well looked after; they loved sitting on the comfy chair in her husband's office when he wasn't around, and his private office staff kept Dreamies ready for
them alongside the rest of the office snacks on their treat table.

'Occasionally we had people that have worked in the Cabinet Office who have an allergy, so we took steps to make sure to keep the cats contained in a particular area – that's done in consultation with the individual,' remembers Gray. 'I don't think there was ever a problem with any individual, apart from, I think, Jeremy, who was the person who really loathed them.' However,
plenty of other people loved them.

Many of the Whitehall cats' names – though Larry is an exception – have a strong association with the history of the building they live in. Evie is named after Dame Evelyn Sharp, the first female Permanent Secretary, while Ossie is named after Sir Edward Osmotherly, author of the Osmotherly Rules, which set out how civil servants should give evidence to select committees.

Evie and Ossie are rescue cats from the Celia Hammond Animal Trust. They were found as strays living on the streets of east London. Evie, the mother, arrived at the rescue centre with three kittens, of whom Ossie was one. She was nervous in the beginning, but soon became a very friendly, calm and sweetnatured cat. Two of the kittens were rehomed together, but the trust wanted Evie to stay with at least one of her kittens.

**Political Animals by Peter Cardwell is published by Biteback and available in book shops, on Amazon or, for signed copies and an optional stamp from Jack the cat, at petercardwell.com, where you can also purchase The Secret Life of Special Advisers about Peter's previous working life in Whitehall.**

**Peter Cardwell is a presenter on the Talk network, and was previously special adviser to Secretaries of State in the Northern Ireland Office, Home Office, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and Ministry of Justice.**

# The UK at the UN: Why an 80-year partnership still matters

## Barbara Woodward explains why the UN remains vital to the UK's foreign policy

On 10th January 1946, 51 nations gathered in London's Methodist Hall for the first meeting of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. With the bombed-out buildings of post-war London a real and constant reminder of the devastating impact of conflict, those first delegates laid the foundations not only of a new organisation, but a new spirit of international co-operation, underlined by a shared commitment to resolve dispute through diplomacy.

Eighty years on from that inaugural meeting, that same spirit is as necessary today as it was in 1946. The organisation that settled on the banks of Manhattan's East River, however, is less able to deal with the sheer range of challenges it faces today. Pervasive conflict, accumulating humanitarian crises, growing human rights abuses and technological threats abound, compounded by growing aggression from certain member states that feel they can act with impunity.

These are not abstract challenges: each of them has direct consequences for the UK, whether as drivers of migration, chokers of economic growth or threats to our security. As such, to deal with them only when they reach our shores is to set us up for failure. Nor is the UN's business any longer the exclusive prerogative of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) or Ministry of Defence (MOD); the challenges above are cross-Whitehall challenges and will require the combined expertise and experience of Whitehall to address them.

**Alt text:** At the UN Headquarters in New York, Barbara Woodward speaks into a microphone. Behind her, her colleagues listen.

## The UK at the UN: Mutual benefits

Since 1946, the UK has played a decisive role in shaping the UN from within: Under-Secretary-General Sir Brian Urquhart, for example, created the concept of UN Peacekeeping, the ‘Blue Helmets’ for which the organization is perhaps best-known today. Such creative engagement has proved mutually beneficial for both parties across the last 80 years, in a number of ways.

**First, the UN amplifies UK security policy.** We’re among the most proactive of the Permanent Members of the Security Council (UNSC), penholding over a quarter of resolutions. Further, during my tenure, we introduced Council debates (against blustering Russian opposition) on the security implications of Covid, climate change and AI, making sure the Council remained focused on emerging threats.

It's true that not every Security Council meeting moves things forward, but they can provide a critical public forum to build and exert political pressure to deal with today’s main geopolitical issues. We consistently used our Council seat to keep the spotlight on Russian aggression in Ukraine, and on the humanitarian situation in Gaza and Sudan, and we secured the first ever Security Council Resolution on Myanmar, providing a lifeline of hope against the military junta. In September, the UNSC led successful efforts to reimpose so-called “snapback” sanctions on Iran’s nuclear programme, blocking the regime’s progress towards an atomic weapon.

**Second, the UN remains the global norm-setter.** It sets worldwide standards in areas from nuclear non-proliferation and human rights to airline standards and telecommunications, to climate change agreements, world trade and global health. Early on, the UN added the Convention on Human Rights (1948), introduced the “blue beret” peacekeepers (1956), agreed Security Council reform (1965) and the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (1970). The 1980s saw landmark adoptions of the UN Convention on Torture (1985) and the Rights of the Child (1989). These are painstaking negotiations, as colleagues and experts across Whitehall know well. We don’t always get everything we want, but the UK is known for its negotiating skills and for finding compromises that enable us to reach strategic goals.

Over the past five years, we secured the protection of Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (2023), the Pact for the Future (2024) – determining a shared vision of the UN – and a UN Ocean Conference Declaration (2025). We need this work to continue with respect to climate change, global health, technology and AI. We also need effective UN-affiliated bodies which enforce these standards, starting with the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice, for which the brilliant lawyer Dapo Akande is the UK’s candidate in November 2026’s election.

**Third, the UN remains a development powerhouse.** In humanitarian crises – such as Gaza or Afghanistan – it is consistently the first on the ground and the last to leave. Last year, its unparalleled infrastructure, supply chains, field personnel and economies of scale helped get aid to 116 million people in the most appalling conditions, with food, water and other essential services. More widely, our contributions to agencies like the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) mean more children in school and more women with access to contraception. Working with the UN multiplies the impact of the UK aid budget; this is now more important than ever.

No other organisation plays such a range of roles, all of which were on display during September's 80th General Assembly in New York. Over the course of that week, UN members overwhelmingly endorsed a two-state solution as the only viable framework for lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East; condemned Russian drones breaching Estonian airspace and Russia's further aggression in Ukraine; reaffirmed commitment to gender equality; and held preparatory meetings for Brazil's COP30 and for the 2026 International Migration Review Forum. In short, the UN did what it was designed to do. It convened the world – 193 member states – on the political and security challenges of our times.


**Alt text:** In the UN Headquarters, New York, delegates sit in a semi-circle. Barbara Woodward sits centrally, speaking into a microphone.

## A League of Nations moment?

But for all the celebratory language and the breadth and reach of its activities – perhaps even because of them – there was a sense at the General Assembly that a sword of Damocles was hanging over this increasingly overstretched organisation.

Referencing the demise of the UN's predecessor institution, the UN Deputy Secretary General, Amina Mohamed, has said that we may be in "a League of Nations moment." Her comments reflect the words of former Kenyan Permanent Representative to the UN, Martin Kimani: as Russia's tanks rolled in to Ukraine on the night of 23rd February 2022, he said "multilateralism lies on its death bed tonight." Sigrid Kaag, a former Deputy Prime Minister of the Netherlands who has had several UN roles including in Gaza, said recently that "the UN is at a point of irrelevance."

My colleagues – fellow and former Permanent Representatives, senior UN officials, and humanitarian experts – agree that the UN has never had it easy. From the outset, it has been underfunded and has struggled to keep pace with changing geopolitics and expectations. Tragic failures in Rwanda (1994) and Srebrenica (1995) led to criticism akin to that which we see today: of an organisation bloated, paralysed and powerless, challenged by geopolitical change and growing aggression and impunity by some member states, with a mismatch of expectations and resources, and an organisational structure that is not fit for purpose in the 21st century.

In response, last summer UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres launched the UN80 reform project, designed to keep the UN relevant for its member states and true to its charter values. Its success may well define his legacy. The project aims to reduce operating costs and organisational complexity and, crucially, to free up staff to help in conflict zones, refugee camps, hospitals and schools.

If successful, it could result in a UN that is better able to play its essential role as the world's mediator and peacekeeper; a UN that focuses its humanitarian assistance on those people around the world in the greatest need, working with and through local organisations, as well as delivering the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); that can continue to champion universal human rights and the institutions that uphold them; and that focuses on results and value for money, maximising the use of new technology and prioritising cost-effectiveness.

The majority of states share this vision of a UN that delivers on its Charter commitments and serves as a platform where we can meet to address transnational issues like conflict, climate change, global health, AI and education. Likewise, they agree that it urgently needs reforms to streamline its activity and deliver the above. As it has done throughout the UN's history, the UK stands ready to work across the membership to turbocharge reform efforts to ensure a stronger, more effective and efficient UN, able to deliver for those who need it most.

## Conclusion

During my five-year term as the UK's Permanent Representative to the UN, I followed over 1200 Security Council meetings and many more sessions in the General Assembly. Sitting at the horseshoe table, listening to endless Russian efforts to distort the reality of their callous, illegal war in Ukraine, it was at times

hard not to sympathise with the naysayers, all too willing to predict the UN's imminent extinction.

In such moments of doubt, there was one place within the UN campus from which I drew particular inspiration and reassurance about the UN's core mission, purpose and values. In an alcove behind the General Assembly stands a statue of St Agnes, clutching a lamb, that was rescued from the ruins of the Roman Catholic church in Nagasaki in 1945. In its charring and mottling is reflected the awful scourge of war, from which the UN was designed to protect all succeeding generations.

That goal is as necessary today as it was 80 years ago, and remains the lodestar by which the course of this reform must run. Or, as former Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöljd put it: "It has been said that the United Nations was not created in order to bring us to heaven, but in order to save us from hell." I think that sums up, as well as anything I have heard, both the essential role of the United Nations and the attitude that we should bring to its support.

As the Prime Minister has said, Britain can never be separated from events beyond our shores. A reinvigorated UN, delivering security, development assistance and global standards, can be a bulwark against the rising tide of uncertainty we currently face, multiplying the impact of UK policy around the world. The expertise of both the FCDO's overseas network and the whole of Whitehall will be key to delivering this reform package.

**Barbara Woodward was the UK's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York.**

# Can democracies solve long-term challenges?

## Lucy Smith argues that democracies need not be short-sighted

I have clear memories of the summer of 1991, which I spent with my French exchange Cécile and her large extended family in an enormous, falling-down house in the Brittany countryside. The family called this house a Chateau, but there were missing steps in the staircase and the kitchen was a couple of hot plates and a sink. Fields of tall corn started right outside the back door. The rest of the world seemed far away.

That is, until one evening, when we crowded round an old black and white television set to watch tanks rolling into Moscow's Red Square. By the end of the year, the Soviet Union had dissolved and the Cold War was officially over.

To a young person at the time, the global reordering that followed was highly visual, a series of events beamed into our living rooms. In some cases it involved direct experience. My school, for example, immediately organised an exchange with a school in the then Czechoslovakia, and off we went to stay in Soviet-style housing blocks near Prague. Importantly, it was also ideological. While historians and economists injected caution, Francis Fukuyama's declaration of the triumph of liberal democracy and the end of history entered our collective consciousness. Not just because democracy was deemed to be the best available way of distributing power and holding it to account. But because it wins. We were confident then that our model's resilience, adaptive qualities and competition of ideas would lead to better outcomes – more innovation and economic growth, a more equitable balance of risk, reward and social protection, more cohesion and resolve when faced with threats.

In the intervening years, that idea has been subject to serious challenge. Not so much from an ideological standpoint, as through changing facts on the ground – just visit Shenzhen or Dubai. To young people today, it's as if modernity and the future are being created elsewhere, a feeling compounded by deep-seated fears about global volatility and conflict, climate change, an ageing population, societal cohesion and fairness for the next generation.

So what about the material benefit of democracy, the problem-solving part? Some might be thinking: if democracy can't show me the future, what's so important about it anyway?

"Of course we have to think long-term," a politician said to me and my colleagues on a recent visit to Japan, "because the challenges ahead won't change." What he

meant was that the challenges we are facing are about external facts, not politics, and are not something politics can ignore. But in the UK it is quite common to hear the view that democratic politics is congenitally and permanently unable to do long-term strategy, regardless of whether the problems we face now demand it or not.

If we accept that, think of the sorts of things we're saying that we're not going to do.

- We're not going to investigate and plan for the profound impact of demographic change, the changing age structure and its impact for the economy and labour market, as well as the costs to public services which could soon crowd out other public spending
- We're not going to reimagine a sustainable, fair tax system, resilient to the challenges of the next two decades
- We're not going to look ahead to the impact on the economy and society of major technological change, consider the impact on our democracy and institutions and make sufficiently early choices about how young people will succeed in a rapidly changing world

If current structures and practices cannot solve real world problems, governance systems – in democracies especially – will have to evolve. We could descend into authoritarianism. We could await, or generate, a disruptive crisis as an excuse to rebuild. Or, we could be practical about it and look at what needs to change so that our current system can solve long-term challenges. On pp 43-49 Philip Bray, in his article "Reclaiming the future: The UK's chance to catch up", describes how four democracies are looking to update and enhance their strategic capabilities so that they can remain agents of their own futures. Let's learn from them.

At the heart of our project on long-term national strategy-making is a simple idea. If we can diagnose and select the top challenges we want to address as a country, set against them our long-term objectives and articulate the 'big bets' we think will make us successful, we will have captured and expressed a national strategic framework for the UK. As demonstrated by Spain and the Netherlands, the very fact of a state-level commitment to think about and set out scenarios and pathways for the future unlocks others to do the same. Everyone plans and acts with greater confidence and can reap the benefits and efficiencies of alignment, as well as contributing towards solving the same problem set.

But this isn't enough on its own. The set of practices and the method by which we get to such an ostensibly simple framework are crucial. This is a moment when our underlying assumptions and 'big bets' need re-examination and reinvention, when the external problem set demands bigger thinking. That can only be done by

opening up to wider perspectives across politics as well as civil society, by properly confronting conflicting views, choices and trade-offs and by conducting an honest conversation with the public about what these mean.

We need longer horizons that go beyond electoral cycles; a 'national' – not government – posture that creates a new relationship with other actors in society on long-term challenges; new methods for considering ingrained assumptions, 'big bets' and fundamental choices, including through a 'contemporary Project Solarium' based on President Eisenhower's 1950s national-level exercise in strategy and foreign policy design; and a different level of openness and transparency, including digital and innovative techniques for testing choices with the public.

We can get going on this now. It is feasible that in 2026 the following things could happen. Imagine if…

- Government produces the first iteration of **national scenarios** for discussion and debate – three alternative scenarios for the UK in 2040, which crystallise the choices and trade-offs involved in different potential futures.
- We hold the first 'UK in 2040' **conference**, with Ministers, parliamentarians, local and devolved government, experts, business, civil society and the public discussing the implications of the most important future trends and scenarios.
- Parliament convenes its **first interparliamentary committee for the future** – with participation from the devolved legislatures – to examine the national scenarios and develop a conversation about the future.
- We hear from voices across society – associations, representative bodies, businesses, places. Civil society experts convene **conversations with the public about the future.**
- We pilot a **contemporary Project Solarium** on a long-term challenge, setting up separate taskforces, drawn from a range of partners, to evaluate and compare different strategies and scenarios.

For those who think long-term strategy-making isn't part of our political or administrative culture, we can reassure. We won't suddenly find ourselves turning Penzance into Shenzhen or developing a Napoleonic administrative system. But we don't need to accept the status quo either. Why should the public accept short-termism and incrementalism as a cost of democracy, a limiting factor on the problems we're allowed to solve and the future we're allowed to imagine?

**Lucy Smith is the third Heywood Fellow at Blavatnik School of Government. She was formerly Director General for Strategy at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.**

# Reclaiming the future: The UK's chance to catch up

## Japan,  Korea, The Netherlands and Spain think about the long term in very different ways to us, says Philip Bray

Folded into the seat on a plane back from Seoul, or under the Channel on a train home from The Hague, or blearily waiting for a delayed Piccadilly Line train after an intense few days in Madrid, I kept coming back to the same two thoughts. First, how lucky I was – to go to these places, speaking to politicians, officials, academics and businesspeople whose work I had only read about. And second, a slightly more uncomfortable realisation: other democracies are simply better than we are in the UK at thinking about the long term.

This shouldn't have surprised me. Over the last year, I've been working with Lucy Smith, 2024–25 Heywood Fellow, not on whether we *should* take a more long-term, more strategic approach – almost everyone we spoke to agreed on that – but *how* to do it. I was perhaps surprised because we still like to describe the UK as "world-beating" and because so many people at home told us long-term national strategy was fundamentally incompatible with a parliamentary democracy like ours.

Our visits to these vibrant, contested, polarised and messy democracies showed something different. They revealed countries that had built quiet routines, cultures and habits that make strategic coherence normal, and an outward-looking, long-term perspective feel entirely natural. Far from impossible for democracies, a practice of national strategy is helping these countries forge ahead and navigate the future.

It left me with one unavoidable conclusion: we have some catching-up to do.

## Spain – thinking outwards

The Spanish Government's Office for Foresight and Strategy was like a startup within the genteel presidential enclave of the Moncloa – filled with young people, strong coffee, big lettering on the wall and potted plants everywhere. And so it was with their flagship initiative. Spain's *España 2050* provides a powerful example of how to strategise about the long-term in a country that doesn't have an embedded tradition of strategy. It's all the more interesting for that reason: the creation of *España 2050* was a highly-intentional act of practice-building, focused on creating a national conversation structured around evidence, foresight and comparative analysis.

Rather than relying on organic or informal strategic instincts, Spain chose to make this a formal, structured, rigorous, open exercise of looking decades ahead; and to look outwards, defining and motivating itself through competition. *España 2050* tells a good story – of tremendous progress since the 1970s, shedding its 'poor man of Europe' image; and setting its sights high, asking what it would have to do to catch up with the EU's most advanced economies over the next 30 years.

This wasn't just the initial framing: it structured the entire approach. Analysis of the challenges faced were comparative ones, identifying school attendance, for instance, as a particular problem in a country at the bottom of every European league table. The solutions it proposed were comparative ones, advocating a New Zealand-style 'wellbeing budget' for example. And the objectives it set were comparative too – based on metrics that could be compared across the EU and intentionally set to catch up with the eight most advanced European economies.

From this outwards-looking mentality, the Spanish government built up two normative scenarios: one that followed path dependency and another that assumed the changes required to catch-up were taken. They 'backcasted' what that would mean, not just in 2050, but what choices and big bets would have to be taken immediately, what staging would be needed and what intermediate milestones Spain should meet on the way.

This comparative ambition, anchored in quality data and openly communicated as a narrative, can powerfully organise domestic debate without pretending that there is a single, set path that must be followed into the future. Maybe we need a bit more of that start-up culture in our thinking.

## South Korea — thinking together

In the swanky café of the National Assembly overlooking the Han River, we were offered iced coffees – a Korean staple. Here, we spoke to two remarkable women who advise parliamentarians on long-term trends shaping this East Asian powerhouse. Had we been looking at the same view just after the Korean War, we'd have seen little more than a sandbar, turned into Seoul's flood-prone airport, serving a city of 1.3 million. Today, Yeouido – a prominent district in Seoul – sits within a glass-and-steel metropolis of 26 million, half the country's population.

South Korea's broader rise is extraordinary: from a GNI per capita of $67 in 1953 – poorer than the North – to around $37,000 today, among the world's richest. Critics often note that early growth came under an authoritarian regime, but what is striking is how much of Korea's transformation happened after democratisation. In one of the world's most vibrant and contested democracies, long-term strategy has endured and evolved.

Successive governments of all political colours kept roughly the same drumbeat: a single coherent economic vision updated in phases every five or so years – from basic industries to heavy and chemical ones, then cars, consumer electronics and now high technology and semiconductors. Politics shaped the 'how', but the underlying consensus remained: build a mercantilist, export-driven economy based around the chaebols (large industrial conglomerates); attract foreign investment; position Korea as a centre of human capital; and protect domestic firms long enough for them to scale.

One interviewee summed this up with a striking metaphor: Korea as a "flotilla". National strategy was never simply a government project. The state, the chaebols and other firms, the creative industries and citizens moved in synchrony – different vessels, different roles, but broadly rowing in the same direction because it made collective and individual sense. Korea's economic transformation was a national

endeavour, powered as much by societal commitment and private-sector boldness as by government programmes.

This coherence is possible because Korea has an unusually shared self-understanding. When we asked people to describe the country's strengths and weaknesses, the answers were almost identical. They described a resource-poor, geographically constrained nation, but one rich in human capital – high educational attainment, technical intensity and cultural confidence. The chaebols were seen as engine and brake, commanding the capital and export reach that drives national success, while also crowding out start-ups and newer innovators. Koreans were equally universally clear about their biggest challenge: a looming demography crisis. This widely shared diagnosis – reinforced by the researchers we were meeting, whose independent institute provides the National Assembly with long-range analysis and evidence about the country's trajectory – gives a stable, common starting place for strategic choice.

Korea's cultural surge tells the same story. Despite a deep cultural tradition, its modern output was once overshadowed by Chinese, American and especially Japanese content. Today, Squid Game remains Netflix's most-watched series ever, and K-Culture generated $13.2 billion in export revenues in 2022. This did not happen by chance. Government created an export agency and invested in infrastructure, strengthened IP protection – but industry leaders consistently told us the state was "playing catch-up". The real strategic engine was the creative sectors themselves: producers, writers, studios and artists who developed globally resonant formats and a highly melodic, choreo-driven pop genre.

Korea's economic and cultural strategies have remained so effective over decades – through democratisation, political upheaval and the rapid development that saw the skyscrapers of Yeouido grow and grow because they were never narrowly governmental. They were national: built on a shared view of strengths and vulnerabilities, and using different actors – different capacities of the Korean nation – playing specialised but aligned roles. When long-term strategy is held in this way, not as a government plan but as a national practice, it becomes both durable and powerful.

## The Netherlands – thinking forwards

A well-lit meeting room in an elegant art deco office in The Hague, being offered buttermilk, felt perhaps an unlikely place to look for creative statecraft. Yet since the 1950s, the Dutch have used scenarios to look ahead, beginning with the work of their first planbureau – independent state research institutions, loosely comparable to the UK's OBR. And here we were in one of them, listening to some of the most enthusiastic public servants I've met describe, with real pride, the Dutch routine of looking 10-20 years ahead through scenarios.

Crucially, Dutch scenarios are well-understood, not as predictions, but as "visions of the future that can inform debate on consistent long-term policy choices."

Their distinctive power comes from their openness. Dutch scenarios are intentionally public. They are published widely, often just before election manifestos, giving society agreed temporal anchors, common ways of thinking

about the decades ahead and an entry point into a mature national conversation about today's choices and their long-term consequences.

They are not government planning tools; they are tools for society. When we got curious and started Googling their 2040 scenarios, we uncovered a whole ecosystem of 2040 strategies – from banks and cities to sectors and ministries. The scenarios provide a common frame around which to plan. They shape debate and inform investment decisions without dictating a single future. The independence of the planbureaus matters here: governments cannot reframe scenarios to suit their policies, and the bureaus themselves feel obliged to think across the political spectrum. Some are now even experimenting with citizens leading scenario design.

The Netherlands is also at the forefront of operationalising strategies looking 10, 20, even 50 years ahead. As one of the most densely populated countries in the world, it treats space – land and seabed – as a strategic resource on a par with money. Housing, economic connectivity, nature recovery, and flood defence all depend on long-term decisions about land use. Maps become the organising tool to surface those trade-offs. Even defining national characteristics, such as the Dutch affinity for cycling, emerge from this shared understanding of how land should be used and protected.

Futures thinking is not alien to the UK – other countries once visited Britain to learn from how we did things. But we have forgotten how central these tools must be to statecraft. Unlike the Dutch, we have not tapped the power of making such analysis public and independent in enabling evidence-based conversations, or giving society common, long-term reference points. Looking out over the parks of The Hague in that art deco meeting room, I found myself thinking about the upcoming Dutch elections – and how, even in such a divisive political environment, futures work can create shared horizons and help anchor national debate beyond the next election cycle.

## Japan – thinking boldly

A brutalist office this time, overlooking the domed, skeletal shell that survived Hiroshima's atomic bomb. A city defined by history. And yet, the prefecture officials we were talking to spoke with remarkable clarity about the future, not because it is any more predictable in Japan, but because there is far greater confidence in how to navigate it.

We heard repeatedly in Japan about a deep sense of loss of its global high-tech manufacturing dominance. In the 1980s, Japan produced nearly half of the world's semiconductors; today it is a bit player, outpaced by Taiwan, South Korea and especially China, which manufactures a quarter of all 200mm+ wafers. This isn't just about national pride. For Japan, sovereign capability in this critical technology is now seen as essential to economic resilience and national security, particularly as China's dominance continues to grow.

Japan's response has been characteristically bold. It is not afraid of long-term big bets, and the centrepiece of its semiconductor push is Rapidus, a new joint venture between the Japanese Government and eight major firms such as Toyota

and Sony. This is no comms exercise. Around $11bn of public funding has been committed, with the eight firms committing millions each themselves. This growing investment has enabled Rapidus to become only the fourth company worldwide to acquire multiple extreme ultraviolet lithography machines – at $200 million each, among the most complex and capital-intensive tools in the world and beyond even the capability of most large firms. It is also a place-based bet: the new fabrication plant is being built on Hokkaido, a relatively poor, rural region with access to the vast renewable power a leading-edge facility will need.

Crucially, this is not a hedged bet. The government has been explicit that profitability or tax revenues are not the aim. Success is defined only in national terms: restoring sovereign capability and long-term economic security in a foundational technology. What distinguishes Japan's approach from other countries' attempts to enter the semiconductor race is its cultural attitude towards long-term strategy. We heard repeatedly that agreement in Japanese politics often takes years – because once a commitment is made, it must be delivered. Targets are not aspirational; they are obligations. The credibility of government depends on meeting them.

This continuity of purpose is systemically reinforced by institutional culture. Japanese civil servants often spend their entire careers working in one ministry, developing deep personal knowledge and links to particular national champion businesses, creating impressive departmental memory and stability. When Japan makes a big bet, the whole system – funding, bureaucracy, politics and industry – re-orients to make it stick.

This gives Japan a degree of strategic certainty that many democracies would envy and an ability to pursue decades-long commitments – whether re-establishing a semiconductor industry or ensuring Hiroshima's past is never repeated – with such steadiness. This blend of cultural and institutional alignment offers Japan an uncommon assurance as it faces the uncertainties of the future.

## Concluding thoughts

Democracies around the world, then, are already practising long-term national strategy. They are variously outward-looking, self-aware, nationally-focussed, committed over decades and willing to discuss hard choices openly. Their strategies are not 800-page tomes or grand designs, but repeated routines – a practice.

The UK is no stranger to bold bets, reinforced institutionally and culturally. From the creation of the NHS, to an independent nuclear deterrent, to the Special Relationship; we have made strategic choices that have endured for generations and still endure now. But we do not yet have a deliberate way of identifying the next set of long-term bets, or of assessing our national strengths and vulnerabilities in comparison to our competitors. We have no regular, confident rhythm of public futures thinking. And we lack structured ways of talking openly about trade-offs and prioritisation at a national level. Above all, we need a practice that is not for government but for the nation.

Much of this capability already exists in fragments. The Government Office for Science looks decades ahead at global trends. The Civil Service remains world-class at using data to inform policy. But these capabilities often sit apart – foresight too rarely linked with decision-making; evidence too often provided only to ministers, leaving our public debate open to vague promises and commitments to deliver everything, everywhere, all at once.

It would be easy to end by asking, 'Which of these models should we copy?' But the more important question is, 'What kind of long-term strategic practice should the UK build, given our own institutions, geography and democratic culture?'

That question lies at the heart of our newly published *National Strategy Playbook* – a first cut at 25 practical steps the UK could take to establish a repeatable strategic routine. And for those who want to go deeper, our detailed paper *The Practice of National Strategy: Concepts, Global Lessons and Their Application* sets out the full global analysis – from the Dutch scenarios to how the Fins use their Parliament to inform future-focused debate to the lessons Cold War US strategic methods could teach us.

Taken together, these resources begin to sketch what a British practice of national strategy could look like: outward-looking, collectively owned, institutionally grounded and capable of renewal. Other democracies are already doing this. We can too – and if we want to navigate an increasingly uncertain world with confidence, we must.

## The National Strategy Playbook

Available online at the Blavatnik School of Government's website, the National Strategy Playbook is an account, in six sections, setting out the 25 instructions by which we could establish a repeatable cycle of looking 15 years ahead to set a long-term UK national cycle, reviewed every five.

**1. The foundations of national strategy –** Establishing the institutions, governance and principles needed for each cycle, this section recommends a central organising team in government and a new parliamentary committee.

**2. Diagnosing the country's challenges looking at its past, present and future –** Taking a cue from Spain's approach, the *Playbook* recommends we take a historical, comparative and data-led approach to understanding where we've got to, where our strengths and vulnerabilities lie and what the future might have in store for us. This would culminate in the creation of Dutch-style published national scenarios and the selection of a handful of strategic challenges which the national strategy must target.

**3. Competing big bets and developing pathways to the future –** Emulating the boldness we saw in Japan, this stage involves us competing different strategic approaches to those challenges against each other, properly understanding the trade-offs and choices involved. It proposes the design of a 'contemporary Project Solarium' building from the technique employed by President Eisenhower to strategise for the Cold War in 1953.

**4. Forming the national strategy –** The Playbook then sets out options for testing pathways through a national conversation that allows for a dialogue about these choices, helping us navigate choices and trade-offs.

**5. Mobilising transformative change –** Stage five is all about execution. It draws from the lessons in Korea, to develop a 'flotilla' approach, acknowledging the role of local places, business and civil society in achieving national goals. It also recommends the adoption of 'anchor strategies', changes to the spending review process and a national spatial strategy to translate strategic aims and choices to geographies.

**6. Monitoring and iterating the national strategy –** And finally, like the repeated practice and rhythm we saw in many countries, we must repeat the process again – reviewing, revising and updating it to face new realities and new futures.

**Philip Bray is a Visiting Practitioner on the 2024-25 Heywood Fellowship team. He previously worked for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, amongst other departments, in various strategic and delivery roles.**

# Happy New Year Reading!

## Heywood Quarterly contributors share their recommendations for 2026

With 2025 coming to a close, we asked former contributors and members of our team to reflect on books (recently published and not-so-recently published) that they have found entertaining or instructive over the last 12 months.

Ranging from a history of the Civil Service to ideas that can change the way we work, we hope there's something in this eclectic list that piques your interest and finds its way onto your reading list for 2026. You can read the full article on the website.

### This is for Everyone by Tim Berners-Lee

Tim is the modest inventor of something that has changed all of our lives – the World Wide Web. What is more, he invented it and gave it away for free (hence the title of the book). The book echoes his personality, telling his extraordinary story in an understated way, starting with the creation of the first website in 1991 (which still exists today). I was amused to find that Tim went to a school I have often passed by in South London, already thinking big thoughts for the future. Later on, as I recounted in my biography about Jeremy, he stepped into government to try to help transform public services. Well worth reading.

**Available via Pan Macmillan**

**Recommended by Suzanne Heywood.**

### Money: A Story of Humanity by David McWilliams

One of my favourite books this year has been *Money: A Story of Humanity* by David McWilliams. There are so many books about the history of money, and a lot of them are great including Felix Martin's *Money: The Unauthorised Biography*, but this one is up there with the best. I love the ambition of McWilliams' historical scope, tracing the origins of money from the use of notches on bones during the Stone Age, to the development of cryptocurrencies and digital assets in the modern day. But most of all I love the way McWilliams places money at the centre of human social development: so that in his thesis money makes society, as much as societies make money.

**Available via Simon & Schuster**

**Recommended by Mario Pisani, Deputy Director in the Financial Stability Group at HM Treasury, and a Trustee of the Royal Mint Museum.**

## Who is Government? The Untold Story of Public Service by Michael Lewis

Government is fascinating. That statement may well be a minority opinion, but by telling the stories of people who do the work of government, this book will convince you. You will meet the manager who made the National Cemetery Administration, which is responsible for burying military personnel and maintaining their places of rest, the best-run public or private organisation in the United States. Or the employee of the Internal Revenue Service, who is so effective at cracking cyber crime that his work has protected society from child abuse, terrorist attacks and cyber fraud (saving over $12 billion for victims of crime and the taxpayer), and who could earn a fortune outside government were he not to value more the impact he makes in his job. And the head of innovation at the National Archives, deeply committed to assuring equal access to the information any citizen might want or need.

This book tells the story of why good government matters through stories of the people who make it good – civil and public servants in the US federal government, who do extraordinary work without profile or praise, motivated by their own deep values of making a difference. Importantly, it is incredibly readable, only 243 pages long and driven by strong story telling as you would expect from Michael Lewis and the other writers he has recruited. The book is a series of essays, first published in the Washington Post. When I had finished it, I hankered for a UK version to tell the story of what the best of government and public service looks like, and why it must be supported to be its best.

**Available via Penguin Books**

**Recommended by Tamara Finkelstein, former Permanent Secretary of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Having completed 35 years in the Civil Service, Tamara will be starting as Chief Executive of the Royal Academy of Engineering in the new year.**

## How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation by Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey

I was given this as a leaving gift from a brilliant manager a few years ago and I keep coming back to it. It talks about why change is so hard (both personal and at work) and how our intentions are often overwhelmed by silent commitments and assumptions. I may be committed to going running in the new year, but if I’m being honest, I’m also committed to protecting relaxation time, and I assume that going running takes time away from being "productive". This book walks you through the steps to find what’s blocking change.

**Available via Waterstones**

**Recommended by James Ancell, Head of Futures and Foresight, Cabinet Office.**

## No Tradesmen and No Women: The Origins of the British Civil Service by Michael Coolican

We like to think the seminal Northcote-Trevelyan report paved the way for the values underpinning today's Civil Service. And in many ways it did, particularly its forthright recommendation for recruitment based on merit rather than patronage.

Yet I hadn't fully appreciated the real genesis, context and consequences of the report until reading Michael Coolican's *No Tradesmen and No Women* earlier this year. With deep research, Coolican provides rich insight on the behind-the-scenes story of both the report and subsequent reforms – the good, the bad and the ugly.

I was fascinated by how many modern debates – generalists vs. specialists, policy vs. delivery, the centre vs. departments – were all playing out 175 years ago. While history may not repeat itself, it does rhyme.

**Available via Biteback Publishing**

**Recommended by Peter McDonald, Director of Transport and Digital Connectivity in the Welsh Government and a member of the Editorial Board of the Heywood Quarterly.**

## Why Nothing Works: Who Killed Progress – and How to Bring It Back by Marc Dunkelman

There have been several fascinating books recently exploring the question why – at least in some US states – it has become harder to get things done and thus to improve living standards and the quality of life. One of these is *Abundance – How We Build a Better Future* by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson.

Another is *Why Nothing Works* by Marc Dunkelman. Dunkelman highlights the great historic achievements of the United States – building the world's greatest rail network, a vast electrical grid, interstate highways, the Tennessee Valley Authority and so much more.

Yet over the past 50 years, building almost anything has become more difficult – with serious consequences for housing affordability and much else. The desire to hold government accountable and address the wider potential costs of economic

development means increasing constraints have been imposed, and individuals and communities have been increasingly empowered to veto or block change that would deliver progress.

Dunkelman argues for a better balance between getting things done and blocking infrastructure, housing or other development. Of course wider costs need to be addressed, but not at the expense of any progress at all. Encouragingly there are US states like Texas which seem able to balance, for example, high rates of economic growth with housing affordability. Dunkelman's book resonated strongly for me with similar issues we're grappling with in the UK and I hugely commend it.

**Available via Hachette UK**

**Recommended by Stephen Aldridge, Director, Analysis and Data at the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government.**

## Gradual Disempowerment: Systemic Existential Risks from Incremental AI Development by J. Kulveit et al

This paper, which came out at the start of the year, provoked quite a lot of reflection on my part and on the part of others (and quite a dark shadow). It breaks from the 'doomster' trope that AI will turn the planet into paperclips to explore more subtle – but more plausible and concerning – scenarios. It seeks to think through the wider implications of a world where AI and robotics gradually expand comparative advantage over humans. For example, even the most dictatorial states have been constrained by the ability of people to withdraw their labour, but this might not apply in a relatively near future.

It's basically tech-savvy geeks discovering political economy, but nonetheless a thoughtful and timely provocation for us all. My own view is that societies have the ability to shape the arc of remarkable technology that is currently evolving, but we're not doing a good enough job on reflecting on those choices. This paper is a good place to start.

**Available via arXiv**

**Recommended by David Halpern, Director of the Downing Battcock Institute, Cambridge, and President Emeritus of the Behavioural Insights Team.**

## How Democracies Die: What History Reveals About Our Future by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt

Whilst largely focusing on the US and offering further examples from Latin America and Europe, *How Democracies Die* acts as a warning against naively assuming that

"demagogues are 'all talk'". It provides a deep-dive into the many symptoms of a democracy at risk of death, calling on an increasingly polarised society, denouncement of the media and evasion of the checks and balances of the judiciary and legislature as key indicators. Democracies rarely collapse overnight; instead, they erode gradually when leaders exploit legal loopholes and disregard democratic conventions. Despite first publication in 2018, Levitsky and Ziblatt provide a topical and engaging introduction for those interested in better understanding the tumultuous global political landscape today. It's a timely read for those who believe democracy is not self-sustaining but must be actively defended.

**Available via Penguin Books**

**Recommended by Sasha Howells, a second-year Government Policy Fast Streamer at the Ministry of Justice and Design and Production Lead at Heywood Quarterly.**

# Round-Up

## A summary of recent news and views you might have missed

### A new Downing Street Department

In a report led by Helen MacNamara, former deputy Cabinet Secretary, the Future Governance Forum has proposed a new Downing Street Department, separate from the Cabinet Office. The report criticises the current model as bloated and closed-off, arguing that a new and “cohesive organisation” would bring clarity, rhythm and cultural transformation. The Downing Street Department would be made up of four groups: Politics and Strategy, Policy and Delivery, Diplomacy and Security and No. 10 Private Office, with a Communications Team and a Political Office operating across the groups.

**Source: Future Governance Forum – In Power 01**

### Reform’s plans for the Civil Service

The speech just before Christmas by MP Danny Kruger about Reform UK’s plans for the civil service - mainly about cutting ‘waste’ – was deemed “genuinely interesting” by the widely followed Whitehall blogger and former senior civil servant Martin Stanley.

Stanley wondered if Kruger was “playing to the gallery” in his remarks on civil service headcount reductions. “Civil servants are a popular target, to be sure, and there are probably too many of them”, he wrote in his Substack commentary. “But they represent a tiny proportion of the workforce”.

On the Reform UK MP’s wish to increase the performance-related pay bonus pot by 400%, Stanley’s reaction was also sceptical. “It’s very hard to identify which officials to reward when, say, crime rates fall. The Permanent Secretary? Or all the various policing, criminal justice, drug policy etc. teams in the Home Office and Justice Department – and what about police officers up and down the country? Those hard workers that don’t get rewarded very often feel aggrieved and discouraged”.

On the other hand, Stanley said he rather liked “the idea that across-the-board pay rises might be linked to ‘improvements in national economic growth or productivity, aligning Whitehall with the priorities of the country’. That might just work!” He also considered “sensible” Reform’s commitment to ‘reviewing each corporate function to determine whether it is something best left to departments or whether it should sit across Whitehall as a service to be used by departments as needed; but not both’.

**Source: Martin Stanley's Substack – 'Storm and Sunshine'**

## Devolution and transport delivery

In 2025, the Institute for Government (IfG) established DevoLab, an initiative focused on exploring devolution, and the innovation and results that it delivers. The third DevoLab event in November brought together Susan Hinchcliffe (Leader of Bradford City Council), Huw Jenkins (Lead Officer for Transport Policy at Liverpool City Region Combined Authority) and Richard Crabtree (Head of Mayoral Partnerships at Shadow Great British Railway) to discuss the impact of devolution on delivering improved transport in the UK.

Insights were shared on the importance of collaboration and connectivity for regional growth, with the West Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority's transport initiative and Mersey Rail being key case studies. It was highlighted that devolution allows delivery of services with a deep understanding of the areas in which they operate – in the case of Liverpool, transforming from 'Miseryrail' to one of the best operators in the UK and enabling the targeting of key growth areas. Such confidence and control has also led to enhanced investment and planning for the long-term in West Yorkshire, with tangible improvements to walking and cycling routes in the county. The next step, then, is to increase collaboration within and across the devolved regions.

**Source: Institute for Government – DevoLab 3**

## The Tony Blair Institute's Playbook for 2026

The Tony Blair Institute has released Reimagining the State: A Playbook for 2026, outlining five strategic priorities for the year ahead. These include defining an AI sovereignty strategy, unlocking national data reserves, upgrading to a more personalised model of public service delivery, becoming an "electrostate" and addressing safety challenges. The playbook calls for a complete overhaul of the state, rather than piecemeal reforms; data and AI are common themes throughout the recommendations, suggesting that AI will continue to be a key topic of discussion in 2026.

**Source: Tony Blair Institute – Reimagining the State**