

What do mediocre Ministers do?

Mediocre Ministers go with the flow. Civil servants present them with issues to consider and problems to tackle. The Minister accepts the inherited policies and is guided by the submissions, often consenting to the civil service description of the problem and the preferred solution. The minister will let the civil service organise the diary which will shape the agenda and define the problems to solve in the way the diary master wants.

The advice has usually been through many hands, and a consensus has been reached. If options are offered the preferred solution will often run alongside clearly bad choices. The advice may suffer from being a compromise view. The Minister really needs to know the range of views and examine whether a different option could be better.

Quite often the best response will be to do nothing. The problem may be contrived or beyond government power to resolve. Any further intervention may make things worse. Doing nothing is an undervalued option, leading us to governments that over claim and underperform.

In recent years from Blair onwards there has been abuse of the power to legislate, with various laws instructing the government itself what to do in the future. This is fatuous. An honest government can announce what it is going to do and then over the years do it. It does not need to embed it in law. These so called laws never have clauses to impose penalties on Ministers and senior civil servants for breaking them. If the government finds it no longer wants to do what it said or is incapable of doing it it can anyway repeal the requirement.

Ministers are most wanted by officials when the department has made a major mistake. The Minister may have known nothing about it or the mistake may predate the Minister's arrival in the department. It will however be the Ministers job to explain the failure and remedial action to Parliament, and to take the blame. Internal review will always show no single official or small group was in sole and continuous charge. No- one is to blame and maybe a lack of resources caused the issue.

J.C.D Clark The Enlightenment An Idea and its history

Jonathan Clark has sent me a copy of his new book on the Enlightenment. It provides a magnificent sweep of intellectual history over the long eighteenth century 1660 to 1832 and into the modern era. It considers the thought of England, Scotland, France, Germany and the USA.

Its central conclusion is that term The Enlightenment is one invented by twentieth century historians. There was no Enlightenment movement, and there were considerable variations of thought and intellectual interests over the decades studied and in the varied European and US geographies. When I wrote about some of the thinkers described here I tried to follow their views of what they thought and how they wished to describe their world. Jonathan does that brilliantly based on a fount of knowledge and scholarship for a wider group.

Those interpretations of our past which saw a progressive movement from superstition to science, from belief to secular rationalism, from feudal agriculture to the industrial and agrarian revolutions, from executive monarchy to democracy, sought to downplay other characteristics of the complex literature, natural philosophy and political debate of the period.

"Enlightenment" figures usually placed themselves on the side of belief in their age's struggle against atheism. They often sided with those who opposed widening the franchise and looked for sponsorship from landed wealth rather than from the new manufacturers.

It is still possible for historians to write golden thread history where England battles her way to great industrial wealth, scientific and technical advances, a better welfare system and a democratic constitution with a full adult franchise. All that is true, and today too often derided or taken for granted. It is important scholars like Jonathan reveal the complexity of the process and remind us most of the intellectuals along this carefully selected journey did not see it like that and did not belong to any modernising or Enlightenment movement. The great natural philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries often wrote extensively about religious matters or dabbled with alchemy as well as producing important breakthroughs we now call scientific.

Who rules? Ministers or civil servants?

Our constitutional theory is democratic. Civil servants advise, Ministers decide. Civil servants remain anonymous, putting their views to Ministers in private. Ministers defend the collective government decision in public which is a decision relevant Ministers and officials have reached through discussion and email exchanges.

This means a good Minister can make a difference, can change policy and can offer informed leadership. It means mediocre and bad Ministers simply do what the officials or Number 10 tell them, and gives great opportunities to civil servants to block, subvert or delay government policies they do not like.

There have been too few good Ministers this century. Nick Gibb was allowed to stay in post as Schools Minister for a long period and did important work helping raise standards. He pursued the need to use synthetic phonics as the best method to teach reading. One of the unsung achievements of the period of Coalition and Conservative government was a big rise in U.K. child literacy as a result. He handled those in the teaching profession and some officials who were hostile to this approach.

More recently Claire Coutinho started to introduce some realism into the self harming energy policy that most officials and the Opposition parties favoured. The U.K. government overrode official advice to ban new oil and gas wells in the U.K. This crazy policy increases world CO₂ by forcing the U.K. to import more CO₂ intensive LNG in place of using U.K. pipeline gas. She started to abate other areas of self harm like the early ban on the sale of petrol and diesel cars and the premature phasing out of gas boilers. Much of the last government's policy was derived from the international Treaty based consensus on climate change, WHO responses to the pandemic, EU regulation and the hopeless forecasts and views of the Bank of England and OBR. We were governed in many areas by an official tyranny based on wildly wrong forecasts and an official consensus shared by the political Opposition that Ministers were unwilling to challenge. The new government will double up on the official consensus as they believe it all, especially the bits where it is obviously wrong.

Some think the lockdown consensus, the money printing bonanza, the pursuit of net zero whilst importing more from high CO₂ countries, the mass migration policies and the rest are the ideas of a few influential billionaires. If only. These are policies shared by armies of officials, baked into global Treaties and pursued by many political parties.

[Fake news and censorship](#)

It has rightly long been against the law to urge people to violence against others or to send out messages to people to join burglaries, looting or rioting. It is an offence to discriminate against people for their race or religion and to use hate speech against individuals or groups. Recent On line Harms legislation has underwritten that none of this must be done online, though it was already a crime whether you used the phone, a placard, a leaflet or an on line posting.

There are now those who want to widen the law to ban so called fake news. They argue that someone can circulate a wrong fact about an event which then whips up racial or religious hatred if it wrongly accuses people of a crime they did not commit. This is still covered by existing law if the resulting comment or stimulus to action is based on hatred and on their race or religion, using an invented and wrong fact to reinforce that ill.

Trying to ban all fake news goes far beyond necessary protections of people and property, and desirable crack downs over invitations to violence. It implies there is just one truth, that the authorities can judge that truth, and that any other statements are false. Life is not that straightforward. If people and institutions cannot make false claims which they believe to be true at the time much debate and discussion will be banned. A government moving in this direction might end up breaking its own fake news law all too often.

Consider some of the statements the present government has made. They said they will build 300,000 new homes a year for 5 years. Many think that unlikely. If they do not build 300,000 a year for the next two years does that make their comment fake news?

Then there is their aim to make the U.K. the fastest growing G 7 economy. It is true it was the first half of this year but most official forecasts expect others to outperform over the next few years. Would that also become fake news?

When it comes to issues like climate change and net zero policies there are big disagreements. Is government saying only one view is allowed of all the complexities? When the Bank of England told us two years before inflation hit 11% it would be 2%, was that fake news?

Of course we need to keep the ban hate speech and stop people promoting criminal activity. Why aren't all the communications of all the small boat vendors taken down and prosecuted? We must not ban different ways of reviewing the big issues like climate change, migration and the economy as disagreement about cause, effect and policy are fundamental to democratic debate.

Labour's inflationary wage awards are unaffordable

The new government solemnly promised that it would not make any important budget or fiscal announcement without a OBR report and forecast showing how it would be paid for. It condemned the Truss unfunded tax cuts though not her much larger unfunded spending rises made without a forecast. The tax Truss cuts were of course immediately cancelled and the Bank of England continued its erratic monetary squeeze disrupting bond markets.

We are living through announcements of large increases in public spending to pay a series of inflationary wage awards. There is no OBR forecast, no statement of how these will be paid for. The rail settlement brought a hopeless Transport Secretary onto the media to tell us she had no idea whether fares will be hiked or taxpayer subsidies increased to meet the

bills. The government dropped the idea of offsetting some of the costs with productivity improvements from smarter and more flexible working.

Meanwhile we can always rely on the Bank of England to make things worse. They cut interest rates just as the government switched to an inflationary pay policy and just before the inflation index started to rise again. There has been no warning from the Bank about the dangers of large wage rises unmatched by improved productivity. I thought they were independent with the sole task of keeping inflation down. When might they do that?