

Crossing Channels

Interdisciplinary answers to today's challenging questions

A Podcast series hosted by **Rory Cellan-Jones**

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Episode 1
WHY HAS IT BECOME SO HARD TO RUN GOVERNMENT?

With
Dennis Grube (Bennett Institute)
Catherine Haddon (Institute for Government)
Mohamed Saleh (IAST)

Why has it become so hard to run government?

Speakers: Rory Cellan-Jones (host), Professor Dennis Grube (Bennett Institute for Public Policy), Dr Catherine Haddon (Institute for Government) and Professor Mohamed Saheh (Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse).

Rory Cellan-Jones: Hello and welcome to Crossing Channels, a joint audio endeavour between The Bennett Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge and The Institute for Advanced Study in Toulouse.

In this series, we're going to use the interdisciplinary strengths of both institutions to explore some of the many complex challenges facing our societies.

I'm Rory Cellan-Jones and in today's episode we're going to be talking about "*Why has it become so hard to run government? The role of civil servants and decision-making in society today*".

We'll cover what's changed to make it so difficult to govern our societies, as well as trying to find some ways forward that might lead to better policymaking.

So to explore these issues today, we're joined by Dennis Grube, the new Co-Director of the Bennett Institute. Dennis has been a researcher on politics and public policy at the University since 2016 and was previously an Associate Professor and Principal Research Fellow with the Institute for the Study of Social Change at the University of Tasmania.

Mohamed Saleh, a Professor of Economics at the Toulouse School of Economics, and a member of the the Institute of Advanced Studies.

And Catherine Haddon the “resident historian” at The Institute for Government. Catherine also leads the institute’s work on changes of government, ministers and the working of the constitution.

Well let’s start by breaking this question down. Let’s start in fact, by asking if it’s true that it has become harder to run government?

Was it really any less complex say thirty years ago? And if so why?

Let’s hear from each of you, and can you also give us a brief introduction to yourself and where you’re coming from on this issue. Let’s go first, Dennis Grube.

Dennis Grube: Rory thank you so I’m a Professor of Politics and Public Policy here at Cambridge and my research interests are around political decision-making, the role of civil servants in that and how that then passes through to institutional memory. So I’m really interested in all of these questions.

I mean you’re right, this is a big opening question and I guess my starting point would be to state: there never was a golden age of government. Government is inherently a complex business. But the problem of speed in government is one that is starting to bite, I think, more and more.

Everything at the moment in policymaking feels like it’s happening at crisis pace. And if everything feels existential. Then that’s not, you know, a great perpetual state to be in for public policy-making. And you combine that with a climate of hyperpartisanship where politicians are being rewarded for leaning in towards hyper-partisan behaviour rather than being punished for it by citizens and you combine that with the echo chamber effect that is out there in relation to social media and how we consume our information where arguments over facts are essentially becoming arguments over beliefs. You look at the recent US presidential election, you either believe that it was stolen or not.

And so government is dealing with this sort of complex interplay of complexity in actually governing, the speed with which they have to respond to events and a citizenry that is not as inclined to let them do those things easily as perhaps they were in the past

Rory Cellan-Jones: Thank you. Mohammad Saleh does that speak to you and your research? Does your research tell us that we’re in an age of ever greater complexity when it comes to government?

Mohamed Saleh: So my research I’m a Professor of Economics I come from the economic history angle and in economic history there’s this big question of the Evolution of state capacity over time and the formation of states and the evolution of state capacity once conditional on having the state. If we take a bit of a longer run perspective, we can certainly see how it became more and more difficult to run governments. I’m talking about the very long run, so if we think about the like, pre -modern era for example, it was relatively straightforward essentially to tax people because taxation essentially was based on observable things like you just tax land or you tax things that the government can or the government bureaucrats can actually see and observe easily.

But if we move to the modern era of course the tax separate units and units on which the government can impose taxes became much more complex than it used to be. Add to this of course the point about the trust in government, which is essentially a key point like if we talk about not just established western democracies. But if we think of governments across the globe, we can certainly see this variation in the level of trust towards government and whether the taxpayers themselves believe what the government says in terms of A: that it's efficient and honest in the tax collection and second whether the collected tax revenue will be coming back to them in the form of public goods. So that essentially that there is no corruption.

Rory Cellan-Jones: Lots to think about there. Catherine Haddon finally, does the existence the very existence of The Institute for Government for which you work, does that tell us that we need to tackle ever greater complexity in this sphere?

Catherine Haddon: To some extent, yeah, I think it does. The purpose of The Institute for Government is thinking about how government can be better and trying to recommend to government, work with government and support it as well as to identify that the long-running problems and so forth.

I should say I mean I'm monikered as a resident historian that started off as a joke when one of my colleagues called me the pet historian but I do think it's relevant for conversations like this because it has changed and for the reasons that Dennis has set out. There is a lot more, hyperactivity, there's a lot more polarization in our politics today but some of this isn't necessarily new. If, you can go back to the nineteen sixties and see 'Decline of Britain' debates. You can see there also the origins of where we look very negatively at our bureaucracy at the very idea of bureaucracy and blame on the civil service for the reasons why the government's not doing that well. But you can go back a lot further and see plenty of absolutely atrocious governments, many failures of foreign policy. The first two years of the First World War, absolutely atrocious from a government point of view. But I think the other thing we've got to remember is that government's got that much more complex, especially with the rise of the welfare state. And these days the expectations upon it are so huge, to solve everything and also to solve everything, not even just from the point of view of a minister but oftentimes very much landing with the Prime Minister as if one individual can solve all of these problems. There's a real difficulty we've got also about how we understand government, how we understand how difficult it can be to solve some of the problems in our society and economy.

Rory Cellan-Jones: Is there a geographical story here? Is this problem very different say in France from in the UK? Do you take an international perspective on this and what conclusions do you draw?

Catherine Haddon: From my own point of view, yes. One of the things I look particularly to and I'm interested in what Mohammed thinks of this is on the continent that it seems to me to be a better understanding of the concept of public administration. You have a better link, oftentimes, between academia and the officials who do a lot of the work of governments.

In the UK the very words public administration have become quite a negative almost a dirty word, bureaucracy is certainly a dirty word. It's something that is conceived of as causing more problems than it solves. So the idea of government is looked upon in the UK as, you have different conceptions

between The Government where we see it as very much the politicians and we focus particularly on the executive. Even though we have representative governments and an executive drawn from the legislature. We saw this throughout the Brexit years where there was a battle between the executive and the legislature, they are conceived of very differently.

We almost have imported American ideas of government, but we haven't really learnt from the continent in terms of that relationship that you can have between the experts effectively in these, people who've devoted their careers to it, oftentimes have studied how to do government effectively. I mean this is probably a grass is greener type approach because there are many problems undoubtedly across the continent of many different styles of government there. But I do think there is something very interesting in the UK. And I think it's perpetuated by things like *Yes, Minister* as much as I love the program, it's added to this idea of our civil service and of the very idea of government as being something that's wasteful and ineffective rather than something that can really promote a better world for us all.

Rory Cellan-Jones: Yeah, that picture of incredibly sophisticated mandarins who are also not necessarily acting in the best interests of the country...

Mohamed Saleh let's bring you in on that. How do you see the differences say between France and the UK? The different challenges of making government work?

Mohamed Saleh: So from my own perspective having lived in the US for many years and then in France, I've never lived in the UK, my impression is that the UK may be closer to the US than to continental Europe. The main difference is in the image of the state in the citizens mindset, at least traditionally of course that has started to change as well. There's this separation maybe to some extent between the the state as a civil bureaucracy, essentially as a neutral agent, that can be managed by experts versus the politicians essentially that the elected politicians that run this. So this separation and my impression in France is that the image of the state itself is much stronger than it is in the UK and maybe in the US. Now of course over the last decades it has been like some erosion of this trust in the image of the state and in particular this has been driven I think by the erosion of trust in the politicians. There is an increasing concern that the political class in France and in, perhaps much in continental Europe, is essentially monopolised or has been monopolised for many decades by a specific group of urban elites that come from Paris and one or two grandes écoles that have been producing French presidents for much of its history. And this erosion of the trust in the elected politicians has also been reflected into lack of trust in the state itself. And this is of course you can see in the challenges around the, what happened during the pandemic which was of course a very challenging and critical moment in the sense that all of a sudden you have, you're faced with an event that brought the nation states back to the front stage.

Rory Cellan-Jones: Dennis Grube, we were always told in the UK that we had a Rolls Royce civil service. What's your view across the anglosphere? If we think about, you know, the United States, the UK, you've got experience in Australia. Is there a common approach there, or is it very different across those different countries?

Dennis Grube: The challenges that Catherine and Mohamed have discussed are in a sense uniform across much of the globe because they're challenges about democracy and the relationship between citizens and the state and who's to blame for their decline.

Now politicians have got a tendency to say well if we want to fix this problem, whatever this problem is it needs to start with civil service reform. So in France, Macron has announced the disbandment of the *École Nationale D'administration* in order to put in place supposedly a more diverse and more open culture of civil service leadership.

Here in the UK, there's a constant debate about civil service reform, we need to change the civil service. Australia has very similar debates and I think the fundamental question beneath this is: what do we want the civil service to do?

The answer always seems to be let's have civil service reform, but I'm never quite sure that we have decided exactly what the question is?

Are we relying on civil services to restore somehow this balance of trust and connection between citizens and government without the help of politicians?

Are we just wanting civil servants to essentially implement decisions, just sort of do as you're told?

Or traditionally, as is the case here in the UK, are we looking to civil servants to be co-creators, co-producers of policy, to work really closely with ministers in order to craft good policy that is then implemented? Those questions are being asked around the world, but the relationship between the question and answer I think is just not quite there at the moment.

Catherine Haddon: You've just made me think of something really interesting that it's almost like in the UK at the moment the differences between those two words. You've got civil service, so the focus is on a service, an idea that this is an institution that evolves, that it needs reform it needs good leadership but it's a body, it's a constitutional institution of long duration and one which we place a lot of emphasis of the quality of good government on it.

But at the moment it's almost like the other use of that in the singular the civil servant where somebody is just a servant of the politicians to do their bidding and we saw this over Brexit in particular with accusations of civil service bias, questions about politicisation and a fundamental debate going on in the civil service about are they just there to do the wishes of the government of the day or are they there to speak truth to power, to push back to think about the longer duration, to be doing work independently effectively and I think that kind of comes down to the heart of the UK's debate about what the purpose is of the civil service.

Rory Cellan-Jones: And aren't we speaking against a background of a crisis of trust, in expertise in particular, a kind of popular revolt? We've seen it around the world which says: we're not convinced that you know what you're talking about or that you understand these issues as well as you should? Mohamed?

Mohamed Saleh: Absolutely so I think it's... to my mind what pops up in my head now is essentially the concept of elite capture in economic history and in political science as well. The idea here is whether the state is captured, the state meaning the bureaucracy essentially, is captured by a specific political class of people that does not necessarily represent the population or not. And I think much of the erosion of the trust has been motivated by some perception, I'm not going to get into the details of whether this perception is correct or not, but some perception that the state has been increasingly captured by this political class and that it's no longer representing the population.

But it's a very tricky business, we're coming back to the point about the distinction between public service versus a public servant. Much of this debate has to do essentially with the idea that the bureaucrats are not elected while the politicians are.

So initially you wanted essentially the politicians to have power over the bureaucrats because, at least in theory, they represent the population. And ah at least the motivation I would say was to say like okay, so if you leave the bureaucrats on their own then they will have different incentives from those of the electorate and thus from the politicians and they will serve their own interest.

The problem with this kind of view is that it overlooks the first point that I mentioned which is the elite capture that if you make the politicians essentially in control and, they should be obviously in control of the bureaucrats to a large extent, then what you are risking essentially is this capture of the state that the state may cease to be a neutral agent and may be captured by these politicians.

Rory Cellan-Jones: But Dennis Grube, the crisis of trust is in both sets of people isn't it? The elected and the non-elected and it's hitting some of the institutions, like the BBC for instance, as well.

Dennis Grube: Yeah I think that's absolutely right and to draw the narrative if you like from Catherine's point to that, I think traditionally here in the UK the way we squared the circle of having civil servants who are both a service and a servant is that we asked them to do both but we linked them as an indivisible part of executive government.

So you are able to advise quietly in the back room and undertake that sort of policy formation function and then go out and deliver the policy agenda that you're given. I think under the pressures of modern government that indivisibility is being broken apart and so as a result there is a blame game emerging between politicians and the civil servants who serve them where they are pointing the finger at each other for the problems of modern government and that then plays through to institutions exactly as you describe Rory.

So without actually becoming politicised institutions like the BBC people like senior civil servants, permanent secretaries are open to perceptions of politicization because of the nature of public debate so without having changed behaviour at all, just the fact that anything that is said in public is now a part of this hyper partisan debate means that our civil servants, our national institutions are drawn into

a politicised debate that they have neither sought and would very much prefer not to be in I think. But I'm not sure that the conditions of modern government, governance, will allow them to avoid it.

Rory Cellan-Jones: We're living through probably the greatest test of governments since the Second World War, the global pandemic. Let's turn to how they've performed and what we may have learned about what works and what doesn't. Catherine, can you kick us off on that

Catherine Haddon: There's a report out in the last couple of weeks from the House of Commons Joint Select Committee report, which a lot of it actually summarises what we already know and what The Institute for Government was writing about last December, which is, the UK had a very poor start to the pandemic, despite a worldwide belief that the UK was very well prepared for a pandemic, it turned out we were preparing for the wrong kind of pandemic... flu.

And then there was a difficulty of groupthink of adjusting minds, both from the scientists and from the politicians to understand that we needed to lock down far earlier than we did, to learn the lessons from Italy, to get out of the strategy that we were locked into from this years of planning and realise that the public would accept lockdown and that that would have saved countless lives.

That was an issue. But what was more difficult too is going to be the biggest part, I think of any future inquiry, was what the government did after that. There's a lot of forgiveness for its handling in March, April of 2020. But over the summer of 2020, when it's desperate to get the economy going again, and then into the autumn, where, despite being months into this pandemic, it still wasn't thinking things through like how to get schools back and what impact that would have on infection levels, responding then when we saw rising infection numbers, and then when we understood that there was a new variant in the country, so the failures of locking down again in September, October of 2020, and again, the Christmas handling and into January 2021. Those are the really big questions because the government should have been learning as it went along and there we don't know how much that was the state had learned lessons, or whether the politicians found there was just such a big disjunction between what they wanted to be able to do and what the virus was forcing them to do.

Rory Cellan-Jones: Mohammed, was the experience in France and more widely on the continent any different from that in Britain?

Mohammed Saleh: It has a lot of similarities, I would say. So what the pandemic brought was essentially this shift in power, I would say towards the nation states again, like that the role of the state has become all of a sudden important again. Interestingly, France initially was, and continental Europe, they were, as the UK, they were taken by surprise, and they were not doing pretty well, I would say that in March 2020, in particular, and April and, and so on, but afterwards, it seems that the French state afterwards managed to come back to a large extent and managed to impose regulations on the population and lockdown, etc.

Later on, when the vaccine started to emerge, the French government, despite a very slow start in the beginning, managed afterwards to catch up and the vaccination rate now is pretty high. Despite the fact that the expectations initially were that Macron will lose part of his popularity because of the

pandemic, it seems, at least in my own reading, that it actually helped him in building back his popularity.

It helped him shape this notion that we need to rebuild trust in the French state that the state and he was always stressing this fact that the French state will be able to deliver it will that that's one of our major goals, ensuring public health. Now, that's not without challenges, like if you look at what is happening after the vaccine pass, for example, or the pass sanitaire in France, the requirement that you have to be either vaccinated or to have had a recent PCR test in order to access like a lot of venues. You can see that there was a lot of protests and a lot of opposition also to this measure.

So obviously, there are challenges, I would say maybe in continental Europe, they are less strong, I would say than what is happening across the Atlantic in the US. There, the lack of trust, and this division and polarisation is much stronger.

One remark that I have noticed, which is pretty interesting is how Spain and Italy despite the fact that they are always considered as being you know, the southern Europe, there is even less trust in the government than, say, in France or in Northern Europe, how they managed to attain higher vaccination rate, impressive vaccination rate, I would say despite this fact. So this may help us again, revise our narratives and our perceptions of why this is happening.

Rory Cellan-Jones: I want to move now to the future to the lessons, indeed, that we've learned from the pandemic, about government, and what we need to do to make it work better what we can be optimistic about, and what we need to do to get there. Dennis, where are you coming from on that?

Dennis Grube: These sort of start to become questions about institutional memory and policy memory, don't they? And in terms of the contemporary lesson, I think one of them is that following the science doesn't give you a free pass on the politics.

Scientific expertise is one link in the chain, a really important link. But you also need to understand the problem you're trying to fix. You need to get the story right about that problem. And then yes, you need the evidence, you need the scientific expertise to bring in to make sure that your interventions are well evidence based on the data that is out there that are available. And then you need to put the right intervention in place.

Some of the aspects that I might give the government better marks on during the pandemic, one of them is at the outset, the issue of homelessness arose in government thinking, and they introduced the programme *Everyone In* and all of a sudden, this policy problem that has plagued us for generations, suddenly we had a policy where, it was a really straightforward problem, which was we need to get a roof over people's heads, it doesn't really matter how we're going to do that, we need to bring people in and get a roof over their heads. And we need to do that quickly.

And government was able to do that, perhaps because of the crisis conditions around. Crisis conditions certainly move governments faster, but I think they also illustrate what good governance looks like even in less crisis ridden times. So you need to get the scientific expertise bedded in, along with good politics and clear policy interventions in order to make policy work.

Rory Cellan-Jones: Mohammed, what does the long perspective tell us about whether we do learn from crises and institutions improve and policymaking improves?

Mohammed Saleh: I kind of agree that we do not really have a long memory of what happened. So we forget essentially, the lessons. That said, like, what are the lessons that we can learn from the current crisis?

Thinking about the challenges and the erosion of trust that we were talking about. I think the key challenge is how to design a system and a policy that is rational and that is scientific based, that essentially tackles the concerns of the population that is largely concerned with these ideas of elite capture and expert capture and so on. But at the same time, doesn't fall into populism, which is the other risk that we are currently witnessing.

These movements, and similarly to what has been happening in other parts of the globe, especially in established democracies, that you see is that it can risk the fall into some sort of populism, the rise of Trump and the rise of populist politics, essentially.

So I think the way to go is and what to learn from the pandemic is that we can regain trust in the state. We can regain trust in the state as a neutral agent, we can regain trust in the NHS, for example, in the UK, in the health system in France and Spain and Italy, without having necessarily these links to the politicians.

Rory Cellan-Jones: Catherine Haddon, looking back we had obviously another global crisis ten or more years ago, the global financial crisis. Did we learn lessons from that? Did that help?

Catherine Haddon: I think we did. But actually, it is more complex, the way in which government learns lessons. And I think the key is actually that it learns best when there is a unambiguous political impact, whether that's negative or positive.

So I'd actually go back further and talk about things like 1967, the devaluation of the pound, 1992, fall of the pound, the exit from Exchange Rate Mechanism. These were big shocks to the system, but they were political shocks as much as they were economic shocks. And they really taught lessons to both parties in terms of their approach to and handling of, and messaging around, sort of big economic shocks, because governments don't want to be tagged as massive failures on these fronts.

What's difficult with the pandemic is that, you know, it is seen by the public as something very complex, it's not seen as something that was specifically down to this government and its handling and its failure.

It was, in many respects, seen as a very complex issue in which this government is partly responsible. But there are many other factors. There are other lessons, though, which are positive, and at the moment, obviously, the UK's success, at least, you know, up until recently, in terms of vaccine rollout is seen as a success by the public, it is connected to continuing good fortune in the polls for the government.

And that's therefore a lesson for the politicians of how you can actually then make a difference and do something successful. So I think that will be an abiding lesson for it. And similarly, if you go back to the financial crash, the political lesson there is despite Gordon Brown actually having worked his socks off and done a huge amount globally, to get the world through that crash, he was still punished when it came to the election in 2010.

So there's no clear lesson there politically in terms of handling that. But there is a lesson that you can do things like nationalise and that we're still seeing that now in debates about the current growing crisis around energy companies, the price of gas cost of living crisis supply side and so forth, where it is feasible for the government to do bold things like nationalise and that's something that perhaps pre financial crash wouldn't have been obvious.

So I think there are lessons that government takes, but they tend to be when there's something political, what's more difficult about the pandemic, is where the government and particularly the state apparatus, we were talking about civil servants earlier on, how they will learn lessons and how they will internalise them because there is a lot that we can see in previous crises and the inquiries that followed them where recommendations were made about resilience about how crisis management needed to work across different departments about also the problems of cognitive failures, groupthink or failures of anticipation, all things that people have been writing about for aeons, but it is very hard for a bunch of people to change their patterns of thinking when they get locked into them. So I do worry that we aren't learning those deeper lessons and that they are very difficult things for the state to learn.

Rory Cellan-Jones: Well, that seems a good point at which to wrap up, I hope we've not had too much groupthink in this discussion.

Thanks to our expert panel, Dennis group from the Bennett Institute for Public Policy at Cambridge University, Mohammed Saleh from the Toulouse School of Economics and Catherine Haddon from The Institute of Government.

Today we've discussed just how hard it has become to run government and I hope we've come up with some ideas for how it might become easier and how we can learn lessons from incidents like the pandemic and the global financial crisis.

Let us know what you think of this first edition of Crossing Channels. You can contact us via Twitter. The Bennett Institute is @bennettinst, The Institute for Advanced Study is @IASToulouse and I am @ruskin147. And please join us next month when we will have a new edition looking at another big research theme that Cambridge and Toulouse have in common.

