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Learning from past government blunders

THE UK PUBLIC has endured a long list of government blunders over the past three decades ranging from the Poll Tax to the private finance initiative for the London Underground, according to researchers Professor Anthony King and Sir Ivor Crewe. But research suggests that flawed policymaking shares common patterns and key lessons can be learned.

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In this two-year project, the researchers examined examples of domestic failures of policy and administration presided over by UK governments between the early 1980s and 2010. “We looked at 12 cases of significant policy initiatives and the general case of IT project failures which failed to achieve their objectives, which were often counter-productive, which wasted public resources and/or inflicted inconvenience or distress on a large section of the public, which could have been foreseen and avoided and which were eventually abandoned,” says Professor King.

The researchers set out to identify the institutional causes of project failure by exploring documentary

sources and conducting more than 50 interviews with politicians, officials and political journalists. “Our interviewees spoke to us openly, frankly and informatively and the distance of time since most of the events under discussion was helpful in this regard,” they point out. “Our focus was more on failures of policy design than failures of policy implementation although

we recognise that the former often explain the latter. We distinguished between behavioural factors embedded in the values, experience and skills of politicians and officials, and systemic factors, embedded in the institutional mechanisms, procedures and conventions for policy design and decision-making.”

Summarising the institutional causes of past government blunders, Professor King points to failures of deliberation, accountability and restraint in the UK’s policymaking arrangements. Common examples of deficient deliberation include the lack of pre-legislative consultation with expert external bodies, inadequate or non-existent parliamentary involvement,

the absence of pilot schemes, dummy runs and evaluations, and the failure to consult or co-ordinate with the bodies responsible for implementation. Deficient accountability, the researchers explain, arises largely from high turnover of ministers and senior officials and the instability of policy-design teams, while the want of judicious restraint is manifested by the setting of unrealistic targets and timetables and a culture of haste and determination to ‘deliver’.

Findings reveal that while blunders can never be totally eliminated, the number of blunders could be substantially reduced if politicians and officials learned the lessons of past mistakes. “It’s not a case of one key lesson,” Professor King argues. “Rather it’s a series of lessons with one overarching theme – that successive UK governments have attempted to do too much, far too quickly and without paying sufficient attention to the ‘do-ability’ of their policies.” ■

i **The Blunders of Our Governments**, Anthony King and Ivor Crewe (Oneworld Publications) forthcoming September 2013

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