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UK Resilience: A Question of Governance

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UK flooding is a governance issue. Sir Philip Dille, UK Environment Agency (EA) chairman, appointed in 2014 by environment Minister Liz Truss, departed after 18 months in post following his appearance before the UK government's Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee on 6 January 2016, held soon after winter 2015/16 UK storms. At the time of writing this meeting can still be viewed on UK parliament.tv. Such short tenures typically worry both shareholders and stakeholders. Concerned about what the signal signifies, and issues of continuity. Proverbially, and in classical parlance, organisations can as fish rot from the head down.

Institutions are nation state first agents. They oil or dry its competitiveness. High performance is shaped by Chairman and CEO setting strategic architecture that is soft enough to bend in the face of globalisation and firm enough to restrict its worst vicissitudes. This includes the relationship between risk and reward, and the scorecards that reveal such. The pumping station at the Foss Barrier failed through poor maintenance of the service tunnel allowing water into the pumping mechanism. But for the ha'p'orth of tar the ship is lost. In the robust language of the British Army 'simple basics' are missing from governance frames. I cite the British Army as it can be argued that its leadership values 'revised in situ' during the recent Afghan campaign. This war presented a NATO-standard-trained field army hierarchy with similar ambiguity, absurdity and farce now facing UK institutions. Solid goals have melted not because problems change but fuzzy late-modern expectations and mediated reality race ahead of the victor's carefully prepared narratives. No clear shared image of a winning line emerged in Afghanistan but its leadership ethos was adjusted, moving from command-control to engagement of its front line troops, sensitising its community to more localised leaderful responses. Although flooding is inevitable it does not mean mission goals cannot be set and revised reflexively in situ if organisational values permit. This is a balance of soft and hard thinking.

The army can deploy to the field now in both orthodox and heterodox formations, having recognised that its political master may not offer a 'victory definition'. It must construct its own in real time. Metaphorically this is the dance of leadership rather than a leadership-geometric. Such shifting aesthetics falls to the Chair and CEO's worldliness and personal confidence in enabling local decision-making structures. The war/flood analogy holds up as it represents spike events in often long-periods of peacetime operations where the metronomic beat of ordinary life reduces leadership responsiveness. Also wars like floods sit at the intersection of farce, technology and politics. The resulting absence of *raison d'être* in a network society increases ambivalence both inside and outside the organisation. Cohering around shared images of 'victory' becomes increasingly difficult. What separate the two examples are extrinsic penalties for failure. Risk-reward frames should be at the heart of the governance debate. What is the instinct leaders evoke from a community when faced with risk and ambiguity?: 'Do we stay by the ships and wait for rescue or strike out for home independently?'

Governance then is the other black swan of the flood debate, in addition to so-called record rainfall. Ministers have a clear shot this summer at governance when they deliver "action plans" from their National Flood Resilience Review. UK winter '15/'16 critical infrastructure failures have not led to a civil servant Inquiry but a politician led Review. Ponderous professional research is sacrificed for quickfire 'appeals for evidence'. Sacrificing granular analysis for heuristics infers Ministers are confident of their direction. They are saturated already with apposite knowledge and are seeing repeated patterns.

Two studies offer them critical governance contexts for UK floods. Firstly, DEFRA's 2002 commission to the Institute of Civil Engineers (ICE) to report strategic flood management solutions. Clearly written and book-size *Learning to Live with Rivers* documented a key finding: Catchment Management is critical and should be aided by computer models of complex catchment water systems. However, it noted that the EA were resistant to computer modelling. Secondly, Sir Michael Pitt's flood report in 2008. This adjusted the government's flood management architecture. EA were given Strategic Lead. Councils became Local Lead Flood Authority.

Pitt's restructure sounded confusing on paper, with two organisations appearing 'in the lead'. This is an architectural flaw, with two spires offering awkward symmetry on the church roof. The EA had not built a strong strategic leadership ethos. Pitt relied on councils' ability to offer a strategic purview. This was a long shot as functionalism is prominent in the executive arm of councils by dint of their operational service demands. Putting councils as front-line leaders implied a leaderful *point* could be added to the EA stick. But the EA is a leviathan (11,000 staff). This sort of size itself when

not sufficiently coherently divisionalised brooks only small wins, with major leaps resisted by large institutions wishing to replicate themselves ahead of wider mission goals. If staff swim around the amorphous mass they themselves experience mission drift and role ambiguity. They are less likely to link mission outcomes to the exercise of their own volition.

In practice, in the moment of truth, councils turn to the EA to lead on the ground. And the EA apply their urban sticking plaster methodology. Has the leopard changed its spots, Select Committee Chair Neil Parish MP asked of EA CEO Sir James Bevan in April 2016. But for the EA flood management is not a core function. Their 2010 Carlisle, Cumbria UK flood barrier was a design/build project, not a performance built system informed by river behaviourists and the like. 400 more properties were flooded than in 2005. It is similar to taking a standard family saloon off-road driving. It will break as there is a difference between tarmac and dirt tracks. But the EA struggle to see the difference because they are structured and led not to 'see' in practice, whatever they say about intent. The UK government have given the EA an ambassadorial stance as the public interface of environmental issues. EA staff have taken to social media with the flavour of Soviet-era style production statistics. These displays of output are not put in the context of their value but look impressive in themselves to a general audience who have no benchmarks.

Typically EA led Flood Investigation Reports absent data from flood specialists. Time passes in which researchers from the sources such as UK's Centre for Ecology & Hydrology could have reported on catchments, and management researchers analysed standard operating procedure efficacy. The Foss Barrier pumping station report issued in May 2016 excludes maintenance management. It is "fact" based. Causal elements are eschewed. These descriptive writings do not risk inflaming public sensitivities. The difficulty here is the public have deep knowledge of their surrounds, its histories. They have family and friends who have worked intimately within relevant industries. To redact documents has the opposite effect from that intended. Also, consumer protection legislation is encouraging public sector bodies to think about 'product and service descriptions'.

Reports typically are not referent to any critical analysis or accumulated specialist data available. Its approach stands in isolation. No inclusion of terms of reference, policy contexts, report authors' qualification in flood management. Primary data gathering is ad hoc and piecemeal, and inaccurate. The lack of scale, urgency and rigour is difficult news for victims who sense the unsustainability of low-key responses. Threat of litigation and schoolboy errors combine. There is also a contemporary mood of 'being seen to do what the people want' so public meetings appear at times a proxy for extensive professional inquiry. A fearful public tend towards favouring immediate action rather than long-term solutions, which can have the dubious effect of rubber-stamping under-evolved and

under-fire council plans. Language remains a temptation for institutions desirous of community embrace. Late-modern individuals are prone to grazing services disinterestedly but expecting instant performance. With increasing disregard for the people who are charged with service delivery: 'We will let you know when it goes wrong'.

The EA has spent £48m severing contracts with its senior management from 2011 onwards. The lower ranks given field commissions. The new EA Director of Catchment posts are nominal and as such misleading but could be regarded as a belated and token attempt to respond to UK Natural Capital Chair Dieter Helm's arguments which are gaining traction in Westminster. The EA's newly promoted leaders appear out of their depth and learning on the job. Faculty bound careers do not equip operational leaders for the generalist politics found open engagement with the public. At flood victims' expense.

Recommendations

14 years after the ICE findings the EA still sits on its hands, still "hesitant" about catchment management. Given this and more recent reports it is recommended:

- a) A Flood Protection Agency (FPA) is split out of the EA. With new leadership informed by military and commercial logistics thinking. It runs large-scale emergency drills regularly to ensure systems are field tested. With this 'state of readiness' setting the cadence of organisational life and leadership practice. The image of an 'emergency service' may aid the general conception of flooding and remind of its devastating impact. The FPA become the back office support for the proposed River Catchment(s) Authorities (RCA), shaped by the System Operator model proposed by Dieter Helm, and supported by appropriate statutory powers.
- b) This new Authority to raise shadow precepts to take governance in hand. At around £15-£20 per person per year a small price to offset flood victims' misery. With its office situated in accessible to the public locations, it will have fewer distractions. Also free to buy in research and put global firms on the ground through a tender process, untied from historic practice. Its project management dashboards reporting on-line to community stakeholders who become RCA Members. This liminal relationship between authority and citizen is vital in

sustaining flood exposed communities but based on full transparency. (As with VW and emissions masking performance metrics is almost impossible to hide.)

- c) New structures are set in an architecture which considers both hard and soft systems methodologies. This is a fancy way for saying classical change management and leadership values should be embedded, alongside the operational, administrative and functional values that crystallise over time when organisations privilege a technocratic worldview. As has happened with the EA.

- d) Critically, complex project management capabilities are embedded into organisational values, and balance the single-project mentality that has evolved in relation to flood defence. Multiple-project horizons sit transparently on public view, via an online dash-board available on social-media formats. Transparency will leaderfully drive practice, and invite more Socratic dialogue. There is a tendency for family culture to emerge in public bodies which lean towards a genteel dialectic, resistant to direct questioning and prone to shock after critical incidents. This is often referred to as 'professionalism' when in truth it is a local set of cultural sensibilities towards interaction. This orientation should be offset by the presence of generalist commercial leadership values that consistently point to explicit performance metrics.

The EA's mission statements and structures are muddled by commercial standards. As clear as flood water. If Ministers do not set new governance frames this will give permission to the EA to spend 10-15 years writing computer modelling software and building from scratch flood management capabilities in an organisation with little change management experience or rigorous governance. And the UK government record on successfully commissioning new software is well known. If they are feeling leaderful they will restructure. Alan Mulally came in from Boeing to rescue Ford Motor Co. when the US car industry crashed in 2007 taking General Motors and Chrysler into bankruptcy. These were leviathans too but Ford responded to Mulally's soft and hard leadership balance.