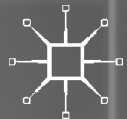


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**WESTMINSTER,
GOVERNANCE AND
THE POLITICS OF
POLICY INACTION**

‘Do Nothing’

Stephen Barber



Westminster, Governance and the Politics of Policy Inaction

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Politics of Policy
Inaction

‘Do Nothing’

palgrave
macmillan

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PREFACE

As former Prime Minister David Cameron put the final touches in 2015 to the first majority Conservative government in 18 years, a dividing line was drawn between the coalition he had led alongside the Liberal Democrats since 2010 and the single party administration formed with a slim majority in 2015. It was not only the ‘quad’ that was gone—the formal mechanism for Conservatives David Cameron and George Osborne and Liberal Democrats Nick Clegg and Danny Alexander to meet in order to thrash out policy, strategy and governance issues—also gone was a barrier to political action.

Clegg’s power as Deputy Prime Minister was less the ability to instigate policy in government (though he was not entirely without such influence) than it was to put a brake on policy. His was ultimately the power of veto. Bennister and Heffernan (2012) illustrate that Cameron remained the ‘resource rich’ actor in the coalition,¹ but Clegg’s Liberal Democrats had what Matthews (2011) refers to as ‘watchdog’ powers to moderate and ultimately block policy.²

As Cameron despatched his new Ministers to their departments clutching their policy briefs, he was naturally signalling the direction and priorities for the administration. In looking forward, the episode demonstrated simultaneously that one crucial significance of the outgoing coalition’s record in office was not simply what it had achieved in the course of five years, but also what it had *not* done. Alas, for all of Clegg’s attempts to convince voters of the preventative influence of his party, it was a point largely missed by the electorate, which punished the Liberal Democrats at the 2015 polls. And yet here in the dawn of a new government committed

to policies including repealing the Human Rights Act and introducing a Counter-Extremism Bill, political inaction can be seen to be a hugely important aspect in understanding the period. Within a year there was a more dramatic illustration when the British people voted narrowly but dramatically to leave the European Union in a referendum that could easily have been avoided. When Cameron announced the in/out referendum in his 2013 Bloomberg Speech, he had every reason to believe that it would not actually take place. A majority government seemed unlikely and coalition partners could have been blamed for doing nothing about the pledge. Alas, the referendum that took place shook the political establishment and led to Cameron's resignation as Prime Minister. This book makes the case that inaction can sometimes produce better results and at this early stage there are indications that Theresa May, the new inhabitant at Number 10, represents a different style of government. Could it be that a more cautious and considered approach will mean less unnecessary action and more do nothing politics where it is likely to lead to better outcomes?

It is also a neat illustration of the importance of understanding the idea of political inaction, or a 'do nothing' policy. And that is what this short book is committed to do. Organised thematically, it explores political inaction in a number of guises, examining its motivations, its legacy and the role played by the combative Westminster model in ensuring policy-makers do nothing. By taking an historical perspective, it illustrates that this contemporary instance of inaction is not exceptional, and that 'do nothing' politics shapes the world we live in today.

I would like to extend my thanks to the editors at Palgrave Macmillan for their enthusiasm about the project and their patience while it was delivered. I would like to acknowledge the insightful comments of my two anonymous reviewers whose thoughts improved the research considerably. Gratitude is also extended to the three interviewees who gave their insights to support this research.

London, UK

Stephen Barber

NOTES

1. Bennister, M., & Heffernan, R. (2012). Cameron as prime minister: The intra-executive politics of Britain's coalition government. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 65(4), 778–801.
2. Matthews, F. (2011). Constitutional stretching: Coalition governance and the Westminster model. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 49(4), 486–509.

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Introduction: A Systemic Problem for Westminster Government

Abstract The systemic problem in Westminster government is political hyperactivity or ‘initiativitus’ rather than inaction. Ministers and permanent officials are motivated to act decisively and be seen to be doing so. Drawing on expert testimony, this section shows that there are a myriad of incentives, principally being the political imperative to react, Ministerial and civil servant short-termism, reshuffles and inter-governmental competition. The research demonstrates that there are few structural incentives to do less or nothing.

Keywords Westminster model • British Civil service • Ministerial overload • Government dysfunction

There has to be a choice in policy-making. Where there are no options, there is no decision, and consequently an event cannot be described legitimately as a policy. The ability to make choices is very often far more constrained than political actors would like to admit, but nonetheless, every day decisions are made in government; some minor and administrative, but others of great magnitude and import to many lives and lifestyles. The range of choices, though, includes a frequently overlooked option: do nothing.

In this sense, policy involves negative preference as well as positive and gives rise to an early and often reproduced definition of public policy offered by Thomas Dye in 1972 as being ‘what government chooses to do or not to do’.¹ There is some limited coverage of the ‘not to do’

part of this description in the existing literature, but on the whole the topic is largely overlooked in favour of its more positive, active brethren. Michael Howlett's excellent assessment of policy design,² public policy implementation appraised by Hill and Hupe, as well as Taylor and Balloch's edited volume on policy evaluation³ are good examples of academic attention to the (active) topic. John (2012) encapsulates this approach in *Analyzing Public Policy* by describing the academic topic thus: 'Research on public policy seeks to explain how decision makers, working within or close to the machinery of government and other political institutions, produce public actions that are intended to have an impact outside the political system. The subject focuses on the decisions that generate outputs.'⁴

But policy can be seen at times as deliberate omission; that is, the intentional act of not doing something and conscious of the implications. There has also been a long-standing debate which is of relevance around the idea of policy-making as an 'incremental' process,⁵ often conceived pragmatically and based on adjusting the status quo versus those who see it as essentially stable and 'punctuated' by bursts of radical change.⁶ There is a suggestion that radicalism means change in a way that pragmatism is more about adjustments and stability. But this raises questions about what is not done, either in the case of incrementalism or indeed the opportunity cost of punctuating the equilibrium.

Understanding this idea of political inaction is the prime focus of this short book. Concentrating on the experience of politics in Britain, the study is grounded in the constitutional apparatus of what has been termed the 'Westminster Model' of oppositional parliamentary government to consider not only what politicians do but, just as importantly, also what they choose not to do.

As such, in what remains a relatively narrow focus, the book contributes to a literature wider than that around policy development. The book draws on and adds to emerging academic debate on the professionalisation of politics, the nature of Westminster opposition, and constitutional change. In this sense, the idea of 'do nothing' politics is a conceptual lens through which it is possible to look afresh at some of these debates.

Nonetheless, the distinct contribution of this book is to dissect the concept of 'do nothing' politics as defined here. Its methodology is longitudinal, based on the practice of government in Britain and organised around three broad perspectives of the topic. First, it explores the philosophical and practical reasons for inaction alongside the implications of professionalisation of politics. Second, it steps back to set the subject in its historical context and to demonstrate the legacy of doing nothing, given

the 70-year experience of post-war government. Third, it considers how 'doing nothing' can be, and is, held to account by widening the study from the narrower actions of the executive to the more far-reaching functions of the Westminster Parliament. Consequently, the research addresses three big questions around these perspectives: What is 'do nothing' politics, and who does it? Why does 'do nothing' politics matter? How is 'doing nothing' held to account in the Westminster system?

The analysis in Chaps. 2 and 4 is supplemented by interviews with three elite informants who have direct experience of the policy-making process and its accountabilities. Peter Lilley⁷ held posts in the Treasury during the Thatcher government, and Cabinet positions at Social Security and Trade and Industry under John Major in the 1990s. He was later Shadow Chancellor when the Conservatives went into opposition after 1997. Latterly at the Institute for Government, Jill Rutter⁸ was a senior civil servant. With spells in the Treasury as Communications Director and in the Private Office, DEFRA and the Number 10 Policy Unit, she experienced the Thatcher, Major and Blair administrations. Margaret Hodge⁹ was a Minister throughout the governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, holding a variety of briefs from Disabled People, Universities, Children, Work and finally as Minister of State for Culture and Tourism. But her most prominent role was perhaps on leaving office, when she became the elected and prominent Chair of the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee.

The book makes the case that political inaction can be as significant as policy action, and that doing nothing has shaped the politics and society that is recognisable today. But it also demonstrates that to properly understand the significance of doing nothing in British politics, one has to appreciate the impact of the adversarial Westminster model, which can be seen as the source of policy 'hyperactivity' as well as political inaction. Government actors are incentivised to be active, and even doing less sometimes means doing more.

In an effort to demonstrate relevance from the research, a postscript is included which categorises some of the shortfalls in the political system highlighted by this publication and makes some modest recommendations for change.

The book is far from comprehensive. Viewing the topic at a conceptual level grounded in the political and historical record, the analysis presented is complete but, as always with this type of research, limited. As such, this study is offered as an opening critique and represents an invitation to other scholars to contribute to the topic. There already appears to be an

emerging interest from academics in the broad subject area. As this book was in its latter drafting stage, a working paper was published by Allan McConnell and Paul Hart, *Public Policy as Inaction: the politics of doing nothing*,¹⁰ which primarily tackles the definition and methodological issues with the topic but the research represents a useful guide to scholars tackling these questions. Alas, it emerged too late to benefit this book, but will no doubt support future studies of this kind.

Further research would explore the subject from within Whitehall itself, examine the historical practice in more detail by way of public records and accounts, or widen the terms to compare experiences across the democratic world. That being said, this research is a self-contained critique of the ‘who, what and why’ of inaction in British politics. Such an academic critique is made possible by the particular format represented by Palgrave’s Pivot publications. A short book rather than a long article, the outcome is different from either the traditional monograph or journal publication and that has allowed for a more generous discussion than is possible in a narrow academic article, without the grander, all-encompassing, demands of a longer book. Indeed, the format means that ‘do nothing’ is a focused study which addresses a series of research questions but with an alacrity and pace otherwise unobtainable. It has also provided a vehicle to draw together and link recently published research produced by the author relating to Westminster politics.

It is in part the format that has allowed for this investigation into an important but overlooked area of academic inquiry. It is hoped the research will provoke discussion about the nature of the governance system, widen academic understanding of policy decision-making, and inform the debate about practical reforms.

Political inaction is bound up in our conceptions of power, and what politicians do when they win power. Before settling on a definition for ‘do nothing’ politics, however, the rest of this opening chapter will acknowledge the more often cited criticism of Westminster government: that it does too much.

‘WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?’ THE PROBLEM OF ‘POLITICAL INITIATIVITUS’ AND ‘LILLEY’S OPTION’

One possible reason for the under-exploration of political inaction is that the systemic problem would appear to be to the contrary. That is, overwhelmingly, the behaviour of politicians is to act and to be seen to

act, comment and legislate across a range of policy areas. What might be termed political ‘initiativitus’ not only sees governments extending their reach in areas which perhaps should not concern them, but more seriously the action can sometimes be counter-productive. That is, doing nothing might have produced ‘better’ outcomes.

Former BP executive John Manzoni was appointed Chief Executive of the Civil Service in October 2014. A month into his tenure he gave MPs his views on Whitehall. Giving evidence to the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, he put it starkly: ‘We are doing 30 % too much across the board anyway—we always have done ... Too much activity. No company would undertake the level of transformative change that this Government have undertaken ... We have to stop people having great ideas and everybody saying yes to them, I think.’¹¹ But this is how democratic government works, and how Ministers and officials are incentivised to act. The systemic problem was described by Peter Lilley when he reflected on his first taste of government in the 1980s:

In my first ever role of minuscule importance I was PPS to the Ministers for Local Government and I had the tremendous privilege of sitting in on ministerial meetings in the Department of the Environment. I by and large kept quiet but I noticed after a while that there would be some problem, ministers would ask officials to come up with proposals, and they would come up with proposals or for some reason proposals would emerge, and I would see them. There would be option one and two and three a, b, c and so on. They would eventually decide that one of them was the best and after a while I ventured to suggest there was one option they had never considered and that was the option of doing nothing. So they then decided to always put that on the agenda and it became known as ‘Lilley’s Option’ and persisted for a while under that title after I left. And subsequently I became more aware of it when I became a minister myself, that officials are goaded into action by Ministers or events or the newspapers or whatever, and so they come up with proposals for change and there are two great problems. One is it never occurs to them or anyone else that doing nothing may be the least bad option, and two that ministers themselves are not necessarily terribly well aware of how the present system works. Where it doesn’t work, you’ve got a problem but they don’t understand the mechanics of it. But they will be told in great detail the mechanics of how the proposed alternative works.¹²

Here, the democratic Westminster system, combined with the pressures of 24-hour news cycles and social media, must take some of the blame for incentivising such behaviour. After all, parties forming new administra-

tions bring masses of plans and initiatives, many claiming the democratic mandate of the people. Jill Rutter offers a subtly different perspective from the experience of the civil servants whose job it is to carry out the wishes of Ministers:

I think there's a bias to action. There's the sense that a lot of policy comes out of the idea that 'something must be done' ... we have to act—the newspapers are baying for us, we can't just say 'rubbish happens and the sensible thing is not to act'. I was in the Chief Secretary's office in the Summer of Disasters in 1987 when we had the Piper Alpha explosion, and we had the Hungerford Massacre. Mrs Thatcher wanted to give away money for everything. We were working out the, 'we've killed 50 people there so how much is that worth?' And there were just a series of things where the reaction was always, go! ... I remember having this argument with Number 10 over Hungerford and saying there are loads of murders, there is a thing called the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme. Just because one man went and murdered a load of people on one day doesn't mean that we do something different ... The dynamic goes that a minister says I'm worried about X, I need to do something, and then I think it's quite a brave move for an official to contradict. Political advisers can say, 'Are you really sure?', but if you have relatively unconfident officials who aren't sure of their relationship with Ministers and who've been told that the Civil Service is blocking ministerial action and are a bunch of obstructionists then the moment the minister says 'something must be done' or 'I'm interested in X, what should we do?' then there's a bias towards doing something.¹³

This tension in Whitehall between Ministers and officials can be judged as a conduit for political action. Civil servants can be seen as reacting to the wishes of their elected masters even if their own instincts would be to think again. Here are actors incentivised to behave in different ways. Sometimes a minister is hyperactive because of lack of experience of being in office, and officials carry out their wishes because of a lack of political confidence to advise otherwise. Reflecting on more than a decade holding various government portfolios below Cabinet rank, Margaret Hodge identifies a real systemic problem in the way Whitehall operates. In part the incentives that drive a Minister to act are coupled with limited preparedness for the job they have assumed:

I was a minister for most of the Blair/Brown years and I only really got it in the last job. I knew we had a year left and I just set myself seven priorities; I set myself seven things to do this year and that's it. And it was incredibly

successful. It's not what most ministers do and that is what we ought to be supported into realising. You can only achieve a few priorities.¹⁴

As Peter Hennessy put it in his study *Whitehall*, governments 'descend with manifestos, policy papers of varying degrees of sophistication and, in the case of more zealous new ministers, a conviction that some of the great intractables will at last yield to the force of correct policy and political will'.¹⁵ This leaves the Civil Service in a delicate position regarding whether they should challenge a new minister or even suggest doing less. Jill Rutter, now at the think tank, the Institute for Government, continues:

One of the messages we give to opposition is that they need to make it clear to civil servants that they are open for challenge early on because the first thing the Civil Service is trying to do is to overcome scepticism and I'll give you an example. I was in the Treasury in 1997 when Gordon Brown came in. Our Permanent Secretary—Terry Burns—had been appointed as a monetarist by Margaret Thatcher. Within three days Gordon Brown wanted to make the Bank of England independent—that was fine—but he also wanted to strip it of its banking supervisory powers. Terry said you need to go more slowly on this, there are lots of issues—Eddie George the Governor won't like it and we need to think carefully. That ended Terry's career effectively; he was marginalised for the next year because Gordon didn't like anyone saying 'no' to him, so the message goes out.¹⁶

The position here no doubts constitutes sound advice but as a prerequisite puts the onus on the politician to invite dissent even when he or she has worked out plan of action, a clear mandate and political authority. Added to this could be the circumstances where they are unfamiliar with the workings of Whitehall. Margaret Hodge counters the argument with a call for improvements in the quality of Civil Service advice, arguing that at the top level there is a similar systemic motivation for officials to act as there is for Ministers.

The only route to it would be a Civil Service which is much more skilled. One which has that sort of intelligence there at the heart of what they're doing. I mean they are the same as the politicians at a senior level; they will make their reputations on initiatives rather than delivering more effectively on existing programmes. You need more confident, competent, independent civil servants willing to challenge, and that would be a transformation of the civil service.¹⁷

While this is a clear problem for any early period of office, when head-strong new ministers meet permanent officials, the problem does not appear to dissipate over time. Older governments feel the need to demonstrate they have not run out of steam. A case in point was the final year of the 2010 Parliament, which led up to a general election date known in advance for the first time because of the Fixed Term Parliament Act. The final Queen's Speech was legislatively light despite some later attempts to counter the damaging accusation that it was a 'Zombie Parliament'. Nevertheless, it led Chief Whip Michael Gove to spring to its defence: 'When this parliament is dissolved—on March 30th,' he told an audience at the think tank Policy Exchange, 'we will have sat for 734 days, 16 more than in the 2005–2010 parliament, 91 more than in the 1997–2001 parliament and 149 more than in the 2001–2005 parliament. On average, we will have sat on more days per year in this parliament than either of the previous two. In this last session of Parliament—shorter than usual sessions because thanks to the fixed-term Parliament Act it only runs from June to March—we are busier than the last—much longer—session of the 2005–2010 Parliament.'¹⁸ Here the defence of government represented not a record of accomplishments but rather a boast about the sheer volume of work it had undertaken. What this amounts to in the round is more activity, more initiatives.

And within government there is competition between ministers for parliamentary time and financial resources that fuel action. The result is near-constant reform of policy and public services, with projects that will often never reach their conclusion before the emergence of another new initiative. Peter Lilley gave some sense of that competition:

There is competition for resources in the normal sense of finance but there's also competition for legislative time. So if a department gets a Bill and it appears in the Queen's Speech, that's considered good, and if it gets two Bills that appear in the Queen's Speech that really puts it up the pecking order in Whitehall. But no Bills is sad. When you do get a Bill—because you don't get one every year—there's a great temptation to put everything in it so it becomes a sort of portmanteau bill.

That competition for legislative time and space either encourages ministers to go for portmanteau bills that cover all sorts of problems the department thinks needs tackling and the Minister may not even be aware of, or to go for big bang solutions rather than to tweak the present system and make it work a bit better and if that doesn't work go for something more radical.

You say, ‘We’d better do it now or we might not get another Bill for another three years.’¹⁹

This experience of intra-government competition also gives rise to a greater understanding of policy inaction. And that is that the things that do not get done are often not premediated or strategic deliberate omissions but rather more practical decisions relating to the legislative process. Jill Rutter picks up the trail:

There are limits to what government does; for instance, we had this draft piece of legislation ready to go which we hoped Ministers would want but it failed to make the cut on priorities for the legislative programme, which is an example of when everybody agrees it’s a sensible thing to do but while there’s no downside, it’s not quite enough of a priority. Government has a legislative capacity and you get that every time, and you see it in the Bills put forward for the legislative programme that there will be some serial ones which come up time and time again as nice to do and sometimes they make it into the last session of a Parliament when nobody has very much to do ... So something that everyone agrees should be done, doesn’t cut through or doesn’t fit the themes even though there’s no real active decision that we don’t want to do it.²⁰

Perhaps the hyperactivity to which Gove referred is a case in point, since the government to which he belonged engaged in a radical reorganisation of the Health Service at a time when it was trying to curb public spending. According to analysis from the Heath Foundation and the *Financial Times*, the shake-up meant that hospital productivity ‘tumbled’, undermining policy-makers’ desire to protect the NHS from budget cuts.²¹ All this came on top of near constant reform during the previous governments led by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.²² Might doing nothing have actually produced better outcomes?

Before moving on to the examination of doing nothing, or political inaction, this section acknowledges and categorises this phenomenon of doing too much. It reflects on debates played out in sometimes disconnected existing research.

There is a long-standing, if limited, literature on ‘ministerial overload’; policy-makers trying to do more than is possible without the space to reflect. Some of this can be blamed on the permanent Civil Service officials and their desire to ‘keep their Minister busy’. Margaret Hodge alludes to this from her own departmental experience:

So what are the pressures? You would be surprised at how mundane it is and it depends where you are, it depends on the civil servants you're working with, it depends on your own priorities. There is a certain culture in the Civil Service which is about keeping junior ministers busy doing nothing—signing off PQs (parliamentary questions), signing off letters, doing the nothing, nothing jobs and if they can do that, no one worries about policy.²³

Indeed, drawn didactically from rational choice theory, Anthony Downs' much cited classic *Inside Bureaucracy* considers the manifestation of politicians who 'go native', behaving as advocates for their departments over their government or party.²⁴ But more precisely overload is a systemic problem. Former civil servant turned academic, David Laughrin, believes that 'government Ministers are more likely to be subject to an unacceptable degree of overload than almost any other profession. Sadly, however, they, those who work for them and those they represent often do not recognise this until it is too late. Overload matters because it can sometimes affect some leaders' ability to think clearly and strategically and take good decisions on our behalf. It matters now because overload is getting worse'.²⁵ Former Ministers frequently report working non-stop, 16-hour days with diaries crammed full of meetings and engagements. 'Ministers not only live in a fishbowl, they also have to be adaptable. They move from meeting to meeting, engagement to engagement, and topic to topic with barely time to read, let alone digest, their briefing. The diversity can be breathtaking'.²⁶ There remains a shortfall of knowledge about just what Ministers do with their time and naturally experiences differ between holders of different posts in different administrations. It is possible to say, however, that the system requires a Minister to head a department, develop policy, attend Cabinet and Cabinet Committees, advocate plans in government, Parliament and in the country, act as a media spokesperson, be a party figure, represent their constituents and defend their parliamentary seat among other activities. Marsh, Richards and Smith distilled these down to four key roles: policy, political, executive and public relations.²⁷ Of those pressures, Cheong argues that policy capacity is the most appropriate skill for ministerial success²⁸ and this makes sense if one considers the purpose of forming a government. However, in terms of overload and doing too much, accountability perhaps presents the greatest pressure. Laughrin identifies this as the pressure on Ministers 'of constantly having to explain what they are thinking and planning, sometimes before they have had time to think it through fully. Today that is often under fierce daily or hourly questioning

from media inquisitors ... If this can be a strength in democratic terms, it is certainly an added stress factor in decision making'.²⁹

For this reason, in Britain's Westminster system, a 'good' Minister is not one who displays expertise over the area for which his or her department has responsibility; Britain has rarely seen professional ministers appointed from outside of Parliament (though Gordon Brown engaged in a limited experiment after 2007).³⁰ Indeed, in comparison with their European counterparts, Jean Blondel demonstrates that historically a British Minister is much less likely to be appointed to office because of his/her subject expertise.³¹ Rather, government Ministers are expected to have the requisite political skills³² to deal with competing ministerial colleagues, the confrontation of Parliament and an often hostile media. In Whitehall, politicians are moved frequently from one department to another. This is an observation long made by those who experienced it, such as Richard Crossman³³ and Nigel Lawson,³⁴ and empirically by academics such as Valentine Herman³⁵ or Berlinski, Dewan and Dowding,³⁶ who demonstrate that British Ministers are likely to find themselves reshuffled with a degree of frequency and have historically held office for shorter periods than their international equivalents.

Furthermore, the major motivation in conducting reshuffles is for prime ministers to exert power over government and consequently they 'attach great importance to maximizing the political advantages to be gained from them. This factor is the chief determinant of their logistics'.³⁷ The constraints of coalition after 2010 made reshuffles less likely, since it diluted the power of patronage enjoyed by the prime minister. That is, while the prime minister retains the right to appoint and dismiss Ministers, in coalition it can only be done within the framework of what has been agreed with the coalition partner. In this case, that partner was the Liberal Democrats led by Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, who enjoyed the right to be consulted on reshuffles and to appoint his own colleagues to particular posts.³⁸ This meant that constitutional arrangements were stretched, while one major motivation for engaging in reshuffles, to assert prime ministerial authority, was weakened. Nonetheless, it is perhaps the criticism of frequent reshuffles, where Ministers are shifted before they can grasp their brief, which led Prime Minister Cameron to be rather reserved in moving Ministers during 2010–2015, engaging in only one minor set of changes in 2012 and a more comprehensive reshuffle in July 2014 to refresh his (Conservative) team ahead of the general election a year later (Liberal Democrat Ministers were left untouched). In his first majority government formed in May 2015, many of the portfolios and all of the

top ministries remained in the same hands, with changes largely initiated by the departing Liberal Democrats. The attitude of new prime minister Theresa May, who spent 6 long years at the Home Office, is yet to be revealed.

Given Michael Gove's boast, this does not seem to have curtailed overall government activity, but in departments at least, there will have been greater continuity. Time will tell if successor premiers choose to, or are required to, exert similar restraint. While future prime ministers might not move their Ministers with the frequency of Tony Blair or Gordon Brown (who between them were responsible for five Secretaries of State for Defence between 2005 and 2010), there seems every motivation to use this lever of power even if it means undermining ministerial responsibility, expertise, grasp of the brief or mastery of their departments.

Alderman offers a spirited defence of frequent ministerial turnover. 'Short-stay Ministers,' he says, 'can be much more positively characterized as *active foreign bodies* whose function is to produce *creative friction*.'³⁹ He rejects the fear that politicians risk acting without mastering their brief with the counter-argument that by that time they have become creatures of their departments. Furthermore, while reshuffles can mean (unnecessary) shifts in policy at the whim of the new Minister in charge, prime ministers can use the reorganisation to deliberately alter direction, tone or policy completely. Arguably, this happened when David Cameron replaced controversial Health Secretary Andrew Lansley with the more low-key Jeremy Hunt in 2012, neutralising somewhat the tensions that had resulted from NHS reform and the unpopular Health and Social Care Bill.⁴⁰ A new Minister can therefore change policy because of the 'power of initiative', even without the authority of expertise. Alderman continues with the case that the 'need to regularly *freshen* their administrations figures prominently in prime ministers' calculations. Leaving many Ministers in the same posts for prolonged periods may convey the impression not of continuity and stability but rather, of immobilism'.⁴¹ That is, governments need to act and to be seen to be acting.

Whether these arguments are considered convincing or not, they amount to a simple truth: it means Ministers doing more, not less. There is a systemic motivation for a new Minister to make their mark, push through a policy change, pilot a piece of legislation through Parliament, demonstrate their political skills to a prime minister capable of promoting them, safe in the knowledge they are unlikely to be in post to be held accountable for the consequences. As Lilley puts it, 'You're more likely to be known for doing something than for doing nothing. You might heroically have saved the nation from going down some dreadful path

but because you haven't gone down that path, no one will know about it.⁴² Margaret Hodge adds weight to this view with a subtle distinction between the short timespan in office and the 'fear' of being moved:

There is this time imperative, the whole time—and I noticed this when I became Chair of PAC [the Public Accounts Committee] because I had five years, allowing me to pace myself and do things in a much more rational way—but if you had a ministerial job under Blair/Brown, you had a year and you just had to get on with it and try to do as much as you could. And, of course, it all becomes very ephemeral; in a sense doing a lot meant we did nothing ... There is no assessment of your capability in a ministerial role—it's another thing that's wrong with the system, there's no support, no career development—you had no idea whether you were doing well or badly. Did that put on pressure to act? I wouldn't correlate it entirely but there was certainly nervousness about getting reshuffled out but pressure to act, not particularly. You kept thinking 'I hope he thinks I'm competent' but you had no idea.⁴³

For Rhodes, an overriding observation was Ministers' 'concern with publicly visible performance and being seen to make a difference. Making a difference has distinct, if related, meanings. Obviously, it refers to legislation and policy that changes the lives of citizens. It also refers to the minister's standing in the pecking order of the governing party. Ministers seek to be onside with the prime minister and the chancellor and look, first, to survive in the Cabinet and, second, to move to one of the great departments of state such as the Treasury or the Home Office'.⁴⁴

Partly because of the confrontational Westminster system, Ministers are expected to act decisively. There is very often little room for deliberation, and Ministers who are seen to be inactive can expect to be 'punished' at reshuffles just as the legislative stars can expect promotion. Budgets are naturally finite, which means ministerial competition to 'win' resources for their department, and the consequence of this is action. While it would be an exaggeration to suggest that policy objectives are absent from the motivation in attracting and spending public monies for Ministers, sometimes the incentives can be more closely aligned with this inter-government ministerial competition.

Moreover, politicians need to be seen to be doing something—whether it is attempting to control dangerous dogs, which resulted in classic piece of pointless legislation in 1991, dealing with floods that had every party leader wading through the countryside in wellington boots in 2013, or countering terrorism, which after the US twin towers attack in 2001 saw an ineffective assault on civil liberties—getting to the heart of a complex

problem is rarely as big a priority as being seen to take action. Jill Rutter suggests much of the action is unnecessary from a policy perspective:

You do quite a lot of things where you don't need to do them. For instance, an awful lot of Home Office legislation, they never move the clauses to put it into law ... The Home Office legislates for a lot of new criminal offences which are completely covered by existing offences but is there because there's quite a lot of gesture legislation. So there's quite a lot of things you do for the purpose of being seen to do something, signalling in legislation that this is now important, but there's no substantive change.⁴⁵

The recently released files on 1980s football hooliganism is a good illustration, for they reveal this pressure to be seen to be taking action as a phenomenon that reaches to the very top of government. The explanations for football violence are complex and run deeper in society than merely the tribal support of a team. Studies have been made of this⁴⁶ and here is not the place for a discussion; suffice to say that the focus of government is on simply tackling the manifestation of violence rather than the social root causes. In frenzied correspondence between the game's governing body and the government, the emphasis was placed firmly on visible changes around crowd control and banning the sale of alcohol in football grounds. The systemic pressure is given away by a handwritten note on the subject dating from 1986. There, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher insisted that 'we must press ahead and be seen to do so ... I know we must not relax now. If we do, one more bad incident and we shall be culpable'.⁴⁷

The manifestation is all too often the tool to hand for policy-makers: legislation. The instinct to be seen to take action makes law irresistible, even if new legislation is incapable of tackling the problem. This was an issue that came to the fore as Tony Blair's premiership neared its end. *The Independent* reported in 2006 that there had been 'frenzied law making' with 'an offence for every day spent in office'. As the report highlighted, the '3,000-plus offences have been driven on to the statute book by an administration that has faced repeated charges of meddling in the everyday lives of citizens, from restricting freedom of speech to planning to issue identity cards to all adults'.⁴⁸ Sweet and Maxwell put this into some perspective when their analysis showed that the Blair government had enacted 11 % more laws per year than the Major government that preceded it, and that the Major government itself introduced 39 % more laws per year than the Thatcher government it replaced.⁴⁹ But laws are not the

only way to assess government action. While the pace of new legislation slowed after 2010, the government became interested in other ideas. With the publication of Thaler and Sunstein's popular book *Nudge*,⁵⁰ 'nudge theory' became rather attractive to policy-makers working in an environment where public funds were scarcer than before. The Behavioural Insight Unit was established within the Cabinet Office to explore these sorts of possibilities, and is noteworthy for a study of 'do nothing' politics. Nudge perhaps represents the semblance of government inaction but still achieves policy change. Rather than legislating or regulating activity, this approach can shift people's behaviour subtly by adjusting the 'information architecture', but is judged by those citizens to be a result of their own decisions. Critics of the approach point out that 'the extent that it lessens the control agents have over their own evaluations, shaping people's choices for their own benefit seems to us to be alarmingly intrusive'.⁵¹

The systemic problem in British politics is policy-makers doing too much rather than too little. Indeed, there are very few structural incentives to do less or nothing. This book explains this phenomenon, but also shows how there can be power in policy inaction. But before that, a simple definition is required.

SO WHAT IS INACTION AND WHY STUDY IT?

'Do nothing' politics means the deliberate decision of policy-makers not to take action where there would have been the option to do so.

'Initiativitus' suggests that the government should not always feel obliged to act, and that 'doing nothing' can even produce better results. A fuller appreciation of the pressures to act can help to develop our understanding of the decision-making process and ultimately improve policy. Furthermore, it stands to reason that in choosing how to use resources and taking decisions, politicians are engaging in inaction; either in prioritisation (doing this means not doing that) or by a more deliberate negative preference. Overload in itself means Ministers are at capacity, so some things simply cannot be done. As Weller and Grattan pointed out in their seminal study of Australian government published in 1981: 'Even working fifteen or more hours a day, choices have to be made; not everything can be done, not everyone can be seen.'⁵² Jill Rutter puts it as a series of questions, 'How do you prioritise? You have a limited amount of time and political capital, potentially a limited part of a programme, and how do

you deploy those limited bits of ministerial capital and how do you achieve a sufficiently sensible regime for everything else?’⁵³

Do nothing politics should not be confused with the status quo. Whether intentional or simply as a consequence, inaction does not mean that nothing changes. Government is undertaken in a volatile environment. However big a player is in that environment, much of what politicians do represents reactions to changes in the world. Inaction does not mean that those changes do not take place; indeed it can mean that their effects are more pronounced. Whether it is the economy, demographic changes, globalisation or natural phenomena, society is constantly changing and inaction can exacerbate that change.

There is also the idea that the state can ‘crowd out’ and disincentivise action at the level of society. Following a decade of significant increases in public expenditure beginning in earnest in 2000, there were other motivations to political inaction than merely balancing the books. The 2010 coalition came to power with a mission to reduce departmental spending overall, and one way of mitigating the effects of less well funded public services was to look to society itself. Jesse Norman summed it up in 2010 in his defence of the ‘Big Society’: ‘we have reached the limits of the idea of the state as a remedy for social and economic failure,’ he said, ‘What is so striking is how impoverished political debate has become on these issues and how reliant we are on a single and inflexible model of state provision of public services to solve our social ills.’⁵⁴ State action and resources, he suggests, have been ineffective in tackling some of society’s social ills. But this does not mean it is a zero sum game. That is, inaction might not have meant that outcomes did not improve at all and might even have meant better outcomes. The question for policy-makers should therefore be: ‘Will state action produce better outcomes than the market or civil society left to their own devices?’ Where the state claims a monopoly, near monopoly or a controlling regulatory interest, whether in the form of healthcare, welfare, education, housing or any number of other areas of life, it can prevent non-state actor involvement or discretion. If policy-makers do nothing, there are circumstances where it can mean that other actors become energised.

The decisions politicians take in office are often important, and the decision to do nothing can be as significant as the more obvious policy pronouncements, legislation and initiatives. Inaction is in part a necessary pre-condition of action, since doing one thing means not doing another. Indeed, some inaction masquerades as small piecemeal change that has

the power to prevent bigger transformations. But the option to do nothing, where action is an option, can be meaningful and have long-lasting implications. For this reason it is an area worthy of academic investigation.

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Why ‘Do Nothing’ and ‘Who Does It’?

Abstract This chapter compares two core incentives for political inaction—ideological and resource-based—and compares the experiences of two respective periods of government: the 1980s, when the Thatcher administration was driven by an ideological belief in a smaller state, and post-credit crunch, where after 2008 Ministers were faced with a squeeze on public spending and promised pragmatically ‘more for less’. The research argues that small-state ideology still meant ministerial hyperactivity and ultimately a stronger state. Even the most significant post-war recession of international proportions, including sovereign debt crises across the world, did not seriously curtail the reach of government. In the context of the Westminster model, the chapter goes on to discuss how the professionalisation of politicians means an unspoken consensus that limits what governments are prepared to do despite a political class committed to action.

Keywords Small state • Thatcher government • Public spending • Austerity • Financial crisis • Professional politicians

The idea of ‘do nothing’ politics, or political inaction, is perhaps more complex than it might initially appear. This chapter begins to unpack the concept so that it might be better understood, beginning with the idea of doing nothing for ideological reasons, and the Thatcher government of the 1980s. It then takes the experience of post-credit crunch ‘austerity’ conditions to consider what happened to the reach and ambitions of

government when resources were curtailed. That is, it considers inaction first from the point of view of a government ideologically committed to doing less, and then from the standpoint of fiscal crisis where it is forced to do less. It argues that even a government committed most philosophically to reducing the size of the state was content to see it grow stronger. And while even global pressures to squeeze spending proved irresistible, in the wake of the banking crisis, government did not systematically withdraw the reach of its interest. The section then considers the extent to which a political class of professional leaders (instinctively committed to change) has conspired to limit what government is prepared to do.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL NATURE OF INACTION

A good starting point for considering political inaction is to contemplate philosophical attachment to ‘small’ government or to preventing policy change. Two partially connected motivations for inaction must, therefore, be addressed. These are (small ‘c’) conservatism and one’s perspective on the limits, if not size, of the state. There is perhaps little point in winning power if that power is not going to be used for some (predetermined) end. ‘Change’ is one of the most powerful slogans in politics and a pervasive theme of government, and that means changes in both policy and law. After all, it is difficult to persuade the electorate to vote for a party if all that is on offer is a change in personnel. Here is a commentary about the political class which can be seen as committed to individual action even where state retreat is a philosophical position.

Philosophically, though, holding power to prevent or slow down the pace of change should be seen as a legitimate objective of office. Here, the idea of conservatism, which exists from left to right across the political spectrum, can be considered a coherent policy response. A prime objective for conservatives is the preservation of civil institutions and even social order. Michael Oakeshott, one of the most influential modern conservative thinkers, put it simply as preferring ‘the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible’.¹ This instinct can be applied to left-leaning trade unions as much as it can to right-leaning political parties. With this confidence in the tradition, identity and wisdom of institutions comes some sense of historical responsibility whereby those who make policy do not exist in some sort of vacuum. Politicians in this way are stewards and, as Edmund Burke would have it, there exists ‘a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are

to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society'.²

For an examination of 'do nothing' politics this can be problematic, since conservatism rarely means no change but rather it is characterised by smaller, piecemeal changes made precisely to avoid a dramatic or radical change that might otherwise have occurred.

One example of this, allied precisely to the nature of power and political decision-making, is Britain's constitution. In the absence of codification, constitutional arrangements have been adjusted subtly over decades and even centuries without any great deliberate plan. The changes that have taken place, however, can be viewed in this conservative tradition of preserving established institutions, centres of power and ways of doing things. Changes such as extending the franchise in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries while retaining the disproportionate first-past-the-post electoral system as well as the erosion of power of the unelected House of Lords and changes to its composition in 1911, 1958, 1963 and 1999, avoided radical change which might have democratically fully legitimised these institutions. That is, change can be identified but that change preserved much of the status quo.³

The flexible nature of Britain's constitution meant that it was able to 'stretch' in order to accommodate two parties in office once the Conservative—Liberal Democrat coalition was formed in 2010. But the record would seem to be more about the established order preventing the sort of change that even some in government were demanding. While the Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg announced 'the most significant programme of empowerment by a British government since the great enfranchisement of the 19th 4 Century', the coalition failed to deliver its package of agreed reforms. The Fixed-term Parliaments Act (2011) was enacted, Westminster Select Committees saw their Chairs elected, and Police Commissioners were elected for the first time in 2013, but the most significant changes simply did not happen. The Parliamentary Voting and Constituencies Bill (2010), which would have reduced the number of MPs and attempted to 'equalise' constituencies, and the House of Lords Reform Bill (2012), which would have replaced the appointed upper house with a mainly elected chamber, both collapsed at the hands of a conservative system and interests. Meanwhile, proposals to change the electoral system to the Alternative Vote were rejected by the electorate.⁵ In the long conservative tradition these radical changes did not take place, but the constitution did change in an unpremeditated and even unintentional way to support a functioning coalition. The understanding of collective responsibility was stretched, as was the concept of prime-ministerial prerogative powers. However, these adjustments to the constitution not only

allowed for the continuation of a stable government but also preserved the adversarial Westminster system and with it the principle of parliamentary sovereignty that sits at the heart of the constitution.⁶

Allied to this overarching conservative thought is a separate instinct about the size and role of the state, which is perhaps more closely identified in Britain today with the Conservative party. Oakeshott himself made the distinction between what he called ‘civil association’ government, which allows citizens to pursue the ends they choose, and ‘enterprise association’ government, where there is some form of collective goal meaning that the state takes precedence over the ambitions of individuals. It is perhaps why his 1956 essay cited above continued to say that being a conservative was to prefer ‘the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss’.⁷ For those politicians who embody enterprise association government, instinctively the response to a perceived societal problem is to direct the power of the state to its solution. Civil association politicians are much rarer, in deeds if not in words. There are few contemporary examples of true ‘libertarian’ minimal-state governments. However, the principle that there are circumstances where the state should not interfere is an important consideration for ‘do nothing’ politics, as such inaction could be motivated by an ideological commitment to or a practical view of the purpose of government.

In the mid-1970s the ‘new right’ of the Conservative party came closer to this view ideologically, following the failure of the technocratic government of Edward Heath and rejection at the polls in 1974. A political and intellectual force in this movement was Keith Joseph, a former member of Heath’s Cabinet and a future ‘Thatcherite’. During this time, he talked of a ‘ratchet effect’ from one government to another, where the state simply got bigger with economic failure and, as the pendulum swung between Conservative and Labour administrations, seeking a ‘middle ground’ which shifted continually to the left. The following extract gives a flavour of his attitude toward the state:

The public sector, including central and local government, and more accurately named the state-sector, or wealth-eating sector; was bound to spread like bindweed at the expense of the non-state sector, the wealth creating sector, strangling and threatening to destroy what it grew upon. It took up a disproportionate share of investment capital, scientists and technologists, starving the private firms on which we depend for wealth and exports.

It employed many more workers than needed, leaving labour-shortages in other parts of the economy and infecting many segments of the private sector with its tendency to overman.⁸

In his influential Stockton Lecture, Joseph further explained that while he wanted a new approach to economic policy targeted at inflation, monetarism was not the summit of his ambitions: 'Government's intention to contract the money supply is welcome and potentially beneficial to all. But it is not enough unless there is also the essential reduction of the state sector and the essential encouragement of enterprise. We are over-governed, over-spent, over-taxed, over-borrowed and over-manned.'⁹ While many, even in his own party, remained to be convinced, it was this basic instinct that accompanied Margaret Thatcher into Downing Street in 1979 and the clarion call to 'roll back the frontiers of the state'. While this was the principle, the record in office is less clear cut. The policies of the Thatcher government after 1979 most certainly opened up (markets) where before there had been restrictions. Beginning with the abolition of exchange controls and moving through the 'Big Bang' deregulation of the City of London, the administration favoured *laissez-faire* to state planning. As a percentage of GDP, public spending fell to about 35 % as Thatcher left office in 1990 from a peak of 46 % in 1982–3 as the recession bit hardest. While spending had hit a high of 48 % in 1975–76, Thatcher had inherited a rate of under 43 % in 1979. In this sense, her legacy overall was to reduce spending by a not inconsiderable, but hardly revolutionary, eight percentage points to levels comparable to those seen during the last full year of the Attlee government in 1950, which had just embarked on a huge programme of nationalisation, new welfare provision, house building and the creation of the National Health Service. Not only that, but there was not a year in the 1980s when public spending in cash and real terms did not increase year on year.¹⁰ Consequently, even accounting for inflation, public spending was higher in 1990 than when Thatcher took office 11 years before. It opens up the question of whether this most active of governments was really committed to doing less. Peter Lilley, a Minister during the Thatcher years, defends the strategy:

We certainly thought we were and to a large extent we were but that required quite a lot of action to do less. The government was effectively getting out of whole industries but it had to privatise them so that was a major action. Once done it meant ministers no longer had to take decisions about where

every railway was going to be built or what time trains ran ... It required quite a lot of legislation to get out of it so we could simultaneously be a government committed to doing less and keep ourselves busy.¹¹

The revolution here was, of course, selling off the vast array of public concerns that had accumulated under the responsibility of government. It privatised one state-run industry after another, from telecoms to utilities to engineering to transport. Control of some £60 billion of state assets were transferred to the private sector, reducing dramatically the numbers employed by the public purse¹² and altering perceptions about what the state should do. Despite opposition at the time, few today seriously contest that the state should build cars or sell telephones, even if there is more support for its control of transport and energy. However, it should be noted that nationalised industries do not represent the same sorts of cost as public services, since they are also income generating and at times have run surpluses. It should also be noted that the original impetus was more practical than ideological.

Table 2.1 offers collated data of all the premierships since 1945 and shows the steady growth in the size of the state as measured by public spending as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP). The most notable retreat remains that of the 1980s, which recast the notion of the direct functions of government. By this measure, other than Thatcher's, the only administrations that reduced the size of the state were those led by Churchill, which can be seen as a modest consolidation of the Attlee reforms; Callaghan simply responding to economic 'crisis' and conditions laid down by the International Monetary Fund (IMF); and the Cameron/Clegg coalition, which embarked on a serious attempt, not to philosophically reduce the size of the state, but to pragmatically reduce the burgeoning budget deficit (discussed in the next chapter). That is, the impetus for the state to be more efficient was driven by the very practical reality that public money was scarcer. Even here the state remained larger than in any year during Tony Blair's decade in Number Ten, and would end Parliament at a comparable size to that inherited by Thatcher in 1979. The closing year of Gordon Brown's government is also comparable to the mid-1970s, when spending was at its peak.

While being quantifiable, then, spending is a somewhat blunt measure of policy-makers' intentions—especially as a proportion of GDP, which by its nature changes with the economy's fortunes even when policy-makers opt for inaction. That is, doing nothing to the total cash amount of public

Table 2.1 Comparing successive premierships and public spending as a % of GDP

<i>Premiership</i>	<i>Years</i>	<i>Spending as % of GDP start end (full years as at election)</i>	<i>Spending as % of GDP high low</i>
Attlee	1945–1951	70.3 ^a 38.0	70.3 (1945) 35.9 (1950)
Churchill	1951–1955	38.0 34.9	39.1 (1952) 34.9 (1955)
Eden	1955–1957	34.9 34.6	35.1 (1956) 34.6 (1957)
Macmillan	1957–1963	34.6 38.3	38.3 (1963) 34.6 (1957)
Douglas Home	1963–1964	38.3 38.4	38.4 (1963) 38.3 (1964)
Wilson	1964–1970	38.4 41.8	43.7 (1967) 38.4 (1964)
Heath	1970–1974	41.8 46.4	46.4 (1974) 41.0 (1973)
Wilson	1974–1976	46.4 46.3	48.3 (1975) 46.3 (1976)
Callaghan	1976–1979	46.3 42.7	46.3 (1976) 42.1 (1977)
Thatcher	1979–1990	42.7 35.2	45.6 (1982) 34.2 (1989)
Major	1990–1997	35.2 37.2	39.7 (1993) 35.2 (1990)
Blair	1997–2007	37.2 39.1	39.4 (2006) 34.9 (2000)
Brown	2007–2010	39.1 46.2	46.2 (2010) 39.1 (2007)
Cameron/Clegg	2010–2015	46.2 42.5 ^b	46.3 (2011) 42.5 (2015) ^b

NB In crossover years the PM might not be in office but arguably responsible for many commitments

Data source: ukpublicspending.co.uk

^aThese figures are skewed by the war effort. In 1945, 74 % of spending was on defence, which by 1951 had fallen to 26 %, with Health and Education each accounting for 9 %

^bProjected

spending would see it fall as a percentage of GDP in a growing economy and rise in a shrinking economy. As the UK's GDP is today many times higher than in previous decades, even a declining percentage can mean vastly increased spending and consequently the reach of the state. Nonetheless it is able to demonstrate longer-term trends. The context of the post-war world in which the state became ever more responsible for the conduct of citizens' lives, the economy and welfare tells us something about the attitude towards the reach of the state, today as much as in the 1970s. Graham Wilson puts some perspective on the decade: 'If the state was shrunk in the 1980s ... it was shrunk having been stretched unprecedentedly far in the previous era. Part of the feeling that there has been a crisis of state authority results not from the actual shrinkage of the state but from the end of the era in which national boundaries and those who exercised within them had become more important economically, culturally, socially, and emotionally than ever before.'¹³ Here it is possible to consider the desire of the post-war state to become increasingly involved in all sorts of matters, and the achievements of the Attlee government in particular are addressed in Chap. 3.

But even if Thatcherism meant a smaller state, by its own ambitions, it also meant a stronger one. This can be a multi-faceted concept, as shown by the social illiberalism of the New Right and its disdain for the ‘permissive society’ of the 1960s, which it blamed for a rise in crime over the decades that followed. Here, new powers for law enforcement agencies and consequently a greater reach by the state were accompanied by classical theories of criminal responsibility that emphasised the individual characteristics in which governments should not attempt to interfere.¹⁴ The strong state of Thatcher, after all, exerted its authority at home during the miners’ strike and against protesters opposed to the Community Charge (or ‘Poll Tax’), and abroad in the shape of the Falkland’s conflict. The Public Order Act of 1986 created new offences and strengthened the powers of the state. And while the rhetoric of libertarianism had some resonance economically, the government was far from socially liberal, as Section 28, which banned schools from ‘promoting homosexuality’, attests. Peter Lilley rejects the accusation that there was a contradiction:

I don’t know that it set out wanting a stronger state. It wanted strong defence, it wanted to be tough on law and order but it discovered that a smaller state was likely to be stronger and able to do things well rather than one whose resources were dissipated widely and be weak because it generated a tremendous amount of friction and resistance and spreading its resources too thinly.¹⁵

This brings the case back to the economic sphere, where privatisation and competitive tendering of public services did not end government’s involvement. No longer responsible for providing these services or managing these industries, government now needed to regulate their activities. Thatcher’s regulatory state with its army of executive agencies oversaw the activities of newly privatised business, supported by the rule of law. Labour’s Margaret Hodge offers some explanation for the apparent contradiction, arguing, ‘there is an ideological difference: the Tories do believe in the small state but then they get their ideology around that so how do you develop the small state? By new ideas’.¹⁶

The observations here are not made with any normative intentions but rather to illustrate that even the most dogmatically small state administration in living memory did not live up to its rhetoric or ambitions. That is to say, while public spending as a percentage of GDP was reduced and with it some of the reach of the state, the Thatcher government did not step back from involving itself across society and the world, and could

hardly be described as inactive. It pursued a less interventionist policy in the economy but ultimately changed more about Britain than any government during the period with the possible exception of the Attlee administration. It wanted to 'roll back the frontiers' but beyond economic policy deliberately created a stronger state. The significance of both and the reaction to them by successor governments is explored in Chap. 3 as it is the legacy that resonates most strongly in terms of 'do nothing' politics.

ECONOMIC CRISIS, PRAGMATISM AND THE SHAPE OF GOVERNMENT

There are perhaps more pragmatic motivations for government inaction to be discussed. Having considered philosophical attitudes to the size or reach of the state, this section examines the impact of more practical fiscal constraints on what policy-makers can do. By taking the case of the global economic crisis and the subsequent squeeze on public spending, it analyses the reaction of policy-makers to reduced financial resources. Does it mean government does less?

'More for less' became a slogan of the Gordon Brown administration when, post-credit crunch, it became clear that public spending would need to be reigned in. The sentiment continued after the formation of the 2010 coalition government, which cut departmental budgets (if not overall public spending, which continued to rise); a direction that carried on into the Cameron majority government of 2015. It is only now with the passage of time that it is possible to assess the implications for the size and scope of government when available resources are reduced. And while this study concentrates on Britain, it shows that the trend is international. Margaret Hodge served in successive governments under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, which saw the expansion of public spending and then a later attempt to bring it under control. It was put to Hodge that the more obvious 'less for less' would have been politically problematic.

'Less is more' should become the mantra. It wasn't discussed because you're only there for a short period, what you do is on the margins so if you're told you need to knock off a percentage of your spending or something you don't really think back to the basics of whether you should do those things. You don't think that way. And it's because one of the conclusions I've come to reflecting on my whole period is that politics is about new ideas and we all get our buzz from thinking about new ideas that fit into our ideology. It

used to frustrate me as a parliamentarian when I'd think 'Why don't all the select committees look at the waste here or the mess there'. And it's because people don't get off on it; they get their buzz from demolishing, creating, or thinking about new ideas. So it's the drive of politics that leads to never thinking 'less is more'.¹⁷

The significance here is that while funding was curtailed, what government does was not seriously challenged in a way that could even have been said to have resulted from the privatisation programme in the 1980s, for example. That is, the post-credit crunch squeeze largely represented a practical exercise to make public finances healthier, with some promise of easier times once economic conditions allowed. In a sense this was a delaying exercise, particularly since short- and medium-term economic objectives, targeted at reducing the structural deficit, were in conflict with longer-term demographic changes. Reducing funding without reducing functions largely means deferral, since the result is cuts to capital spending more than operational. So government inevitably did a little less but it is hard to describe it as permanently retreating. There is perhaps a good structural explanation for the unimpeded reach of government in that there remains competition for resources within government and that very often means doing more. Reduced resources increase the competitive pressures between spending departments. How government goes about this is perhaps the key observation, as Jill Rutter noted:

I think in some areas they will have withdrawn and do a bit less but I think that people in departments would say when you offer ministers lists of things that we should stop doing, they're usually very reluctant. The general response is let's try and do similar things for less ... There are some examples of government doing things different ways having stripped out the admin costs. The bit I would say that has an effect on government is that people change jobs more rapidly and goes to the heart of understanding the system. There are bigger spans so quality is stretched thinner with everyone trying to work with 20 % less. If you were going to take quite a lot of money out, 2010 wasn't a bad time because quite a lot of money had gone in.¹⁸

Nonetheless, during the crisis and since it is possible to identify transformations in policy and policy-making, each responding to the changing economic fortunes of Britain, and of the world. There remains a suspicion too that governments use 'crisis' as a means of policy adoption where previously such change might have been unthinkable. Consequently, such a fiscal crisis represents something of a 'policy window' for government.

Spending less can mean an opportunity to do things that had previously been difficult or impossible. Indeed, while the long aftermath can be more commonly identified as offering a policy window, Froud et al. (2010) had identified the crisis nadir, which threatened to overturn 'market government' as a rare opportunity to produce radical reforms.¹⁹ The reality is that two sets of changes—fiscal and ideological—can be judged to be jumbled together. Irrespective of either the global financial crisis or the change of government in Britain, we were likely to have seen an evolving approach to public policy. The context of the credit crunch made choices stark and the implications all the more pronounced. One intriguing observation is to watch the pendulum of opinion swing towards demand-side Keynesian policy (more government) at the crisis peak and indeed wake, only to sway back towards Hayak and the supply side of policy (less government) as deficits and debts mounted in the aftershock.

It is of little surprise that Dunsire and Hood's 1989 book, *Cutback Management in Public Bureaucracies*, enjoyed a 2010 reprint, since the lessons of the past are vital in the present, especially given the relative youth and limited 'real world' experience of modern policy-makers. Here the authors identify the problem of cutback management as being 'how to wind back bureaucratic spending and staff with least damage to whatever is held dear (including one's hold on power)', and make the very strong case that such a problem, 'is present whether the impetus for the cuts comes from ineluctable external pressure or the relentless drive of the political leader's inner convictions'.²⁰ Writing towards the end of a decade dominated by Thatcherism and Reaganomics, it is understandable that ideology receives a heavier weighting than can be identified in more contemporary analysis. In part, as this book argues, this is the result of an ideological accommodation in modern mainstream politics making what might earlier have been dogmatic decisions now more pragmatically grounded. There is, nonetheless, more than a trace of policy window in their thoughtful volume that remains highly valid in our own debates.

Other literature too of the 1970s and 1980s around managing decline has been revisited of late, including Levine's much cited 1978 article which, familiarly, argued that the 'decline and death of government organisations ... is a symptom of resource scarcity at a societal, even global level'.²¹ Others, including Behn in 1985, have explored the now crucial role of government or the state in matters of institutional decline.²² In reviewing such research Bozeman (2010) has observed that it is only from the public administration literature (not general management) that (until recently)

interest waned.²³ Dealt with only briefly here, such analysis would appear to have found a renewed relevance given relative economic fortunes. But it indicates strategic ways of managing government services while coping with funding cuts without doing less, let alone nothing.

The longitudinal comparisons also offer benchmarks by which to measure the severity of cutbacks and policy change. Examining the numbers dispassionately in this manner goes some way to putting change in perspective. Rhetoric or elite messaging is, after all, important in setting policy direction, establishing political opposition and even the reaction of the markets. But rhetoric alone can be highly misleading. Contrary to the rhetoric of rolling back the frontiers of the state, for example, Thatcher succeeded only in slowing the rate of public spending growth. The plans put forward for the 2010 Parliament, were similarly less ambitious than rhetoric would suggest, again slowing the growth in public spending but resulting in a modest shrinkage in the size of the state as a percentage of GDP. By the time of the 2015 general election, it was clear that this was nowhere near being met, with the Chancellor sticking to his spending plans rather than deficit reduction targets.

In terms of ideological commitment, it can be argued that principle extends only so far as contemporary consensus politics allows. The ideological 1980s shifted thinking on economic policy to such a degree that what would have been considered ‘ideological’ when Dunsire and Hood published their first edition in 1989 is now considered to be orthodoxy. Protagonists believe policy prescriptions to be right but are not driven by dogmatic thinking, and consequently reducing the reach of government is not a principle of policy. The ‘technocratic’ analogy, then, is not with Thatcher but rather with Ted Heath, whose 1970 government talked of radicalism but backtracked when the waters became choppy. Similarly, the Cameron coalition showed itself to be rather shy of controversy, engaging in frequent U-turns, with cuts framed in the language of *Accountancy Age* rather than the Centre for Policy Studies. Nevertheless, the administration was willing to take part in some rough and tumble over the value of a large state, and indeed a degree of radicalism over scaling back public service spending, especially around welfare. Such distinctions, though, can be exaggerated. Simon Lee, for example, argues that all governments, including those led by Thatcher and Blair, have intervened to pick industrial winners.²⁴ Minimal ideology, however, does not necessarily mean a lack of boldness or substantive policy change but the two should not be confused. That the coalition’s economic proposals were contentious

and even divisive was anticipated, given the implications for public sector employees, service users and taxpayers, but is in one sense astonishing given the broad degree of policy agreement.

A shift in economic perspective grew out of the aftershocks of the great economic crisis. As banks teetered on the brink of collapse in 2008, governments around the world united in a concerted intervention, pouring billions into the financial system and stimulating the global economy in the spirit of Keynes. The subsequent change in perspective can be attributed directly to the very success of this intervention. In order to stabilise the banking system and return the economy to growth, US and European governments in particular extended their budget deficits. Having taken a back seat to the power of the markets, this moment saw something of a return of the state; the idea that government doing more was the solution, and the only solution at that. Hodson and Mabbett (2009) analysed this change in the British policy context through the lens of Peter Hall's policy paradigms to show how the crisis produced such a sudden change in economic policy towards 'unconventional' monetary policy and a 'surge' in spending.²⁵ Elsewhere, former German Minister Erhard Eppler penned a new edition of a now optimistically titled book, *Return of the State?*²⁶ to celebrate the re-emergence of economic intervention. The irony is that it was the very global markets these governments 'rescued' that were subsequently to reassert their authority over domestic economic management. The 'sovereignty free' actors of the markets, to borrow James N. Rosenau's phrase, put pressure on individual economies, leading to the aftershock crises in the period following the return to global growth. More recent research published by Reinhart and Rogoff (2010) has demonstrated the historical connection between banking crises and sovereign debt defaults, highlighting the reality now experienced that countries build up so-called 'hidden debts'.²⁷ These ultimately determine the limits of what governments can do—or at least what they can spend.

This really can be seen as a global phenomenon, and in considering inaction is important to sketch out the international economic (and political) context. By the time of the Presidential elections of 2012, the USA had accumulated, in cash terms, the largest debts the world had ever seen. The increasingly bitter tone of the election cycle meant that at one point America might have even defaulted on payments, and the political uncertainty led to the mighty nation losing its AAA debt rating in August 2011. The Eurozone sovereign debt crisis, meanwhile, strained the 'one size fits all' monetary policy operated by the European Central Bank as peripheral

economies including Portugal, Greece and Ireland suffered from interest rates designed for growing the core Europe of Germany and perhaps France. Economist Vicky Pryce (2013) places the blame squarely at the feet of political motives that enjoyed preference over economic priorities from the very conception of the single currency and ultimately led to disaster.²⁸ Such misery was compounded by an effective loss of fiscal policy constrained by such unwieldy deficits and unmanageable debt. However, concurrently, risk averse markets pushed up the cost of borrowing to prohibitive longer-term levels—notably different from the easy money of the early years of the millennium. Ironically, however, by the summer of 2011, such was the flight to quality away from equity markets discounting slowing growth, British borrowing became cheap and Gilt yields actually fell to their lowest rate since Queen Victoria sat on the throne, and US Treasuries (irrespective of the view of Standard & Poor's) did likewise.

Intriguingly, these respective debt crises might be the pivotal moment identified by future policy historians. Amid each crisis, political as well as economic change can be observed. The August 2011 US debt crisis is a case in point. Congress needed to agree a rise in the American debt ceiling to enable the country to avoid a potential default. Such a situation was serious for global economic health, given the exposure of international financial institutions and the correlation between economies. The eleventh-hour cross-party deal approved the necessary rise in the ceiling, but with it a longer-term agreement to reduce the deficit by cutting public spending while not raising taxes. On the other side of the Atlantic, euro-zone accommodation of debt-struggling member economies, including the larger nations of Spain and Italy, came only at a price of domestic austerity. It was a prescription adopted voluntarily (and earlier) by the British coalition government in 2010; though Cameron's administration did not remain as disciplined as it claimed, and the 2015 government was forced to give itself the task of reducing spending once again.

Such developments go beyond the unpopular austerity measures accepted by many previously profligate nations in the years following the great recession. And such austerity has been widespread in Europe, impacting on public services in particular. It would be wrong to assume that such pressures are entirely novel, however. More than a decade ago, Paul Pierson wrote about 'coping with permanent austerity' and described a situation where 'contemporary politics of the welfare state take place against a backdrop of both intense pressure for austerity and enduring popularity ... strong supporters of the welfare state may come

to acknowledge the need for adjustment, and even severe critics may need to accept the political realities of continuing popular enthusiasm for social provision'.²⁹ Perhaps it is because previous governments in times of 'austerity' neither sought to do less with government, or to achieve a sustainable revenue settlement, that the problem was destined to recur. Nevertheless, austerity as a primary policy environment became established from around 2010 and led to an explosion of literature internationally as well as in Britain. This included a sophisticated treatment of fiscal contractions by the IMF suggesting possibilities for resulting economic expansion but highlighting its contradictory and sometimes overstated effects.³⁰ There are serious critics too, perhaps most notably the economist Paul Krugman, who has argued, 'conventional wisdom isn't based on either evidence or careful analysis. Instead, it rests on what we might charitably call sheer speculation, and less charitably call figments of the policy elite's imagination—specifically, on belief in what I've come to think of as the invisible bond vigilante and the confidence fairy'.³¹

Such factors mean that an emphasis on a balanced budget and smaller deficits is becoming not simply a vague target for a particularly difficult stage in global economic recovery but rather the norm in policy-making, but where at the same time there is little systematic effort to do less. The three main parties at the 2015 general election in Britain all pledged to reduce the deficit further with a continued ambition of eradication. The US debt deal, reached in 2011 after a stand-off between the White House and Congress, revealed widespread support for a 'balanced budget amendment', while the Franco-German emergency talks amid Europe's sovereign debt crisis, just a few weeks later, resulted in proposals for euro-zone countries to enact 'constitutional amendments' requiring member states to deliver balanced budgets. This can be seen to have piled on the pressure, leading eventually to Greece's anti-austerity movement gaining office in 2015.

Government spending in Britain and other developed countries has risen over the decades since the Second World War and with it has come a corresponding growth in budget deficits; a situation that has accelerated since the early 2000s. It did this first because of cheap money and then in response to crisis. The political norm throughout has accepted ever rising public spending not only in cash and real terms but for the large part also as a proportion of GDP. This has largely meant government doing more. While this trend can be said to have been arrested, it is difficult to argue that it has been reversed. It will be a different era before governments

turn to the bond markets with the alacrity of the recent past, but the state remains committed to involving itself in similarly wide areas of our lives, albeit with gaps in funding and service, and politicians remain a class committed to action.

PROFESSIONALISATION OF POLITICS AND THE 'NO CHANGE' AREAS

While ideology and available resources might be seen as the major driving forces behind political inaction (and action), a broader political trend can be identified, centred on a political class sharing a common world view at the head of national politics.

In the now long experience of post-war Britain, most governments (and most oppositions) cannot be said to be purely, or even primarily, ideologically driven. Competition for votes has meant that parties have had to become adept at marketing themselves to an electorate of political consumers.³² For Colin Hay, in his study *Why We Hate Politics*, the 'internalization of the assumption of instrumental rationality on the part of political actors has led, in a variety of policy domains to a series of processes of depoliticization'.³³ Rational choice means that parties converge on and fight for the same territory, having accepted the broad policy assumption to prevail. The post-Thatcher convergence of parties in policy terms was perhaps underlined most forcefully by the response to the economic crisis.

More than this, during Britain's first coalition since 1945, and throughout the implementation of the so-called 'austerity' policies that ensued, public dissatisfaction with existing arrangements intensified. While Westminster continued to be arranged around two or three national parties, in the country at large the model started to disintegrate. In part this can be seen as disillusionment over political choice and the professional class of politicians who were dominant. It is a trend seen elsewhere in the developed democratic world (no more forcefully than in Greece, where the electorate rejected 'austerity' in favour of another way). In the event, the electoral system protected established parties to a degree at the polls in 2015, which saw the Conservatives secure a small majority (though the Liberal Democrats were nearly wiped out). But the raw voting numbers, which put challenger the UK Independence Party (UKIP) at almost four million votes, or 12.6 %, but winning just a single seat, while the Scottish National Party (SNP) took all but three of the 59 Scottish seats on just 1.4 million votes, allude to general discontent. It was perhaps also this disaffection that contributed to the rejection of EU membership by voters in the 2016 referendum.

Professionalisation of personnel does not necessarily mean consensus, and there has at times been clear differentiation between parties. However, coalition has been one of the strongest signals to the electorate that the choice of people and policy is limited; that is, whichever way one votes, it is seemingly impossible to achieve a change in policy. Here is possible to categorise 'no change' areas as those where there is open agreement between parties that are in a position to form a government and areas where there is disguised consensus; that is, policies upon which parties seek to exaggerate differences with elite messaging. This section is mirrored by the discussion in Chap. 4, which examines the 'no go' areas of policy for mainstream politicians resulting from the pressures of the confrontational Westminster system.

Political polarisation is rather rare in mainstream British politics (though the election of left-wing Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader in 2015 could well signal its return). The 1980s represented an exception rather than the norm that is sometimes assumed. Here the Labour opposition moved markedly to the left after the party's defeat at the 1979 general election, just as the Conservative Thatcher government shifted public policy to the neo-liberal right. The left of the Labour party, which was in ascendance, was 'concerned with its own ideas and battles, unwilling to compete effectively with the new political environment being challenged by the Thatcher administration'.³⁴ National politics was most certainly combative, but it was a rare example of a sincere battle of philosophy and that is not what typically characterises parliamentary arrangements. Even so, the continuities of policy from one administration to the next must be acknowledged in some way as a professional political class developing politics despite or irrespective of party affiliation. Peter Lilley offered some evidence to support this idea:

There's far more continuity in our political system, despite its adversarial nature, than you might expect. When I was responsible for Social Security policy, commentators would always say policy is chopped and changed as one party comes in and reverses what a previous government did. I can't think there's any example of any government coming in and reversing what its predecessor did. It would sometimes change direction but it's always building on what has existed before. Barbara Castle built on what Keith Joseph had done and subsequently the Conservative government built on what she'd done, perhaps in ways that she would not have done but nonetheless, didn't reverse it.³⁵

The Westminster model or system, as practised in the family of Parliaments across the world sharing the British House of Commons' model, is combative and oppositional. It requires the official opposition to be critical and, because it must also represent an alternative administration, it is essential that it maintains a broad church of opinion in the same way as on the government benches. Chapter 4 analyses the model in more detail to demonstrate how it can prevent policy action where it is needed; that is, the areas that mainstream politicians avoid, or simply fail to tackle, because of the pressures of the Westminster model. This section combines the understanding of this type of politics with the identification of a political class to make an argument that is subtly different.

The Westminster model, together with its first-past-the-post electoral system, has historically meant confrontational politics between two alternatives. And that has also meant that minor parties or minority voices at the periphery are 'crowded out' of discourse as elections have been fought over the centre ground. It is here that those exaggerated differences matter, because parties position themselves to maximise votes and this means differentiating between themselves and their rival, but where dissimilarities between them are necessarily relatively small.

Parties competing for votes naturally mean a choice for voters, but this model also means a raft of policy areas where there is effectively no choice for the electorate since there has developed an open or an unspoken consensus around them. This means that whichever way we vote, politicians will do nothing to change the policy on these issues. The previous section perhaps highlights this most forcefully by demonstrating that mainstream parties in Britain and across Europe and the USA have broadly accepted the constraints on policy and the prescriptions that are required to manage the economy successfully. The results have been the 'austerity' described: a policy environment that has required sacrifices from the voter and consequently has been unpopular.

Throw into this the suspicion that there is little by way of choice in terms of the types of people at the top of British politics and it is not hard to see why there has been renewed academic attention paid to the idea of the professionalisation of politics. Philip Cowley,³⁶ Paul Cairney,³⁷ Byron Criddle³⁸ and this author have all contributed to the recent analysis which has demonstrated that our political leaders are more alike in terms of their backgrounds (even if there has been an increase in diversity), have less experience of the world of work known to most of the electorate, and even that party leaders have less parliamentary experience prior to taking

on the top job. Leaders and those occupying the front bench are more likely to be identified as 'professional politicians', having studied for similar degrees at Oxbridge and then gone on to work as a special adviser in the heart of government prior to gaining election and rapid promotion. Today's leadership class is more experienced but almost wholly practised in policy-making and government itself. It can be said that 'we are not seeing less experienced leaders in the quantified sense but rather those who have been elected to lead their parties have predominantly political experience. That is to say, it is not so much the amount of experience but rather its nature that is noteworthy. The consequence of this professionalisation is that politicians have increasingly less exposure to the 'real world' work of those they represent'.³⁹ Jill Rutter, who has seen Ministers at work from within Whitehall, reflects on this:

One of the big problems is not officials pushing them over the parapet but that they'll have colleagues and constituents. It's interesting on issues where politicians are ahead of public opinion, so on things like climate change or the 0.7 % [foreign aid spend], you could consider as a conspiracy of the political class to lock itself into where it knows it needs to be going but also knows it doesn't want to have to re-win the battle time and time again.⁴⁰

Again, the election of Jeremy Corbyn signals something of a reaction against the trend but the established norms are ingrained. This means that the combination of the Westminster model and the emergence of a 'political class' who look, sound and perhaps think the same, effectively cements some 'no change' policy areas. Peter Lilley went further when considering successive governments' attitudes to climate change action: 'because it happens to give ministers and activists and those who goad them on an excuse for detailed interventionism which they love and which went out with the collapse of socialism'.⁴¹ Perhaps a less inflammatory interpretation would be to reflect again on politicians' commitment to action, but as a class that action can sometimes be uniform across the spectrum.

The 'political class', the membership of which extends across developed democracies, shares an outlook on the world as it is, the way we are governed and the limits of policy: 'This means that leading politicians can be seen as pragmatic implementers of simply the way we do things round here rather than principled proponents. They pick from and pick at an economic and social settlement that few have the will, the initiative or the ability to change.'⁴² It is only from the periphery that many of these

assumptions are challenged. One might develop a comprehensive list of policies but here, for illustration and discussion, consider the following:

When YouGov polled Britons in 2013, 17 % of those questioned said the country should give nothing in overseas aid. Asked to rank how generously the UK should give on a scale of 1–10, respondents overall averaged at just 3.6. And at a time when Britain was spending just 0.56 % of national income on aid, 66 % of the survey said they wanted government to reduce spending in this area, while only 7 % thought the amount spent should increase.⁴³ And yet, in his 2013 Budget, Chancellor George Osborne declared an ‘historic moment’ as he announced the increase in UK aid to 0.7 %, making Britain the first G8 country to hit this UN target.

On the 50th anniversary of the abolition of the death penalty in Britain, YouGov reported that support for capital punishment had dipped to 45 %, with 39 % opposing its reintroduction.⁴⁴ And yet the British Social Attitudes survey shows how for decades the majority of the population believed execution to be an appropriate punishment for some crimes. From 1986, when the survey began, and into the 1990s, around 73 % consistently agreed with the notion. It is only since then that support has steadily waned.⁴⁵ And yet throughout these decades there seemed to be little prospect of the reintroduction of a punishment, which ended upon a 1965 private member’s bill introduced by Labour MP Sydney Silverman to suspend temporarily the death penalty for murder and was passed by the House of Commons by 200 votes to 98.

For those of us who identify with liberal progressivism, the outcome here is undoubtedly welcome. And for all that can be made of popular attitudes, there is a strong argument about protecting against the tyranny of majorities. No less than John Stuart Mill articulated this fear when he said, ‘there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling, against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them’.⁴⁶ That is democracy and the policy-making which emerges from it cannot be simply a ragbag of popular opinion but needs to work for all of society. Nonetheless, something else is illustrated here. In a confrontational political system such as Westminster’s, the official opposition thrives on unpopular decisions made by the government. But there is an agreed consensus between the three main political parties that means they will all maintain a policy line irrespective of public opinion. In 2010 and 2015, Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats each pledged to meet the UN target for overseas aid, while no party has shown interest in

reintroducing capital punishment. There is a consensus among political elites who have more in common with each other than with the general population, and, of course, this means that voters have been unable to challenge the decisions. Buoyed by progressive developments in political attitudes, political elites are content to wait for public opinion to catch up with policy, even if it takes many years, and in the meantime the acknowledged consensus ensures that nothing is done to change the policy.

If these are examples of the explicit consensus among political elites that means no change in policy, there are more subtle, unacknowledged areas too. For all the political capital to be made out of the global economic crisis, mainstream debate remained inside the confines of what is accepted to be the limits of globalisation and the way we are governed. Mainstream policy-makers perhaps now accept that 'economics doesn't lie',⁴⁷ and it means that there is consensus about economic policy challenged only from the periphery. The belated response has been a wave of anti-establishment parties rising to prominence across Europe, in part a reaction to the 'austerity' being suffered in many parts of the European Union. But domestically they also represent a reaction against a political class that maintains 'no change' areas of policy.

CONCLUSION

All policy-makers inevitably engage in political inaction. Not doing something is an unavoidable consequence of doing something else. Already stretched, there is a limit to the actions that can be taken by government; and some politicians are simply less active than others. Nonetheless, there are some circumstances that are noteworthy for motivating a 'do nothing' policy. This chapter has identified three: the philosophical approach of politicians; necessity borne of fiscal constraints; and the acceptance of existing political and economic boundaries shared by a democratic political class. This research has argued that, even here the outcome does not necessarily amount to less government or fewer actions.

By exploring the experience of government, it has shown that even the administration committed most philosophically to 'rolling back the frontiers' of the state, made government stronger and extended its regulatory reach. It has further discussed the impact of the credit crunch and subsequent pressures leading to a reduction in departmental spending, but has shown that while government attempted to spend less it did not demonstrate a similar ambition to do less, and the reach of government

cannot be said to have fundamentally retreated as a result of a period commonly referred to as ‘austerity’. Nonetheless, it can be shown that the forces of conservatism and vested interests can be a very powerful inhibitor of action. Additionally, the research has identified areas of policy that run contrary to the usual oppositional and tribal behaviours of political parties. It has argued that a political class with shared values and views of the democratic world ensure that no change areas of policy exist and are protected from the democratic will of voters.

Such an identification of circumstances that might motivate policy inaction nonetheless obscures the potential power and significance of ‘do nothing’ politics. And this leads on to the next chapter, which dissects the legacy of political inaction in contemporary British politics.

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Why Does ‘Do Nothing’ Politics Matter?

Abstract Viewed through the prism of key historical episodes of the contemporary British political experience, this chapter takes a longitudinal approach to show that policy inaction has been crucial in securing significant social and economic change. Taking as examples the decisions of those administrations that followed Attlee and Thatcher, respectively, it argues that the legacies owe much to the inaction of political opponents to unwind change. Elsewhere, Harold Wilson’s policy on Vietnam and Tony Blair’s attitudes towards the European single currency demonstrate that ‘do nothing’ politics can be as significant as active responses. Reflecting on Peter Hall’s concept of third-order policy change, it suggests the possibility of an additional driver in ‘no order’ ‘change’.

Keywords Post war consensus • New Labour • Wilson and Vietnam • Britain and the Euro

This chapter argues that decisions to do nothing can be just as important as those to activate change, and illustrates this with four episodes from contemporary British experience. It shows that the opponents of the respective radical governments of Clement Attlee and Margaret Thatcher, in the end, were just as important a part of policy success as were those who implemented the programmes. And, viewed through the prism of the counterfactual, it demonstrates how the most important decision of the administration led by Harold Wilson in the 1960s was probably the

one to do nothing. As a consequence, Britain did not enter the war with Vietnam. It also points out the decision of the Blair government to do nothing about its positive vision of UK membership of the European single currency is one for which it gained credit retrospectively, but speculates whether the inclusion of sterling might have meant a brighter record for the euro. This middle chapter then deals with the idea of a ‘do nothing’ legacy and demonstrates that political inaction matters and can be responsible for the permanency of policy change.

ACCEPTING THE WELFARE CONSENSUS

Winston Churchill remains among the most celebrated political leaders in the history of the Western world. His Whitehall demand for ‘Action This Day’ drove the military and civilian effort during the long days of the Second World War. Emerging victorious in 1945, a great deal had changed. War had taken its toll, but real and hard policy decisions had been made by Churchill’s coalition.¹

Churchill and the Conservatives were, of course, thrown out of office in the 1945 Labour landslide and when they returned to government in 1951, with an aged Churchill once again at the helm, things were not the same. Gone was the urgency of war and gone too was Churchill’s insistence upon ‘Action This Day’. Historians treat this period with similar embarrassment and polite courtesy towards that which emerged from commentators at the time. Clive Ponting’s admittedly critical biography sums up the prime minister’s performance more pointedly:

He was increasingly deaf and had difficulty concentrating on an issue as well as a tendency to reminisce at the slightest opportunity. At Cabinet meetings he was a poor chairman and indulged to the full his tendency to ramble on at inordinate length. The huge appetite for work and intervention in the affairs of every department that had characterised his approach to office had faded. He spent much of his time reading newspapers, playing cards, eating and drinking. He had better intervals, but they became few and far between.²

This might be an accurate portrayal but it does not do justice, in policy terms, to the period, because what happened was rather profound. For six years from 1945 to 1951, Clement Attlee led the first majority Labour government. It was an administration which, against the odds in political, environmental and economic terms, delivered a full-scale British welfare state with the National Health Service ‘free at the point of delivery’ at its

very heart. Alongside an ambitious building programme of 'homes fit for heroes', pensions, unemployment, sickness and child benefit passed into legislation. There was a vision of Whitehall-driven economic planning. Private industry was nationalised, taking about a fifth of the economy into state ownership,³ including the Bank of England and the steel, coal, roads, rail, electricity and gas industries. Porter sets this in perspective when observing that 'Attlee's record is one which his successors could only envy as they experienced the frustrations of the mismatch between what could be promised and what could be delivered.'⁴

It really was an extraordinary achievement, given that Britain had recently become the biggest debtor on the planet, and it simply would not have happened had Churchill retained office for the period. The Conservative modernisers,⁵ led by R. A. (Rab) Butler, who had piloted the 1944 Education Act through Parliament during the latter stages of the wartime coalition and which introduced free secondary education, had yet to carry the day in Churchill's party (or with Churchill himself). During the 1945 campaign, Churchill (implausibly) tried to paint Attlee and his plans as being akin to some 'sort of Gestapo', and the mainstream of his party remained highly resistant to the ideas. The Conservative party won office in 1951 and, through the premierships of Anthony Eden, Harold Macmillan and, briefly, Alec Douglas Home, held power until 1964. And yet during this considerable period, 'do nothing' policy proved crucial to the long-term nature of British politics and society.

Despite remaining in office with solid majorities for 13 years through the 1950s and into the 1960s, no significant part of Attlee's welfare state was dismantled. There was the occasional tinkering at the edges, and the early part was characterised by a concentration on foreign affairs and Britain's (fading) place in the world, but 'new Jerusalem' survived in spite of periodic pressures on funding.

Such a view is not, it should be noted, universally accepted. Noel Whiteside, for example, argues that this construction, 'owes much to the benefit of hindsight. It concentrates totally on those elements of state welfare that survived the demise of the Labour government after 1951 ... the welfare state has tended to be defined only in terms of those social policies which governments of all political persuasions were prepared to support'.⁶ This is self-evidently true, but while he highlights numerous instinctive and even ideological divides between mainstream Labour and mainstream Conservative opinion at the time, the reality is that the central tenets of Attlee's policies remained intact. The Conservative governments determined simply to do nothing about apprehensions identified on

its side. Indeed, mainstream domestic politics throughout these decades coalesced around the ‘post-war consensus’—a programme of policy accepted by all governments that maintained the welfare state, a mixed economy and Keynesian economic policies pursuing full employment via fiscal intervention. Again, there is much historical debate about the very existence of this consensus. The great Samuel Beer (who is implicated in recognising consensus in an earlier guise⁷), for example, led a school of thought arguing that economic decline in these years can be attributed to a lack of political co-operation.⁸ The ideological and forthright Thatcherite challenge to consensus in the 1980s, and its legacy, put some of these views into perspective. Even so, towards the end of that politically turbulent decade, Ben Pimlott rejected wholeheartedly the very existence of post-war consensus on the grounds that this is not how policy-makers in this period viewed their own behaviour.⁹ Rodney Lowe’s sound review of the arguments is a must for those who wish to delve deeper. He makes the case that, in welfare at least, it really was crucial but argues that ‘consensus, as it evolved, was increasingly passive, dictating what could not, rather than what could, be done to resolve the historic problems which threatened economic growth and hence government’s ability to guarantee “full” employment and rising standards of welfare in line with public demands’.¹⁰ Consensus, by this evaluation, was negative rather than positive; it was about not doing something rather than taking a different course (radical or otherwise). Whatever the motivations, though, it meant stability of policy throughout the so-called ‘golden age of capitalism’, and that the giant health and welfare institutions of Attlee’s consensus were drawn in to form their part of the British establishment.

Indeed, the governments we celebrate (or condemn) for their radicalism can have this one thing in common: the inaction of their successors despite earlier opposition. It is this that ensures a long-term legacy. Essentially, these governments achieve what Peter Hall described in 1993 as, ‘third-order policy change’. Hall’s seminal work categorised policy change into three types. First order uses existing structures; second order extends these structures; and third order represents a paradigm shift. Hall tells us that this is ‘likely to involve the accumulation of anomalies, experimentation with new forms of policy, and policy failures which precipitate a shift in the locus of authority and initiate a wider contest between competing paradigms. This contest may well spill beyond the boundaries of the state itself into the broader political arena’.¹¹ This book will turn again later to such categories of policy change, but here it is a useful concept

through which to judge radical governments, especially as more recent events tend to be given greater significance than the more dispassionate eye of history would bestow. Indeed, in the light of the recent financial crisis it is instructive how many studies have returned to Hall's categories.¹²

Such radical governments are, naturally, rare, since radicalism itself is insufficient (and, as Robin Gibb reminds us, 'there is no great virtue in radicalism, if the ideas put forward are radically unpopular'¹³). These governments, which push the boundaries of policy, cannot claim long-term success unless they remain in office for sufficiently long periods (and consequently through multiple electoral tests) and their ideas are embraced by the alternative; what was once radical essentially becomes the mainstream. Indeed, these two are connected since the resistance of an opposition to policy change can erode when rejected by the electorate, and acceptance of policy change secures electoral success. For the welfare consensus to take hold there was not even the need for multiple electoral tests (though it had its origins in the hard wartime coalition). Churchill's Conservatives had, by the time of the 1947 Industrial Charter, reconciled themselves to Attlee's radicalism and an 'adherence to the middle way'.¹⁴ And by accepting the new welfare state, demanded by voters so dramatically in 1945, they not only secured for themselves a lengthy period in office but their willingness to do nothing ensured that radicalism prospered and then became mainstream.

THE RADICALISM OF THATCHER

Another such administration, though at the other end of the policy spectrum and separated by three decades, is the radical neo-liberal government led by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. The extensive and polarised reaction to her death in 2013, more than 22 years after she left office, and the ensuing elaborate state funeral in all but name goes some way to illustrating the change embodied by this towering and divisive political figure. Representing a challenge of ideological proportions to the post-war Attlee consensus,¹⁵ the Thatcherites turned economic policy on its head, rejecting Keynes and experimenting with monetarism (what George H. W. Bush, as a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 1980, described as 'voodoo economics'). The government embraced the market as a panacea for the country's obvious ills, and through an ambitious programme of privatisation shifted delivery of numerous services from the arms of the state to commercial enterprise. Promotion of the individual at the expense of the collective and a hastening of the process

of deindustrialisation did for the once powerful trade unions as much as the fierce legislation to curb their authority. Thatcher promised to 'roll back the frontiers of the state' and, echoing President Ronald Reagan's joke that there is little more terrifying than the sentence, 'I'm from the government and am here to help you', determined that the state would do less. Industry was expected to stand on its own feet without the support of public funds. Mines and shipyards closed, financial services deregulated and at the end of the decade Britain was a very different place.

One has to be careful not to get too caught up in the rhetoric of Thatcherism. A good deal of what the Thatcher government 'achieved' emerged in response to changing circumstances rather than being a result of a carefully drawn-up blueprint. For example, the privatisation programme originated as a rather practical way of directing much needed funds into state-owned British Telecom without the government falling foul of its own macroeconomic targets for public borrowing. But the policy took on a dogma of its own as one state-owned industry after another was sold off. David Marsh, for one, argues that the 'government's aims in relation to privatization ... changed substantially over time. As they ... changed, and the political aims [became] more important, so the government ... offered incentives to ensure successful asset sales and broader share ownership. Far from establishing the consistency and coherence of privatization policy ... these developments indicate the inconsistencies and contradictions in the policy'.¹⁶

Thatcher was also much more politically pragmatic than folklore cares to remember. While shipyards and mines closed in the North, the car industry in the politically sensitive Midlands and in the shape of British Leyland received financial support. 'The steel strike was not going to bring British industry to a halt,' she later wrote, '[but the] closure of the volume car business ... would not be politically acceptable to the Cabinet or the Party, at least in the short term'.¹⁷ And for all the talk of ruthless efficiency, one look at the shambles that amounted to the early Medium Term Financial Strategy is all that is needed to be much more sceptical over the administration's record. Marsh and Rhodes make the point that the 'Thatcher government may have had more radical objectives than previous governments but they were probably no better at achieving those objectives'.¹⁸ But it was the radicalism, sense of purpose, longevity and force of personality which turned the government's actions into a coherent programme of government that was to change the shape of British politics.¹⁹

For Thatcher, this was an ideological crusade driven forward in the face of considerable entrenched opposition. At the forefront was the official parliamentary opposition of the Labour party which, through the leaderships

of the left-wing Michael Foot and 'moderniser' Neil Kinnock, traipsed through the 'No' lobby time and time again in a vain effort to defeat the Thatcher government's programme in the House of Commons. And for the most part the opposition was genuine and heartfelt even through to the leadership of John Smith after 1992 (though the attempted defeat of the government over the Maastricht Treaty, creating the political side of the European Single Market, was notable for the sort of tribal opposition discussed later; especially for Smith, one of the rebels who defied his party whip in 1971 to ensure that Britain entered the European Community (EC)). Soon to be leader, Neil Kinnock really meant what he said when he delivered his impassioned speech on the eve of the 1983 general election:

If Margaret Thatcher is re-elected as prime minister on Thursday, I warn you. I warn you that you will have pain—when healing and relief depend upon payment. I warn you that you will have ignorance—when talents are untended and wits are wasted, when learning is a privilege and not a right. I warn you that you will have poverty—when pensions slip and benefits are whittled away by a government that won't pay in an economy that can't pay. I warn you that you will be cold—when fuel charges are used as a tax system that the rich don't notice and the poor can't afford.²⁰

Kinnock became Labour leader shortly after this speech and, following the humiliating defeat at the polls, set about reforming his party.²¹ Nonetheless, Labour continued to oppose the radical programme of the Thatcher government, and at the 1987 election pledged to reverse privatisation. One might have expected, then, that after 18 years in the political wilderness, the eventual return of Labour to office would have brought with it a dramatic reversal of policy. But it did not.

BLAIR DOES NOTHING

The party finally returned to government in the guise of 'New Labour' and, led by Tony Blair, achieved a historic landslide victory in 1997. Blair was young and energetic, so it is difficult to compare his premiership to that of Churchill with his frail grip on power after 1951, but they have something in common. For all the dynamism and clarion cries of 'modernisation', the Blair government over 13 years did nothing to reverse the essence of the Thatcher reforms; indeed, in areas such as the marketisation of public services it could even be said to have extended them. As Casey and Howard (2009) put it, 'the Blair government accepted most of the

Thatcherite political-economic settlement. Privatisation was here to stay and was even expanded ... Fiscal conservatism and monetary stability were the rule at least in the short term'.²² Ironically, research has shown that the electorate was not converted to dogmatic neoliberalism during the 1980s but it is a fair observation that, despite widespread unpopularity as early as 1988, voters were not prepared to eject the Conservatives from office until the alternative government, personified by the middle-class lawyer Blair, had resolved to do nothing to reverse the policies. Perhaps the most significant impact of the decade, then, was on the political class itself.²³ Thatcher once said that her greatest achievement was Tony Blair, and if this is to be believed, it demonstrates the critical importance of 'do nothing' politics.

It is not that there was stagnation during the Blair and then Gordon Brown administrations. Indeed, they were a hive of activity and prime ministerial power. As noted earlier, Blair's was one of the most legislative governments in history, creating new criminal offences for almost every day it was in office,²⁴ pumping vast sums into public services, and engaging in numerous foreign policy adventures. But while huge majorities, a weak Conservative opposition and a buoyant economy would have allowed it to have reversed almost any aspect of Thatcherite economic and industrial policy, the core principles that Labour had long opposed were left untouched; with perhaps the considerable mission creep of the size of the state by way of public spending increases being the lone indicator of changed attitudes (see Chap. 4).

The Thatcher government remains of such crucial significance in policy terms today not just because of the actions undertaken during the 1980s but also as a consequence of its successors' subsequent determination to do nothing. By the time Blair had won the leadership, his party was willing to embrace and even extend all it once opposed. And it did this not simply for the cynical motivation of winning power but because it no longer believed in the counter-arguments. In office, it is true, the party directed resources to numerous social policy projects that had always interested Labour but (regardless of the hubris over 'no more boom and bust' and the disastrous consequences) economic policy took priority and the means were identified ideologically with Thatcherism.

I have argued in my book, *Tragedy of Riches*, that in policy terms we live today with what can be described as a mixed economic settlement. This is a policy concoction accepted by mainstream political parties vying for office and made up of the contrasting traditions of Attlee's welfare liberalism, Thatcher's economic liberalism and the social liberalism that emerged in the 1960s. These three strands are now ingrained into public policy and

while their architects would have conflicted ferociously, it is a mix without rival. The political classes, across all mainstream parties, accommodated the settlement and resolved to do nothing to change it.²⁵

The consequence of these observations is that the resolution of policy-makers to do nothing can be profound. While there is a tendency to overlook policy change of a first, or even a second, order in the long sweep of history (to use Hall's typologies) there are good reasons to place an emphasis on the decisions. Indeed, one might argue that there can be a 'no order' policy 'change' of equivalent significance. It is worthwhile, therefore, to consider the counterfactuals: Would we still revere the giant administrations of Attlee and Thatcher, respectively, if successor governments had rapidly dismantled their programmes? Indeed, had the welfare state and Keynesian economics been abandoned in the 1950s, would there have been an appetite for a neoliberal revolution in the 1980s at all? A very different economic and social vista would lie before social scientists today.

MR WILSON'S COUNTERFACTUAL

If counterfactuals can define the significance of governments then it is possible to reassess periods of history long considered to be relatively uneventful in policy-making terms. Take, for example, the administrations led by Prime Minister Harold Wilson in the 1960s. Winning the elections of 1964 and 1966 after a long period of Conservative rule, Wilson promised modernisation: 'the white heat of technological revolution' no less. He condemned the outgoing Conservative government for '13 wasted years' (despite it cementing Attlee's achievements). The 1964 government promised to usher in a new technology-fuelled meritocracy embodied by the creation of 'Mintech' (the Ministry of Technology), but as David Edgerton demonstrates, the rhetoric was not matched by actions, and the administration cut defence research and development (R&D) and scrapped numerous projects as well as expecting a commercial return on civil technology spending.²⁶

At 48, Wilson was a young prime minister compared to his immediate predecessors, spoke with a 'man of the people' Yorkshire accent and, as the 1960s got into full swing he represented a break from the stuffy, establishment, conservative 1950s. This was notable in contrast to the outgoing prime minister, the aristocratic Alec Douglas Home. During his brief premiership from 1963 to 1964, Wilson would remind voters of his background with references to him as the 'Fourteenth Earl' (to which Home

would respond that the leader of the opposition was the ‘Fourteenth Mr Wilson’). The 1964 election confirmed the desire to embrace modernity in all its forms. But Wilson’s record in programmatic terms is less than glittering. It is true that the administration did more than step out of the way of a range of social reforms whose time had surely come. The decriminalisation of homosexuality, reform of the divorce laws, abolition of capital punishment and the legalising of abortion were among the big changes to have taken place during these years.²⁷ But while the executive facilitated these changes, many emerged from private members and the extent to which they can be associated with the leadership is surely limited. Indeed, it is radical Home Secretary Roy Jenkins rather than Wilson who is given historical credit for reform. Up close, there were meaningful decisions it is true, but in the long view of history they fade, somewhat, in significance. Perhaps the longest-lived achievement of his government was the establishment of the Open University, created under a Royal Charter in 1969. These were eventful economic time, with Wilson’s Treasury battling the devaluation of sterling, which was eventually forced on the country in 1967, economic planning (in the shape of a short-lived new Department of Economic Affairs²⁸) and proposed industrial relations reforms (notably Employment Secretary Barbara Castle’s divisive ‘In Place of Strife’²⁹).

For all this activity, the programme of the Wilson government can be said to represent almost entirely first- or second-order policy change. As a leader he was most accomplished at party management, holding Labour together as divisions between left and right grew in intensity, and would eventually spill over into open warfare in the early 1980s. It was this aptitude that enabled him to be an electorally successful figure, leading his party to victory through four out of five general elections (1964, 1966, 1974 Feb., and 1974 Oct., but losing in 1970) despite the seemingly irreconcilable party factions of the socialist left and revisionist right. As Tim Bale argues, it is this that is perhaps responsible for the long-held view of Wilson as ‘one of the most skilful political operators ever to lead a British political party ... The correlative of such skill, however, is commonly considered to be an absence of both principle and vision’.³⁰

There is, however, one matter on which Wilson and his government made a strategically significant decision to do nothing, the counterfactual implications of which reverberate through British political and social history. Indeed, the decision to do nothing is arguably the most important policy decision made by his government. And it is unsurprising that the prime motivation was the maintenance of party harmony. That decision was not to engage British troops in the ill-fated US war with Vietnam.

It is intriguing from the point of view of 'do nothing' policy that among the numerous accounts of the Wilson administration to have been published over many years, very little attention has been paid to the policy on Vietnam and Wilson's management of domestic and international pressures.³¹ This, it should be noted, despite vociferous and ongoing argument within and outside of the governing Labour party at the time and demands from Washington for the UK to legitimise US action. Even less attention is paid to Britain's role when viewed from the American side of history. This tells us something about the perceived importance of decisions not to do something against the alternative to do it. Had Wilson backed up the Americans militarily, the academic implications would have been potentially far more intense than the more recent Iraq war. He did not, of course. And yet, when one considers the counterfactual, it is difficult to dismiss this decision as anything other than weighty and significant. It is also worth noting that the British government avoided out-and-out disapproval of the US policy, thereby largely maintaining amicable transatlantic relations.

Perhaps the best historical account of the Wilson administration's policy over Vietnam is offered by Rhiannon Vickers.³² The historian argues that Wilson's opposition to President Johnson's escalation of hostilities was not born of morality but rather was founded on the prime minister's concerns for his own domestic position and the need to pacify his parliamentary and grassroots party. Wilson skilfully negotiated the pressures from his own party domestically to distance the government from the conflict and from Washington, which wanted at least a token British force present (or a 'platoon of bagpipers', as Johnson sarcastically demanded) to legitimise US action. 'Although the Vietnam War spurred the left to charge that Wilson had betrayed the party, he actually was fairly successful in managing British policy on the war. He kept Britain out of the fighting but maintained the country's "special relationship" with the United States.'³³ Continuing the policy initiated by the outgoing Conservative government before 1964 to provide moral support to the Americans' 'defensive' position, Wilson stretched credulity by clinging for so long to his excuse that military intervention would be incompatible with the UK's role as co-chair of the Geneva Accords. Despite increasing anger from Johnson (and Wilson's own supporters) Wilson even managed to hold a political line where he dissociated Britain from the escalation of bombing in North Vietnam while continuing generally to give support to the White House and its policy. The result was that relations between Wilson and Johnson were strained until the latter's election loss in 1968

and might well represent the worst relationship between a prime minister and a president in post-war history. But the policy was artfully maintained such that there was no irreparable damage done to the two countries' diplomatic association.

This very brief account of the British government's policy towards Vietnam shows just how deliberate the decision was to 'do nothing' over military intervention, and in many respects just how adroit was the management of the position. Given the glory of hindsight and what we now know about the outcome of the war that dragged on into ultimate failure in 1975, one only has to imagine the implications for Britain both at home and internationally. Indeed, it is perhaps the experience of the ill-judged Bush—Blair 2003 adventure in Iraq that has refocused some academic attention on the Wilson government's foreign policy.³⁴

BLAIR DOES NOTHING AGAIN

It has been shown that a significant decision by the Blair government to do nothing was in relation to Thatcherism. Here it can be said that the administration accepted, and indeed embraced, the new consensus despite ample opportunity to reverse policy. But there is another significant policy area where the Blair administration chose to do nothing despite both favouring the course of action and, arguably, having the means to achieve it because of a powerful campaigning machine and facing an opposition in disarray. That decision was whether Britain should join the European single currency.

Now utterly eclipsed by the 2016 referendum where voters told government to leave the EU, Britain's policy history in relation to the euro is one of long-standing 'do nothing' proportions that pre-dates the Blair administration. Blair's predecessor in Number 10, Conservative John Major, negotiated its creation as part of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty. The political side to the single market, the Treaty on European Union paved the way for monetary union and framed the convergence criteria for entry to the euro.³⁵ Those countries ratifying Maastricht would consequently be obliged to adopt the euro subject to these criteria. Euroscepticism at the time (and since³⁶) was bubbling away in middle England, the popular press and the Tory party. At the negotiations Britain (and later Denmark) secured an opt-out to this provision while retaining the right to join the currency should it wish at a later date.

With a party reconciled to European convergence³⁷ (indeed attracted to the social chapter over which Britain had also secured an opt-out),

the leadership of Blair alongside his Chancellor and eventual successor Gordon Brown, were much more favourably disposed towards Brussels. Indeed, notwithstanding the fractious Iraq war which later divided European opinion, it is reasonable to observe that the Blair administration engaged positively, building networks and alliances, through to seeing the Union expand. Speaking in Cardiff in 2002, Blair warned his audience that Britain must avoid its usual negativity:

We must end the nonsense of 'this far and no further'. There are areas in which Europe should and will integrate more: in fighting crime and illegal immigration; to secure economic reform; in having a more effective defence and security policy. Britain should not be at the back of the file on such issues but at the front. On the Euro we should of course join if the economic conditions are right. A single currency with a single market for Europe makes economic sense.³⁸

This might have reflected the government's attitude but the thrust of this speech was unusual because, as Philip Stephens noted at the time, if Blair 'made Britain's case in Europe with measurable success, he has failed to make Europe's case in Britain'.³⁹ And it was this question of whether (or when) the UK should join the single currency that presented itself as a strategic policy question to the young government. While neither Blair nor Brown were ideological monetary unionists, and Brown became more resistant in office (as he saw it as a potential check on his own powers by the Treasury) just as Blair saw opportunities to extend his prime-ministerial power into the Continent, it was nonetheless a question on which minds had been made up in principle.

Unlike the opposition, which under William Hague's leadership had hardened its position to form a 'Save the Pound' electoral strategy, this government decided to do nothing about its policy dilemma. And its mechanism for this was Gordon Brown's 'five tests'. This a form of 'depoliticisation' akin to that discussed in the Chap. 4. Confirming that Britain would not join in the first wave, and as part of the 'triple lock' to include Cabinet approval and a referendum, these economic conditions ran as follows:

1. Are business cycles and economic structures compatible so that we and others could live comfortably with euro interest rates on a permanent basis?
2. If problems emerge, is there sufficient flexibility to deal with them?

3. Would joining the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) create better conditions for firms making long-term decisions to invest in Britain?
4. What impact would entry into the EMU have on the competitive position of the UK's financial services industry, particularly the City's wholesale markets?
5. In summary, will joining the EMU promote higher growth, stability and a lasting increase in jobs?⁴⁰

Presented as a form of evidence-based policy-making, these tests hardly represented a scientific assessment, and it seemed that Chancellor Brown himself was the uniquely qualified judge as to whether the conditions could be met. Indeed, it is reported that the list was drawn up in the back of a taxi with Ed Balls, at that time Chief Economic Adviser to the Treasury, while they were visiting the USA. Just as the very creation of the euro was as much a political as an economic project, so too would giving up powers over monetary policy ultimately be a political decision. By June 2003, it seemed that any hope of the UK joining was dashed when Brown announced that only the City test had been met.

Had there been decisive agreement at the top of government and political will, it is conceivable that the Blair administration could have convinced a reluctant Britain that joining the single currency was the best course. Bear in mind that, buoyed by success in Northern Ireland, in these early years Tony Blair believed he could accomplish nearly anything through his powers of persuasion. A MORI poll at the time suggested that while the British public remained sceptical of entry to the euro, as many as 7 percentage points were added to the yes vote if the government were to 'strongly urge' a vote in favour.⁴¹ But added to this would have been the formidable New Labour media machine that had delivered electoral victory in 1997. While press opinion had often been negative, the assumption by Julie Firmstone that 'the lack of consensus within elite opinion and government policy on the Euro [created] a situation whereby newspapers put themselves at the forefront of the debate by becoming active and involved participants',⁴² means that this might have been changed.

Why did the administration decide to do nothing? For Julie Smith, the most powerful explanation is that 'however deeply committed the Prime Minister and his colleagues were to the European Union, they were ultimately more committed to ensuring that the Labour party remained in power nationally'.⁴³ There is undoubtedly some truth in this assessment.

Blair had not wanted to be a single-term prime minister and the party was focused very much on opinion polls. However, the Conservative party's decision to build a campaign around a 'Save the Pound' election slogan in 2001 had shown that while the British people might have agreed with William Hague's Euroscepticism, actually monetary union was not such a hot political issue as schools and hospitals. On election night, a single net seat changed hands and Labour was returned with a second landslide. And then there was Iraq, which by almost any measure was an unpopular policy with the electorate and yet it was pursued by the Blair government irrespective of the consequences at the polls (Labour was rather saved by the electoral system in 2005, which delivered a majority result on the smallest percentage of the vote in history). For Nick Carter, the answer comes down to economics. 'At no time ... were Brown or Blair prepared deliberately to tailor or sacrifice domestic economic policy to the requirements of EMU, nor were they prepared to risk the second term in order to take Britain into the euro.'⁴⁴ That is, while the decision was political there was not the commensurate political will to defy the 'sound economic management' by which it set its store.

The result was to do nothing. And more than a decade on and long ejected from office, Gordon Brown has enjoyed plaudits from his traditional foe for having kept Britain out of the near doomed monetary union. Ironically, however, had the government chosen to use its new influence in Europe at the start of the twenty-first century to reinforce its own disciplined economic attitudes (at that time at least) the worst of the problems that eventually befell the euro in terms of sovereign debt might just have been avoided. After all, the blame in large part can be laid at the feet of the (political) decision to fudge the fiscal rules. Sterling's membership could have been a stabilising influence. But that is another counterfactual. And one can only speculate as to the cause and effect implications for the in/out EU referendum that eventually followed.

CONCLUSION: NO ORDER POLICY 'CHANGE'

Peter Hall's policy classification is dependent on 'change'; not simply specific legislative enactments but also the identification of broader transformations. It has proved a useful tool to scholars over what is now decades since his article was first published. And Hall is not only interested in the forces that lead to change but also those that create stability. But as this chapter has argued, the decision to do nothing can have profound

implications for policy. It opens up the question as to whether we can view Hall's typology through the lens of the counterfactual? That is to say that more than simply identifying stability, something which might be described as a 'no order' policy dynamic is one where doing nothing has significant counterfactual implications. The examples discussed here open up a view whereby policy can be reassessed for the repercussions of what did not happen as well as what actually took place. By exploring decisions in this way, it might be argued that doing nothing (representing 'no order') is potentially as significant as third-order change.

What each of these examples of 'do nothing' politics has in common is that while they ultimately meant inaction, the respective governments still gave the impression of action. This is perhaps one explanation for the continuing debate about the existence of the post-war consensus. The political system represented by the Westminster model simply demands this. Nonetheless, political inaction has left Britain with a legacy of near permanent social and political change.

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How is ‘Do Nothing’ Politics Held to Account?

Abstract By analysing the implications of the Westminster Model and its constitutional apparatus, this chapter argues that combative opposition with poor co-operation and minimal consensual discussion ensures government inaction across crucial policy areas. Democratic checks and balances, it is argued, amount to a disincentive to take necessary but unpopular action. Meanwhile, mechanisms such as independent inquiries give a semblance of action but the ability to do nothing about given issues. Elsewhere Parliamentary Select Committees themselves create public interest and demand action of ministers. By taking a longer view of spending commitments across a series of elections, it demonstrates that the Westminster system incentivises parties to match rather than depart from incumbents’ plans, making such change largely incremental. Parliamentary government in Westminster can both incentivise inaction and provide the tools to ‘do nothing’.

Keywords Westminster model • Inquiries • Select committees • Public spending

With its focus primarily on the British experience, this evaluation has sought to better understand UK government, which is grounded in parliamentary democracy and the ‘Westminster model’. This chapter considers both how ‘do nothing’ politics can and is held to account by Parliament and the impact of this democratic system on the nature of policy decisions. It argues that the lack of co-operation in British politics between

parties and the paucity of consensual policy-making (despite occasional unspoken consensus) makes parliamentary government not only a combative process but also one that ensures government inaction across a host of important policy areas. It considers the Westminster model, Select Committees, independent inquiries, and what all of this incentivises in terms of parties' spending policies.

THE WESTMINSTER MODEL AND POLICY INACTION

The Westminster model or system means confrontational, adversarial politics¹ in both physical design and constitutional construction. That inbuilt confrontation, while vigorous in its demands on government accountability, is just as forceful in preventing policy-makers from taking some of the most difficult long-term decisions with which any administration can expect to be faced. This is a structural and cultural issue that punishes politicians who make unpopular policy with the threat of a replacement administration drawn from the opposition benches. Mirroring the discussion in Chap. 2 about 'no change' areas of policy, this section shows an opposing force whereby the Westminster system can act as a block on decisions that should be made.

The model has evolved but it is also formalised in the British constitution. The leader of the opposition is recognised in law in the form of the Ministers of the Crown Act (1937), the Ministerial Salaries Consolidation Act (1965) and the Ministerial and Other Salaries Act (1975, as amended). Consequently, the leader of the opposition draws a salary, as does the opposition chief whip and deputy chief whip. The functions of the official and legitimate opposition can be seen not as performing a constructive job of holding the executive to account but rather as a perpetual attempt to defeat the government's parliamentary votes and to represent an alternative government themselves. That is, the opposition's job is to identify and attack unpopularity rather than to improve bad policy. And this not only applies to the opposition leader; it is true of the entire shadow cabinet and arguably for many Members of Parliament (MPs) occupying the opposition benches. My own, recent research has highlighted the dominance of the Shadow Chancellor in Westminster opposition, occupying a central co-ordinating role. It shows 'the functions of the Shadow Chancellor [as] those of combative opposition to the policies of the government of the day rather than seeking to influence the policy agenda and the role within the front bench team to determine taxation and spending commitments (and as a consequence strategically controlling the scope of the party's domestic policy)'.²

In that sense, the role is to project credibility alongside the leader as head of an alternative government. The power within the shadow cabinet is that of veto; preventing colleagues from making commitments. There is no responsibility to persuade the incumbent to do things differently, and consequently, the post of Shadow Chancellor is something of a 'do nothing' job.

As the respective research of Johnson (1997) and Norton (2008) attest, the result is that parties which form the official opposition are required maintain a 'broad church' rather than represent niche interests. They have to be sensitive to public opinion, and if they want to be successful, they need to be unified.³ This has implications for policy-making: 'While all democratic political systems highlight their distinctive policies and values, the Westminster model is not only combative but also exaggerates differences between parties because of this concentration of power; facilitating the alternation of (usually) single party majority governments in office.'⁴

The implication of this structure of politics is that it restricts the policy areas in which government is willing to engage. Since opposition is almost always incentivised (indeed arguably has a constitutional duty) to criticise 'unpopular' decisions, as an alternative government the inference is that such policies will be reversed with a change of administration. Peter Lilley is rather sanguine about this political reality:

It seemed fair enough that the opposition should oppose you. Where there was general lack of understanding why something should be done that the opposition may latch on to that ... My view was always that you had to win the intellectual argument, that you had to mobilise popular support and then you can get something through Parliament. So on Social Security reform I was initially told that it was political suicide for a Tory to try and set about reforming the system. I didn't believe that and I made a series of high profile, probably poor taste, popular speeches and series of lectures setting out the case intellectually and I think I won the argument and though there was opposition from the opposition benches, they sort of gave up on the basic argument so it's more important to win the argument than keeping quiet.⁵

Notwithstanding the earlier discussion of 'no change' areas, the tribalism of Westminster prevents consensus even on matters where politicians agree were positions to be reversed. A relatively trivial but illustrative example of this is the proposals by the coalition government after 2010 to reduce spending on the police. The move was criticised vocally by the opposition, who had themselves only recently departed office. But any cold assessment would acknowledge that had the roles been reversed and opposition were

in government, an identical decision would have been made. Not only that, but had government been in opposition, it too would have criticised the decision. Jill Rutter has seen this political pressure prevent necessary but unpopular change:

You could produce a list of causes of inaction, one of which is we know ‘we ought to do it but we know there’s a huge political price to pay for doing it so we’ll just duck and hope the next guy picks it up’ to ‘we would quite like to do it but there’s not a big political pay-off and there are other things that are more important’ to serial sins of commission like someone should sort out the housing market but it’s too difficult so not now, not the right time or we’ve got other things. Quite a spectrum of reasons for not doing things.⁶

Here is a democratic system of government whose constitutional checks and balances can sometimes amount to a strong disincentive to take necessary actions. For a tough decision to be taken there often needs to be both commensurate political reward and an absence of heavy political cost. Of course, all governments make unpopular decisions, and the electoral cycle even permits some of the hardest choices to be made early in a Parliament with the prospect of giveaways as the election approaches. But the Westminster system incentivises the opposition to seize on particular sorts of unpopularity, and consequently for government to opt for political inaction. Broadly, these are policies that are detrimental to widespread material interests but where the benefits are in the (distant) future, and those that could result in a tactical defeat in a parliamentary vote. It has already been demonstrated that the Westminster system, which has historically produced majority governments, is very capable of delivering the demands of Ministers and does not distinguish in its efficiency between good and bad policy. Unpopularity in that sense is not an obstacle provided it does what Westminster itself does: divide and rule. Consequently, once government itself has decided on a policy, Parliament is very effective at turning it into an Act, and this means that governments in the Westminster system tend to be relatively strong. The Westminster model means high aggression in its scrutiny of government and opposition to its proposals but it remains limited in its ability to hold it to account. However, it is not only that Parliament facilitates the desires of government, but the paucity of any consensual approach to policy-making also prevents some unpopular but necessary change.

Consequently, where a policy is naturally divisive, Westminster is able to turn it into legislation in a way in which more consensual parliaments

might find difficult or impossible. The Community Charge (or poll tax)⁷ is a good illustration of this because despite misgivings in government, opposition from non-governing parties and protests across the country, the 1988 Local Government Finance Act progressed through the Commons relatively smoothly. But since the proposal divided both opinion and interests, it was perfectly possible for the government to push through an otherwise unpopular proposal. Its implementation was inept and there was widespread criticism of its inequity. As unpopularity in the country turned violent, the departure of Margaret Thatcher allowed the government to have a rethink ahead of a closely run general election, and Conservative MPs to support a change in policy⁸ the legislative implementation of which Parliament supported. Jill Rutter was involved in this policy as a civil servant:

I worked on the poll tax review group and the review was set up on the basis that the one thing we weren't going to do was look at a new alternative to replace Rates because that had been done before, there'd been a Heseltine Green Paper alternative to Domestic Rates and they'd decided that it wasn't a very good system but there was nothing else better. So we were set up not to do that but what changed that was the disaster of the Scottish re-rating and that completely changed the political dynamic ... It met all the criteria of good policy-making in many ways; it went through every Cabinet Committee, there was a Green Paper, there was a White Paper, it was incomprehensible but apart from that we did analysis and modelling ... but that could have been stopped at various stages ... Had Nigel Lawson resigned, the Secretary of State Kenneth Baker had serious reservations but knew which way the political wind was blowing. If you think the Prime Minister is really pushing something, then Ministers want to advance, it takes quite a brave Minister to say 'no, you're wrong' so there are lots of forces pushing you towards doing things.⁹

The poll tax had genuine opposition on grounds of unfairness and this is unlike the big issue of climate change, where mainstream politicians largely agree on the need for action. But unlike the poll tax where the Westminster system aided enactment, here it incentivises opposition to exploit unpopularity in the necessary provisions, which in turn incentivise government inaction. Of course, it is not only the 'Westminster family' of democratic governments that have been slow to act (indeed, Britain has at times been at the forefront of international progress) and the non-democratic world hardly has a distinguished record in tackling carbon emissions. But the issue illustrates how the system disincentivises political action. As Held and

Hervey (2011) observe, across the world ‘political commitment to tackling climate change is critical, yet may require political leaders to adhere to a particular course of action that is potentially unpopular, and hence contrary to structural democratic pressures. The actual implementation of policies that reduce global warming may infringe on the democratic preferences of citizens. In such a context, political leaders can be caught between a desire for recognition and esteem in the international community—recognition that comes from peer admiration for leadership—and the need to ensure accountability to domestic electorates’.¹⁰ What democracies have in common is the electoral test, where the government will have to defend its record to voters. Such is the brevity of the political cycle, with elections in Britain at most every five years, that governments avoid decisions that will cause them electorally damaging unpopularity, pushing the burden on to future administrations.¹¹ Under the Westminster model, governments usually have the power to enact even unpopular policy, but the pressure for inaction is intensified by the opposition, which both represents an alternative administration and is incentivised to criticise such decisions even where it would otherwise agree. That is, opposition to climate change action not only comes from the lobby that are dismissive of the evidence but also from politicians vying for office. This need not apply to the principle of dealing with climate change (where there is broadly a consensus) but presents a serious threat to government framing specific policies. The Fuel Price Escalator is a strong case, since governments of various complexions have sought to reduce fuel consumption in an effort to reduce carbon emission, and price is widely acknowledged to influence consumption.¹² And yet, even oppositions that have pursued the policy when in office will make political capital out of a successor government’s unpopularity in continuing the strategy. Since only costs are accrued to the public in the short term, and there are only vague benefits in the longer term, the electorate’s reaction can be understood; especially if it is incited by a combative alternative government.

Westminster democracy in particular invites a collusion between politicians and voters to ignore difficult longer-term decisions and create competition for votes around what the government can deliver in the short term.¹³ Over recent years this has combined with a much more individualistic approach to political choice. Gerry Stoker (2014) put it thus: ‘The role of political parties as bastions of collective loyalty and identity has shifted more to a practice of catch-all institutions looking to market themselves to a wide range of free-floating voters. The major institutions of engagement

including trade unions, churches and formal membership associations have seen their role decline and instead interest politics is more dominated by single issue campaigns and organisations that demand not loyalty and engagement from their membership, but rather funding and fees to support professional and sleek campaign organisers.¹⁴ There is scope for further research here on factors that determine 'no change' and 'no action' policies where one might have expected some sort of consensus.

Nonetheless, the outcome is that politicians will opt for inaction if longer-term decisions harm short-term electoral prospects. These circumstances are distinct from the no-change policy areas highlighted in the Chap. 2, where a political elite or class enjoys an unspoken consensus on an issue. Here, parties competing for votes and office will exploit unpopularity. Both government and opposition operate within a political cycle that prioritises short-term decisions and punishes policy-makers who make unpopular decisions where there is no immediate benefits for at least some of the voters. The outcome is a political culture that pins blame on governing parties facing electoral competition.

The other area where the Westminster system can lead to inaction is where the opposition can defeat the government in a parliamentary vote. Defeats in the House of Commons are rare, since single-party, majority governments are commonplace. Defeats in the House of Lords are more frequent, but as a revising chamber, the power is to amend and delay. Even here, as Russell and Sciarra (2007) demonstrate, it is the tribal voting of organised oppositions that is most likely to lead to the government losing a vote.¹⁵ For a government to lose a vote in the Commons, there necessarily needs to be a strong (if not always large) body of opinion on the governing back benches that philosophically rejects the policy. The official opposition, with a front bench leading a largely unified body of MPs, need not consider the merits or demerits of the policy any further than the prospect of defeating the government. Indeed, oppositions habitually vote against governments, with support for the incumbent being much rarer. But this pattern of behaviour means that oppositions will seek to defeat governments despite the 'national interest', and even when their individual political instinct might be in alignment.

The most prominent defeat of the Cameron/Clegg coalition government came in August 2014, when Parliament opposed a government motion by 285 to 272 votes and in doing so rejected the policy of Britain joining US-led strikes on Syria, where the regime was believed to have been using chemical weapons. The purpose of highlighting this episode

is not to argue that one side or other of the debate was right. The case was finely balanced, with many strong opinions expressed in the House on both sides of the issue. The controversy of Iraq continued to cast a long shadow over MPs, and the very fact that the government was vulnerable to a defeat illustrated that there were strong reservations on the government's own benches. The point to be made for the purposes of understanding Westminster and political inaction is that principle and a dispassionate assessment of the proposals mattered less to the shadow cabinet decision to oppose government than did two party political assessments. These were the potential reactions of supporters and key target voters, and the prospect of defeating the government, thereby weakening its authority.¹⁶ It was perhaps because of the cynicism of the decision that 'Cameron was somehow allowed by Labour to turn what should have been a truly devastating defeat into some sort of victory for parliamentary democracy.'¹⁷ Nonetheless, just as with climate change, the outcome in policy terms was clear: inaction. As something of a postscript, the contrast here is with the December 2015 Parliamentary division on Syrian intervention, where the opposition, under its new leader Jeremy Corbyn, was split in opinion and voted unwhipped. In this case, MPs who decided to pass through one lobby or another did so on principle. Corbyn and his followers on the left were largely opposed on principle, and while there was no neat factional split, many of the mainstream Parliamentary Labour Party, who had sought to defeat the government the year before, voted this time with the Conservatives.

TECHNIQUES OF THE TRADE: INQUIRIES AND EVIDENCE

When Harold Wilson described a public inquiry as something which would 'take minutes and waste years', he was rejecting calls for the establishment of a Royal Commission on the trade unions. But his cynical view reveals the capacity for independent inquiries to bury an issue rather than tackling it, while leaving the impression of action on the part of politicians. While there is a developed literature that has grown around the appointment and management of public inquiries, the one area where there is a shortfall of analysis is on this use of the mechanism to avoid policy action. This short section simply highlights the useful function of independent inquiries to support a government 'doing nothing' when the pressure is to do otherwise. However, first it acknowledges the more positive use of independent inquiries in handling the sorts of unpopular issues discussed.

The depoliticisation of an issue by handing it to an independent body can have the effect of creating a momentum behind a policy area which

otherwise could not command support of the government because of the sort of opposition highlighted in the previous section. The use of so-called 'evidence' can, however, be misleading. It can be a way of taking action in an ostensibly 'unbiased' way, but where a choice of evidence is almost always available. It is what Michel Foucault termed 'political technology'.¹⁸ Nevertheless, tackling difficult, long-term problems has perhaps been a notable success of some inquiries and contrasts with the problems highlighted above:

There are a number of tactics that explain why you set up an independent inquiry. Pensions was set up because there was a Blair/Brown split and Brown was refusing to do anything and it had gone through a huge process. [Howard] Davies [report on Heathrow] was to get it beyond the election ... In some ways these are ways of 'long grassing'; in other ways they can come back with potential ways forward. So while [the] Turner [Commission] started as an exercise in long grassing—certainly from the Treasury's point of view—it ended up as an exercise in radical reform, and one of the pluses of taking it outside of government was that it could think of things that would have been very difficult.

Independent inquiries can be good ways of getting people to engage. There is something to be said for allowing deep thinking in government. When you've got this clutter of all the other things you're doing there's not much space. Other ones are basically there to put a name on something a Minister has already thought of already.¹⁹

The Pensions Commission chaired by Adair Turner, for example, which published its second report in 2005, provided successful cover that allowed the government to raise the retirement age, linking state pensions to life expectancy and the creation of accounts for those without access to an employer scheme. The Andrew Dilnot-led Commission on Funding of Care and Support was also successful at driving a debate which political parties had otherwise found impossible to handle. Elsewhere, John Browne's report into Higher Education funding allowed Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg and his Liberal Democrats in coalition to reverse their election commitment to scrap university tuition fees, though here the party paid a huge political price when the fees were subsequently increased to £9000 per year and the Liberal Democrats suffered a humiliating rejection by the electorate at the 2015 general election.

There is a long history of public inquiries, in particular dealing with crisis issues, and a well-developed literature on the subject.²⁰ Here it is noted that there are several forms of inquiry, the distinction between which sits outside the scope of this piece; suffice to say that several scholars have

commentated on the decline of the Royal Commission in favour of judged investigations. Elsewhere, attention is paid to the idea of blame avoidance and credit claiming, particularly where there is ‘negativity bias’ in the media. Christopher Hood (2010) has investigated this and attests to the limited structural research available, but notes that ‘government reform programs often include strong aspirations to counter excessive blame aversion in public administration through red-tape-busting activity’.²¹ An attractive feature of an inquiry for policy-makers is the ability to ‘kick an issue into the long grass’, which might otherwise conspire to pressure a government into action it would rather avoid. Sulitzenu-Kenan alludes to this when he writes that ‘it is possible that the consent of political rivals, the press, and the public to demote an event on the public agenda is gained by the government’s willingness to pay in the prospect of a negative authoritative evaluation. Political rivals, the press, victim groups and the general public may all be willing to agree to a pause, considering the prospect that their claims will be empowered by the critical report of a public inquiry appointed by the government. By the time this fails to materialise (and in the less frequent cases when it does), time has already been gained’.²² The Leveson Inquiry²³ into the behaviour of the press is a good example here, where public outrage at phone hacking by journalists put pressure on the government to act to regulate the press. The process of conducting the Inquiry shed light on some disgraceful press practices and the report was damning in its conclusions. But the political fallout in the wake of its publication, involving the two coalition parties of government issuing different responses, and a row with the opposition, ensured that the press did not ultimately endure radical reform of its regulatory environment.

Regardless of the motivation, whether it is to depoliticise or to avoid blame, inquiries will eventually report. Of course, not all of the recommendations of such commissions can be expected to be adopted by policy-makers, and government is able to pick and choose, once again displaying action but with the discretion to do nothing. All too often there is pressure to adopt more of the recommendations than Ministers would prefer. At other times, government can use the passage of time to avoid enacting the sort of policy prescription that would have been necessary in the eye of the storm.

There are plenty of examples of this, but an interesting contrast is between the two very different administrations elected in the 1990s. The increasingly embattled government of John Major reached for independent inquiries to handle issues that were threatening to destabilise the government’s strategy; increasingly, one of firefighting against allegations of ‘sleaze’. The Nolan Inquiry—The Committee on Standards in

Public Life—was set up in 1994 in reaction to the ‘cash for questions’ scandal that engulfed a number of Tory backbenchers. While it produced a significant report that changed the way Parliament governed itself, its creation was motivated very clearly by the desire of the government to be seen to be doing something about a problem that was a little too close to home. Then there was the Scott Report, published in 1996, into ‘arms to Iraq’, where ministers had agreed to and encouraged the sale of military equipment despite an arms embargo, and withheld evidence to that effect when the directors of the arms firm Matrix Churchill found themselves on trial.

Things were very different for the subsequent energetic Labour government, led by Tony Blair and elected in a landslide in 1997. While several inquiries would years later pore over the circumstances of the controversial war in Iraq, in the early days of government Blair used independent inquiries to avoid enacting policy commitments to pursue constitutional reform, at least to the extent that many supporters expected. This, then, mirrors the ‘conservatism’ discussion at the start of this book, which saw the pace of change slow down. Blair’s government in its early days established two inquiries: Lord Wakeham looked into reforming the House of Lords, while Lord Jenkins examined electoral reform. Both reported back with sensible proposals having considered wide-ranging evidence. But neither found their proposals adopted by the government.

Independent inquiries can both facilitate policy action and allow government to do nothing about a contentious issue. They have been employed by governments as a tool for inaction over a prolonged period, since they give the impression of politicians taking an issue seriously and doing something about it. Thus they are ultimately a very useful tool for government: for all his cynicism, it should also be noted that Harold Wilson was responsible for setting up ten Royal Commissions during his two premierships.

ACCOUNTABILITY, PARLIAMENT’S SELECT COMMITTEES AND ‘CREATING PUBLIC INTEREST’

One aspect of parliamentary practice that has bucked the trend of Westminster ‘oppositionalism’ is to be found in the departmental select committees. These came into being in 1979 and boast the power to call for ‘people and papers’ but, as this section argues, while they have

increasingly been capable of holding the government and Ministers to account, rarely can they be seen to probe what governments do not, or even should not do.

Select Committees represent the organisational apparatus by which Parliament is able to conduct permanent oversight of government. While not being without successes during their first three decades of existence, some leading select committees rose to prominence after the 2010 general election. Long being responsible for some of the most constructive scrutiny of the British executive, their effectiveness has been all the more notable given the popular assumption that we have been witnessing the ‘decline of parliament’.²⁴ Thankfully, during this time, select committees have grown in professionalism and demanded better resources, most notably since 2001 and the Hansard Society Commission on Parliamentary Scrutiny (The Newton Commission), which challenged the balance of power with government and led to the adoption of ‘core tasks’.²⁵ So is there now a new, permanent, culture of independence? Margaret Hodge proved to be one of the most powerful voices of accountability as elected Chair of the Public Accounts Committee:

I put it down to three or four things: the chairs were elected so you’re not there through patronage—these were the Tony Wright reforms which were absolutely central. The second thing was the expenses scandal meant MPs were trying to re-assert their credibility to the public. And then the third rationalisation for it that I had was that we had coalition government which I thought meant that tribal loyalties were broken down. We haven’t got coalition government this time so I think time will tell whether the Tony Wright reforms were sufficient in themselves, and the indications aren’t bad if you look at Crispin Blunt at Foreign Affairs or Sarah Wooleston at Health or Julian Lewis at Defence, they’re all demonstrating independence and so it may be that a new career trajectory is being built.²⁶

It was during the 2010 Parliament that Westminster’s select committees increased their prestige, profile and power. As a result of the Wright reforms, chairs were elected by MPs (rather than being appointed by government and opposition whips). Dunleavy and Muir (2013) have measured the growing status of Commons’ select committees. From examining press databases, they show a tripling in media coverage 2008–12. The research ‘offers prima facie evidence supporting the qualitative impressions of almost all external observers that the Wright reforms have been successful in greatly improving the external visibility of parliamentary activity’.²⁷

While the quality and independence of scrutiny has improved, for this particular study there is a further question about how Parliament can hold government or public bodies to account for what they have not done, or even to consider whether inaction would have been a better decision. As this involves demonstrating a negative, a counterfactual, it is an unlikely expectation: 'It's a big ask. Highly desirable but it's back to what do politicians think their role is and it's cogitating on policy initiatives. So I think if you are looking for a mechanism that would encourage inaction, it's a big ask of the Select Committee system.'²⁸

Inquiries conducted during the 2010 Parliament can be seen to have responded to the appetite in the electorate for accountability that emerged after the credit crunch and expenses scandal. And to that extent, select committees and their cross-party members can be said to represent the electorate's popular interest. Indeed, while it is true that they have championed popular causes, and have often been successful in 'depoliticising' issues, in holding government to account they have yet to demonstrate a real willingness to stick their necks out and call for unpopular (if necessary) policy. Whether it was big business avoiding tax, bankers' bonuses or wasteful public monies, select committees led the charge in demanding answers to newly emerging public intolerances during the Parliament. Committees have even assumed a new right to hold hearings into certain public appointments, and appear close to demanding a right of veto and dismissal, most notably concerning the appointment of a new head of the Office of Budget Responsibility.²⁹ But they have not attempted to buck public opinion. In a sense they are gatherings of public representatives, standing up independently for their interests. From her own experience, Margaret Hodge views this a little differently, with the compelling idea that select committees are able to create public interest:

I think we had pretty high profile inquiries which depended on it's nature. Nuclear waste you wouldn't put at the top of your list ... Who'd have thought tax would be a major issue? I would never have thought tax would have been a big issue until we got involved. The efficiency of HMRC gave us our in to it, we were looking at spending. What we did with tax was to create public interest. I think we shone a light which sparked something off. And it's the way you conduct the inquiry, it's whether there's anything in it—there were some real shocks which you couldn't have predicted.³⁰

The Cameron/Clegg coalition is partly responsible for this, since it meant a stretched role for party manifestos and the novelty of a coalition agreement.

Government backbenchers surely owed their allegiance to the manifesto on which they were elected rather than to a plan of government drafted by leaders from the two parties. Despite the majority government, the 2015 Parliament could still prove to extend this further, since the third party (as measured by number of seats) won. The Scottish Nationalist Party has very clear representative interests in getting the best for Scotland and will have a powerful voice on many committees.

Consider too that the expenses scandal, and the banking crisis during the 2005 Parliament both damaged public life (despite the earlier ‘Nolan Inquiry’). The House of Commons had the advantage of a wholesale clear-out in the 2010 general election. Some of the brightest and most vocal political figures since then were drawn from that unblemished intake. And coalition on the government benches and a seemingly stable shadow cabinet led many of these to seek alternative career outlets rather than merely ingratiating the whips. The assertion of parliamentary authority in these circumstances should be seen as a welcome development for the policy process. Despite this, the Westminster system survived coalition and reasserted itself after the 2015 general election. Intriguingly the chaos of Corbyn’s Labour benches, with the mainstream refusing to serve in the shadow cabinet, has led some of the most able to conclude they can best hold government to account through Select Committees. The political class at all levels remains committed to, and interested in, action rather than inaction, and all are incentivised to demand that ‘something must be done’.

Select committees are a welcome form of scrutiny in Westminster, and can be said to be more effective and constructive than the floor of the House of Commons. But they are as motivated by championing the popular views of those they represent as by a systematic check on government action. What they were able to do, however, was to create public interest in causes.

THE WESTMINSTER MODEL AND SPENDING

To bring this examination of political inaction full circle, it is an appropriate moment to return to public spending to show how the constitutional apparatus of the British political system influences the most profound currency of action and inaction. Examining spending policies over a quarter of a century, it demonstrates what the Westminster model has incentivised parties to do. This section will start with the credit crunch and work back to the 1992 general election to show the confines that the political system has placed on spending pledges. It shows that no opposition intent

on winning office is seriously willing to stray from the headline plans set out by the government, and even the seismic nature of the global financial crisis barely shifted the approach beyond rhetoric. Consequently, the Westminster model can be seen to mitigate against policy-makers pledging to adjust spending commitments in anything more than an incremental fashion, and are responsible for inaction in such policy innovation.

As the dust settled on the credit crunch, Hellwig and Coffey's (2001) British survey data analysis demonstrated precisely what many observers had surmised: that politicians have been broadly successful in persuading voters to blame market actors for the financial crisis rather than governments, and shows how messages from competing political elites developed, to be reflected in mass beliefs about the crisis.³¹ Such elite messages, then, are crucial to political if not economic survival, and require unravelling if one is to appreciate competing policy positions in the context of the Westminster model.

On coming to office in 2010, the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne made a calculated political risk. He deviated from the policies of his predecessor and announced a more ambitious programme of deficit reduction. The case can be made that this was far more of a political risk than one of economics, since it allowed for rhetorical party political division while maintaining a consistency of policy prescription. Even though the coalition failed to stick to these plans, it provided for a rhetorical polarisation between government and opposition.

Ever since Shadow Chancellor Gordon Brown, in the approach to the 1997 general election, pledged to stick to the incumbent Conservative government's spending policies for the first two years in office, oppositions in Britain have tended towards this tactic. Even the possible exception of Michael Howard and Oliver Letwin's 2005 position can be seen in the tradition of elite messaging rather than a real development in policy-making. After all, the suggestion of 'sharing the proceeds of growth' by splitting the increase in revenues accruing from economic expansion between spending increases and tax cuts, evaporated as a position after the election and in the decade since has rarely been discussed. Potentially, it meant a commitment to continued public spending while indicating an ambition of a Conservative administration to cut taxes. It did not depart from the levels of spending committed to by the incumbent.

There is a simple explanation for all this. It avoids the sort of vulnerability to which Labour exposed itself during the 1992 election, when each and every spending commitment was pored over with a stinging attack such that the election of the party to government would mean a 'tax bomb-

shell' for ordinary voters.³² In pre-financial crisis mode, David Cameron's Conservative opposition followed suit with a pledge honouring the Labour government's (ever growing) public spending commitments for fear of an attack on the Tories' plans for the National Health Service (NHS). This pledge dissolved only once the government of Gordon Brown itself had faced up to the need to reduce public spending in the wake of the crisis. Peter Lilley put some perspective on the policy:

The electorate is wary of radical change. They think better the devil you know than the devil you don't, so almost inevitably parties emphasise the fact they're going to continue with the spending rounds or tax plans of their predecessors for a couple of years to reassure them. David Cameron, along with George Osborne, when first elected leader said he was going to keep Labour's spending plans, share the proceeds of growth, and they found there wasn't any growth to share and I don't know how they were expected to anticipate that but if they'd said 'Oh no, there's going to be a great financial crisis and there's not going to be any growth', people would have thought they were nutty.³³

Notably, despite the recognition of the need to reduce spending post-2010, the Conservatives retained a commitment to ring fence the Health budget. Osborne then presented a political gift to his opponents in departing from this pattern, allowing them to portray via elite messages their position as being distinct and less painful than that promised by the coalition; something that characterised parliamentary opposition to government right through to the 2015 election, where policies solidified in the campaign.

In the broad sweep of economics, the plans of the outgoing Brown administration and the incoming coalition can be said to be broadly consistent. The Fiscal Responsibility Act introduced in 2009 made it law that the deficit should be halved in four years (and, by extension, eradicated in eight years, which takes us to 2017). The (legislatively meaningless³⁴) Act 'required' that government borrowing in each year up until 2016 should be lower than the previous year, and that borrowing would be no more than 5.5 % of GDP by 2013/14. Osborne's plan was to pay off the deficit in full by the end of one Parliament in 2015; a plan that appeared increasingly unlikely to be met as the economy slowed and shrank mid-term. Indeed, by the 2015 general election it was clear that the trajectory pointed more realistically to a 2017/18 target, consistent with Darling's original commitment. As such, the 'too far and too fast' opposition message represented a matter of just two years at most, and in the event no bottom line difference at all. It is difficult to argue that this represented a matter of great ideological difference, and indeed, as anyone engaged

in economic forecasting will attest, once growth projections and borrowing differentials are taken into account, differences are at the margins. In political terms, however, those differences were exaggerated through elite messaging, allowing Ed Miliband's opposition to align itself with hostility to everything unpopular about the coalition's cuts agenda.

When this was played out during the 2015 general election campaign, only elite messaging argued that there was a serious difference between the contenders for office in the two or three main political parties of Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats. Here, the vanity of small differences allowed for tribalism to continue, and prevented any of these parties from putting forward a serious case for widespread spending reductions, spending rises, tax cuts or tax rises.

The contention of this chapter, nonetheless, is that there has been a policy consensus in the approach appropriate to managing public finances shared across mainstream parties and politicians. As with the post-war consensus, this does not necessarily mean collaboration, or even co-operation, but it nonetheless offers a degree of consistency in direction over the decade. This means that not only can an economic policy trend be identified, but it would also be a reasonable expectation that any substantial change to this trend will not be driven by political leadership. Rather, more modest initiatives, positions and leadership will find accommodation within these established economic confines defined by the Westminster model. But that model ensures that no party can stray very far from the confines of the debate created (deliberately or not) by mainstream parties. Perhaps only Jeremy Corbyn's election as Labour leader in 2015 could signal a departure from this? Even so, few commentators judge his leadership to represent a serious office seeking strategy.

CONCLUSION

While it is rarely discussed or highlighted, Parliamentary government in the Westminster system can be seen to both incentivise inaction and provide the tools to facilitate a 'do nothing' policy. While the House of Commons prides itself on aggressive tribal opposition and combative scrutiny of government, it fails to hold government to account for inaction, and can be accused of preventing governments from taking necessary but unpopular decisions. While allowing for a clean break in alternating single-party governments (usually) and mitigating against consensual policy-making, this tribal competition for votes means that parties vying for office rarely depart in any fundamental way from prevailing spending commitments, and therefore the reach of government.

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CONCLUSION

This short book has sought to open discussion on the concept of ‘do nothing’ politics; that is, deliberate inaction by policy-makers when action was possible. Taking a longitudinal approach and located in British parliamentary government, the analysis has centred on the implications of the tribal, Westminster model. It has made the point that the systemic problem in British politics is not that governments are inactive but rather that they do too much. Political ‘initiativitus’ sees ministers motivated to act and to be seen to act. Parliament is good at facilitating the will of government, and promotion through its ranks is often predicated on grasping opportunities to pilot legislation and promote change. Much of the existing research around policy-making in government is concerned with political action, and yet politicians have another choice: do nothing.

‘Do nothing’ politics in this sense means the deliberate decision of policy-makers not to take action where there was the option to do so. The book has outlined philosophical and pragmatic explanations for such inaction by considering small-state governments and those forced into curtailing activities by fiscal conditions. But by examining the record of the Thatcher government, which intended to roll back the frontiers of the state, and the post-credit crunch administrations of Gordon Brown and David Cameron, which had to consolidate public spending, it reveals that the ambitions of government are perhaps harder to constrain. While the Thatcher administration of the 1980s reduced the functions of the state by privatising previously nationalised industries and intervening less in the

economy, over a radical decade in power, it served to strengthen the state significantly. Meanwhile, those governments that came to terms with a burgeoning budget deficit after 2008 were forced into reducing departmental budgets if not overall public spending (which continued to rise). But even with such practical constraints on resources, the state did not fundamentally attempt to do less and its reach was not significantly curtailed.

Nevertheless, this book has argued that the confrontational, tribal, Westminster system, which pits an administration against an alternative government, is responsible for two forms of inaction. First, by sustaining a political elite that lead broad church parties, it means there are ‘no change’ areas of policy where a spoken or unspoken consensus exists. Second, since the system punishes parties who introduce, or promise to introduce, certain forms of unpopular policy (rather than bad policy), it also prevents governments from tackling important problems and they are instead incentivised to push the issue on to successor administrations.

The central contention of this book, however, is that ‘do nothing’ politics can be as significant as active policy. By dipping into the historical record it has demonstrated that some of the most important decisions of governments in post-war Britain have been to do nothing about an issue. And it has shown that credit for the legacies of the two most radical governments of the period, led by Attlee and Thatcher, respectively, can be claimed by their more restrained successors who chose not to unwind the changes. In this sense, political inaction has shaped the society we live in today.

POSTSCRIPT: SOME PROBLEMS WITH OUR SYSTEM HIGHLIGHTED AND SOME THOUGHTS ON CHANGE

While based on the observed practice of government, the analysis in this book has largely developed an academic, conceptual understanding of policy inaction. ‘Do nothing’ politics in that sense has been an opportunity to look afresh at many of the developments and debates in contemporary British government. It has re-examined the Westminster model and argued that it is responsible for incentivising both action and sometimes inaction.

But aside from this, the book has highlighted several weaknesses in Britain’s policy-making system and it seemed worthwhile to highlight very briefly the implications of some of these in terms of real-life practice of government.

There is the systemic problem of action being required of policy-makers when sometimes doing nothing could produce better results. Government does too much, and that is not a philosophical statement about the size or reach of the state but rather an observation that it and the ministers who

serve in it are frequently overstretched and incentivised to instigate short-term initiatives, policy statements, plans and legislative change. Some of this is motivated by the rapid turnover of ministers. While there are signs of greater stability in office holders, since Cameron became prime minister the instinct to do more, to make one's mark, to pilot high-profile policy reform, has not been arrested. Some practical check on the sheer amount of government output in favour of quality, and the acknowledgement that inaction can sometimes yield significant outcomes, would be an improvement. Here there could also be attention paid to the permanent Civil Service: what motivates them, their relationship with Ministers, and the advice they offer. One simple proposal would be to (re)instate 'Lilley's Option' meaning that it should become common practice that when officials present a list of options to ministers—all involving action—the final option of 'do nothing' is included.

Much of what incentivises the behaviour of politicians in Britain is the combative Westminster model and system of accountability that concentrates power, facilitates action and mitigates consensual policy-making. Opposition politicians are motivated by defeating government rather than improving policy, while the system works against giving alternative voices a platform. With the breakdown of two-party dominance, it is surely time to reassess existing constitutional arrangements. Were the House of Commons more representative of votes cast at elections, and were the upper chamber to gain greater democratic legitimacy, there might be more temptation in scrutiny to try to improve policy, to create greater continuity between administrations or simply ask that governments pause. Select Committees in particular might be encouraged to consider the inactions of government as well as the actions.

But it cannot all be one-sided. Politicians as a class are held in low esteem by the public, and often for good reason. There is widespread scepticism of their honesty and little faith in their pledges. Politics is not, however, a one-way street. Democratic government represents a compact between elected officials and voters. Unfortunately, so long as there remains this unspoken collusion between the electorate and politicians whereby the former make unrealistic demands of the latter, who in turn make unrealistic promises, the system will continue to underperform. A lack of deliberation can be identified in British politics and to improve that the electorate, and not just politicians, need to take greater responsibility in terms of understanding the nature of decision-making. Governments cannot only pursue popular policy when there are huge issues to tackle. The voting public needs to be a more engaged part of the balance of debate than either being asked to put a cross in a box at election time or to act as consumers shopping for the most attractive political proposition.

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