

The Tory tools of government

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As many readers of this blog will know, Open University academic Ivan Horrocks is a regular provider of thoughtful comment on many issues on this blog. He offered this comment yesterday [in response to my blog on the Gagging Bill](#). I thought it far too significant to be lost in the comments section, so reproduce it here to give due prominence to this theory on the Tory tools of government:

I for one was first alerted to this bill by you, Richard (and have since done as much as I can to object to it), so thanks for that and your continuing stand against it. But you are absolutely right to highlight the dangers inherent in a “pause”. As Zoe Williams points out, at the head of the article you quote from:

‘Looking at the pause in action during the health and social care bill in 2011, it seems designed to concede enough small, technical things to humiliate its key defenders and bore everyone else into submission — while slipping in enough new, large things to show the world who was in charge once the government hit play again. Humiliation, shmumiliation! What doesn’t unseat you makes you stronger.’

One of the things I think those of us interested or involved in UK politics have to be slow to acknowledge (and I single out the Labour Party here) is that since May 2010 the Tories (with the help of the see no evil, hear no evil, and do nothing to combat a whole lot of evil, Lib Dems) have brought a new set of “tools” and “techniques” into government. The “pause” is one example. Almost all had been seldom if ever seen before in this country, though they are often par for the course in the US, which is quite obviously where they’ve been imported from (as with almost everything else the Tories do).

The most fundamental and most dangerous (to the majority of the citizens of this country) has been a complete departure from any semblance of evidence based policy making. Ideology now trumps everything. The counter argument will be that ideology always plays a role in political policy making. And so it does. But as far as I can ascertain no UK government in the 20th or 21st century — not even the Thatcher governments — have been so intent on the pursuit of ideological policies to the

exclusion of all else.

The second and related technique is a willingness to go to any lengths to support or claim some legitimacy for evidence free policies. The complete and clearly deliberate disregard for what we might best refer to as the honest (i.e. accurate) use of statistical data, or other material, is one such example that's been fairly well reported on. It's worth adding that employing this technique is made all the easier with the existence of a plethora of consultancies and such like who would pretty much say anything as long as they see a £ sign or lucrative contract at the end of it.

The third has been a very rapid and extensive programme of populating all policy advisory/consultative groups that are of any significance with supporters (or at the very least, sympathisers) of the neo-liberal project, be that in health, environment, defence, taxation, or indeed, the purpose and operation of government and public administration.

The fourth is bringing together (we could say breeding and nurturing) a group of people (the Cabinet/Front bench, including such people as Grant Shapps) who are entirely relaxed with this approach to government and policy making. One of the outcomes is that it's nigh on impossible for any journalist, be they from TV or elsewhere, to ever get a member of the government to admit to a mistake or error of judgement.

I could go on but they are the main strands. In the process the Tories have redrawn the political and governmental landscape of this country to one which more closely resembles that of the Tea Party — Democrat divide in the US. As I noted above, Miliband and his team have been extremely slow to recognise this, and have only recently started to respond in an effective manner (they are not alone — there are far too many political commentators who are still framing this government's actions using pre 2010 points of reference). But as we've seen with NHS privatisation, the Tory government will never drop anything they see as part of their ideological crusade, and the gagging law is part of that crusade — whatever the Lib Dems may convince themselves into thinking.