

# Governments fail when they act in the interests of power...

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As is obvious from much of what I write, I believe that governments can be both benign and profoundly beneficial to the population of a jurisdiction.

I am not, however, naive. Long experience has made me aware that the processes of government can be corrupted, and all too often are.

I stress that I am not suggesting that government is itself corrupt.

Nor am I suggesting that those who work for a government are any more likely to be corrupt than those who work in the private sector. In fact, by inclination I think the opposite is likely to be the case.

However, corrupt, self-serving, negligent, self-centred, egotistical or even straightforwardly cowardly people can and do undermine the processes of government in ways that make it likely to fail. That this is a very real possibility is something of which anyone engaged in the political process should be aware.

The report from the infected blood inquiry makes this uncomfortably clear. Being published at the same time that the Post Office inquiry is continuing, with the former Post Office CEO being subject to cross examination on her role in that very obvious failure of a government institution this week, this report makes it very clear that the possibility of failure is most definitely present in the UK system of government.

As far as I can see, very little can excuse the actions of those ministers and officials who ignored the warnings with regard to potentially contaminated blood-based products that existed from the 1970s, about which they have no excuse for not being aware from the very early 1980s onwards.

Even if those officials never personally profited from having ignored the warnings they were given, the processes of the government failed, and they obviously contributed to that.

With regard to the minister involved in the infected blood scandal, I think the burden of

responsibility is greater because if it can be shown (as I understand it has been) that they knew about this problem and chose to ignore it for reasons of supposed cost, then they did so to advance the interests of the governments of which they were member, and so their own well-being, which appears to me to be actions requiring much greater attention. Ken Clarke's belligerence on this issue is very unbecoming, without presuming that implies guilt. Norman Fowler also has obvious questions to answer on his role.

The Post Office inquiry has not, of course, concluded its hearings. I will, therefore, draw no conclusions relating to the conduct of anyone, but it is still very apparent that something that can only be described as collective wrongdoing went on in that organisation, with there being a tacit cover-up put in place to disguise the fact.

The infected blood inquiry proves failure by governments, from the level of political leadership onwards, and these failures are inexcusable. I will not seek to apologise for them, or offer explanation, because they are simply unacceptable.

That said, what is very obvious from my perspective as a former auditor is that both these episodes indicate failings within the overall control environment of these organisations.

Risk was not properly appraised.

Governance procedures, including appropriate checks and balances, clearly did not exist.

In the case of the Post Office, there were glaringly obvious failures in accounting systems. It is almost impossible to explain how the double-entry for the Horizon entries could not have caused considerable alarm to its accountants and auditors, and yet it apparently did not.

And in both cases it is apparent that a collective culture of denial was promoted.

We know how to prevent these things. There have to be whistleblower protections. There has to be the opportunity to challenge decisions. There has to be accountability. Government must be undertaken in a spirit of openness, however occasionally uncomfortable that might be.

I believe that is possible.

I do not believe it is within a culture of neoliberalism that always seeks to protect the powerful. And it is that culture that I blame for these failings.