

# Has the government given up on governing?

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The government's accounts are incomplete and out of date and might fairly be described as CRAP – or completely rubbish approximations to the truth – so how can they govern properly?

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This is the transcript:

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Has the government given up on governing? It's a reasonable question to ask because in the last week it has issued what are called the [Whole of Government Accounts](#). The Whole of Government Accounts do literally represent everything that the government does or at least, they should, and the important point about the Whole of Government Accounts to which I'm referring is that they are for the year 2022/23, meaning that they are horribly out of date, given that they have been issued in November 2024.

And despite the fact that they are horribly out of date, they are, in fact, also seriously incomplete. The National Audit Office that audits these accounts to tell us whether they show a true and fair view of what the government is up to has had to actually disclaim an opinion on them, which means they literally cannot tell us whether they are fair or not, and the reason why is that 90 per cent of the UK's local authorities could not supply useful information to the National Audit Office or to the government to be included in the accounts in question. And that is extraordinary.

Fifty per cent of those local authorities couldn't actually supply audited information. And the remaining 40 per cent couldn't even supply information at all. Only 10 per cent of local authorities in the UK supplied reliable information for the purposes of preparing these accounts, and I suspect a great many of those are in Scotland, where it appears that local authorities are under much better control than is the case in England and Wales, where the auditing of local authorities was outsourced after 2015 to the private sector and no one in the private sector wants to do the job, meaning that as a consequence, control of local authority finances in this country appears to have collapsed, to put it bluntly.

But there is a wider question that I am asking when noting this failure by the government. That is, has the government given up on governing? After all, accountability is a core part of the process of governing. If the government doesn't account for what it does to us who elect it, and that is what is implicit in this failure - the failure to deliver accounts on time and the failure to deliver accounts that are true and fair because they are incomplete - then does it mean it has stopped governing in our best interest because we have no idea whether that is happening or not?

And I think that question is absolutely crucial. I know that most people do not pay attention to the Whole of Government Accounts, but then let's be honest, most people don't pay much attention to accounts in general, including of the large companies that employ them, that they trade with, that influence how they live, that supply them with the products and everything else. But in reality, the reason why we have accounts is to prove that someone is responsible.

And if we don't have proper accounts, and I will put it to you quite bluntly, that the government has now ceased to have proper accounts, then what is going on in government that they believe they can get away without actually delivering information that makes them accountable to us, the people who elect them?

I think the answer is that they are actually treating us with contempt.

Why else would they not care?

Why else would they be indifferent to the consequence of supplying basically incorrect information?

Why else are they not putting in place the systems to ensure that there are accounts that are available?

But even more fundamentally than that, why aren't they wanting this information? Because after all, if we haven't got the information to know whether they are accountable for what they're doing, on what information are they governing?

It cannot be the data from the Office for National Statistics because if it is, that's deeply

and profoundly concerning because the Office for National Statistics make up the numbers that they present with regard to government information.

GDP is a made-up number. Ten per cent of it is the made-up number that represents the rent that homeowners supposedly pay to themselves for the privilege of living in their own homes, which is, of course, never paid, and does not exist, and therefore is complete fiction, but nonetheless is a number that the government reports as if it is true.

And the Office for National Statistics figure for the national debt is complete nonsense because it ignores the sums that the government owns and it includes liabilities that will never be paid, including the money that the government has issued into the economy through the Bank of England.

So, if we look at this situation, we have the government managing on the basis of make-believe numbers from the Office for National Statistics and producing what are supposedly the true figures for its financial performance incredibly late and with key data missing. We have a government that is, therefore, fundamentally out of control.

Now, I will blame the Tories for this. Let's be clear: I can't blame Labour because all these failures happened on the Tory's watch. The collapse in the quality of data from the Office for National Statistics has happened since 2010. The collapse in the audit service for local authorities has happened since 2015. Until around 2020, the government produced its accounts, broadly speaking, on time, but since then, it has failed miserably. So, there is no doubt that all of this happened on the watch of Rishi Sunak or those who preceded him over the few years before that.

But nothing has been said by Labour. They haven't acknowledged this failure. They haven't talked about the fact that they need better data to govern. They aren't, therefore, trying to govern, is my point.

If a government doesn't demand good data, it can't make good decisions. And we're seeing the consequence of that.

We know, for example, that the government claims that there are loads of people out of work when it is now thought that the Office for National Statistics is understating the number of people in work by maybe a million.

We know that the government is, therefore, putting in place programmes which may not be appropriate.

We know that the government is obsessing about national debt on the basis of information from the Office for National Statistics that is untrue.

We know that austerity is being imposed upon us even though there is no need because the data does not, if it's analysed correctly, imply that there is any necessity

for it.

We know that the government is, therefore, choosing not to govern by choosing to use misinformation as the basis for the decisions that it makes.

Is this the state of modern government? Where dogma and belief matter more than fact and delivery. We have to come to the uncomfortable conclusion that this might be just as true for Labour as it is for the Tories.

And if so, what are we going to do about it? How are we going to get politicians who understand that governing in the public interest requires them to be accountable for the decisions that they make, and, therefore, they must have high-quality information to make those decisions if they haven't got it, that they need to create it.

That, to me, is an absolutely fundamental question at the core of the whole discussion of what government is about at present.

Let's not dismiss accounting as some sideshow here. Accounting is fundamental to good governance, and good governance is fundamental to the effective management of government. And I'm not convinced that's what we've got, and that really worries me.