

If ministers don't believe in government, it can't ...

Published: January 13, 2026, 1:23 pm

For decades we have suffered ministers who get elected to advance their own careers but not to deliver good government, in which they have no belief. Government that's rotted from the top down is the consequence of that.

https://youtu.be/_2hXFPKHlyk?si=2z9PE6cDHKnDTI-A

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=g8xu9-175cdfa-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=&logo_link=episode_page&bt_n-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

Why does nothing work anymore?

People say that things don't work. There's plenty of evidence that they don't. The NHS is, for example, clearly not working in the way that people want.

Nor is social care.

People aren't getting the pensions they desire. And so much else appears not to be working within the UK state.

So why is that? What is it that has gone wrong, because if people are complaining now, and they weren't in the same way in the past, something must be wrong; be different? And I think there is something that is different and that something is right at the very

top of the UK political pile.

You have a choice when you're a manager, and that is what politicians are once they get to the rank of the Cabinet, or ministerial posts, or whatever else it might be that they've been appointed to by a Prime Minister. Once they get to that position of power, they've got a choice about how they are going to manage the department for which they are responsible. They can either believe in what it is doing and, therefore, throw themselves wholeheartedly into the activity of that department, promoting it, trying to make it work to best effect, supporting the people within it, being its champion, demanding the resources that it requires from the Treasury and on. Or they can not bother. And I think we've had far too many ministers who've just not bothered for too long.

And the reason why is very straightforward. Since the post-war era, brought in the period of big government, there has also been a narrative about small government. This small government narrative was first put forward by the economists Frederick Hayek and Milton Friedman. And from the late 1940s onwards, they promoted the ideas that became neoliberalism.

And the whole concept of neoliberalism is about having small government, based upon the presumption that people know how to spend their money better than government does, and that government should, therefore, basically leave people alone to get on with things as they would wish, using the resources that they've got available to them, in other words, their own income and savings.

There are, of course, fundamental problems with that. That would mean that we wouldn't have had mass state education for everyone to the age of 18, and overall, we've benefited from that.

We would not have had universal health care, and a lot of people would have died a lot younger as a result.

We would not have provided a social safety net, which means that a load of people would have lived in poverty and probably died of the consequence.

And we would not have provided things like social housing, which for decades did improve the quality of life in the UK, even if it's very much harder to prove that now because so much of it has been sold.

We would also not have had the developments in so many industrial areas because the underpinnings would not have been provided.

But let's just presume for a minute that there is a counter-argument that neoliberalism might be right, that we could have small government. There are, after all, people who have got to high office in the UK who believe that. Most notably, of course, there was

Liz Truss. She came into office believing that every single person in government was basically a communist set up to oppose everything she wanted to do. And why were they a communist? Because they believed that the state could deliver and, therefore, they were inherently bad in Liz Truss's view.

She was rotten at the very top of government. It's unsurprising her government failed. You can't run something when you don't believe in what it does. And that was the problem that she personified more than anybody else.

But there are ample people who appear to have that lack of faith in government even now when we have a Labour government.

It's not clear that West Streeting actually believes that the NHS is a good thing. He keeps on talking about what the private sector could do instead of the NHS.

It's not clear we have education ministers who really believe in the power of the state to deliver transformative education because they're all too happy to outsource it to educational trusts, which are pretty weird organizations when you think about it, and universities, which are structured as, well, businesses more than anything else. To be blunt, they are not really organisations that are focused upon meeting the needs of young people who want dedicated further education, so that they might understand better a particular subject so that they can help society at large when they've left that university and moved on into their careers.

This is not what we're seeing government ministers believe in. No, what we're seeing is government ministers who believe that the private sector is better than the private sector. And we hear it time and time again.

Every time an answer is wanted to a question, it's "How can we bring in BlackRock?"

"How can we bring in foreign direct investment?"

"How can we partner with the private sector?"

And yet, that isn't the foundation on which this country's economy or any other major country's economy was built on. In fact, the economy of the UK was very largely built on the basis of the state providing protection to business to help it to prosper, but within a safety net that the government provided to business itself. There were in fact tariffs around UK business to make sure that it developed and prospered for a very long time. And there have been state subsidies, and state support, and state assistance with regard to training, and so many other things for decades. But if you don't believe in any of that, if you think it's up to the private sector to provide the solution, that they have all the answers and you have not, you create what is called a rottenness at the very head of government.

And when we look at a fish, there is a story that goes around which is that the rot starts

at its head. And it always does, by the way. That's where things begin to degrade. And that's where this phrase about rottenness at the top comes from. Because that's what's going on. When you have ministers who don't believe in what they're doing, you don't get good outcomes.

For fourteen years, the Tories did not believe in what they were doing, and the results were so glaringly obvious, almost everywhere. We were not prepared for Covid. They did not put in place the protections that were required to manage a pandemic, even though they knew one was likely. And look at the Post Office, reporting directly to the government, and yet, very clearly rotten in so much of what it did. And we can look elsewhere and find similar examples.

The problem with government is that it cannot function well unless there are ministers in office who actually believe in what government does, who believe that it is the job of the state to collect tax, who believe it is the job of the Bank of England to create the money that is required to fund our government services, who believe that it is the job of government to meet need, to facilitate opportunity, to protect people from fear. If you don't do that, if you don't have that belief, you won't deliver those outcomes. And that's why I think we have rotten government.

Because when it comes down to it, it doesn't work because ministers don't believe in it. And what we need are politicians who actually believe in the jobs that they all appear to be so desperate to do to pursue their own personal advantage, but which we want them to do to pursue advantage for the whole country.