

‘Politics for the Future: Reorienting Political Institutions Towards the Long-Term’

Prof. Simon Caney
University of Oxford

‘How can today's Europe better safeguard the needs
of the future?’, High level event on the
representation of the rights of future generations

28 Sept 2015, 3pm-6.30pm, EP premises

The Plan

I: The **Problem** of Short-Termism

II: The **Drivers** of Short-Termism

III: A **Fivefold** Proposal

I: The Problem of Short-Termism

I: The Problem of Short-Termism

[1] **Environmental Policy** (eg Stern Review on *The Economics of Climate Change* (2007)).

[2] **Housing**: Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors Housing Commission – *More Good Homes and a Better United Kingdom* (2013).

“We need to end **short-term** and partial policies for housing. This requires governments and administrations to raise their game and shape a long-term political and cross-departmental consensus on how housing matters.”

“Successive governments have not produced a coherent, **long-term strategy** for housing ... Initiatives from the Westminster and devolved governments, with public capital support falling, have focussed on the **short term** job effects of housing”.

[3] **Pensions Policy**: House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee *Governing the Future* (2007)

I: The Problem of Short-Termism

[4] **Foreign Policy**: House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee 'Governing the Future' (2006–07).

[5] **Disaster Policy**: in the case of Hurricane Katrina. Andrew Healy and Neil Malhotra found that the costs of dealing with the aftermath cost **15** times more than the amount that preparation would have required ('Myopic Voters and Natural Disaster Policy', *APSR* (2009))

Helen Clark the United Nations Development Programme Administrator:

“**Every dollar** spent reducing people’s vulnerability to disasters saves around **seven dollars** in economic losses. Investing in prevention not only increases the resilience of countries to future disaster, but protects economic growth and other development achievements from being lost in a single catastrophic event.”

II: The Drivers of Short-Termism

II: The Drivers

1. **Ignorance** (*uncertainty, radical change*)

2. **Self-Interest**

3. **Creeping Problems**: Persons often fail to detect certain problems because they are gradual in nature, with imperceptible effects, and creep up on them slowly. (Michael Glantz *Creeping Environmental Problems and Sustainable Development in the Aral Sea Basin* (1999))

4. **“Identifiable Victim” syndrome** Jenni and Lowenstein ‘Explaining the Identifiable Victim Effect’ (1997)

5. **Vividness and ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ processing systems**: Related to this, persons respond well to ‘vivid’ risks, ones which they personally experience or witness (‘hot’ mechanisms), but they do not respond well to information acquired not from personal experience from abstract, general social scientific trends (‘cold’ mechanisms). Elke Weber ‘Experience-Based and Description-Based Perceptions of Long-Term Risk’ (2006).

II: The Drivers

6. Invisibility: 'Out of Sight/Out of Mind'. Agents have a tendency to ignore what is not in front of them. If it is not in the forefront of their consciousness and their daily routine it can get pushed to the back of their list of things to do.

7. Positive Illusions: Human beings are prone to “positive illusions” - such as “over-estimation of capabilities”, “illusion of control over events” and “perceived invulnerability to risk” (Johnson and Levin ‘The Tragedy of Cognition: Psychological Biases and Environmental Inaction’ (2009).

8. Weakness of will/temptation.

9. Procrastination. Andreou and White *The Thief of Time* (2010).

II: The Drivers

10. Electoral dependence (electoral cycle) and tenure in office

11. Economic Dependence (political donations)

12. Media Coverage the 24 hour news cycle puts a pressure on politicians to be able to respond quickly to show that they are taking action.

13. The Duration of Time which is used by government departments and by bodies auditing government policy: the shorter the timeframe, the more those being audited will focus on the short term.

14. what kinds of performance indicators are used

III: A Fivefold Proposal

Proposal 1: Manifesto for the Future

Proposal: A mandatory requirement that the Government set out its vision for the future and how it will confront future challenges and opportunities. It is required to speak to trends proposed by independent Council for the Future (see proposal 4). ('Britain/Europe/Wales and its place in the world in 50 years'.)

Tackles drivers

Lack of visibility. 'out of sight/out of mind' – makes the future visible and hard to ignore

procrastination – requires people to engage in planning

temptation and weakness of the will – makes it harder to give in to temptation

self-interest: people do not want to look bad

Proposal 2: Visions for the Future Day

Proposal: 'Visions for the Future' day built into the Parliamentary timetable where the Government outlines its manifesto for the future and the ways it is responding to challenges and opportunities on the horizon ('**State of the Union' speech for the future**)

responses from opposition parties; a process of public justification. Embodies the idea of 'public justifiability' (John Rawls). Its effectiveness would be enhanced if accompanied by national 'deliberation days' or deliberative 'mini-publics'.

Proposal 3: Committee for the Future

Proposal: There be a Select Committee for the Future. Relation to the Finnish model (1993-2000; 2000-).

Composed of elected representatives; their role is to scrutinize policy for impacts on future generations; powers of scrutiny; can compel civil servants and politicians to answer questions on what they are doing for long-term goals like avoiding climate change, what plans they are putting in place. Accountability mechanism for the future.

Responds to tendencies for 'out of sight/out of mind', procrastination, invisibility of the future. Puts the 'future' at heart of decision-making in the 'present'

Proposal 4: Independent Council for the Future

Proposal: An external Independent Council for the Future. Produces reports of long-term trends, challenges, opportunities

* Similar to Welsh 'Future Trends Report' (Article 11 of *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Bill*), but not produced by Ministers.

* May specify some of the items that the Government must address in its Manifesto for the Future.

* No decision-making power (no veto or legislative power), but '**agenda setting**' power (Bachrach and Baratz 1962).

Combats tendency to ignore long-term trends, forces politicians to confront them, makes the future 'visible', makes the problems of the future part of the agenda for today.

Proposal 5: Long-Term Performance

Indicators and Audit

Long-term Performance Indicators: employ indicators that reliably track long term performance (eg – ‘health’ metrics)

Consumption and Stocks

- i. environmental evaluation using ‘commitment accounting’ (Davis and Socolow 2014)
- ii. ‘natural capital’ index (Dieter Helm)

Investment

- iii. Investment in early years childcare and education (human capital)
- iv. Investment in science and technology (capital)

Evidence of Forward Planning

- v. Implementation of forward-looking mechanisms (horizon scanning, ombudsman or commissioner, committee for the future)

Extend audit timetable: from annual or three year spending review (D. King and I. Crewe *The Blunders of our Governments* 2014)

“extending the timescale of audit. Audit at the moment takes place mostly on a strictly annual basis. Company accounts are audited annually, and so are the accounts of government departments and agencies. But the test of almost all major government policies, including most of those discussed in Part II, is whether they remain in place and also prove to be effective and efficient over a considerable period of years, say a decade or even longer. **There would be a lot to be said for encouraging – and, if necessary, permitting – both the National Audit Office and the select committees of the House of Commons to assess how well government initiatives were continuing to achieve their declared objectives after, say, five, ten or twenty years”** (King and Crewe 2014, p.358)

Concluding Remarks

I: The **Problem** of Short-Termism (macro economic policy, environment, welfare state reform)

II: The **Drivers** of Short-Termism (human nature and institutional design)

III: A **Fivefold** Proposal

- i. Manifesto for the Future
- ii. Visions for the Future Days
- iii. Committee for the Future
- iv. Independent Council for the Future
- v. Long-Term Performance Indicators

Acknowledgements

This is part of work with Dr Jaakko Kuosmanen and Dr Dominic Roser as part of a Policy Brief to be published later this year.

The research draws on Simon Caney 'Political Institutions for the Future: A Fivefold Package', forthcoming in *Institutions for Future Generations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) edited by Axel Gosseries and Iñigo Gonzalez Ricoy

The research was funded by Oxford Martin School 'Human Rights for Future Generations'.

Thank You!