



Addressing Tipping Points for a Precarious Future

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Tipping Points and 'Too Difficult Boxes'

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[-] Abstract and Keywords

Faced with complex and wicked problems, even well-established governments seek delay and denial when contemplating 'Too Difficult Boxes'. Failing to grasp the nettle of change brings society nearer to tipping points. But inaction breeds crises which create their own dysfunctional solutions. To get past the many 'Too Difficult Boxes', solutions have to be identified, challenges to implementation have to be understood, lobbies need to be placated, legal constraints have to be overcome, and international dimensions taken into account. Democracy needs to be nurtured. Even if unpopular, tough decisions have to be made.

Keywords: Too Difficult Boxes, denial, wicked problems, unpopular choices, tough decisions

Analysing tipping points is both interesting and potentially illuminating. Amongst other things, such a process rightly respects the importance and practical significance of an enormous range of government decisions which, to varying degrees, certainly have an impact on the economic, social, and environmental conditions of billions of people.

Government is not the only player. Indeed you could argue that it is becoming less important over time; but it certainly is a major one, probably the most important. This vital fact immediately draws attention to the quality of government decisions. Do national governments properly address the magnitude of the challenges their country faces? At a global level, do governments have the capacity to work together to meet truly global challenges?

Where solutions cannot easily be identified and implemented, national governments often dispatch strategic problems to the 'Too Difficult Box'. This is not simply where there is rapid alternation of governments, though that makes things more difficult. Even longstanding governments, such as the eighteen Conservative years from 1979 to 1997 and the thirteen Labour years from 1997 to 2010, failed fully to address a wide range of important issues. These include climate change, the relationship of Britain to Europe, nuclear disarmament and terrorist

threats, immigration control, regulation of the banks, social exclusion of certain groups, and the ageing society, including public sector pensions and long-term care for the elderly. There are many more.

In each of these cases, failure to grasp the nettle of change can bring the whole society closer to a tipping point which means that decisions finally have to be taken in an atmosphere of crisis or, worse, not taken at all.

What all of these subjects have in common is that change is needed, change is difficult, and time is not on our side. Moreover the solutions will **(p.230)** require at least some people to suffer some loss. And that means that in democracies change becomes difficult. Even longstanding governments have to face elections every four years or so.

All governments, whatever their electoral mandates, come to appreciate that it is indeed their responsibility to address the challenges I have described. They then need to establish how best to do that. They have to go through a series of stages. The starting point is to identify clearly the problem that needs to be addressed. This identification is itself not easy. The issues are themselves very complicated and intertwined. For example, the demands for energy sustainability and energy security, at one level entirely mutually compatible, can lead to quite different, even opposed, policy solutions.

Once the problem that needs to be addressed has been identified, government then needs to overcome seven further hurdles, any one of which can provide the obstacle which stops a government in its tracks.

First, the solution needs to be clearly identified. This will involve controversy, as honest people can differ about the best solution. Wherever possible, scientific analyses should offer better ways of addressing options than mixes of prejudice and media platitudes. Criticisms need to be properly dealt with, not ducked, by the scientists as much as anyone else.

Second, the challenges of implementation need to be understood. In some cases implementation is simple, in others very complex. It is rare that it is only a matter of decree, a simple stroke of the pen, even after a law is passed or an executive decision legally taken. Moreover the potential long-term advantages of change may well be outweighed by short-term disadvantages, which cause political problems.

Third, a variety of vested interests need to be placated or overcome. The vested interests who are losers will organize, and an iron rule of politics is that potential losers will organize against a change. Potential gainers will leave it to the government to make the case. The losers are likely to have at least some good arguments and they will maintain that their concern is actually the public interest, not their own. They will seek to undermine the overall argument for the proposed solution. They will often use pretty effective campaign techniques to mobilize hostile public opinion.

Fourth, a range of legal constraints, for example in international or European law, need to be circumnavigated. Ministers, rightly, have to act within the law. The United Kingdom is part of a wide range of international legal regimes, such as the European Convention on Human Rights. Many of these were established soon after 1945 in circumstances very different **(p.231)** from those which govern our lives today, and they create a very real set of constraints within which

Parliament and governments have to act. And renegotiating international agreements is a very difficult and time-consuming process.

Fifth, in many cases the international dimension of the problem has to be appreciated. This is particularly true in relation to the European Union, which is the main actor in relation to many areas of our national life, for example the environment, agriculture, competition policy, consumer protection, employment law, health and safety, and energy. The same is true, to a lesser extent, of our other international relationships and obligations, for example in the United Nations and the World Trade Organization.

Sixth, the political process is complex and its vicissitudes have to be overcome. Every policy proposal needs to be enacted. This is not just a question of a clear statement or speech, nor is it only a matter of determination. A law has to be passed, and at all points in the process political theatre will be present, parliamentary rebellions will happen, rethinks will go on, and retreats will take place. The Opposition will normally retreat to the opportunism of opposition. This is a real power: since in most Parliaments this is enough, together with rebellious sections of the governing party, to make votes tight in the Commons and to defeat government in the Lords.

And seventh, underlying everything, the government needs to sustain the political energy and creativity which is so essential if change is to be successfully accomplished. Divisions of ideology or ambition can make that difficult, as can the simple passage of time.

This is an impressive range of obstacles, which explains why governments, even with large majorities, have not been able to address comprehensively the problems which society faces.

When we turn to the problems of securing international cooperation, the problems become even greater, since definitions of common interest are so much more difficult to identify than at the level of the nation state. Even the European Union, the most sophisticated effort to do that in the last century, has found it very difficult to sustain itself against national preoccupations. The experience of the two World Wars led the whole world to try and create institutions which would express the common ambitions of all humanity. But they too have not found it easy to change in a way that reflects the wider changes in the world.

But, ultimately, it is simply not good enough to leave unsolved too many big and fundamental problems. The real-world problems are just too great, **(p.232)** the pace of change too urgent. There are too many areas in which a tipping point approaches. Decision not to act, to delay, or to postpone are choices too, with their own consequences which may be very serious. It is now obvious that reform of the banking system, a classically difficult issue, was just such an example. Failure to reform across the world led to economic disaster which was far worse than it need have been. Inadequate government action meant that a tipping point was passed. The same may happen in the Eurozone. This is even more the case with some of the proposals discussed in this book. Climate change will not go away. Nor will nuclear proliferation or food insecurity.

It is important to emphasize that democracy offers the best means of making the necessary changes, though it also creates difficulties. Unlike authoritarian or dictatorial political methods, democracy seeks to take account of all aspects of society. But democratic politics has to face up to long-term problems. It has to be a long-term provider of solutions rather than a short-term scorer of political points. That is the message for politicians in both government and opposition,

who have to show political courage and leadership in articulating that tough problems need to be addressed even if that means losing short-term popularity.

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