This short book has sought to open discussion on the concept of ‘do nothing’ politics; that is, deliberate inaction by policy-makers when action was possible. Taking a longitudinal approach and located in British parliamentary government, the analysis has centred on the implications of the tribal, Westminster model. It has made the point that the systemic problem in British politics is not that governments are inactive but rather that they do too much. Political ‘initiativitus’ sees ministers motivated to act and to be seen to act. Parliament is good at facilitating the will of government, and promotion through its ranks is often predicated on grasping opportunities to pilot legislation and promote change. Much of the existing research around policy-making in government is concerned with political action, and yet politicians have another choice: do nothing.

‘Do nothing’ politics in this sense means the deliberate decision of policy-makers not to take action where there was the option to do so. The book has outlined philosophical and pragmatic explanations for such inaction by considering small-state governments and those forced into curtailing activities by fiscal conditions. But by examining the record of the Thatcher government, which intended to roll back the frontiers of the state, and the post-credit crunch administrations of Gordon Brown and David Cameron, which had to consolidate public spending, it reveals that the ambitions of government are perhaps harder to constrain. While the Thatcher administration of the 1980s reduced the functions of the state by privatising previously nationalised industries and intervening less in the...
economy, over a radical decade in power, it served to strengthen the state significantly. Meanwhile, those governments that came to terms with a burgeoning budget deficit after 2008 were forced into reducing departmental budgets if not overall public spending (which continued to rise). But even with such practical constraints on resources, the state did not fundamentally attempt to do less and its reach was not significantly curtailed.

Nevertheless, this book has argued that the confrontational, tribal, Westminster system, which pits an administration against an alternative government, is responsible for two forms of inaction. First, by sustaining a political elite that lead broad church parties, it means there are ‘no change’ areas of policy where a spoken or unspoken consensus exists. Second, since the system punishes parties who introduce, or promise to introduce, certain forms of unpopular policy (rather than bad policy), it also prevents governments from tackling important problems and they are instead incentivised to push the issue on to successor administrations.

The central contention of this book, however, is that ‘do nothing’ politics can be as significant as active policy. By dipping into the historical record it has demonstrated that some of the most important decisions of governments in post-war Britain have been to do nothing about an issue. And it has shown that credit for the legacies of the two most radical governments of the period, led by Attlee and Thatcher, respectively, can be claimed by their more restrained successors who chose not to unwind the changes. In this sense, political inaction has shaped the society we live in today.

**Postscript: Some Problems with Our System Highlighted and Some Thoughts on Change**

While based on the observed practice of government, the analysis in this book has largely developed an academic, conceptual understanding of policy inaction. ‘Do nothing’ politics in that sense has been an opportunity to look afresh at many of the developments and debates in contemporary British government. It has re-examined the Westminster model and argued that it is responsible for incentivising both action and sometimes inaction.

But aside from this, the book has highlighted several weaknesses in Britain’s policy-making system and it seemed worthwhile to highlight very briefly the implications of some of these in terms of real-life practice of government.

There is the systemic problem of action being required of policy-makers when sometimes doing nothing could produce better results. Government does too much, and that is not a philosophical statement about the size or reach of the state but rather an observation that it and the ministers who
serve in it are frequently overstretched and incentivised to instigate short-term initiatives, policy statements, plans and legislative change. Some of this is motivated by the rapid turnover of ministers. While there are signs of greater stability in office holders, since Cameron became prime minister the instinct to do more, to make one’s mark, to pilot high-profile policy reform, has not been arrested. Some practical check on the sheer amount of government output in favour of quality, and the acknowledgement that inaction can sometimes yield significant outcomes, would be an improvement. Here there could also be attention paid to the permanent Civil Service: what motivates them, their relationship with Ministers, and the advice they offer. One simple proposal would be to (re)instate ‘Lilley’s Option’ meaning that it should become common practice that when officials present a list of options to ministers—all involving action—the final option of ‘do nothing’ is included.

Much of what incentivises the behaviour of politicians in Britain is the combative Westminster model and system of accountability that concentrates power, facilitates action and mitigates consensual policy-making. Opposition politicians are motivated by defeating government rather than improving policy, while the system works against giving alternative voices a platform. With the breakdown of two-party dominance, it is surely time to reassess existing constitutional arrangements. Were the House of Commons more representative of votes cast at elections, and were the upper chamber to gain greater democratic legitimacy, there might be more temptation in scrutiny to try to improve policy, to create greater continuity between administrations or simply ask that governments pause. Select Committees in particular might be encouraged to consider the inactions of government as well as the actions.

But it cannot all be one-sided. Politicians as a class are held in low esteem by the public, and often for good reason. There is widespread scepticism of their honesty and little faith in their pledges. Politics is not, however, a one-way street. Democratic government represents a compact between elected officials and voters. Unfortunately, so long as there remains this unspoken collusion between the electorate and politicians whereby the former make unrealistic demands of the latter, who in turn make unrealistic promises, the system will continue to underperform. A lack of deliberation can be identified in British politics and to improve that the electorate, and not just politicians, need to take greater responsibility in terms of understanding the nature of decision-making. Governments cannot only pursue popular policy when there are huge issues to tackle. The voting public needs to be a more engaged part of the balance of debate than either being asked to put a cross in a box at election time or to act as consumers shopping for the most attractive political proposition.
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