

Governing Post-War Britain: The Paradoxes of Progress, 1951-1973

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In Joseph Heller's 1979 novel *Good As Gold*, the hapless protagonist, college professor and would-be public intellectual Bruce Gold, writes a light-hearted magazine article entitled 'Nothing Succeeds As Planned'. He sends a copy to his contact at the White House, the ineffable Ralph Newsome, who is delighted with it. 'I can't tell you how you're boggling our minds', Newsome tells Gold. 'If nothing succeeds as planned – and you really present such a strong argument – then the President has just the excuse he needs for not doing anything'. He goes on to explain that photocopies have been made so that everyone in government can read it, but that because they have all been stamped 'secret' nobody will be able to.

Political satire is full of such moments of unintended consequence: the high-sounding initiative that gets the minister into hot water, the policy that rebounds on its creator, the economy drive that ends up costing money. This type of narrative both gives us the satisfaction of seeing the pomposity of the powerful punctured and at the same time warns/reassures us of the fundamental impossibility of change. We are all given the excuse we need for not doing anything. It is important then, that Glen O'Hara's book, which deals explicitly with the problem of unintended consequences in modern politics, distances itself such negative readings. Although its pages are full of policies gone wrong – or at least, gone not quite right – O'Hara assures us that he does not mean to advance the conservative precept of 'perversity', that is the idea purposive social or political action always has a negative impact. 'Though perhaps often achieving "perverse" effects, the British government's actions rarely made the exact problem under scrutiny worse', he writes of the period under study. 'They usually caused problems to emerge in other arenas, evoked unheralded opposition, or produced unexpected second-order problems of management and administration' (p. 199).

The book is distinguished by the depth of its research, in American as well as British archives, and by its grasp of a quite astonishing range of secondary literature. It is written with great lucidity, and provides a wealth of information on a range of fascinating topics. The subject matter is indeed quite eclectic. O'Hara makes use of the 'core samples' approach used by Lawrence Black in *Redefining British Politics: Culture, Consumerism and Participation, 1954-70*.⁽¹⁾ This involves making use of case studies to cast light on bigger issues, rather than seeking a 'comprehensive' treatment of a single theme. It can be effective because it allows for the thorough exploration of byways that might otherwise be ignored. It is also potentially risky,

because of the possibility of excessive diffuseness, but it works well in O'Hara's hands. His decision to group his chapters into sections helps create a sense of thematic coherence.

In substantive terms, the chapters cannot be praised too highly. They represent an important contribution to scholarship, and will be referred to by specialists for years to come. My sole criticism of the book is that some of the ideas it raises, especially the problem of unintended consequences, could have been analysed more systematically throughout. Therefore, in this review, having first described the contents of the chapters, I will put forward some issues for clarification and discussion. My aim is to foster a dialogue in order to help advance the intellectual agenda put forward by O'Hara, with which I am very much in sympathy.

Section one, 'Ideas from "the Outside"', deals with British policymakers' use of foreign exemplars. Within it, chapter one explores 'The use and abuse of foreign archetypes in British economic policy'. It examines anxieties about Britain's place in the world during an era of relative economic decline, and the ways in which political thinkers became obsessed with apparently more successful foreign models. We learn that, surprisingly, there was 'relative silence' with regard to West Germany, partly because it took a long time for the British to adjust to the fact that the ruined and vanquished former enemy could be a serious competitor, and partly because the Germans were seen as old-fashioned in their 'pre-Keynesian' approach. French economic planning seemed more attractive up until the 1960s, and, in the age of the Sputnik, Soviet performance seemed both impressive and threatening. As O'Hara notes, what the British thought about these other countries tell us a lot about what they thought about themselves. Looking abroad, they thought they saw order, purpose and rationality; at home they perceived chaos, loss of willpower and muddle.

Chapter two is called 'Archetype, example or warning? British views of Scandinavia' and is one of the most fascinating parts of the book. It shows how there was a strong tendency to view Scandinavian countries almost as utopian societies, in spite of suspicions of their geopolitical stance during the Cold War. The 'Scandinavian model' of society generated enthusiasm even though the economic success of the countries concerned may have been better explained by their liberal trade policies in combination with their position in the world economy. However, although many British thinkers were interested in in theory in importing Scandinavian ideas, it was a different matter in practice. A 1962 TUC delegation to Sweden was impressed with the cooperative atmosphere but was 'entirely unpersuaded of the need to change to change its own plant-level practices' (p. 39). During the same period, the Conservatives did actually legislate to facilitate Scandinavian-type housing cooperatives, but the impact was minimal, as the government, retaining its 'obsession with owner-occupation' (p. 45) failed to provide adequate subsidy. As O'Hara notes, the interest in Scandinavia remains important today. For example, Sweden has been an influence on today's 'free schools' concept. It seems not only that the foreign archetype has been wrenched out of context, but that its actual success even in Sweden is also open to doubt. *Plus ça change.*

Section two, 'Sliding away from stability', focuses on the economy in the 1960s, in its international dimension. Chapter three, 'President Kennedy, Prime Minister Macmillan and the gold market, 1960-63', shows the complex interplay of political and economic factors at a time when the cracks were beginning to show in the international monetary system established at the end of the Second World War. In a system of fixed exchange rates, both the dollar and the pound were vulnerable in the face of balance of payments deficits. Moreover, in spite of the huge power of the United States, it had considerable difficulties in bringing its will to bear on its allies, including the British. The Americans could not easily contemplate a sterling devaluation, for fear that the dollar would be the next target of the speculators. Thus, the British could extract more help from Washington than might have been expected in the light of their rapidly declining status. This is seen in chapter four, 'President Johnson, Prime Minister Wilson and the slow collapse of equilibrium, 1964-68'. O'Hara is sceptical of the idea of a 'secret deal' between Harold Wilson and LBJ. He notes that the two men 'shared a number of unspoken objectives which may have tied the interests of the two leaders together without any formal pact. However, the difficulty with arguments focusing on their "deal" is that such work often underestimates the extent to which the British were able to manipulate the relationship to their won ends' (p. 73). Thus in spite of the pressure from the Americans to maintain their defence role East of Suez, the decision to withdraw – albeit in the face of economic crisis –

can be seen as much as ‘a signal of continuing freedom as an admission of failure’ and as ‘a retreat which signalled an assertion of independence’ (p. 90).

Section three, ‘Governing Britain’, provides a similarly mixed picture. Chapter six, ‘The creation and early work of the parliamentary “Ombudsman”’, tells the origins of an institution that is now rather taken for granted, at least by those who know of its existence. A prominent advocate of the idea was Donald Johnson, a Conservative MP who, although extremely eccentric, was rightly concerned about the arbitrary use of power in respect to people considered to have mental illness. (Johnson had been incarcerated for six months a few years before he entered Parliament in 1955, and believed himself to be a victim of a conspiracy by unnamed gangsters.) Here is another case where Scandinavia was an inspiration, Sweden having established an Ombudsman in 1809 and Finland having done so in 1919. The Wilson government legislated to create the new office in 1967. As O’Hara notes, this move can be seen as an example of the widespread late 20th-century desire to put certain types of decision-making ‘beyond politics’, a tendency which may have reflected suspicions of democracy and popular control. On the other hand, this particular reform appears to have been a desirable one, and the expansion of the role beyond its original narrow limits is cited in the conclusion as an example of a *positive* unintended consequence which benefitted ‘many citizens’ (p. 199).

Chapter seven, ‘Sir Alec Cairncross and the art and craft of economic advice, 1961–69’, might perhaps have sat more naturally within the previous section, but is nonetheless a stimulating account of the frustrations of life within government. As a supposedly key official adviser to successive governments, Cairncross might have expected wide influence, but repeatedly found his uncomfortable advice ignored. He knew that the incoming Labour government faced a choice between deflation and devaluation, and his own preference was for the former. But ministers would not choose either, and so ended up doing each in turn. Chapter eight, ‘“An All Over Expansion”: the politics of the land in “Golden Age” Britain’ contains further evidence of such shortsightedness. The Land Commission created in 1967 was an attempt to address the problem of high land prices, but it resulted in ‘the far-from-welcome consequence of actually pushing up the price of property under conditions of planned scarcity’ (p. 148).

Section four, ‘Educating the nation’, contains two chapters. Chapter nine, ‘Planning the education system in the post-war era’ paints what is some ways a rather positive picture. Education spending as a share of GDP expanded quite dramatically from the end of the Second World War until the mid-1970s. This resulted in many more teachers, schools, and further education places. The comprehensive revolution may have been imperfect, but it was a major achievement. Moreover, although O’Hara mentions the 1963 Robbins report only in passing – many more people gained the opportunity to go to university. The unintended consequence here was not that things got worse but rather that the genuine improvements failed to put an end to the ongoing sense of educational ‘crisis’ which persists to this day. Chapter ten, ‘Slum schools, civil servants and sociology: Educational Priority Areas, 1967–72’, examines efforts to address educational deprivation via positive discrimination. One problem with this approach was that targeting was difficult. As one contemporary observed, ‘Most children in EPAs are not specially deprived, and most of the deprived are not in EPAs’ (p. 183). Even before the Thatcher era, the concept of positive educational discrimination was running into the sands. The Education Action Zones initiated under Blair marked a revival, although policymakers at that point seemingly had no knowledge of the previous experiments.

With all these examples in mind, are there any ways to make the helpful concept of unintended consequences more analytically rigorous? Such consequences are, after all, an innate part of the human condition. O'Hara sees them – in the form under discussion in his book - as a particular product of recent modernity, arguing that 'ever more complex ambitions and trade-offs definitely *were* a characteristic of post-war governance' (p. 4; emphasis in original). Without disputing that, one might well ask whether the problem of unintended consequences was in fact any more acute in the 1950s than in, say, the 1930s. Going further back, one thinks of the period described in Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher's *Africa and the Victorians* (1961), which showed how the expansion of Empire followed logically from official assumptions without anyone ever having quite willed it to happen. Certainly, the nature of the problem of governance subsequently changed, but increased complexity provided opportunities for the state as well as difficulties.

It might be helpful, then, to distinguish more clearly between the different types of unintended consequence. For example, the consequences of the design flaws in the Bretton Woods system, which no state actor could hope to overcome on its own, were rather different from the consequences of the poor decisions of the Wilson government with respect to deflation/devaluation, which were equally unintended but more avoidable. Then there are the consequences of misjudged policy transfers, which may, in fact, sometimes represent accurately what politicians wanted to do, even if we think them foolish or immoral for having wanted to do it. If, for example, the Education Secretary wants to justify his half-baked policies by reference to the supposed experience of other countries, and in so doing helps ruin the British school system, can the consequences really be described as unintended? Presumably our model needs to leave some room for genuine stupidity and bloody-mindedness as well as for the muddles produced by the well-intentioned.

Similarly, I would like to press O'Hara to expand on his concept of 'imagination' which he deploys in respect to how the British viewed other countries' economies. His use of the term, inspired by Benedict Anderson's well-known description of nations as 'imagined communities', has a great deal of analytical potential. Nonetheless I wonder if he is right to contrast 'imagination' with 'understanding' (p. 12), suggesting a gulf between them. Imagination, I would suggest, is a key tool for understanding the world, and it can be used well or badly. Neither O'Hara or I was alive in the 1950s, so we have to try to imagine it, and contemporary evidence is the aid that we deploy in order to do so. In the same way, in order to learn about other countries, policymakers have to use the tools that are available to them, which are likely to contain important biases. It is probably impossible to have a view of the world that is not in some way distorted, but some distortions are more problematic than others and some people are more aware than others of the limitations of their own mindsets. So I would urge a more positive view of imagination and a further exploration of its capacity for yielding positive outcomes, in addition to its undoubted potential for introducing intellectual error.

My final point is about the media, which receives little explicit mention in the book. During the period in question it was undergoing rapid changes and was becoming (from the politician's point of view) more 'intrusive'. Increasingly, policy became increasingly media driven, and politics seemed to become ever more frenetic. The narrative of ongoing crisis to which O'Hara refers was in part the product of these new dynamics. One 'crisis' might fade away to be replaced by another, but the media's interest was always to present some topic of fierce urgency or imminent disaster, and that of the politicians was always to be seen to be 'taking action' in order to 'solve' whatever the problem was alleged to be. Unintended consequences, therefore, are not necessarily exclusively the result of internal flaws in specific policies. Rather, they are partly the product of a political-media environment that cannot tolerate a vacuum, and which drives the governmental agenda in such a way as to create a permanent cycle of public anxiety and reassurance.

In summary, this book is a significant one, which will stand the test of time, and which raises some vital questions for future scholars to take forward. Doubtless it will also have some unintended consequences of which we don't yet know, but, if so, O'Hara will have the satisfaction of being able to claim them as further proof of his central idea.

Notes

1. Lawrence Black, *Redefining British Politics: Culture, Consumerism and Participation, 1954–70* (Basingstoke, 2010).[Back to \(1\)](#)
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