

The Lack of Project-related Experience Amongst Government Ministers¹

Martin Hopkinson

In his recent paper, Alan Stretton (1) draws a useful distinction between project estimating mistakes made as a consequence of cognitive bias and mistakes made deliberately. It is instructive to see how many Australian government projects may have been a victim of the latter. I could identify several UK government projects that may have been similarly affected including the HS2 High Speed Rail, which is likely to cost in excess of £100b (2).

Although it is tempting to assume that politicians are dishonest, I will make the argument in this commentary that there is a simpler explanation for at least some of their poor decisions. Government projects often involve high levels of risk. Given this, it would help if the key decision makers had acquired a sound project-based experience during their previous careers. In the case of the largest projects these people are government ministers. If ministers lack the relevant experience, we should consider whether some of their decisions that we, as project management professionals, perceive to be dishonest might, more simply, be the result of incompetence.

Perhaps it would be instructive to conduct a review of the prior project-related experience of senior government ministers around the world. By way of example, the current members of the UK government cabinet and their previous careers (3) can be summarised as:

1. Boris Johnson (Journalist)
2. Dominic Raab (Solicitor)
3. Rishi Sunak (Hedge fund manager)
4. Priti Patel (PR)
5. Liz Truss (Management accountant)
6. Steve Barclay (Law, Financial services)
7. Ben Wallace (Army)
8. Michael Gove (Journalist)
9. Sajid Javid (Banking)
10. Kwasi Kwarteng (Author, Financial analyst)
11. Alok Sharma (Corporate finance)
12. Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Corporate finance)
13. Therese Coffey (Finance director)

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14. Nadhim Zahawi (Marketing director, founder of YouGov)
15. George Eustice (Family business – fruit farming)
16. Grant Shapps (Company director of multiple small companies)
17. Brandon Lewis (Barrister)
18. Alister Jack (Businessman)
19. Simon Hart (Chartered surveyor)
20. Natalie Evans (Manager employed by various professional bodies)
21. Nadine Dorries (Nursing, Health service providers)
22. Oliver Dowden (Political research)
23. Jacob Rees-Mogg (Investment banking)

Those in the above list who have been company directors all appear to have been responsible for the delivery of “business as usual” or consultancy activities rather than projects. Thus, it would seem that not one of the current members of cabinet has significant prior personal experience of project delivery. A similar trawl through the biographies of members of the Labour Party Shadow Cabinet identifies a similar dearth of project-related experience, although there is a difference in that, instead of the Conservative Party ministers with financial services or corporate experience, there is an abundance of trade unionists, political organisers and charity leaders. Thus, amongst the Labour Party politicians, there appears to be less evidence of a background that might include mathematical modelling skills.

The case of Chris Grayling MP provides a sharp example of the effects of ministerial naivety in the management projects. Grayling is a Cambridge history graduate who authored books and worked in film and television before entering parliament. He is an able and articulate person and, in contrast with some in his peer group, I cannot recall him saying things he knew to be dishonest. Having received criticism in previous ministerial posts (for which he also lacked relevant experience), he was appointed Transport Secretary in 2016. The department of Transport has a large project portfolio which includes the UK’s High Speed Railway HS2 project. In this new post, and after a series of controversial project-related decisions, he started to attract the nickname Failing Grayling, even it is said amongst his cabinet colleagues.

I remember Chris Grayling being interviewed on BBC Radio early in 2019. The interviewer challenged the government’s position that the cost for the first phase of HS2 would not exceed £28b. Grayling’s reply was that, since he had set £28b as the budget, the cost would simply not be allowed to exceed that value. It appeared that he might genuinely believe that a minister could guarantee the delivery of projects of any size or complexity by decree!

Ministers who lack project-related experience are in a weak position to challenge the cost and schedule forecasts presented to them. In these circumstances, optimistically-biased forecasts

are likely to be accepted, particularly if they have been unwittingly encouraged as the consequence of naivety combined with political ambition. I suspect that politicians often make project-related mistakes simply because they lack the necessary competencies but are unable or unwilling to recognise this to be the case. It would be harsh to classify such decisions as being deliberate. Nor would cognitive bias be a strictly correct explanation. More generally, given that politicians are responsible for managing change, their lack of project-related experience could be viewed as a significant issue.

References

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 - (2) Hopkinson, M. (2020). HS2 – A Project Business Case in Crisis; PM World Journal, Vol. IX, Issue XII, December. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/pmwj100-Dec2020-Hopkinson-HS2-a-project-business-case-in-trouble.pdf>
 - (3) Wikipedia Biographies May 2022
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About the Author



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Martin Hopkinson, Director of Risk Management Capability Limited in the UK, has 30 years' experience as a project manager, project risk management specialist and consultant. His experience has been gained across a wide variety of industries and engineering disciplines and includes multibillion-pound projects and programmes.

Martin's first book, *The Project Risk Maturity Model*, concerns the risk management process. His contributions to Association for Project Management (APM) guides such as *Directing Change* and *Sponsoring Change* reflect his belief in the importance of project governance and business case development.

In his most recent book *Net Present Value and Risk Modelling for Projects* he brings these subjects together by showing how NPV and risk modelling techniques can be used to optimise projects and support project approval decisions. ([To learn more about the book, click here.](#))