

PRIMING THE POLICY STRATA FOR FATEFUL CHOICES

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To fit the subject of the session let me put forth bluntly my view on “radical new approaches”: they are essential for coping with radically novel challenges. But no partnerships, complexity theories, networks and so on will work if one critical requirement is not met: **The quality of politicians must be significantly improved, with emphasis on the abilities of their minds to comprehend and creatively cope with unprecedented future-shaping issues; their educational abilities to encourage steep societal learning curves; and their moral virtues.**

True, this is not enough: senior civil servants need additional qualities, and so do other components of the policy strata. But without significantly improved politicians the likelihood of good futures is lower than that of bad and perhaps catastrophic ones.

Given this prolegomenon, let me move to some specifics within the constraints of time. The human species as a whole and many countries in particular are sure to face in the foreseeable future unprecedented and in part inconceivable challenges posing both huge opportunities and catastrophic dangers, up to endangering the existence of the human species. These challenges are both more complex, in the sense of a larger number of diverse variables being at their center, while being in part hard to understand and in a state of phase-jumping transformations. In addition, they are more “fateful”, in

the sense of having very significant though hard to foresee consequences, in part inconceivable, up to potential catastrophes.

Illustrations include transformation of employment markets by labor saving technologies, such as AI robots and molecular engineering, that can break up societies or provide well-used large scale leisure time; advances in human enhancement increasing the number of people above the age of 100 in good physical and cognitive health as well as enabling “production” of human super-warriors; and mutated viruses healing cancer while providing fanatics with mass-killing biological weapons.

Such issues, driven by science and technology together with value changes, will increasingly pose “fateful choices,” as best described by the classical Confucian Chinese scholar Xunzi around 2400 years ago:

“...at a crossroads: if a man makes an error of half a step in the wrong direction, when he awakens to the fact, he will have made a blunder of a thousand li.”

These require all the measures discussed in the pioneering *Annual Report of the Government Chief Scientific Adviser 2014. Innovation: Managing Risk, Not Avoiding It* (London: 19 November 2014), but much more – including determined efforts to avoid some of the more serious dangers of select scientific research and technology development, all the more so given the global security situation endanger, inter alia, by ferocious fanaticism.

To jump ahead for a moment, a minimum requirement from politicians, senior civil servants and other key policy intellectuals is good literacy in main scientific and technological trends and at least some understanding of their potential impacts. However my contacts with policy strata members in many countries leads me to the strong impression that this requirement is seldom met, though it is not difficult to convey the necessary knowledge and understanding in a number of intensive study retreats – which also seem to be very scarce.

Such understanding is all the more essential in view of the likelihood that in order to utilize novel opportunities and prevent disasters, controversial measures will be essential, such as strict regulation of potentially dangerous science and technologies; global surveillance detecting ferocious fanatics; limitations on problematic human enhancement research, such as human cloning; forceful channeling of mass migration caused by rising sea levels; and decreasing polluting-energy quotas.

Unavoidably such measures have to be global in scope, enforced on reluctant countries and other significant actors, making a decisive global regime essential. Also, significant reevaluation of widely accepted values will be essential, such as limitations on freedom of research and strict prevention of diffusion of hate-instigating opinions. Overall, “raison d’humanité” will have to override quite some raison d’état.

The policy stratum, including politicians, senior civil servants, policy

professionals and free floating policy intellectuals carry most of the responsibility for preparing necessary measures and putting them into action, as well as coping with unavoidable crises accompanying them. Civic society and markets will be important, but only politicians have the legitimacy and power to take the stern and largely unprecedented action needed for dealing with emerging critical issues, requiring what Stefan Collini and Donald Winch called in their 1984 book a “noble science of politics” – or, in my terminology, a much upgraded type of “avant-garde politician.”

However politician cannot cope with the challenges on their own. An improved version of senior civil servants is essential for advising the politicians and implementing radically novel policies. And policy professionals and intellectuals have to ponder what is anathema and creatively design policy options on taboo subjects.

Unavoidably a very tiny part of humanity makes, within constrains, most of the choices shaping the future of all of us. Democracy helps to make politicians reflect the public, but does not necessarily make them wise and may bind them too much to the here-and-now. All the more essential is a highly professional senior civil service to assist politicians to recognize, at least in their minds, metamorphosing issues. To do so the senior civil servants should have significant autonomy of the mind, to be respected and also welcome by politicians.

The role of improved policy professionals becomes essential for coping with the vexing features of emerging contingencies, such as

having a very low or unknowable likelihood, but staggering consequences if occurring.

In some respects, most important of all are “free floating” policy intellectuals, whether located in think tanks or contemplating on their own. They can and should withdraw mentally from the blinders of what is accepted and, instead, consider what may become essential – somewhat in line with one of the suggestions of Arnold Toynbee.

But public support and societal learning are essential, otherwise what is necessary will be hard to do. Therefore the policy strata should not only be open, but one of its main duties is to educate publics at large. But, to be frank, most of the onus for speaking truth to publics has to be assumed by senior politicians. This requires (1) that they themselves understand the metamorphosis into which humanity is cascading; (2) and that they accept the risks of telling publics what many of them may not wish to hear, including on unavoidable transition pains

Such requirements are far above the present realities of nearly most of the political strata in the vast majority of countries. Despite my long-standing interest in UK central government, and being on several occasions asked to advise it, I am not qualified to assess its qualities as compared to what is increasingly needed. Certainly I do not have the Chuzpa to express views on its political leaders. But I cannot avoid being somewhat disturbed by the closing down in 2010 of the Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit, instead of expanding and deepening its work so as to ponder long-term alternative futures with

all their novel opportunities but also serious danger. This goes far beyond “effective government”, however well discussed in some of the work of the Institute for Government, in the direction of “future-shaping government” – because the future is unlikely to take care of itself; and “muddling through” will involve much of “muddling” but not get “through.”

Leaving aside the UK, about which I am not up-to-date, I stick to my evaluation that most of the policy strata worldwide is preoccupied with current crises, pressures and demands; caged in “the art of the possible” instead of committed to what is needed; and all-too-often, though not always, rushing forward with minds looking too much into rear mirrors .

This tentative assessment applies primarily to the vast majority of politicians and many senior civil servants. But their inadequacies are in part not the result of personal failures, being caused by inappropriate institutional structures and sleep-walking publics. Other parts of the policy strata too suffer from serious inadequacies, without such excuses.

Thus, nearly all the many books being published on upgrading governance, however in part interesting, confine themselves to short term issues and narrow improvements. The “digital revolution” is receiving a lot of attention, but the much more radical implications of synthetic biology, molecular engineering and human enhancement are hardly faced. Most public policy schools still grant degrees to graduates who are ignoramuses regarding on the main drivers of the

future, including science and technology. And, worst of all, the very idea of radically upgrading the quality of politicians is not only neglected but “taboo” in professional discourse on governance, as if it somehow contradicts democracy.

I leave operational proposals to my books. But more important is an essential precondition, which I formulate as two questions and suggested answers:

One, are most of our politicians, senior civil servants, policy professionals and policy thinkers up to coping with emerging fateful issues? My proposed answer is a regretful but clear “In the main, No!”

This leads to the second question: Can something be done to improve relevant qualities of politicians, senior civil servants, policy professionals and policy intellectuals before a high price is paid for their inadequacies? My answer is a clear “in principle and also practice yes”, but this depends on clearly recognized what is needed before calamities become a harsh headmaster of humanity.