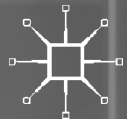


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**WESTMINSTER,
GOVERNANCE AND
THE POLITICS OF
POLICY INACTION**

‘Do Nothing’

Stephen Barber



Westminster, Governance and the Politics of Policy Inaction

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Inaction

‘Do Nothing’

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macmillan

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PREFACE

As former Prime Minister David Cameron put the final touches in 2015 to the first majority Conservative government in 18 years, a dividing line was drawn between the coalition he had led alongside the Liberal Democrats since 2010 and the single party administration formed with a slim majority in 2015. It was not only the ‘quad’ that was gone—the formal mechanism for Conservatives David Cameron and George Osborne and Liberal Democrats Nick Clegg and Danny Alexander to meet in order to thrash out policy, strategy and governance issues—also gone was a barrier to political action.

Clegg’s power as Deputy Prime Minister was less the ability to instigate policy in government (though he was not entirely without such influence) than it was to put a brake on policy. His was ultimately the power of veto. Bennister and Heffernan (2012) illustrate that Cameron remained the ‘resource rich’ actor in the coalition,¹ but Clegg’s Liberal Democrats had what Matthews (2011) refers to as ‘watchdog’ powers to moderate and ultimately block policy.²

As Cameron despatched his new Ministers to their departments clutching their policy briefs, he was naturally signalling the direction and priorities for the administration. In looking forward, the episode demonstrated simultaneously that one crucial significance of the outgoing coalition’s record in office was not simply what it had achieved in the course of five years, but also what it had *not* done. Alas, for all of Clegg’s attempts to convince voters of the preventative influence of his party, it was a point largely missed by the electorate, which punished the Liberal Democrats at the 2015 polls. And yet here in the dawn of a new government committed

to policies including repealing the Human Rights Act and introducing a Counter-Extremism Bill, political inaction can be seen to be a hugely important aspect in understanding the period. Within a year there was a more dramatic illustration when the British people voted narrowly but dramatically to leave the European Union in a referendum that could easily have been avoided. When Cameron announced the in/out referendum in his 2013 Bloomberg Speech, he had every reason to believe that it would not actually take place. A majority government seemed unlikely and coalition partners could have been blamed for doing nothing about the pledge. Alas, the referendum that took place shook the political establishment and led to Cameron's resignation as Prime Minister. This book makes the case that inaction can sometimes produce better results and at this early stage there are indications that Theresa May, the new inhabitant at Number 10, represents a different style of government. Could it be that a more cautious and considered approach will mean less unnecessary action and more do nothing politics where it is likely to lead to better outcomes?

It is also a neat illustration of the importance of understanding the idea of political inaction, or a 'do nothing' policy. And that is what this short book is committed to do. Organised thematically, it explores political inaction in a number of guises, examining its motivations, its legacy and the role played by the combative Westminster model in ensuring policy-makers do nothing. By taking an historical perspective, it illustrates that this contemporary instance of inaction is not exceptional, and that 'do nothing' politics shapes the world we live in today.

I would like to extend my thanks to the editors at Palgrave Macmillan for their enthusiasm about the project and their patience while it was delivered. I would like to acknowledge the insightful comments of my two anonymous reviewers whose thoughts improved the research considerably. Gratitude is also extended to the three interviewees who gave their insights to support this research.

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Stephen Barber

NOTES

1. Bennister, M., & Heffernan, R. (2012). Cameron as prime minister: The intra-executive politics of Britain's coalition government. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 65(4), 778–801.
2. Matthews, F. (2011). Constitutional stretching: Coalition governance and the Westminster model. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 49(4), 486–509.

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Introduction: A Systemic Problem for Westminster Government

Abstract The systemic problem in Westminster government is political hyperactivity or ‘initiativitus’ rather than inaction. Ministers and permanent officials are motivated to act decisively and be seen to be doing so. Drawing on expert testimony, this section shows that there are a myriad of incentives, principally being the political imperative to react, Ministerial and civil servant short-termism, reshuffles and inter-governmental competition. The research demonstrates that there are few structural incentives to do less or nothing.

Keywords Westminster model • British Civil service • Ministerial overload • Government dysfunction

There has to be a choice in policy-making. Where there are no options, there is no decision, and consequently an event cannot be described legitimately as a policy. The ability to make choices is very often far more constrained than political actors would like to admit, but nonetheless, every day decisions are made in government; some minor and administrative, but others of great magnitude and import to many lives and lifestyles. The range of choices, though, includes a frequently overlooked option: do nothing.

In this sense, policy involves negative preference as well as positive and gives rise to an early and often reproduced definition of public policy offered by Thomas Dye in 1972 as being ‘what government chooses to do or not to do’.¹ There is some limited coverage of the ‘not to do’

part of this description in the existing literature, but on the whole the topic is largely overlooked in favour of its more positive, active brethren. Michael Howlett's excellent assessment of policy design,² public policy implementation appraised by Hill and Hupe, as well as Taylor and Balloch's edited volume on policy evaluation³ are good examples of academic attention to the (active) topic. John (2012) encapsulates this approach in *Analyzing Public Policy* by describing the academic topic thus: 'Research on public policy seeks to explain how decision makers, working within or close to the machinery of government and other political institutions, produce public actions that are intended to have an impact outside the political system. The subject focuses on the decisions that generate outputs.'⁴

But policy can be seen at times as deliberate omission; that is, the intentional act of not doing something and conscious of the implications. There has also been a long-standing debate which is of relevance around the idea of policy-making as an 'incremental' process,⁵ often conceived pragmatically and based on adjusting the status quo versus those who see it as essentially stable and 'punctuated' by bursts of radical change.⁶ There is a suggestion that radicalism means change in a way that pragmatism is more about adjustments and stability. But this raises questions about what is not done, either in the case of incrementalism or indeed the opportunity cost of punctuating the equilibrium.

Understanding this idea of political inaction is the prime focus of this short book. Concentrating on the experience of politics in Britain, the study is grounded in the constitutional apparatus of what has been termed the 'Westminster Model' of oppositional parliamentary government to consider not only what politicians do but, just as importantly, also what they choose not to do.

As such, in what remains a relatively narrow focus, the book contributes to a literature wider than that around policy development. The book draws on and adds to emerging academic debate on the professionalisation of politics, the nature of Westminster opposition, and constitutional change. In this sense, the idea of 'do nothing' politics is a conceptual lens through which it is possible to look afresh at some of these debates.

Nonetheless, the distinct contribution of this book is to dissect the concept of 'do nothing' politics as defined here. Its methodology is longitudinal, based on the practice of government in Britain and organised around three broad perspectives of the topic. First, it explores the philosophical and practical reasons for inaction alongside the implications of professionalisation of politics. Second, it steps back to set the subject in its historical context and to demonstrate the legacy of doing nothing, given

the 70-year experience of post-war government. Third, it considers how ‘doing nothing’ can be, and is, held to account by widening the study from the narrower actions of the executive to the more far-reaching functions of the Westminster Parliament. Consequently, the research addresses three big questions around these perspectives: What is ‘do nothing’ politics, and who does it? Why does ‘do nothing’ politics matter? How is ‘doing nothing’ held to account in the Westminster system?

The analysis in Chaps. 2 and 4 is supplemented by interviews with three elite informants who have direct experience of the policy-making process and its accountabilities. Peter Lilley⁷ held posts in the Treasury during the Thatcher government, and Cabinet positions at Social Security and Trade and Industry under John Major in the 1990s. He was later Shadow Chancellor when the Conservatives went into opposition after 1997. Latterly at the Institute for Government, Jill Rutter⁸ was a senior civil servant. With spells in the Treasury as Communications Director and in the Private Office, DEFRA and the Number 10 Policy Unit, she experienced the Thatcher, Major and Blair administrations. Margaret Hodge⁹ was a Minister throughout the governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, holding a variety of briefs from Disabled People, Universities, Children, Work and finally as Minister of State for Culture and Tourism. But her most prominent role was perhaps on leaving office, when she became the elected and prominent Chair of the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee.

The book makes the case that political inaction can be as significant as policy action, and that doing nothing has shaped the politics and society that is recognisable today. But it also demonstrates that to properly understand the significance of doing nothing in British politics, one has to appreciate the impact of the adversarial Westminster model, which can be seen as the source of policy ‘hyperactivity’ as well as political inaction. Government actors are incentivised to be active, and even doing less sometimes means doing more.

In an effort to demonstrate relevance from the research, a postscript is included which categorises some of the shortfalls in the political system highlighted by this publication and makes some modest recommendations for change.

The book is far from comprehensive. Viewing the topic at a conceptual level grounded in the political and historical record, the analysis presented is complete but, as always with this type of research, limited. As such, this study is offered as an opening critique and represents an invitation to other scholars to contribute to the topic. There already appears to be an