



## INNOVATIONS IN PUBLIC POLICY

Ian C. Elliott

# Mission-Driven Government

- The UK Government has committed to being a 'mission-driven government' with missions focused on clean energy, economic growth, the future of the NHS, opportunity for all and safer streets.
- Whilst mission-driven government is being presented as novel it is not new nor is it untested as an approach to governing. The Scottish Government developed a form of strategic state in 2007 which shares many of the characteristics of mission-driven government in emphasising a unifying purpose, having clear strategic objectives, and coordinating activity to achieve those objectives.
- Lessons from the Scottish experience offer valuable insights for others who are planning to develop mission-driven or strategic forms of government. These include the need for long-term and sustained investment in strategic capabilities; the need to connect to accountability processes for individuals and organizations including budgeting and evaluation; and the need for collaboration between different levels of government. It is important that these are taken into account to avoid potential pitfalls and maximise the chances of success.

### What is mission-driven government?

Mission-driven government has been described by the Institute for Government as "a whole new way of doing government" ([Pannell 2024](#)). The UK Government has committed to developing a mission-driven government as a way of providing a sense of purpose and to "end short-term sticking plaster politics" ([Labour 2023](#)). As a result, there is growing interest in what this means for the design and delivery of public policy - reportedly there were no fewer than 52 events at the 2024 UK Labour Party conference with the word 'mission' in the title ([White et al, 2024](#)).

The need for mission-driven, strategic, government is unquestionable. Many of the global challenges set out in the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#), first adopted by UN member states in 2015, require long-term and collaborative approaches. Progress by the UK to date has been slower than across the EU and, on some indicators, progress is getting worse ([Lafortune et al. 2024](#)). In this context, mission-driven government must achieve meaningful outcomes, but questions are being asked about how to operationalise a long-term, mission-led approach in the UK.

So far, the Labour UK Government has set out five missions focused on clean energy, economic growth, the future of the NHS, opportunity for all and safer

streets. Mission Boards, chaired by the relevant Secretary of State, have been established to oversee progress on each of the missions. But beyond the addition of Mission Boards much of the structure and functioning of government would appear, at least for now, to be the same. It is unclear how the Mission Boards will operate in practice and how they will align with the Cabinet Committees and coordinate, co-design, and evaluate delivery within a multi-level governance system.

## Origins and past experiments

The idea of mission-driven government is not new nor is it untested. In their best-selling 1992 book, David Osborne and Ted Gaebler listed ten principles for **reinventing government**. One of these principles was “mission-driven government”. The overall thrust of their argument was the need for more entrepreneurial, adaptable and outcomes-focused public sector organisations. At the time, the Osborne and Gaebler text was hugely influential, particularly in the Clinton US administration (Peters and Savoie, 1994) but also later in the Blair UK government. For example, the **Modernising Government White Paper (Cabinet Office 1999)** set out a “long-term programme of modernisation for a purpose” (p.7) which was to move towards “more new ideas, more willingness to question inherited ways of doing things, better use of evidence and research in policy making and better focus on policies that will deliver long-term goals” (p.15). Much of this mirrors the rhetoric of the current UK Government, and others who espouse mission-driven government, and yet these examples and experiences have not featured in recent UK debates.

## Recent experience with the strategic state

Examples of mission-driven government, highlighted by the **Institute for Government** (2024), include Camden Council, the Australian government and the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. But there is another example that offers important insights.

The Scottish Government developed a strategic, long-term approach to government in 2007 which was underpinned by the National Performance Framework (NPF). This has been described as a ‘strategic state’ approach in that it set out an ambition to develop “a whole-of government approach to the design and delivery of public services which links a shared long-term vision with the collective capacity, capability and conviction to make it happen” (Elliott, 2023: 85). The reforms that underpinned the development of this approach to mission-driven government included restructuring of the Scottish government and investment in leadership development, as well as

establishment of the National Performance Framework (Elliott 2020). Recent research has shown that some aspects of the strategic state have not endured over time (Elliott, 2023). But the NPF continues to be a feature of Scottish policymaking, was put on a statutory basis through the Community Empowerment Act 2015, and reviewed and updated in 2011, 2016, 2018. The latest review began in 2022 and is currently ongoing.

The **National Performance Framework** is the statement of the Scottish Government’s ambitions for Scotland. The most recent version, published in 2018, included 11 national outcomes and 81 national indicators with an overarching purpose to “focus on creating a more successful country with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish through increased wellbeing, and sustainable and inclusive economic growth”. It has been highlighted positively by both the OECD (2023) and WHO (2023) in relation to developing well-being approaches to government.

At the same time, it has been found that a lack of focus and waning momentum have created challenges for the achievement of outcomes (Elliott, 2023), and the Auditor-General for Scotland has pointed to an ‘**implementation gap**’. The current **review of the NPF** has raised a number of related concerns about implementation and again provides a rich evidence base for any governments planning on developing mission-driven approaches.

## Delivering Mission-Driven Government

Research related to the strategic state highlights three key lessons of relevance to the development of mission-driven government (Elliott and Roberts, 2024).

The first lesson is that missions cannot be achieved without people. There is a need for long-term and sustained investment in strategic capabilities. For better government to be achieved, the people within government, and across the public sector, must be equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to work in new ways. Recent research has shown that there is a willingness to develop an educational offer for government officials that is adaptable (Bottom et al, 2022) and that better meets the needs of the UK public sector (Elliott et al, 2024). The establishment of the **Leadership College for Government** and the **UK Association for Public Administration** (UKAPA) shows that there is the capacity and the commitment to make this happen through a more positive and engaged approach to scholarship. There may also be significant value in developing more participatory forms of governance including the use of citizens’ assemblies to include the public in decision-making and draw on diverse perspectives and insights. These more participatory forms of governance may also help mitigate against some of the challenges to

strategic government that can arise from short-term election cycles.

Secondly, there is a need to connect to accountability processes for individuals and organisations including budgeting and evaluation. Only by linking strategy to action can mission-driven government achieve meaningful change. Many of our budgeting processes continue to be based on organisational structure rather than citizen need. A more human-centred, relational, approach to public service design and delivery can facilitate collaboration and realise positive outcomes (Wilson et al, 2024).

Finally, mission-driven government requires intergovernmental dialogue and collaboration across all levels of government. There is a risk with the establishment of the five missions and mission-boards that it becomes a top-down initiative which reinforces entrenched views of power imbalances across different governments and levels of governance. Some of the recommended steps noted here, particularly around participatory approaches, budgeting, and evaluation, can help promote better relations and collective effort to achieve missions. There are already important structures in place that could facilitate this, including the Council of the Nations and Regions. It is important that these structures engage meaningfully with the agenda and ethos of mission-driven government and mechanisms for other levels of governance to contribute to a mission-driven approach are supported.

Overall, the need for a more long-term, outcomes-based and collaborative approach to government is hard to contest. The pursuit of mission-driven government is a worthy one. Yet questions about what mission-driven government means have failed to engage with and learn from established practice. The mission-driven approach provides both a useful purpose and can be a meaningful driver of fundamental changes in the structures, functions and culture of the entire governance system. But to realise its full potential, it will be crucial that the Government learns from prior experience in the UK and elsewhere, and builds on the skills and knowledge that exist at all levels of governance and society.

## References

Bottom, K., C. Elliott, I., & Moller, F. 2022. 'Chapter 8: British public administration: the status of the taught discipline' in *Handbook of Teaching Public Administration*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing

Boyle, S. 2021. 'Christie's clarion call can't wait another decade'. Audit Scotland. <https://audit.scot/publications/blog-christie-10-years-on>

Cabinet Office. 1999. *Modernising Government* (Cm. 4310). The Stationery Office, London

Elliott, I. C. 2023. 'Chapter 6: The strategic state: a case study of devolved government in Scotland' in *Handbook on Strategic Public Management*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Elliott, I. C., Bottom, K. A., Glennon, R., & O'Connor, K. 2024. 'Educating a civil service that is fit for purpose: perceptions from UK stakeholders'. *Public Money & Management*, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2024.2343798>

Elliott, I.C. 2020. 'The Implementation of a Strategic State in a Small Country Setting – the case of the 'Scottish Approach'. *Public Money and Management*, 40 (4), 285–293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2020.1714206>

Elliott, I.C. and Roberts, A.S. 2024. 'The Concept Of The Strategic State: An Assessment After Thirty Years'. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12685>

Institute for Government. 2024. 'Mission-driven government: What has Labour committed to?' <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/mission-driven-government-labour>

Labour. 2023. 'A 'Mission-Driven' Government to End 'Sticking Plaster' Politics'. <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/5-Missions-for-a-Better-Britain.pdf>

Lafortune, G., Fuller, G., Kloke-Lesch, A., Koundouri, P. and Riccaboni, A. 2024. *European Elections, Europe's Future and the SDGs: Europe Sustainable Development Report 2023/24*. Paris: SDSN and SDSN Europe and Dublin: Dublin University Press, <https://doi.org/10.25546/104407>

Osborne, D. and Gaebler, T. 1993. *Reinventing Government: The Five Strategies for Reinventing Government*. New York: Penguin

Scottish Government. 2023. Review of the National Outcomes, <https://consult.gov.scot/national-performance-framework-unit/review-of-the-npf/>

Scottish Government (nd) National Performance Framework, <https://nationalperformance.gov.scot/>

Wilson, R., French, M., Hesselgreaves, H., Lowe, T., & Smith, M. 2024. 'New development: Relational public services—reform and research agenda'. *Public Money & Management*. 44 (6), 553–558. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2024.2344902>

## About the author

**Dr Ian C. Elliott** is Senior Lecturer in the Centre for Public Policy, University of Glasgow. He specialises in British public administration with a focus on mission-driven government including the strategic state. He is a member of the Scottish Government's Expert Advisory Group for the National Performance Framework.