Mistaking mistakes and the rightness of wrongness...

GUEST ESSAY

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DEMOS

'Mistakes have been made.' We have been hearing those words a lot lately. Ministers, CEOs and economists have been forced to own up to error by the sheer scale of the economic crash and the undeniable inexcusability of certain expense claims. But if they were expecting quick forgiveness, it has not come. Apologising is the minimum that is expected, and usually it is not enough.

On the one hand, this is not surprising. If you make a complete hash of something very important, why should others say, 'No problem, everyone makes mistakes'? Yet, in fact, a common injunction of self-help and management advice over recent years has been to 'make more mistakes'. Few now seem happy to have heeded the advice so enthusiastically.

Management gurus have been among the most ardent advocates of mistake making. 'Don't "tolerate" mistakes. Embrace them!' said *In Search of Excellence* author Tom Peters.[1] No collection of management quotes is now complete without several extolling the virtues of error, such as advertising executive Leo Burnett's aphorism, 'To swear off making mistakes is very easy. All you have to do is swear off having ideas.' But the idea has also permeated popular culture. For example, 'If I had my life to live over, I'd like to make more mistakes next time' is the first line of the ubiquitous popular poem 'I'd pick more daisies', which is to websites in the 2000s what 'Desiderata' was to tea towels in the 1970s.

The advice has a good pedigree. Mistakes are good because, as James Joyce put it, 'A man's errors are his portals of discovery', and, in Einstein's words, 'Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new.'

Now that certain mistakes have had such dire consequences, however, you do not find so many people encouraging us to make them. Then again, mistake making has always been more virtuous in theory than in practice. Although CEOs may rally their organisations with the bold promise to make more mistakes, it has not been known for a politician to win an election on the same platform. When assessing who has been the best sports manager, prime minister or doctor, it would be perverse to choose the one who has demonstrably made the most mistakes. Mistake making is praised most highly when it has not yet happened.

A similar contradiction surrounds the admission of mistakes. We all agree that people should be big and honest enough to admit when they have got it wrong. But although it might be refreshing for someone to 'fess up occasionally, regular admissions are taken to be signs of incompetence, not commendable honesty.

So what is the right way to think about mistakes? Making mistakes is neither a virtue nor a vice in itself. Everything depends on the nature of the mistake: in particular, why it was made and what the alternatives were. What I want to do is outline some of these different kinds of mistakes, so that we can try to adopt a more constructive attitude, one which is neither too permissive nor too unforgiving.

A more mature mistake culture is particularly important when it comes to politics. On the one hand, politics is one of the spheres of human activity where mistakes are least likely to be admitted. A leading politician may try the frank 'we got it wrong' gambit only once, perhaps twice, if their career is long enough. More often than not, however, there will be no admission of failure even if it is painfully obvious to everyone that there has been one.

At the same time, failure in politics is often inevitable. The economy and public services can be run better or worse, but never perfectly. Changes often need to be made but not all changes are going to work. Important decisions are made almost daily, and it would be absurd to expect all of them to be right. The recent spectacle of economists queuing up to admit that none of them really understand what has been going on anyway is a sobering reminder of how little we know and how feeble our powers of prediction are. Given the world is so unpredictable, it would be insane to expect those charged with managing it never to slip up.

Hence in politics there is an extreme mismatch between the realities of failure and official responses to it. Politicians are like fishmongers who refuse to countenance the idea that their work might create the odd stink. But it would be rash to blame them entirely for this state of affairs, because too often the electorate acts like customers who expect their fishmonger's to smell like florists.

Last year's row over the abolition of the 10 pence tax rate is a good example of how this combination of attitudes is obstructive to good politics. One of Gordon Brown's last acts as chancellor of the Exchequer was to reduce the basic rate of income tax from 22 per cent to 20 per cent, while also abolishing the 10 per cent rate. When the legislation came into force in April 2008, it became evident that around 5 million relatively low-paid people would be worse off as a result.

That this was some kind of mistake is obvious. Of all the accusations that could be levelled against Brown the chancellor, the idea that he wanted to reduce the incomes of the worst off is the most ludicrous. But for some reason, he either missed the fact that this is what his plan would do, or underestimated the extent that up to £4.50 per week would be missed.

The row quickly escalated. No one in government was prepared to admit that a mistake had been made, and the public, opposition and back-benchers were unforgiving that one had been made. Bill Clinton's maxim that the electorate care not about what you did for them yesterday but about what you'll do for them tomorrow was fully vindicated, as those who had gained most from Brown's chancellorship leapt on him for instigating one small loss.

By the time Alistair Darling introduced measures to compensate the losers in May, Labour's opinion poll ratings had dropped from around 30 per cent and over before the row broke to consistently below 30 per cent. Other factors influenced this slump, of course, but the 10 pence furore was one of the biggest issues of the day.

Even accepting that the tax rate change was a mistake, the idea that it should have been taken to be a general indicator of Labour's fitness to govern is absurd. It did not reflect anything about the general direction of policy or the principles guiding it. It was actually a rather technical matter about how a small piece of fiscal engineering impacted on a small minority of the population. It became much more partly because of our wrong-headed attitude to mistake making: unforgiving on one side and unadmitting on the other. I do not think it too fanciful to suggest that if Darling had simply announced in early April that the tax change had an unforeseen consequence and the government would work at fixing it, the storm would have passed much quicker.

Nevertheless, it would be crass to say simply that we all accept, like grown adults, that mistakes will be made. There is a difficult balance to be struck between accepting failure when it is inevitable or understandable, and demanding as little failure as is humanly possible. The former without the latter is not grown-up, but dangerously permissive. Nor should we be embarrassed about having very high standards. As someone once said of John Major, when it was suggested his greyness was refreshing, 'I don't want to be led by an ordinary man, but [by] an extraordinary one.'

In order to foster a more mature attitude to mistakes in public life, we therefore need to ask three questions:

- **What sort of mistakes are acceptable, or even good?**
- **What obstacles stand in the way of admitting and recognising them?**
- **What can be done to change the current attitudes we have to them?**

Honest mistakes

In Vienna in December 2008, the actor Daniel Hoevels prepared to enact the slitting of his character's throat, in the last scene of Friedrich Schiller's *Mary Stuart*. The audience applauded his realistic suicide, not realising that the prop knife had been replaced by a real one. Hoevels was rushed to hospital and thankfully survived.

In such situations, there has clearly been a failure, but it would be odd to say that Hoevels had made a mistake. He did everything he should have done, and it was not his fault that, as a result, something awful happened. However, in situations which are logically very similar, the mere fact that the result is bad can lead us to attribute error.

For example, an official has to make a decision on whether to recommend the use of a particular drug. Evidence is called in and the experts agree that using it will save more lives than not using it, or using available alternatives. So the drug is approved. But it turns out to have unforeseen side effects, quite terrible ones. In this situation, the claim that no mistakes were made is likely to be treated with disdain by an angry public.

There is a sense in which a mistake can be understood as any action or decisions which leads to a worse outcome than was necessary. But ordinarily, the attribution of a mistake entails a judgement that a person should have done otherwise than as they did, knowing what they should have known. The official who approves a drug on the basis of all the available evidence cannot be said to have fulfilled this condition. Knowing what he did, it would have been irrational and irresponsible for him to have chosen otherwise. We do not praise health officials who choose the option judged to save fewer lives, we blame them. Had this one not approved the drug, it would have been a rare case of fortuitous incompetence.

You might think that, even if the official was off the hook, surely a mistake was made somewhere down the line? Not necessarily. It could be that everybody involved in the decision chose rationally, it is just that the effects were both unforeseen and unforeseeable. It is simply not reasonable to assume that every failure is the result of a choice that someone should have been able to identify as wrong.

The Scottish philosopher David Hume illustrated this with a story about an Indian who lives in a land where the temperature never falls below zero. A traveller passes through and tells tales of strange monsters and of how water turns solid and expands when it gets cold. Knowing what we do, it is easy to think that the Indian should dismiss the monster stories and accept the description of ice. But that is being wise after the event. Based on good reason and what he knows, the Indian has no reason at all to believe this strange story. On the basis of what he knew, water turning to ice was as improbable as lead turning into gold.

Whether or not Hume's example is the best one, the general point surely holds. Sometimes we draw the wrong conclusions but for the right reasons, and someone who drew the right

conclusions on the basis of the same evidence would only do so by being less, not more, rational and responsible.

For reasons I have explained, it would perhaps be better not to call this a mistake at all. In common parlance, we perhaps describe such acts and decisions as 'honest mistakes'. The proportion of mistakes that we accept are honest, however, varies enormously depending on whether the mistake was made by ourselves and allies, or enemies and others. Suspicion of the honest mistake defence is understandable, because it has been discredited by frequent misuse by those who really should have known better. But the fact that an excuse is offered falsely much of the time is no reason to think that it can never be offered truthfully some of the time. There are at least three reasons why we should be more willing to acknowledge the existence of honest mistakes in public life:

- **First, we want to encourage people to make decisions based on the best assessment of available evidence. To do this, we should be prepared to support them when following this generally reliably procedure leads to choices which go wrong. Public servants are already given too many incentives to act sub-optimally. The old maxim that 'no one gets fired for buying IBM', for example, is played out in countless choices to do what everyone else is doing, even if the evidence is that it is not for the best. The best way to make sure people choose for the right reasons is to support them vigorously when they do so, even if the consequence is failure.**

- **Second, it is not as though the difference between exculpating explanation and false excuses is not pretty clear. It should be possible to show why someone ought to have chosen differently, if they indeed should have done. If we set out to see whether any given case is a justified explanation or a mere excuse, we will learn more about what was and what was not known, and how the decision was made, and will probably learn lessons for the future.**

- **Third, it is a simple matter of fairness. It is unjust for anyone to take the rap for decisions that they were perfectly justified in taking, or ones which have nothing to do with their ability to do their job. In June 2008, for example, Wendy Alexander felt compelled to resign as leader of the Scottish Parliament because of £8,000 of undeclared donations she had accepted for her leadership campaign. This was the quintessential honest mistake: Alexander had sought advice from parliamentary clerks who assured her she did not need to declare the donations. Yet she faced extreme opprobrium, even being suspended for one day by the Scottish parliament's SNP-chaired standards committee.**

- **Of course, in any particular resignation there are usually other, unseen factors at work. But the general point still holds: being too punitive about honest mistakes is both unjust and counter-productive, leading to discontinuity and disruption in important departments. It also fosters the ugly culture of hounding people out as soon as blood is sniffed. Scapegoats are often demanded for sacrifice when the principled thing is to refuse to draw their blood.**

Taking risks

This first kind of acceptable mistake fits into the Rumsfeld schemata under the category of 'unknown unknowns'. A reasonable decision turns out to be bad because of things we did not know we did not know. On other occasions, however, decisions have to be made which involve known unknowns. Rather than having every reason to suppose what we choose will work, sometimes we really do not know if it will. Nevertheless, it is often right to go ahead anyway.

Needless to say, such choices require some assessment of probabilities. 'It's a long shot, but it might just work' is a reasonable justification *in extremis,* when the alternative is catastrophe, but it is rash when not doing anything, or trying something else, is a much shorter shot.

It would be reassuring to think that there is a neat algorithm for deciding when such risks should be taken, and cost benefit analyses do indeed attempt to provide them. In principle, the algorithm is quite simple. If P = probability and B = net benefits (where a minus figure would indicate a net cost), then for each option we would calculate P × B and choose whichever option results in the highest score.

So, for example, if the probability of escaping near certain death by jumping 100 feet off a cliff is 0.01, then it is worth doing, because the alternative is a 1.0 probability of the ultimate negative score. Similarly, if one option has a 0.2 probability of saving 20 lives, and another has a 0.4 probability of saving 15, the second option is preferable, since on average that course of action would save six lives, as opposed to just four.

An accurate assessment of probability, however, does not give you an accurate prediction as to what will happen in any given case. Tossing three heads in a row is no less improbable than it always is when it actually happens. When you deal with probabilities, by definition you cannot know what will actually happen.

This fact is often trumped by the wisdom on hindsight, however. For example, if we take the option where there is a 0.4 probability of saving 15 lives over the option where there is a 0.2 probability of saving 20, it is more than possible that the calculations were exactly right, but in fact only three lives are actually saved. In such situations people find it hard to accept that the calculations were nonetheless right, even though we know that an unlikely event that actually happens is still unlikely.

This is another variety of 'honest mistake', which is best not described as a mistake at all. For what seem to be psychological rather than rational reasons, however, we are often compelled to think that people really should have known better. But making the wrong choice – in the sense of one that has a worse outcome than an alternative – is an unavoidable possibility when you are dealing with probabilities, which is sadly what we are doing a great deal of the time.

However, a bigger problem is that no matter how scientific risk analyses look, on many occasions, the variables are just too unknown to form the basis of a reasonable calculation. Political decisions are particularly vulnerable to this because, by definition, most new policies have not been tried before. Even those exported from abroad are not truly tested until they have been replanted in the local cultural soil. Large class sizes, for example, produce good school results in Japan and Korea, but it would be rash to assume they would work as well in more individualistic cultures, such as we have in the West.

If some decisions lead us to known unknowns where we cannot even make a rigorous assessment of the probability of success, bad outcomes are going to occur with alarming frequency. So why ever make such inherently risky decisions? Is it not a genuine, rather

than an honest, mistake to try something where the outcomes are so uncertain? Is it not culpable negligence to ignore the law of unforeseen consequences?

This is an important question, which goes to the heart of the difference between what we can loosely call progressives – who actively seek to change the nature and fabric of society – and conservatives. One of the core premises of conservatism is that we may not understand why things work as they do, and that society is a kind of ecological system that we meddle with at our peril.

This conservative challenge is not taken seriously enough by progressives, who see it as an excuse for maintaining historic injustices and privileges. Perhaps it often is, but at the very least it should urge a certain amount of caution. If the status quo more or less works and someone instigates a change that has disastrous results, we would be right to question their meddling. However, even conservatives allow that sometimes change is necessary or desirable, and that, as a result, some mistakes are inevitable. So the vital question is: when is it worth taking the risk of a change which has significant unknown consequences?

Such situations are subject to three variables: necessity of change, risk of doing so, and ease of reversibility. In cases where the status quo, far from being just fine, is rotten, greater risk is justifiable, and reversibility is less important. That does not mean any change, however reckless, is justified, of course. But it does justify the taking of certain risks in search of a better alternative, although the less easy it is to revert if the innovation fails, the more cautious we should be about forging ahead.

Situational factors have to be taken into account to apply these conditions. For example, the need not to risk making things considerably worse is not always specifiable in terms of percentages. If a service aimed at the jobless currently only reaches a handful of the intended service users at great expense, it is worth trying something else, even if that means half the current users drop out. But if a service prevents 10 deaths a year at reasonable cost, you want to think very carefully before risking a change that might lead to a halving of the success rate.

Reversibility also must be sensitive to context. Changes in the education system, for example, cause great disruption if they are made too often. On the other hand, where people use services as one-offs, it matters less if things are chopped and changed.

The current financial crisis has been a good example of how the three variables of necessity, risk and reversibility apply. Governments around the world have been forced to take drastic steps to try to stabilise the financial system. In retrospect, some will turn out to have been more effective than others. We can expect, for example, to learn that some measures cost billions, had little effect, and may even have ended up in part lining the pockets of already well-paid executives. But doing nothing has not been an option, and nor has it been possible to think through all the consequences before jumping in and doing something. We will praise some people for making brilliant choices, condemn others for making stupid ones, but also, if we are wise, excuse many others for making understandable mistakes. One reason for this is that not making any decisions at all would have been worse than making several, of which some were wrong. That is also why reversibility is not a critical consideration in this case: whichever direction we go in, it cannot in this case be back to what got us into this mess.

Matters become trickier when situations are bad, but not critical. Two good examples, precisely because results have been mixed, are the private finance initiative (PFI) and academy schools. PFI was a response to the problem that there were public service initiatives which needed implementing, but a lack of government money to fund them. Let us assume what is not agreed, that this is indeed a more or less accurate diagnosis of the problem.

If that were the case, was it justified to experiment with new funding arrangements, which brought in the private sector? Had such risks not been taken with PFI, and mistakes made, a great deal of public service infrastructure, such as the hundreds of dilapidated schools around the country, would not have been rebuilt or improved. Failure would not have been disastrous. The worst that could have happened was that some projects cost more than they might have done, but PFI spending was only a small proportion of total public spending anyway. For legal reasons, reversing particular projects to bring them back into complete public ownership would not necessarily have been easy, but nor would it have been impossible, and PFI contracts are in any case time-limited. Add to this the fact that doing nothing would have been even worse, and no better option was on the table, and the risk seems fully justified. There was clearly considerable need for change and the option for change selected carried an acceptable risk, even allowing for the fact that outcomes were too uncertain to be fully quantified.

That the balance of opportunity and risk was about right is reflected in the fact that the results have been neither an unmitigated triumph nor a disaster. In fact, reports from the Public Accounts Committee in 2003 and the National Audit Office in 2007 suggest that, although there are some serious problems with PFI, they concern details of implementation, not fundamental flaws. The main criticisms have been lengthy and complicated procurement procedures, and changes to contracts after they have been signed, both of which counter much of the supposed efficiency. Lessons can be learned from this and future PFI initiatives improved as a result.

We are still learning, of course. The government has had to step in to bail out some PFI projects whose contractors have been among the victims of the credit crunch. Despite claims by the TUC that this totally discredits the system, the sober truth seems to be that it is another wrinkle that may well be ironed out.

The same kind of defence could be used to justify experimenting with academy schools, which again have only been qualified successes. Leaving the education system as it was would have been a terrible dereliction of duty to future generations, but there were good reasons for thinking there were limits to what could have been done by simply injecting more cash into the system (which the government did as well. Another lesson: it's not necessarily experiment or do nothing.) Academy schools were first tried in relatively few areas, where the existing schools were not so good that there was a large risk in supplanting them. Again, we had the required combination of a high enough necessity for change, an acceptable risk of bringing it about, and the possibility of reverting to the status quo if it all went horribly wrong. Once again it seems the results are mixed. It looks as if the enduring legacy of academy schools will not be their precise structure, but the beginning of a shift to more autonomy for schools to run themselves, a legacy which could be very valuable indeed.

Situations where it is most justifiable to risk mistakes occur where change is highly desirable, but the stakes are low. For example, a local council might try a new refuse collection regime in a limited area, in the reasonable hope that, if it works, it could provide a model that could radically reduce the amount of waste going to landfill. Even if the scheme turns out to be a disaster, short of bringing plagues of rats out onto the streets, it is worth a go. Such risk taking should be encouraged because mistakes are not severely punished, successes can bring high rewards, and reversion is always possible.

Running such pilot projects is the least controversial form of action which we know will involve mistakes. But although innovation is widely praised as a good thing, there is scope to innovate a lot more than we do. For instance, we should think about running more parallel pilots, trying out different options in different places at the same time.

However, there are two mirror-image reasons why people may not like being part of pilots. One is that people often do not like the idea of being 'guinea pigs'. The other is that those not selected for trials sometimes resent the fact that others are getting the new-fangled services and they are still stuck with the old ones.

People readily fall into the reluctant guinea pig role because of a psychological bias called loss aversion, which means we value what we already have, and therefore might lose, more than we value what we might lose the opportunity to gain if we do not make changes. For example, if you are given a free book and lose it, you are more likely to be annoyed than you would be if you discovered that you could have picked up a free copy but did not. Similarly, we are more worried about losing the perhaps poor services we already have than we are of passing up the opportunity for better ones we do not yet have.

Reluctant guinea pigs can therefore be difficult to reassure. The best we can do is truthfully tell them that the old ways were not working and that we have good grounds for thinking the alternative might well be much better and is not likely to be much worse. If this case cannot be made, then the guinea pigs' complaints are justified.

More interesting is the 'missing out' charge. For if the response to the guinea pig question is sound, why not try the alternative on everyone? The best reason is the uncertainty principle again: any radical change may have unforeseen consequences, so it is wise not to be more radical than is necessary. In particular, the more widely changes are made, the less easy they are to reverse if a trial goes wrong. The problem with explaining this clearly is that the more you reassure those afraid of missing out, the more exposed the guinea pigs will feel.

In practice, loss aversion means that most of the time people will not be queuing up to take part in pilot studies. Despite the risks of innovation, in general we are too shy of it, not too keen on it. But if there is a popular sense of missing out on change, we need to ask whether we should not be bolder with our experimentation. Since people do not generally like change, if they are demanding it, it may be a sign that what they currently have is so bad they are willing to take risks to improve it. If this is the case, we should listen.

The idea that some changes are 'worth a go' is therefore one which can be robustly justified. As long as certain conditions apply, we should be prepared to try more new things. If they turn out to be wrong, we should be sanguine about the mistake, as long as the possibility of error was built into the rationale for making the change in the first place. Politically, this does present various challenges, because people are more forgiving of mistakes that might be made than they are of those that have already been made. But political leaders just have to be more upfront, admitting the possibility of failure and then pointing out that this was always possible if things do go wrong.

Keeping failure real

In encouraging a more mistake-friendly culture, it is important to pre-empt the danger that the whole idea of mistakes becomes meaningless. Just as success is only meaningful if failure is a real possibility, acceptable mistakes are only a genuine category if unacceptable ones remain.

In Britain right now, many people are in no mood to become more forgiving about mistakes because they feel that individuals already do not pay the proper price for them. MPs have been lambasted for some of their excessive expenses claims, but what has

irritated people the most is that they seem to be facing little or no sanction for their bad behaviour: 'In the private sector, you'd be straight out of the door for that' has become a popular refrain. 'Fat cat bosses' receiving hefty bonuses, even as they are sacked or as financial markets go into meltdown, are another example in the public's mind of miscreants getting away with murder.

When it came to taking responsibility for mistakes, parliament used to lead by example. But it has ceased to do so. Parliament used to be governed by the principle of ministerial responsibility, whereby if there were a major failure in a department, the minister in charge would resign. This would happen even if the minister was personally blameless. So, for example, three Foreign Office ministers resigned in the aftermath of the Falklands Invasion in 1982, in recognition that the department had failed to see it coming. However, no subsequent enquiry pinned any blame on the ministers themselves.

A year later, however, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Jim Prior, did not resign when 38 IRA prisoners escaped from the Maze prison. Instead of taking responsibility for everything that happens on their watch, these days ministers tend only to take responsibility (sometimes, at least) for policy failures, not operational matters. To see ministerial responsibility in action today, you have to look to India, where several senior figures resigned or offered to resign after the Mumbai outrage, even though no specific failure was the direct result of decisions made by those who fell on their swords.

In many ways the weakening of ministerial responsibility is quite sensible, but the overall effect has been that fewer people take responsibility for mistakes. A high burden of proof is now required before anyone stands up and takes the flack. Quite understandably, this has led many to believe that there are insufficient penalties for mistakes.

In this climate, to argue that we need to be more forgiving of mistakes would seem to be bizarre. What is needed is therefore a new deal with the electorate: in order for decision makers to be allowed to make justified mistakes, there must be clear sanctions for those who make unjustified ones. Most obviously, such mistakes include those that demonstrate incompetence, and those that we can sensibly conclude should have been foreseen. But the same variables as those used for identifying justifiable mistakes should also form the basis of judging when they are unjustifiable.

- **First, if there was not a strong necessity for change, a failed innovation should be judged more harshly than when the status quo was not an option. For example, it should be unacceptable to introduce a new system which ends up costing more than fixing or improving the old one and does not offer any improvements.**

- **Second, if a change not only does not work, but makes things significantly worse, then that has to be taken as evidence that the innovation was too risky and should not have been made.**

- **Third, if a failed innovation turns out to be very difficult and costly to reverse, then that again should be taken to indicate a failure of judgement about the critical importance of reversibility.**

When any of these unjustified mistakes is made, those responsible should be expected to resign, or forced to do so. Such resignations should be mandatory even if the changes were made in good faith and the bad consequences were not readily foreseeable. As India's national home affairs minister Shivraj Patil said when he resigned in the aftermath of the 2008 Mumbai attacks, it is a question of 'moral responsibility'.

Conventions like these are needed to preserve the distinction between justified and unjustified mistakes. Unless the latter carry a sanction, the former just will not be

tolerated. Paradoxically, if we had more such resignations, the extent to which mistakes are tolerated would increase. People should be willing to stand down because their judgement turned out to be flawed, even if, in retrospect, they could not have seen how they could have judged differently. To make decisions on public funding is a great responsibility, and failure should not be taken lightly, even if it is understandable.

This would mark the return of the honourable resignation. These days, people rarely resign unless they are forced to do so, and hence end up walking away in disgrace. But when people walk willingly, even when we know that they did their best and did not behave awfully, we look more kindly on their failures. Estelle Morris, for example, was widely praised when she quit as education secretary saying, 'I have not felt I have been as effective as I should be, or as effective as you need me to be.' Ministers who resigned under the convention of ministerial responsibility often returned to government with little fuss, sometimes barely months later. Those hounded out rarely do so or, like Peter Mandelson, need years to be rehabilitated.

Politics is too important for us to shrug our shoulders when things fail. But it is too important that failures are allowed to happen for us never to tolerate them. To maintain the right equilibrium, people have to both fall for their mistakes when they are big and costly, and be excused them when they are entirely justified. You cannot simply have a mistake-tolerant or mistake-intolerant culture: we need to be as intolerant of the wrong failures as we are tolerant of the right ones.

Barriers to a mistake culture

Despite the strength of the rational case for a more mistake-tolerant political culture, it would be naïve to think that all we now need do is make changes accordingly. Where irrationality persists it is usually because of hard-to-change psychological, sociological and institutional factors. Any political programme that neglects these is doomed to failure, no matter how effective it is on paper.

One of the biggest psychological barriers to change is that we find it very hard not to respond positively to the appearance of strength and consistency, and negatively to any appearance of weakness. For example, numerous experiments concerning eye-witness testimony show that the more confident a witness is, the more she is likely to be believed. But the evidence from psychology suggests that, if anything, there is a negative correlation between degree of conviction and reliability of testimony. The person who is more careful, admitting that they cannot be sure, is often more reliable than the person who says 'definitely', but is much less likely to be believed.

In politics, the same general bias applies. Terms of praise for a leader include 'steadfast', 'resolute' and 'person of conviction'. But people get criticised for 'flip-flopping' or doing 'u-turns'. This is a real problem. Talk in abstract terms and people will readily agree that we need to be mature about mistakes. But in practice, they react more positively to those who exude confidence and admit hardly any. This is surely one reason why Margaret Thatcher stayed in power for so long. She was probably the most vilified prime minister since the war, if not ever, yet when faced with the ballot box, everyone else seemed weak and lily-livered.

Although politicians are criticised for being obsessed with image management, if we are serious about getting more tolerance of the right kind of mistakes, we cannot afford to ignore the problem of perception. Fortunately, however, it is possible to combine the

appearance of strength with the admission of failure. The key is in the framing. For example, we tend to talk about 'admitting' a mistake has been made, and that the appropriate thing to do then is apologise for it. Such ways of putting things foregrounds what has gone wrong and forces the explainer onto the defensive. The alternative is to report more fully on what has and has not worked, and then to talk positively about what the next steps are.

Politicians are often forced into doing something a little like this, but the tendency is always to gloss over what has not worked, or to give a ritual apology if the pressures to do so are high enough. So, for example, when Ed Balls announced in October 2008 that SATS for 14-year-olds were going to be abolished, he talked a lot about what was good in the current system, simply acknowledging that advice had been taken, leading to the end of some tests. Everything was presented positively, but there was no acknowledgement that anything was actually wrong.

Instead, what Balls should have done first was explain why the testing regime had been introduced. He should then have said, as he did, what has worked about it. But then he should have analysed what had not worked: tests were not treated enough as a means to an end, but as ends in themselves, and as a result, what should have been regular indicators of progress had become a series or oppressive obstacles. Therefore he had decided to relieve this burden by abolishing SATS at 14 so that the testing regime as a whole could be rebalanced in order to fulfil the function it was originally meant to. Such a narrative would have been honest about what had gone wrong but also would have indicated a fundamental rightness of purpose and a strength and determination to keep learning and push forward. Instead, Balls sounded like a man who was trying to put a positive spin on a u-turn.

The necessary rhetorical shift needs both to advocate the positive benefits of learning from mistakes and to stress constantly the dangers of not doing so. Comedian Stephen Colbert, for example, hit a nerve when he said of George W Bush: 'You know where he stands. He believes the same thing Wednesday that he believed on Monday, no matter what happened Tuesday.'

Key to this kind of reframing is getting away from the simple 'worked/did not work' dichotomy. We should foster a habit in government and public service of breaking things down into what bits worked and what bits did not. Such an approach is not only more honest and accurate; it also allows us to tell a more compelling narrative about how we are moving forward to better things through the experience of mistakes and successes.

The Humphrys effect

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to a more mature mistake culture, however, is that when a lot of people own up to mistakes, it creates an opportunity for the less honest to cover up their own and appear stronger in comparison. This is similar to many scenarios in game theory, where we can all get the best result just as long as we all cooperate. But if we do, there is always the opportunity for other parties to 'defect' and take advantage of our honesty. In such situations, the incentive to cooperate evaporates, with the perverse result that no one gets the best result.

The solution is to make sure that defection is punished. The person who refuses to acknowledge what has not worked needs to pay a price which is larger than the one demanded when they admit mistakes in a timely and honest fashion. This links in with

what I said earlier about the need for unacceptable mistakes to have a real price if acceptable ones are to be truly accepted. Even if a mistake was justified, not to admit it as soon as it becomes obvious that it was a mistake should have as strong a sanction as making an unjustified mistake.

Indeed, not seeing or acknowledging that things are going wrong is often a worse crime than making a bad choice in the first place. Initial decisions are often made from a position of at least partial ignorance. Seeing that things are not working, in contrast, merely requires that we look at the evidence that is already there. Making mistakes has to be seen as a lesser sin than not clearing up after them.

There is, however, one other obstacle which is harder to deal with: what might be called the John Humphrys effect. I can imagine a politician heeding the advice of this essay, only to end up on the *Today* programme being subjected to ridicule: 'If you got it wrong before, why should we trust you to get it right in the future?'; 'We do not want people to admit they were wrong, we want ones who will get it right in the first place'; 'If you won't resign even when you screw things up, when will you?'. All these questions have reasonable answers, but the problem is that the mere asking of them, especially in an accusatory, incredulous tone, makes the person questioned look under siege and weak.

I am not sure what the answer to this is. The danger of being made to look weak is one of the biggest problems in creating a mature mistake culture. This is exacerbated by the fact that potential detractors are engaged in asymmetric war. Opposition can jump on governmental mistakes knowing that, right now, the tables cannot be turned. The media is in an even more invulnerable position.

The best solution to this problem is the conviction that, explained correctly, the admission of mistakes need not look like weakness, but strength. This is why there is no point in being half-hearted about embracing a mature mistake culture. There has to be conviction about its intellectual and moral integrity, a conviction rooted in good reason. Critical to this is the insistence that real mistakes must not be forgiven, but punished. The credibility of the claim that these mistakes are acceptable is inextricably linked with the admission that those mistakes are not.

This mistake culture has to be embraced from a position of strength, otherwise it looks like belated contrition. Whoever wins the next election must from day one say that it is going to be both open and unrepentant about justified mistakes, and tough on unjustified ones, and those who fail to spot what is going wrong early enough.

The analogy here is with tolerance. Toleration is not a virtue when it is indiscriminate. Then it is just weakness and absence of any moral conviction. Toleration requires that we do not tolerate everything and, in particular, that we do not tolerate intolerance.

Toleration for mistakes is likewise only a virtue if it comes with conditions. I have sketched out what those conditions might be as it is vital for a real mistake culture that they are met. Otherwise, people will justifiably conclude that the plea for more maturity about mistakes is really no more than a plea for immunity from responsibility.

Conclusion

The plea for a more mature mistake culture is not a call for undeserved forgiveness. The kinds of 'mistakes' some MPs have made in their expense claims do not fulfil any of the conditions of justified mistake making I have set out. Greater leniency where it is

appropriate does not preclude strict holding to account where it is not. Nevertheless, any call to be more accepting of error can sound utopian. A world in which people are sanguine about things going wrong is as likely as one where lions lie down with lambs. It can be done, of course, just as long as you have a fresh supply of lambs each day.

This is not, however, the age-old cry for more honesty and integrity in public life. As David Runciman argues in his *Political Hypocrisy*,[2] it is not only naïve but undesirable to demand that politicians are never hypocritical. What we need to do is to make sure that they are sincere about the right things. Runciman believes that the highest priority should be placed on 'maintaining the conditions under which democracy is possible'. A mature mistake culture is one of these conditions, because without it people are punished for mistakes they should have made, while others get away with making inexcusable ones. This is what matters, not whether people are sincere when they say they feel they ought to resign, or whether they lie about their personal motivations. The heart and soul of the erring politician is no business of public life; what matters are the more objective criteria of how necessary, risky and reversible the decisions they made were.

The rational case for such a culture, however, is a rigorous one. What needs to be overcome are the sociological, psychological and institutional barriers that make the admission of error so hard to deal with. It is foolish to think that just as long as the logic is right, the case will eventually be clinched, if it is made enough. Unfortunately, the rhetoric as well as the logic of the mistake culture has to be developed.

There are reasons to think that such a rhetoric can be very powerful. To those who seek to cast the mistake culture as weakness, certain tropes need to be repeated again and again: you are the people who never admit when they have gone wrong, or do so too late, after too much damage has been done. You are the people who would rather let things rot than risk a cure that might not completely work. We are the people who take responsibility for our mistakes, while you neither learn from the small ones nor own up to the big ones.

Such a rhetoric can work, just as long as it is backed up by reality: both the practice and preaching need to be carried out with consistency and conviction. But why should anyone risk trying? Is it worth risking the mistake of embracing the culture of mistakes?

The answer comes by following the advice self-referentially. The mistake culture should be piloted, mindful of the importance of necessity of change, the risk of doing so, and ease of reversibility if necessary. It is probably too late now for the chancellor to be upfront about how some of the measures he has taken to deal with the credit crunch might not work, but future crises could provide the opportunity for an honest admission that risks need to be taken and so mistakes might be made. In any area of government where improvement is needed, there is an opportunity to say why acceptable risks are being taken, and why, if they do not work out, lessons will be learned or the changes reversed. Saying this after the event is too late: it just looks like back-tracking and excuse-making.

Embracing the principles and values of the mistake culture I have championed will not be a rash gamble to see if it works or does not, but a justified experiment in seeing what works and what does not. Then we can assess things from there, learn and move on. It is not risk free, but the status quo is not working so well that messing with it is not a risk worth taking. And if it ends in disaster, I can promise an honourable resignation – by the director of Demos, of course.

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NOTES & REFERENCES

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