

# Political decision-making in a crisis

In March 2010, a British Academy Forum looked at how political decisions are taken during a crisis (whether 'foot and mouth' or 7/7).

Dr Catherine Haddon considers the lessons that can be learned for the future.

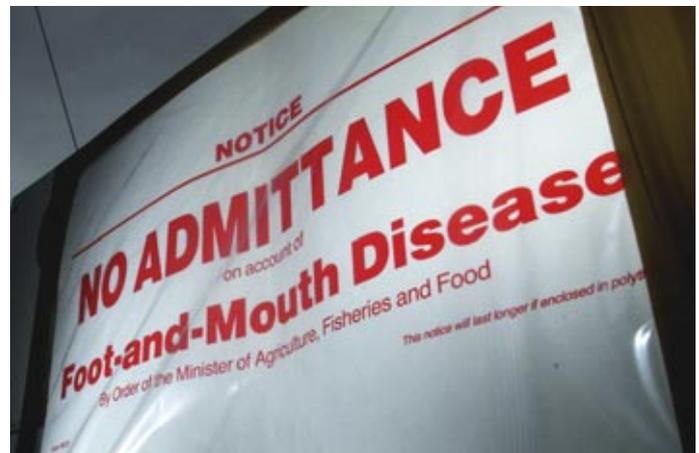
FROM FUEL PROTESTS, foot and mouth outbreaks and floods, to terrorist attacks and bank collapses, the last Government faced a number of serious crises that often had terrible and lasting consequences. In both the successes and failures of their handling, officials and politicians learnt important lessons at Cabinet, departmental and local agency level. A comprehensive guide for officials and a shorter one for ministers have recently been completed, and officials now undergo training and rehearsal sessions fairly routinely. Nonetheless, such events are hugely challenging even for a relatively seasoned government, as the volcanic ash cloud and the confusion around the UK government's responsibility and response in April 2010 reminded us. Looking at both the last 13 years and further back into the history of crisis decision-making demonstrates just how important it is that crisis-handling machinery is cared for, and lessons of behaviour and response are imparted to new generations and to a new government. This was the subject of a recent British Academy Forum attended by representatives from the civil service, political, media and academic worlds, and from the Institute for Government.

## History

The current system for managing emergencies in the UK has its origins in the early 1970s, and has been studied in depth by Rosaleen Hughes, one of the Forum participants. Hughes described how, during the miner's strike of January-February 1972, 'the country was really just days away from the end of coal-fired electricity generation' and the loss of 75% of energy supply. The strike was 'handled very badly politically and logistically... The system was very slow to find out what was happening and even slower to react to it.' The scale of the shock of these events led to 'long post-mortems' which concluded that the system was broken, in particular the emergency committee of ministers, which was large and unwieldy. A smaller committee was established in summer 1972, known as the Civil Contingencies Committee (with a Civil Contingencies Unit to service it) incorporating both ministers and officials. This Committee met in the Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR) and 'was integrated into the same system as planning for nuclear war'. The new system did not resolve many of the problems surrounding crises, particularly industrial disputes, but it was a vast improvement on its predecessor and forms the basis for the present system. It also played a major role from the 1970s onwards in dealing with counter-terrorist emergencies such as the Iranian Embassy siege. This would continue to be an important element in its character.

These origins of COBR in the 1970s left an important legacy in how government coped with civil emergencies. As one observer of both eras – former Permanent Secretary Sir Richard Mottram – put it, the fact that 'COBR came out of a defence and nuclear release set of arrangements ...

had an interesting impact... It drove the way communications were thought of ... [and it] gave it a defence flavour, which may not have been that helpful'. COBR retained its role and importance in counter-terrorism emergencies, and successive Home Secretaries and officials were experienced in this area. However, with the end of the Cold War there was a reduced focus on rehearsing transition to war and planning for civil defence. This, and other factors, seems to have led to a degree of atrophy in crisis handling, specifically over civil emergencies. The scale of the problem became apparent when, between autumn 2000 and summer 2001, three major civil crises occurred to which the country 'seemed almost unable to respond'. These were the three 'F's: the fuel protest in September 2000; major floods in October and November of 2000; and the foot and mouth disease outbreak that lasted from February to October 2001. All generated lessons, the machinery and official training and rehearsal were improved. Yet, while improvements



DEPARTURES				
Time	Destination	Flight	Gate	Remark
16:55	FRANKFURT	LH4009		DUE TO VOLCANIC ASH
17:10	ZURICH	LX485		DUE TO VOLCANIC ASH
17:10	EDINBURGH	BA8712		CANCELLED
17:20	DUBLIN	AF9119		CANCELLED
17:35	AMSTERDAM	VG240		CANCELLED
17:35	EDINBURGH	AF5165		DUE TO VOLCANIC ASH
17:45	NANTES	AF5209		DUE TO VOLCANIC ASH
17:50	ROTTERDAM	VG290		CANCELLED
17:50	AMSTERDAM	VG240		DUE TO VOLCANIC ASH
17:50	MILAN/LINATE	AP4219		CANCELLED
18:00	EDINBURGH	BA8708		CANCELLED
18:05	ANTWERP	AF5237		DUE TO VOLCANIC ASH
18:10	GLASGOW	BA8728		CANCELLED
18:20	ROTTERDAM	VG292		DUE TO VOLCANIC ASH
18:20	ZURICH	LX487		DUE TO VOLCANIC ASH
18:20	PARIS - ORLY	AF5027		CANCELLED
18:30	COPENHAGEN	QF3628		CANCELLED

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Figure 1. Political crises caused by nature.

Top: The outbreak of foot and mouth disease in 2001. Photo: Reuters/Ian Waldie. Bottom: Flights cancelled because of the ash cloud from the Icelandic volcano in April 2010. Photo: Reuters/Andrew Wimming.

occurred, particularly for agencies and emergency services after the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, as well as the central COBR machinery, such events will always prove a major challenge and their handling will acutely affect people's lives.

### Different behaviour

For ministers, particularly new ministers, knowing the role they play and the forces that will be upon them are a real challenge. As the former Permanent Secretary at the Home Office and Security Intelligence Coordinator, Sir David Omand, put it:

you are going to behave rather differently; the pace of decision-making is going to be much faster than you have been used to; the mechanics of your relationship with your officials are going to be rather different, and very importantly, you are going to have to take more decisions on less information than you have been used to. That last point means you have to stick your neck out ... it is about risk management. You do the best you can, but it may or may not be the best decision at the time and you are not going to know that as you take it... You have to live with that and just get on. That is not how most policy-making process works.

With this in mind, and based on the expertise of two leading officials in crisis management in government – Alun Evans, who was Secretary for the reviews into both the 2001 and 2007 foot and mouth outbreaks, and Simon Webb, who has spent the last year developing both officials' and ministerial guides to crisis handling – the British Academy Forum discussed a number of important lessons for ministers in how the machine works and what their role should be.

### 1. Anticipation of potential crises

There was some discussion about the nature of different crises – those that stem from policy failures or develop over a period of time, as opposed to those that seem to come out of the blue. The government has become much better at dealing with crises of a similar nature to the last one, but as Professor Peter Hennessy reminded the Forum, there 'is always an unforeseen element [to a crisis] even if it is a repeat' where a particular crisis 'suddenly rises up again in a different form in a different generation'. At the same time, this does not mean resorting to fatalism: crises will occur, but 'the trick is how to prepare and deal with them in the circumstances in which they happen.'

### 2. Preparation of contingency planning and training

Officials now have extensive training and practice drills, something that many believed helped the reaction to the terrorist attacks in London on 7 July 2005. A question remains as to how much ministers need to be involved in such training. In the US the outgoing Bush Administration arranged for a crisis rehearsal for the Obama team. In the UK, this was not constitutionally possible before the 2010 election, but ministers have much greater continuity of support from officials. As well as potential rehearsal opportunities in their departments, there is still a question about how much ministers should be encouraged to think collectively about how they might react and what lessons they can learn from previous governments' experience.

### 3. Reaction to an emergency or escalating crisis

Poor 'initial political and public handling' in the early stages of a crisis can have a severe impact on confidence, as well as knock-on effects on response and recovery. One part of this can be recognising that you are in a crisis. As Sir David Omand put it, 'it is when the ship no longer responds to the helm and you are about to be swamped by the waves and reports of damage are coming in faster than normal processes can cope with'. This was a particular factor in the fuel protests. Though the most acute phase only lasted five days, the government was slow to realise how serious an impact the blockades were having.

### 4. Communication

This is a problem both of the centre communicating with those directly dealing with the crisis, as well as with the media and, most importantly, with the public and especially those affected by the crisis. The ability to gather information and co-ordinate it in the middle of a fast-moving event is a huge challenge. Increasingly, as the former Ministry of Defence and Department for Transport official Simon Webb put it, governments 'are liable to be outpaced in the public information space', especially by new social media in terms of recording information and transmitting what is actually happening. This continues in the aftermath of a crisis when the issues of narratives, accountability and responsibility, and the role of an inquiry, are very important. For former Home Secretary Charles Clarke, 'you underestimate at your peril the desire of everybody to know what happened'.

In certain crises, where government decision-making can form the basis for the solution, such as in the fuel protests, this can prove to be more difficult. One of the issues during that crisis was whether the Government should change its policy towards the fuel escalator tax, the issue that had caused the protest in the first place. At the same time, the crisis was becoming acute because of the specific threat to human life in hospitals that were running out of fuel. This made the role of ministers and their decision-making a crucial component, and only partially separate from the logistics of being able to get fuel deliveries restarted.

### 5. Delegation

Too often there is a desire to try to gain control by managing a crisis from the centre. In actual fact it is largely the role of local officials and agencies. Where the centre of government is important is in being able to see the overall strategy and picture. Also, many crises will cross departmental boundaries. There is often not only an issue of co-ordinating action and communication, but also the important question of which ministry should be the lead department. A number of crises discussed had seen confusion between Departments and the centre of Government about who held responsibility for certain decisions. It is important that ministers also understand the limits of their role. For Charles Clarke, Home Secretary during the 7/7 bombings, one of the most important things was to avoid 'taking up the energies of the key operational people' by having them reporting to committees when they needed to be 'doing their job'. Instead, he saw his role being 'to try and protect the operational people in those circumstances'.

## 6. Expert advice

One of the greatest challenges, along with access to information, is the ability to analyse that information in a timely and accurate fashion. This is particularly important in terms of advising non-expert ministers who may then have to make the decisions on the basis of such advice. Conflicting ‘experts’ may appear, not least in the media, and the fog of excess information and conflicting accounts of what is happening may dominate the narrative. It is important to remember that perception of the narrative of what is occurring can often be as important as, or more so, than what is actually happening (or subsequently becomes clear has happened). Credibility is hugely important, and the role of expert advice is crucial in this respect, as in other parts of government.

## 7. Public expectations

Individuals expectations about access to information and support have greatly increased, not least because of the greater role of social media. This was seen subsequently in April 2010 when, after a volcanic ash cloud forced a no-flight zone for several days across Europe, the UK government was seen as slow to react and then confused in its response to the thousands of Britons stranded. Simon Webb reminded the Forum that, after the Asian Tsunami of 2005, much of the Swedish government decided not to come back from its Christmas vacation on the grounds that people should have insurance and the airlines should get them back. After two parliamentary inquiries, Swedish Ministers were forced to resign over the issue. In the same vein, the Forum also wondered whether, having vastly improved its domestic crisis handling, the UK machinery was geared up to handling similar issues abroad and of synthesising its domestic and foreign machinery.

## 8. Ministerial role

Political decision-making in a crisis is sometimes misunderstood. For Simon Webb, who has created a checklist for ministers for the early

stages of a crisis, ‘finding a ministerial role is about two things in the early hours’. One is the ‘strategic outcome’. Decisions made in the early hours of a crisis can often be crucial for reducing the harm caused. On 7 July 2005, for example, ministers were clear that London had to ‘stay open’ for business. Giving overall direction and the focus of an outcome helps the machine so that it does not just cope, but seeks to steer. The second immediate role for ministers is in helping to communicate this strategy. Actually delivering it may not be the right role for a minister publically, depending on the nature of the crisis (note the roles played by Chief Medical or Veterinary officers during medical or animal health scares), but there is still a ministerial role in considering how the key messages should be formulated.

## 9. COBR

One of the issues discussed was the personality to chair COBR.

COBR meets with the news going on around it; it needs tight chairing in order to deal with the situation, depending on who is there and what is going on, and this is not easy to achieve. I have always thought the role of chairperson in meetings is extremely important and it has been given insufficient attention as a means of ensuring you do things in the right way. You need a strong chair who can deal with strong personalities sat around the table.

There is also a question about how COBR should be used and whether the chair understands this. One of the big problems identified in crises was ‘groupthink’, where consensus pushes out critical analysis or alternative views that might prove crucial. The role of COBR was seen as vital to this, it was ‘not necessary and a waste of time for COBR to be just getting up to date, you can have people commissioned to do that and they can circulate it in advance. The ideas to get on the table at COBR are the forward options, and to have a proper discussion which includes having a sceptic there to try and break into groupthink’.



Figure 2. *The day after the 7 July 2005 bombings in London, Home Secretary Charles Clarke meets faith leaders at the Home Office. Photo: Gareth Fuller/AFP/Getty Images*

### Learning lessons

Of course, in all this there is a human dimension that must be remembered and means that no 'system' is itself adequate. Instead it is also about 'the personalities of individual people ... [and] their qualities. People are very aware that they will be judged by history and how they behaved at this key moment. People behave in different ways'. The importance of learning lessons about crisis handling and in thinking about how to impart them to new generations of government should itself be part of contingency planning. The Conservatives, as part of their preparation for government work while in Opposition, were keen to undertake some training on this subject, but this was blocked. It is also why the Institute for Government has incorporated crisis management as part of its induction programmes for new ministers and for special advisers. Indeed, as Peter Riddell pointed out, there have been a number of crises in recent years where 'the system coped rather well'. Nonetheless, these crises have had huge and lasting

effects on people's lives. Reflection about the government's capacity to respond, *including* the effectiveness of its ministers, should be treated with appropriate seriousness.

#### Note

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Dr Catherine Haddon is Research Fellow at the Institute for Government. She co-authored the Institute's important publications on *Making Minority Government Work* and *Transitions – Preparing for Changes of Government*.

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The British Academy Forum on 'Political/ministerial decision-making during a crisis' was held on 30 March 2010. It was chaired by Professor Peter Hennessy FBA.

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