

Munira Mirza ([00:00:08](#)):

Good afternoon everybody, and welcome back. I hope you've all enjoyed the Unconference session. I've lost my Unconference virginity and I enjoyed it very much. Some of you may have felt the same and had lots of really interesting and stimulating talks and discussions. But now we're back in this room talking about how to be good stewards of progress. So, this morning, we've heard a lot about the history of economic development in the UK and the different causes and drivers of both growth and decline and we've also talked about some of the current challenges around regulation and barriers to growth including concerns about safety and concerns about the environment and so on. In this session, we're going to try and talk about what people who work in public institutions or who are motivated to try and change public institutions or drive innovation should be doing.

([00:01:11](#)):

So we're, we're moving from very high level to, I think, quite concrete considerations. And hopefully we can all take some lessons back into our everyday lives. So for this session, I'm really pleased to introduce a brilliant panel. First speaking will be James Phillips, who is a former special advisor to the Prime Minister previous Prime Minister Boris Johnson and also my former colleague in Number 10. He was working on the science and technology brief. I won't give long biographies for everybody. You can look them up on our website. But in the interest of time I'll just give very brief ones. And then next, Stian Westlake, who is the Executive Chair of the Economic and Social Research Council and is also an author. He has also worked previously in government as well as a special advisor. You'll start to recognise a theme as I introduce everyone. Ben Reinhart, who hasn't worked in the UK government as a special advisor, <laugh> is the CEO of Speculative Technologies, which he will talk a little bit about. And then finally to the far right, not politically, of course, <laugh>

Rachel Wolf ([00:02:25](#)):

Not at this conference, definitely <laugh>

Munira Mirza ([00:02:30](#)):

Rachel Wolf is the founding partner of Public First and was the founder of the New Schools Network which I think she will talk about briefly. And was also a special advisor in government in Number 10 and who I have worked with as well. I'm delighted to have such a fantastic panel. Everyone is gonna speak for about five minutes each, and then we're going to try and have a kind of conversation amongst ourselves on the panel, but also bring the audience in as much as possible. So hopefully this will be a very interactive session. So I'm delighted to hand over to James now. Thank you.

James Phillips ([00:03:10](#)):

Great. First of all, thank you for having me here. I thought I would talk a little bit about applied metascience, 'cause some people here might not be familiar with that. And that'll serve as an introduction not only to the rest of what I'm gonna say but also what other panellists are talking about. And I think the phrase, stewards of progress is to me a very good one in that it implies sort of almost like tending to a forest and looking after it, rather than micromanaging and controlling it in a top-down way. And I think that latter mindset has got too predominant in science and technology policy over the last few decades. So if you're a steward, what sort of signals should you be looking for in this system and, trying to balance and correct?

([00:03:51](#)):

And I think the first is really the seed of the applied metascience movement is that we should begin studying the processes of science itself and then trying to create new kinds of scientific institutions, which address gaps in the existing landscape. So why should you care about the institutional landscape that supports science and technology? Well, in the UK and indeed around the world, almost all science and technology that's publicly funded is organised in a very, very similar way. It has peer review, it relies on an academic hierarchy. It typically has a very strong division between discovery and engineering, as though these are two separate things. And yet, if you look at the post-war period places like Bell Labs, Xerox Park, we're organised in very, very different ways and very, very different to modern academia. And so the applied meta science movement is trying to go back and say, right, if we go to the origins of the internet, if we go to the origins of molecular biology, of telecommunications, what do we see?

[\(00:04:43\)](#):

And we see a system which is far more diverse in how it was organised than what we have today. This has been noted in a number of neat recent reviews, including one with Tony Blair and William Hague, which I was a part of, and another one by Paul Nurse. So I think one of the challenges for the next 10 years is what does the next generation of scientific institutions look like and how do they address the challenges that we have today? And I'm gonna point to a couple of specific challenges that I think are very important at the early stage, but there are also many others. So the first one is really inspired by a quote from Sydney Brenner, who laid much of the groundworks of molecular biology here in Cambridge. And he said that I strongly believe that the only way to encourage innovation is to give it to the young.

[\(00:05:22\)](#):

The young have a great advantage in that they are ignorant, because ignorance in science is very important. If you are not ignorant, you can't try new things. I always work in fields of which I'm totally ignorant. Today, we have invented a culture in science based on the slavery of graduate students. and so I knew Sydney when he was working in America where I was working, and he sort of corrupted me early on to this view that the senior professors and the most learned and knowledgeable people were actually not the experts on what the future would look like. And that you should be looking to the edges, you should be looking to the outliers, and especially to the young, to try and work out what the next phase of science and technology will look like. And from my experiences in government and before, the UK's R and D system is very strongly predicated on knowledge and experience being the guide to discovery rather than exploration and creative promise.

[\(00:06:10\)](#):

And I think if you look at places like Bell Labs Xerox Park, they were far younger than the power structures that we have within UK research. And I think this is a major area for innovation. I'd also say that I think if you look, say at the Blair Hague report, where we spoke about reforming the advice on artificial intelligence, we said we should close down the AI Council and some other bodies. And one of the main reasons for that is there are 25 year old men and women in Open AI and Deep Mind who know far more about this cutting edge of artificial intelligence than you have from the kind of grandees who can often end up on these advisory panels. And the government should be talking and listening to the actual researchers and the actual scientists, not people who last did research 30 years ago and are experts of sitting on government panels.

[\(00:06:53\)](#):

And I think I saw during Covid how disastrous that can be. And I think it's a really important lesson that great scientists do not look like great scientists. Isaac Newton did not look like he does in those portraits when he actually did his great work. Einstein did not have white hair when he did his great research. And this is a really important lesson. I think the second part is about how you have effective public r and

d organisations. The Cambridge laboratory for molecular biology is basically a kind of Nobel Prize factory in the 1950s to 1970s. During that time, it laid the groundwork of much of modern medicine, and yet it was reviewed every five years with a five page progress report where they said, here are the discoveries we've made, please give us some more money. Today, they have five, 500 page reports every five years, auditing every minutia of how it operates and being subject to all kinds of incentives and top-down control.

[\(00:07:46\)](#):

Now, when we set up the Advanced Research and Invention Agency, we insisted on two things which are fundamentally important. One, we did not give it a mission. There was a huge amount of fuss that we were saying, what should it work on? What should it do? And this was criticised a lot in parliament. If we'd done it, then it would've been net zero. If we'd done it today, it would be AI safety. We do it next year, it'll probably do something different. In 1957, they did not give ARPA a mandate to create the Internet. No one knew what that was. No one knew what personal computing was. We are too addicted to that kind of mindset, and that's why it was open-ended. And second to close it has a single business case. Air gapped from government, government has nothing to do with choosing what it does. And this is enshrined in, in law that the government has very little ability to control it. And I think this is extremely difficult to get through Whitehall. It took a lot of effort from several people in this room, including Munira. and happy to talk in questions more about how we did that. So in summary, we need to look to the young, we need new institutions of science, and we need to stop micromanaging the future, recognising that it is unknowable.

Munira Mirza [\(00:08:49\)](#):

Brilliant. Thank you. And within five minutes as well. Ben. Alright.

Ben Reinhardt [\(00:08:55\)](#):

Hi everybody. I am Ben Reinhardt. I'm a little bit of an outlier here. I am an American, I am a mechanical engineer. I haven't advised the British government and I run a private non-profit research organisation. There should be a slide here. Yes. Thank you. So to introduce what I want you guys all to think about. Does anybody know what this is? Biochemical pathway in a cell. Thank you, James. Yes, <laugh>. So, these are the biochemical pathways of the cell. This is how cells, this is, these are all the processes by which cells turn molecules into energy and other molecules. And what I want to propose is that progress and innovation happens the same way in the sense that there are thousands and thousands of different pieces of work that need to happen that feed into each other to make things happen.

[\(00:09:52\)](#):

And similarly, if we extend the metaphor if each one of these pathways become, like if even one of these transitions becomes even 1% less efficient, the organism will get a metabolic disease and die. And I want to propose that the same thing is happening and is what's happening to progress. That each of these, each of the transitions between the different pieces of work, whether it's someone spending five years staring at a whiteboard, whether it's a small team iterating quickly on a prototype, whether it's a huge factory that needs to be scaled up - each one of those transitions is getting slightly more friction, and that's what is, is causing the stagnation. And so where, where do, where do I come into this? So, Speculative Technologies, we're a private nonprofit research organisation.

[\(00:11:01\)](#):

We focus on materials and manufacturing technology. We're trying to reduce the friction in just one small area. And the way that we're doing this is through the ARPA model that James helped set up in

ARIA which is to really give the power to individual programme managers to execute on a vision with very little supervision. Basically, what I want to propose is that the, the solution to, to the issue is, is perhaps very unsatisfying. Not going to come from finding the one bottleneck or passing the one policy, but it's gonna come from driving the agency down the ladder of abstraction to the people on the ground who are actually doing the work. There's, there's so many different flavours of work. And what, what I would implore you to do is, is to really try to understand this and, and go deeper than basic science or applied science or research and, and understand the minutia of something, because then that will help you understand that there are sort of an infinite number of minutiae that are all becoming more full of friction.

[\(00:12:30\)](#):

Thank you.

Munira Mirza [\(00:12:32\)](#):

Thank you very much. Thank you, Stian.

Stian Westlake [\(00:12:41\)](#):

Thank you very much. I'm Steel Westlake. I'm Executive chair of the Economic and Social Research Council. We are the UK's public funder of economic and social research and we're part of the UKRI, which funds research more generally in the UK it's relevant for two reasons. One is as a day job. I'm meant to be one of the people who's trying to make help make some of these investment decisions get made well. But of course also these vital questions of metascience that James talked about are social science. So we have a real interest in investing in that and making it work. There are kind of two things I wanted two little dichotomies or dilemmas that I wanted to highlight here. One is about looseness versus tightness, and the other is about what I would call craft and craftiness. And I think they're both very important in trying to think about how we do this stuff well on looseness and tightness.

[\(00:13:26\)](#):

I think there is a myth that sometimes gets perpetuated about great institutions like DARPA, that they are just about freedom, especially if you're an academic and you are filling out your research excellence framework and sort of filling out forms. I used to have to fill out European Commission forms. You'd have to sign in blue pen, not black pen, blue pen. There is a sense in which you think these controls are the problem getting me down. I'm like Gulliver constrained by the PU and all their little chains. And that is certainly not wrong. James is absolutely right. Ben is absolutely right that a lot of these constraints are, are unhelpful. We know that perverse metrics are really bad and we know that these metrics can sometimes be captured. And I'm looking here at my friend Ian Mansfield, who's been recently writing some very interesting challenges to some of the changes that we're proposing to make to the research excellence framework on the grounds that maybe they might go in a bad direction.

[\(00:14:15\)](#):

I think that's something we always have to be cautious about. But I think the flip side is that total freedom makes you vulnerable to something else, which James also alluded to, which is the disciplinary grooves, the cultural problems that you can certainly get in certain parts of the research system, whether that's in academia or elsewhere. And the UK's research system is unusual in that we are unusually dependent on university research. Crunching the numbers from the OECD estimates the other day. If the UK's non-university publicly funded research system was of a similar size to the OECD average, there'd be about 800 million pounds a year more research done in those organisations than

elsewhere. That's good for diversity of thought, for institutional diversity, and it's also an opportunity that we should be thinking about when we think about these organisations.

[\(00:15:03\)](#):

But when I look at DARPA programme managers, these people who have a lot of power, a lot of ability to cut through that kind of bureaucracy to cut through bad traditions. And I think that's important. So that combination of looseness and tightness in doing things well is really important. And then I wanted to come to this other kind of binary about craft and craftiness. If we think that it matters how we steward the innovation system, if we think there are difficult choices to be made about when to provide freedom, when to challenge the existing norms. I enjoyed your comments James, about graduate students slavery as well. That requires really careful work by the people who are involved in doing the system. This is not a kind of mindless process of bureaucracy where you are administering a process.

[\(00:15:52\)](#):

You need to exercise judgement, you need experimentation. This is where meta science comes in. You want people to be practitioners of meta science. this is politically difficult because this involves spending money on bureaucrats, people who get called pencil pushers, people who work in offices. When we think of some of the people who are responsible for some of these great breakthroughs, these are people who are doing office jobs. They may have been scientists by training. but that's a political challenge for us. but it involves getting good data, experimenting, trying to do things differently. And then finally, this idea of craftiness. It also requires a certain amount of wiliness and creativity about how the system works. As we've said, the system is not a system where every single part, sorry, I was looking at for, for Ben's old diagram. But you know, with any biological process, it's full of things that evolve for all sorts of different reasons.

[\(00:16:46\)](#):

And I think we can't depend on all cultural norms to be good. So therefore it requires craftiness, guile and an understanding of what the social systems are that are going on. And it also requires creativity. And again, this comes back to some of the admirable characteristics of DARPA and a focused research organisations that these decisions to fund are fundamentally creative decisions. These aren't just decisions that happen at a desk, and that can be totally rule bound. So that does create a particular onus on the people and the organisations we want doing this system. So for me, if we can embrace that kind of messiness, where sometimes we need to run the system in a tight way, sometimes in a loose way, and we can do it with a lot of judgement , with a lot of craft, with a lot of craftiness, that will be very helpful to making all of this work and achieving progress. Thank you.

Munira Mirza [\(00:17:35\)](#):

Great. Thank you Rachel.

Rachel Wolf [\(00:17:42\)](#):

Thank you. I'm conscious that most of the speakers have been talking about science and innovation. and I'm a of the problem of this conference in that I was technically innovation advisor despite not knowing very much about it when I was in Downing Street. So I'm not gonna talk about innovation. I'm gonna try and bring together some of what's been said here, but also in earlier sessions, which seems to be characterised by people who are saying it's completely obvious what we should do. Why does nothing get done? And think about ARIA as an example of something where it has happened or is beginning to happen. and some of my experience doing school reform in 2010 where things did happen and why did

they happen. So the first thing that probably has to be recognised is I think a lot of the things that did change or do change are areas of relatively low electoral salience.

[\(00:18:34\)](#):

Actually broadly, people don't vote on education, and they certainly don't vote on R and D. So if you can identify areas where actually the public don't care that much about the detail, but you think it matters, you, it's much more plausible that you're gonna get changed through. I think a second thing that characterises quite a lot of the areas where you do get progress is you are unlocking some form of pent-up demand. James and Ben will know more than me, but there obviously is a deep frustration among a large group of researchers, large, relatively that they're not able to do the kind of work they want to do. In the case of free schools there was a pent-up demand of both parents, but also teachers who wanted to do something. And there was a clear blocker, I think childcare, which came up earlier is another interesting example where actually quite often what we talk about is releasing constraints where there isn't a lot of demand.

[\(00:19:30\)](#):

Like parents are not desperate for there to be twice as many kids looked after by a person. But perhaps less about areas where there is pent-up demand where people would really like, like it to be easier for grandparents to look after kids, for example. So I think it's worth thinking about where there is pent-up demand. and the third thing which came out of or two, actually two more things, which came out of the unconference sessions that I was in, which I very much enjoyed. I think that successful change usually comes from exploiting moments of disorientation or lack of attention on, on the subject. So one thing that seems to me a potential opportunity is that if you have a new majority government with a bunch of new MPs who do not know what the hell they are doing, <laugh>, that's a moment when you can push legislation through really fast.

[\(00:20:23\)](#):

there are, there are moments actually Theresa May leaving was slamming through net zero legislation is another good example of this. These are not moments of intense public scrutiny and attention. They're, they're moments disorientation and change. And that's usually when you get to shift things. And then a final one I think is speed. One of the things I have really noticed and feel quite distressed by in my different dippings into government, in 2010 when I was doing school reform, in 2015 where I tried to do a DARPA and totally failed miserably - it was a disaster, in 2019 when I worked with on the manifesto, is in each one of those occasions, things are visibly slower than the previous time that I was in involved in government. And I think where, where change tends to succeed is when you broadly have a small number of people who are slightly operating outside of the normal governmental systems.

[\(00:21:14\)](#):

For a brief period of time, we had our own foundation charity doing free schools who are very mission-driven and can do things fast enough that, again, you're creating your own sort of slight cycle of disorientation. So, the reason I'm stressing these is because I worry that in the kind of wonderful sessions we've had where it's been explained patiently what it is we need to do, perhaps not being crafty enough in finding the moments to do it. but there are lessons that we can learn for when things change.

Munira Mirza [\(00:21:46\)](#):

Brilliant. Thank you.

[\(00:21:53\)](#):

So I want to, I want to start with a, a question to the panellists about...I think there's an insider outsider dynamic or a disruptor incumbent dynamic going on anytime there's a prospect of change. So to take an example James with ARIA you were proposing a model which was outside the normal system of science research funding and bureaucracy. And there was a degree of resistance from, I mean, you can tell me within the science community or certainly within some parts of the UK government that were not used to that level of freedom, just handing over a cheque, not a blank cheque, but a cheque, and saying you have the freedom to spend it as you wish. So how does one deal with that level of resistance? Is it just a matter of patiently explaining why it's a good thing or do you have to work around them?

(00:22:51):

And then, you know, Rachel, obviously with the New Schools Network, you decided on a completely different model rather than trying to change the existing school system, funding experimental institutions, the new schools that could be independent and had a degree of freedom. So there's similarities even though they're obviously very different organisations between ARIA and the free school system, which is trying to allow for disruptors to come in and work around the resistant forces with the vested interests that exist. But, tell me a little bit and you know, what lessons you've learned.

James Phillips (00:23:33):

I think that first of all, there, there was definitely a lot of resistance inside government, especially the treasury. There were always these conversations where we would be talking about some rule we wanted it exempt from, and they would say, well, you know, could set a very difficult precedent for us. And we were sort of like, that's kinda the point, <laugh>. and in terms of incumbents, the people who are doing well from the existing system are the ones who hold the power in the existing system. So the people who are getting money from the research councils will be like, why don't you just give more money to the research councils? And they sit on the advisory boards, they sit on the Council for Science and Technology, which means that within the, the scientific establishment, there is a lot of resistance. but I think West, ultimately, the power rests with the politicians and with Whitehall. and if you have the political will to do it, then, then it can be done. I mean, this has been suggested as Rachel said many, many times before. And I think you may have said the part out loud, which you're not meant to say about exploiting disorientation, but it should be said that have

Speaker 7 (00:24:27):

To say it out loud, <laugh>,

James Phillips (00:24:28):

It's it should be noted that ARIA was sort of pushed through right at the time of the constitutional crisis in 2019. So it was sort of snuck in a little bit under the radar. but yeah, the, the incumbent framing is a very, very good one. And I think it's like the principle challenge in public R and D policy.

Munira Mirza (00:24:45):

Rachel, and then I'd like to come back to, to Ben and Steven as

Speaker 7 (00:24:48):

Well. I mean, I'd be really interested what others think. I, I think the truth is for it's immensely hard to change existing institutions from within, and that's not because the people are incompetent or trying, you know, necessarily to sort of malevolently hoard power is that institutions have their own inertia.

That's one of the things that makes 'em succeed culturally, but it's also one of the things that makes a hardens change. So if you're trying to do something new, you have to start it, I think externally. That said, one of the things that I think is underrated is how fast new programmes gain their own vested interests and, and sense of momentum and, and inertia. And one of the things I think, again, for the people in this conference that you can think about that help, that is politicians and politics is actually much more susceptible to elite signals than it probably should be.

(00:25:37):

It's less interested in the electorate, more interested in elite signals. So it doesn't take much to create a fan club. I think it made a difference that Michael Gove had lots of columnists saying how brilliant he was for about a year. I think it made it much harder for people to then pull it back. So one of the things that if you care about these things you can do, it's kind of create a fake sense of fan club quite fast that makes it easier to hold things in. But you have to start from outside.

Munira Mirza (00:26:02):

Then you've obviously decided not to try and work within the establishment

Ben Reinhardt (00:26:06):

So, I am very much the working outside the existing system I think there's a couple things. So clearly we're not even in government. We're a private organisation. And one of the reasons for that is that I'm garbage at politics. but another is that I'd just like to flag, is that there's a fundamental tension around government research, and that is in democracies, you want the government to be at least vaguely responsible with the way that they're spending taxpayer money. And to do great research, you need to be kind of irresponsible sometimes. And so I decided to go sort of like, and run around that and just say, okay, we're, we're gonna try to do this completely outside of government. And the last, last thing to note, I think also around incumbents is something that's interesting about government and research organisations more generally is that sort of, it it's very hard for them to die. you know, it's, we talk about creative destruction, but the destruction piece you don't see that happening often and, and that could be another sort of angle on things.

James Phillips (00:27:17):

So Ben's being very modest and that he was one of the key people advising on ARIA and wrote many of the best papers on it before we did it. So he was also

Munira Mirza (00:27:23):

Aha. So you are a government advisor.

James Phillips (00:27:25):

He is a government advisor. <laugh>,

Ben Reinhardt (00:27:27):

I'm a guy who publishes things on the internet and I have no control over who reads it. <laugh>.

Munira Mirza (00:27:33):



So, Stian, you obviously are in charge of a major institution and a bureaucracy. How do you yourself retain your kind of innovative, disruptive spirit?

Stian Westlake ([00:27:45](#)):

Well, I, I'm, I'm trying to work on that at the moment. I mean, one, one interesting angle on that is if I look at, if I look at the social sciences in the UK and I say, where are there some institutions that have been built that are not like the normal thing that are outside of the kind of traditional university scope and have done good work and have been impactful as well as being rigorous? I think there are probably two, and I apologise if there's another one or more that I've left out, but I'd point to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which many of you will know. Very, very impactful. I don't think anyone could fault them for rigour. and the other is the Resolution Foundation who are more recent. And I think the story behind them is really interesting. So the Institute for Fiscal Studies, when it was put together according to Andrew Delmont, when I was hearing the story of some of its earlier days, he says they've really struggled for funding.

([00:28:31](#)):

They managed to get funding from David Sainsbury, who was speaking earlier this morning. And David Sainsbury said, I will put money in on the condition that the economic and social research council co-fund, and kudos to whoever my predecessor was at the time. He or she did that. Probably he given the period, the period when it was, and the, and we'd been funded to them since. And that kind of worked. The Resolution Foundation has a much simpler story, which is that Clive a insurance kind of wealthy person put money into them. I think for quite a long time they struggled and were not very effective, but he kept on doing it. They got more and more effective, and now they do very effective work. So I think there's a real story there about the will to act to build these institutions, basically in the UK having been dependent on people who got resources willing to put them in an unconstrained way. It would be great to see more, more of that. I think there's a really interesting question in that kind of field, when we look, for example, at the promotion of growth, the promotion innovation, if there are any rich people out there who care about growth, this is a very good thing to invest in. If you want to build alternative institutions to try and promote this kind of thing we need more people like Clive Cowdery and David Sainsbury to try and do that sort of thing.

Munira Mirza ([00:29:42](#)):

I'm gonna come out for questions in a moment, but I just want to ask one more question, which was something related to what Rachel said about elite signalling and elite preoccupations. So when I first came into Number 10 and started working with James, we looked at some of the requirements that exist in getting grant funding from the big bodies as well as research excellence or, you know, being able to demonstrate one's ability to do good science research. There are all sorts of other social requirements and expectations about representation of the people that you recruit, what, how that reflects society. Obviously there are some research councils that have a particular interest in focus on areas like environment or social justice, whatever it might be. Who decides those agendas are they the right ones? Is it democratically deliberated upon or not? Should we just get rid of them all and just let researchers decide what they think is valuable? And just let the chips fall where they may?

Stian Westlake ([00:30:56](#)):

I guess the way the system is designed at the moment is, these things for the most part, the big decisions, are controlled by researchers, but not, not all researchers. It's fundamentally by academic researchers who make up most of UK research. So research council funding under the Haldane Principle,

researchers make decisions on what gets funded. But for example, as you say the question of what types of organisations I'm allowed to fund at research councils these are governed by rules. There are relatively few non university institutions I'm allowed to fund. They're called independent research organisations. In a previous job, I went through the process of trying to get my organisation accredited as an independent research organisation. I think it took about 24 months and two goes, because fundamentally the process is designed to be very, very difficult to get through. There are very few organisations that are qualified, and to some extent that's 'cause the people who've been involved in setting these things up are people who work at universities and whose idea of what a good research organisation is is a place like this. You've gotta have at least 26 PhD level researchers. You've gotta have various criteria. You've got to do things. And I think, you know, one of the things that I'm keen to do is to at least raise some of those questions and see how we can get more institutional diversity into the system.

Munira Mirza ([00:32:10](#)):

I dunno if anyone wants to come back on

Ben Reinhardt ([00:32:15](#)):

That question, I would go even further, right? Like in terms of institutional diversity, I think that's really key. It's almost like if you have enough institutional diversity, that question almost ceases to be a question in the sense of, well, there'll be some institutions that make decisions in that really focus just on the researchers and some institutions that make decisions in very different ways. And so if you have a diversity of how people are choosing the research I think that then makes the, so that you don't even need to, to worry about that question.

Munira Mirza ([00:32:55](#)):

And there's lots of people out there who would argue that they don't have access or equivalent access to research funding and therefore feel locked out of the system in some way. James, sorry, you want us to jump?

James Phillips ([00:33:06](#)):

No I mean, it's sort of touchy subjects in some senses, but I mean, my sense is that perhaps policy is getting, science is getting a bit distorted by other things and should be focusing on discovering truth. I think the lab leak thing is an example that Matt Ridley has spoken about, but I think there are other examples of that. And I think if you, you get science moving too much into the political space and it becomes viewed by the public as politicised, it dies, I think. So I think there's a worry.

Speaker 7 ([00:33:34](#)):

Just building on that. I think there is a sort of broader problem that a lot of institutions and a lot of policy is trying to optimise for too many things at once mm-hmm. <affirmative>, and they're all valid things. but it just dramatically overestimates the capacity of any single set of people or institutions to achieve things. You, you, it is, it is probably better to have something that is doing social justice than to try and infiltrate several of those things through every single institution that you have. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, it's one of the things I worry about with the missions,

Ben Reinhardt ([00:34:07](#)):

The layering those missions is what builds up that friction.

Speaker 7 ([00:34:10](#)):

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I would agree with that.

Munira Mirza ([00:34:13](#)):

Yeah, I mean, an example of this, just to make it concrete, is I think the Wellcome Trust, which is the largest funder of medical research possibly in the world, it's certainly the largest charitable funder in the UK, has set a target for the number of people from ethnic diverse backgrounds at all levels of their institution, including their grant funding. Now they're obviously very motivated to respond to concerns about representation. Science is traditionally quite skewed in favour of people from developed countries, majority white. So there's an understandable concern in the world of that, that Wellcome operates in to try and address that and use their levers and use their funding. but it's a, it's a, you know, it's a very big and far reaching change that they've committed to. Is there any concern or do broadly, do academics support that? Do they recognise that that's a worthwhile thing? I'm interested in whether there's been any discussion of this in the scientific community.

James Phillips ([00:35:17](#)):

I think you'd be very brave to write into nature disagreeing with that policy. <laugh>.

Speaker 7 ([00:35:24](#)):

I do think there is a, there is a tension though that we should probably acknowledge, which is that a lot of what we've been saying in this session is you need independent organisations. You need to run with it. You need to give them freedom and money. And then we're like, I hate these organisations endowments. I can't control them. Why is Nesta doing that? Why can't I have the money back? And what about all of these completely unaccountable regulators, that are running around making my life miserable? so it is, it is probably fair to say that in general you still want democratic accountability and political accountability over most of the money, right? Even if there are a few exceptions.

Munira Mirza ([00:35:58](#)):

And of course, Wellcome is an independent organisation

Rachel Wolf ([00:36:00](#)):

It's up to them really.

Munira Mirza ([00:36:01](#)):

It's entirely free to do as it wishes with its funding. And you know, I guess that goes to your point about their freedom is how they choose to use it. okay, I'm gonna come out to the audience. Hands up. Already, lots of hands. Tom and then the lady at the back in the red, Lola, and then Sam who's got his hand up. And then I must come to Neil, who's our chair at the front at some point, or I'll get into trouble. Tom.

Speaker 8 ([00:36:34](#)):

Yeah. Cheers. Thanks a lot. my question's about the idea of having good taste. So it seems to me that people that just have good taste if you are allocating resources and picking a good person to fund or a

great idea seems really important, but it's kind of like qualitatively difficult to sort of cultivate or identify. So I didn't know if any of the panellists just had a view on how that informs their surely good stewards need good taste.

Munira Mirza ([00:37:04](#)):

Okay. Thank you.

Speaker 9 ([00:37:06](#)):

Hi, thank you. the world of academia feels like such a monster that if tomorrow an extremely conservative government would enter and close it entirely would probably cause a recession. So why do we keep giving, again, any money to the institutions that we know are structurally not working? Is it because we are afraid of that kind of recession? Or is it because we're so enslaved to them, we don't know how to think outside of the box.

Speaker 10 ([00:37:39](#)):

Okay. my question relates to your point, Rachel. is there possibly a third mechanism that isn't total discretion for institutions that get public funding and isn't democratic accountability, that's a sort of ongoing discretionary oversight, but is there a kind of legal mechanism that we could imagine where institutions that deviate from their original mission can be sued or can be challenged in court for doing that? Or maybe for, say, dissolving their endowments and giving them to other organisations as one 134 million pounds endowed organisation did this week?

Speaker 7 ([00:38:10](#)):

<laugh>.

Munira Mirza ([00:38:12](#)):

Okay. Come back to the panel on any or all of those questions.

Ben Reinhardt ([00:38:16](#)):

I, I have, can I, can I go for opinions on all of them? Go for it. Okay. So to the point about taste it, it is absolutely taste based and I think that we have sort of denigrated taste as a legitimate way of, of picking things. And I, I, I think that this is, this is one of those cultural changes of just sort of saying like, oh, like that person has good taste, let them do things to the point of shutting down academia. I actually do want to speak in favour of it. There's a lot of things, there are many things wrong with it, and we can all point to this, but there are a number of things that academia does that no other institution can do. we haven't talked about training researchers.

([00:39:03](#)):

Everybody likes to talk about what the researchers are going to do after they're trained, but nobody talks about other ways of, of training them. in, in the pursuit of like discovering things about the universe, academia is extremely well suited. I, I think it certainly has its problems and I would argue that it's not great at creating technologies. That's another issue, but I do not think that we should shut down academia. I think that what we've done is we've overloaded it over the course of the decades since the fifties. and then finally to Sam's point, I have a proposal where I think that government should think about itself almost as a large corporation that wants to acquire organisations. So instead of sort of saying like, oh, either it's you know, have these like really hard restrictions or let them have total

freedom, maybe it's let organisations build up a track record outside of the government, and then the government starts coming in and saying, oh, you're, you're really good.

(00:40:08):

We're actually going to acquire you and just fund you now that we know that you are good. that's another possibility.

Stian Westlake (00:40:20):

On that last question from Sam about how do you deal with institutions that get captured, that drift in a kind of generalised left social justice direction? I mean, for me, the other way of balancing that is to kind of try and engage more with institutions on the part of all of those who aren't on the left. And I think there's kind of a common failure mode among whatever you wanna call it, non left politics, not necessarily on the right, where they just assume that these institutions are kind of irredeemable, that charities are just unbearably, woke, can't be fixed. That public institutions are just unfixable. And I think one of the challenges there is you probably do need institutions, whether, even if you think the institutions need to be somewhat different, an economy will need institutions. And if you're gonna have, if you're gonna, if you're gonna abandon the fight, if you're gonna leave the battlefield, that is a very significant problem. So I think there's a kind of a case for if you can't constrain with legislation, enter the fray and try and participate to make sure that you don't allow 'em monoculture to dominate by, by just not participating.

Munira Mirza (00:41:29):

I'm interested in how the people who run institutions come to be in those positions and why some people opt out very early on from becoming the head of a major university, becoming a vice chancellor. They would rather go off and set up a startup and be in charge of their, their own day, be in charge of their own team and not have to fight a bureaucracy. Is there a natural tendency, I mean, Stan, you're not a typical kind of, you know, head of a bureaucracy and <laugh>, I think of you as a, you know, you're a more of a disruptive influence and somehow you've landed in this you know, as a subversive in your role. but, but you know, many people have to kind of climb the greasy pole. They have to say the right things to the right people.

(00:42:18):

They have to be agreeable. Is there just something inbuilt into institutions that smart people leave after a while and they think I've, I've had enough. I mean, there are, there are a number of current and ex-civil servants here who, and I know lots of junior, very, very brilliant civil servants who I've worked with, who after a few years think, I've got to leave, I've got to get out and I'm not going to go carry on on the path up to, towards permanent secretary. Is there, is that just inevitable? Can we bring them back in? What, what can be done for, for those people?

Rachel Wolf (00:42:51):

What do I think? I think it is probably always going to be the case that people who opt into governmental institutions and large institutions are gonna believe that governmental institutions and large institutions are a good thing and should do stuff. and that's probably relatively eternal. And I'm, I'm always a little bit sceptical of like policy conversations that end with, well, we just need to change the culture of X. 'cause I've just, I've never seen it happen. Maybe it happens. but I do think that, and this links to maybe Tom's question, I do think that there are ways in which you can make it more enjoyable. One of them, which I would say is, is less about good taste, is just consistency of taste. I think

my, my impression is a lot of what turns out very good people is not the kind of climbing of the greasy pole, but the endless sense that you're kind of being pulled this way in that way. you dunno what you're trying to achieve. And it's enormously difficult when you look back five years to know what on earth you got done. so I think that that is oneway in which we can make it easier. We can probably make it easier to get people back into institutions once they've left. But like the idea that you're gonna go in and suddenly make government super conservative and anti-government, it's just not gonna happen.

Munira Mirza ([00:44:24](#)):

But even without politics, I mean, just leaving aside whatever ideological disposition people have, people who like getting stuff done and like seeing tangible results as a <laugh> as an effect of their hard work. If that is too detached from their day to day, if they, if they feel that they work incredibly hard, but good things just can't happen because somewhere higher up the food chain, something hasn't happened.

Rachel Wolf ([00:44:48](#)):

I'm now gonna go into policy. I'd be interested in what other people think the truth is. I think one of the only ways you can do that is to make stuff smaller. Yeah. And some of that's probably localization. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. because if you are in a massive hierarchy and that hierarchy's getting ever more complex, very, very hard to do that. you know, if there is one kind of relatively easy low political salience, people don't vote on it, big policy that you could do it is probably that.

Munira Mirza ([00:45:17](#)):

Okay. Any more questions? There's some hands up, right? the lady in the middle, Neil at the front and then Nick on the side here. Thank you. Hello.

Speaker 11 ([00:45:31](#)):

Does that work? Yeah.

Munira Mirza ([00:45:32](#)):

Alright. Sorry. Yes. Yes. Go ahead. Hello. Hi.

Speaker 11 ([00:45:35](#)):

I was just curious we, we've heard from the masters, I'd like to hear from the slaves a little bit. The point you made about sort of post-doc precarity being really quite unpleasant. I managed to be a precarious postdoc for nearly 10 years and a civil servant for only one. And now I run a tech company. So what I wanted to ask was, 'cause we all know that the talent pool in precarious postdoc academia is, is pretty brutal. I just wanted to ask the assembled, who has been a civil servant show of hands, who has been a precarious postdoc show of hands and which was worse? 'cause they're both pretty brutal <laugh>. So that's kind of what I wanted to say is that the talent management processes for both who might be a future research leader or leader of an organisation and government itself are quite different, but both quite weird. So that was, yeah.

Munira Mirza ([00:46:31](#)):

Okay. Thank you. anyway,

Speaker 12 ([00:46:34](#)):

I was just thinking about the Neil Mendoza. Sorry. I was just thinking about the line of being a good steward of progress and we've heard a lot about institutions, but I was thinking about the environment in which you are inhabiting, particularly the regulatory environment. 'cause it seems that because of the technological world that we're going through in life sciences or computer sciences or pharma, things are moving very fast. And do you think that the way that government's working can get hold of the regulatory change to allow you to do the kind of work you want to do? And even with fringe legislation, like, I don't know, the online safety bill or the freedom of speech bill, this stuff gets away from you so fast even while you are thinking about it.

Munira Mirza ([00:47:14](#)):

And then Nick?

Speaker 13 ([00:47:17](#)):

Yeah I was absolutely fascinated by what James was saying initially about ARIA and trying to pare down process from you know, from a five page report to have or backed towards a five page report. and I was also very interested in Ben talking about sort of trying to drive things down to the people who actually understand the problem they're trying to solve. You know, enabling the people at the coalface, I guess. And, and also very interested by Munira's point about, you know, perhaps the broader lessons one can learn. I, I was a, a civil servant and I suppose over the course of 30 years, one thing I noticed was a steady creep of process maybe at the expense of delivery and what bureaucrats are brilliant at doing. And if you get to my kind of age, you know, you do see that people became increasingly obsessed with process and that created various work streams that went with the monitor scrutiny associated with process.

([00:48:21](#)):

And eventually, in some cases in my former department, one got the sense that it was obscuring, you know, what we were really there to do. And you ended up actually in the worst case scenario with people at the top who were so competent at process and scrutiny that they'd forgotten really what the shop floor was actually trying to deliver. And I know culture is very, I'm a great believer in organisational culture, but I think there has been a culture shift over the last 30 years in some ways away from delivery and towards the creation of management jobs associated with process and scrutiny. And that that's not necessarily a good thing. And I just wonder in the particular case of ARIA has this kind of counter-cultural revolution in terms of trying to lighten that load. Have you seen any positive outcomes from that? Or are you being forced in the direction of everyone else

Munira Mirza ([00:49:21](#)):

On just a, a point on process and accountability? So I recently read Kate Bingham's book about the, the vaccine task force and her experience of working in government. If you haven't read it, it's a, it's a really fascinating account of a quite an unusual experiment in government of getting something done and it being successful. And she talks at one point, <laugh>, I mean, they had basically a blank check because we were spending so much on lockdown that anything they spent on the vaccine would've been a good return on investment. And she makes that point in the book. But she talks about having been establishing her role, organising her team, working phenomenally long hours, exactly the kind of person, exactly the kind of expertise, experience mindset that you would want from someone leading a major, major project for the country.

[\(00:50:13\)](#):

And she says within, you know, a few days, a few weeks, the National Audit Office decides to launch an investigation of how successful the task force is. And if not, they barely got going. And she describes how suddenly this process gets going, which starts asking them all sorts of questions about how they're set up, the impact they're gonna have, how have they proven their value for money? And she said, this is mad. I mean, obviously it's impossible to prove value for money on a speculative vaccine that nobody's ever done before in this way, but you just know that it's value for money and why am I being asked to do this and spend time on this, which is an opportunity cost. And I thought when I was reading the book initially, that this is just classic bureaucracy go mad, you know, pen pushers, bureaucrats and so on.

[\(00:51:00\)](#):

But actually what was interesting is that it comes out in the book, is that there is a kind of organising mind behind the investigation into her, which is a cynical group of people, not named, not even kind of working in tandem, but just a kind of ant-blob blob, which is they assume that anything that government is doing must be corrupt and bad that her position was given to her because she was married to a conservative MP or because she knew the right people and somehow an alliance, an informal alliance between the media, between, you know, probably the good law project or whatever it was at that point, and various other activists who believed that government was bound to be working in some kind of semi corrupt fashion and that they needed to be taken down or interrogated.

[\(00:51:59\)](#):

Now that happens across government, the kind of the terror that someone is going to say, you're doing this for wrong reasons, or this is you know, being skewed by some kind of other agenda. To what extent do we just have to accept that that is the way it is, you know, perhaps it is a good thing surely, isn't it, that we have a media that scrutinises and checks and makes it impossible really to be genuinely corrupt in this country. But does it go too far and, you know, should we just accept that this is something we, we have to live with?

Stian Westlake [\(00:52:35\)](#):

Can I come in on that? I think it's a really good question. I've written in the past about the treasury, which is kind of part of this anti blob blob, the tre, you know, if you work, anyone who's worked in government will know, the treasury is always there checking your sums. Treasury civil servants are the most cynical people around on one level. They don't believe any projects you pitch them to. And you know they will, they will cut you down.

[\(00:52:56\)](#):

Rachel: They tend to be less cynical about the chancellor's own projects.

[\(00:52:59\)](#):

Indeed. So the one thing that doesn't get evaluated is, but on the other hand there are lots of there are lots of very bad projects pitched by government that are terrible value for money, huge waste of taxpayers money, and the treasury are kind of there shielding us from them.

[\(00:53:16\)](#):

I think what's interesting to your point is that you can, as well as whether you do that or not, there's also a question of how well you do it. And one, I think really interesting critique of the Treasury, which isn't kind of abolish it, which I, I have written in the past, but that's kind of an extreme version. The one interesting critique of the treasury is to say, well, there are some things that they're actually just not



very good at, that they could do better. So in the past, I think it's less true now. For example, it was just a criticism that the treasury was not very good at accounting. You know, treasury is sort of the CFO of government, but in the past it's often just not been very good at doing accounting processes. So that if you look at say, defence procurement, they were insisting that defence procurement be very smooth, which is not how it works when you procure things. And you've got common critiques like that. So there was something there about say, Hey, let's accept that you need a treasury, you need a bad cop to keep you on the straight narrow. You need an immune system, as it were. But that immune system can be more or less functional. So as well as whether you need it, you can focus a little bit on the skills and capabilities of it.

Munira Mirza ([00:54:17](#)):

Ben?

Ben Reinhardt ([00:54:17](#)):

Munira Mirza ([00:54:18](#)):

Like you want to jump in?

Ben Reinhardt ([00:54:19](#)):

Yeah, well, I, I just wanna jump in and, and double click the, the point about that fundamental tension and these, that, that the justification is especially deadly when you're starting new things. And because it, it's unproven. And, and so I think maybe the question is, does this when you're, you're starting something new, it's like, does this need to be done within the government? Because I, I think that, that that justification demanding it is hard to get rid of because, because of, of the accountability that you want governments to have. And so, like, I'm not, I'm not like a radical libertarian and trying to say that like government, like we do, we need government to do many things. But when it's sort of like weird new things that I think may be a, a thing where, where the, those tensions are especially high friction.

Speaker 7 ([00:55:14](#)):

Munira, can I ask you, 'cause you were a special advisor too, and I think part of your question was about external organisations that use legal mechanisms within government to stop things. How much of a problem do you think that is and could you credibly do anything to change it?

Munira Mirza ([00:55:32](#)):

So I think it is, it's a, I said this in an unconference session just earlier. I think the public actually doesn't realise how much things like judicial review and the threat of judicial review impact on how government policy works. So if you, and you know, there are some departments that are more susceptible to the risk of this, the Department for Work and Pensions, which has had lots of judicial reviews brought by non-governmental organisations, charities groups, and, and often with very good intention because they're trying to expose some failing in a department. But judicial reviews are very, very blunt instrument. And even if the government thinks it has a fairly good chance of winning a judicial review, there's always a risk. There's a risk of negative publicity. And all those things are just bad in politics. Ministers don't like to hear their policy that they're going to announce will be attacked, might end up in court.

([00:56:29](#)):

we're seeing this now, actually. they're a very high profile case and therefore it just chills, it creates a chilling effect. and someone said earlier, I think it was James, that if you have political will to do something, you can usually bulldoze through, you can usually push through, you can build a support in the alliance, but it's very hard for, for any government, even when it has a united political party behind it, which is an increasingly rare thing in politics to, to be able to withstand that kind of difficulty. And then if you go from the very big and and abstract kind of level of an entire government to an individual person working in a system, are you going to be the person that says, you know what? Nevermind this judicial review stuff. Nevermind the legal challenge. Let's just do it. And I have seen, I have seen, you know, people in government do that, but it takes a certain degree of courage that is called, it

Speaker 7 ([00:57:22](#)):

Must be said that there was one person who was involved in both free schools and Aria, who <laugh>

Rachel Wolf ([00:57:26](#)):

Was very, very, was quite doing that <laugh>,

Munira Mirza ([00:57:31](#)):

But then it often worked. I, so I remember one particular example where I think it was around planning reform where we were told that if we enacted at a particular timetable, it would face a judicial review and the government would lose because it was too fast and it hadn't been consulted upon for the right length of time. And a certain individual said, nevermind all that, let's just do it to this timetable. And the government won the judicial review, I believe, I'll have to go back and check the exact facts, but it, it, there was a moment where it actually was successful. but you are taking calculated risks as an individual in doing that, and the system does not encourage that kind of risk-taking. Certainly if you're a special advisor, you can probably just about get away with it. but if you're a civil servant, all the incentives, someone said this earlier as well, all the incentives are to advise against that level of risk. I, I think, but I maybe, maybe, do we all need to be a bit more courageous and just say, minister, go for it, or, or is that a foolhardy thing to do? So a couple of hands, a few hands up actually. Ian Mansfield at the back has been waiting patiently Joe at the front and then I'm going to take the gentleman at the back with his hand up as well, Eric.

([00:58:51](#)):

So Ian, I think if a microphone could just go to him. Thank you. Yes,

Speaker 14 ([00:58:56](#)):

Thank you. So my question I guess is about OACs versus the mainstream. So Rachel said that things have got worse each time she's been in, when we've seen some of the things we were talking about before, planning childcare objectively got worse over the last decade. We've stripped public sector research organisation institutes of a lot of their freedoms. UKRI has just announced it's going to be switching funding from research excellence to EDI policies and EDI metrics amongst other things fitted differently. I guess big successes we've talked about have been OACs free schools, ARIA, vaccine programmes. To what extent should we essentially say, if you want to get anything done, give up on the mainstream, create OACs and accept that anything meaningful and good that will change will come out of the ARIA, will come out <inaudible>. And then if it's good enough, it will take the rest of the system with it. Or how much should you aim to work within the system as, for example, what Stian is doing now to incrementally make the mainstream better.

Munira Mirza ([01:00:00](#)):

Okay. Thank you. Yes, Joe, go

Speaker 16 ([01:00:02](#)):

Gonna ask something very similar, so I'll pivot it a little bit. we've talked about working outside of like traditional government and systems to kind of build the institutions and get things done rather than trying to reform them. And we've talked about schools and science as well. And I'm interested in the panel, have any thoughts on what's next? Thank you.

Munira Mirza ([01:00:20](#)):

Good questions. at the back? Yes, Eric?

Speaker 15 ([01:00:25](#)):

I just wanted to come back to the judicial reviews. it was something I wanted to ask you about at the end of the session. but obviously we ran outta time with the judicial reviews and yeah, as you were saying, they have this chilling effect. And I understand that trying to curtail them looks like a sort of an assault on, on sort of democratic norms or whatever. But are there any realistic ways to change that process? Can you limit what can be judicially reviewed? Can you try and bake in better scrutiny as part of the process? Is there anything that can actually be done to sort of expedite that? And, and because I've worked on several policies, I mean, HS2 is the kind of the, the famous one of just kind of constantly being JR'd and everything that happens, but <affirmative>, but what can be realistically done? Like, you know, if if Munira, if you're back in government could wave the magic wand, like what would be the thing that you would do to try and to ideally try and change that without pushing up against what's considered kind of like a, a the ability to take the government to court, essentially.

Munira Mirza ([01:01:32](#)):

Okay. we've got three very good questions there, Matt. Go ahead. Matt. Matt Ridley has been waiting as well.

Speaker 17 ([01:01:38](#)):

Yeah. Just on that judicial review point it occurs to me, and this might have been what you were saying Munira that the anti blob and the blob are in a sort of symbiotic relationship here. That the reason the blob is becoming obsessed in the process is because it's gotta get the process right to fend off the judicial reviews. And just to the, to the anecdote you told about Kate Bingham, I took a call from a journalist at one point during all this who said, you live in Northumberland. Did you know that Kate Bingham has hired a firm whose boss is married to a man who was on the board of a small charity with the five of the wife?

Munira Mirza ([01:02:38](#)):

I was saying to somebody earlier that it's fantastic that different people in this audience know each other from different parts of their working life. And then I started worrying that in fact, we stumbled upon a conspiracy. And you are all, in fact a secret cabal. If you're not, if you're not already part of the secret cabal, hopefully by the end of today you will be and you will be trying to change the system. so we've got, we've got lots of questions. I won't try and summarise 'em, I'll come back out to the audits.

We have got some time, but I just wanna come back to the panel and see if anyone wants to quickly respond. I've, I've been asked a couple of things as well, but James, go ahead.

James Phillips ([01:03:12](#)):

Yeah, I mean, I think just, just very brief though. And I was asked a similar question about this mainstream versus sort of outside of things at UCL recently. And I was asked, why did you spend so much time trying to do ARIA and not fix the rest of it? And I think there's a couple of related points, which at least from my perspective, I think are very important to, to understand, which is one, the reason a lot of these things are, or institutions are, you know, in my view, somewhat broken sits at very high levels in government. It's in the treasury, the cabinet office, and only places like Number 10 and those institutions can fix it. And getting them all in agreement at once is very difficult. Second of all, we did a review of bureaucracy in 2020 and 2021. of course the treasury recused their own processes from the bureaucracy review which we knew at the start was gonna be a, a challenge.

([01:04:03](#)):

and the reviewers would sort of go to the university, frontline researchers, map a piece of bureaucracy all the way up through the university department, the university central offices through the research councils up to UKRI through the UKRI CEO into BEIS past the science minister to the Secretary of State, to the treasury, up to the chancellor. Then it goes to number 10, it comes all the way back down. And each part of that system, you say, well, why have you got this piece of bureaucracy? And they'll say, well, come on. We know it's ridiculous as well, but UKRI is gonna ask for some data in a few weeks time. We better be ready just in case. And it's the same all the way through. So unless you fix all of these things at once, it's very, very difficult to reform it. And I know that people like Charles Munger and Warren Buffet have said it's very hard to take over organisations that are broken and reform them. so that was really the reason we prioritised new things, that there was no one powerful enough to fix that problem.

Ben Reinhardt ([01:04:53](#)):

Can I, can I just add a a small anecdote to that? This is not just in government, this, this sort of like cascade of justification where it's like everybody, everybody's saying, well, oh, you need to justify it to me 'cause I need to justify it to other people. And the thing that can be done is that individuals can say like, it stops here. So at, at Speculative Technologies, we give out grants without needing a lot of justification. And for me it's absolutely terrifying because we could get audited, right? And, and someone could come along and be like, can you justify this spending? And I will have to say, no, we can't. but I, I think that that's the way that, that you want one way to, to sort of get past that. and then just on the, the sort of reform versus creating new things I would, I would, I wish I could pop up the, the why not both meme where, where it's like, if you are inclined, if you, if you have the disposition to go into policy and try to reform things, like please do that.

([01:05:59](#)):

But then at the same time, I think, I think you sort of need both and that they can feed off of each other where sort of in an ideal world, if the existing institutions start seeing new institutions sort of doing an end run, and perhaps they, they will actually start saying, oh, well, maybe we should change because like, clearly there's this other way of doing it.

Munira Mirza ([01:06:25](#)):

I was asked a question about judicial review. So we did, I just started Googling it to remind myself <laugh> what reform we did do whilst I was in government. And it was very procedural. We made some tweaks to the way the judicial review process works. But I mean, the first thing to say is judicial review is a very important and relatively ancient aspect of British law. And it's to protect individuals from unnecessary harm by the state. So it's there for a very good reason. However, in the UK and in other countries, its use has expanded quite considerably in recent years. Some of that is to do with the use of judicial review in terms of immigration cases, because immigration has gone up.

[\(01:07:04\)](#):

So the absolute numbers of cases in that area having increased. But some of it's to do with the use of it as a, as a tool of activism to try and change policy and highlight using specific cases to then change policy or say that the policy was not legitimate in the first place. And I'm not an expert by any stretch in how the, the tool is used. So I shouldn't speak or claim to speak with authority, but there are enough people in the legal sphere who would say that this is a concern and it needs to be looked at. I think that when it's raised in government, it has a chilling effect, but it's not necessarily always a block on action. It just means it's a, it creates friction in what government can do, and it therefore means that a minister or a cabinet that wants to do something could actually do it.

[\(01:07:56\)](#):

But they have to work extremely hard and work around and think very, very long term about the process and anticipate this friction and then find a way of cleverly making something happen. So often it's about the fear of being tripped up by the thing you weren't anticipating the thing you didn't know about. And it just requires extremely intelligent policy design. And to do that, you need bandwidth. And part of the problem is that government often just doesn't have bandwidth 'cause it's doing so many things. So I think it's about having clear focus and then trying to deal with what has become you know, a very kind of obstructive tool of use by, by, you know people who are trying to resist certain policies and just make one, one point. We've been, I think we've been quite negative as a, as a panel about how hard it is to get things done.

[\(01:08:46\)](#):

It is also possible to get things done in the system. And I'll, I'll give one example, which I was involved with and so was Sam Richards, who was on a, an earlier panel. He was in number 10 while whilst I was there as well. And this is changing the regulation around gene editing which is a a piece of regulation that, that received royal ascent earlier this year. In 2019, a new government comes in we look at the rules around research and gene editing, and this is a area of science that Britain is very good at. It's about gene editing for crops and animals. So climate climate resistant crops, preventing animal disease using precision breeding techniques, which are essentially accelerating what happens in nature. And there are, you know, there are certain restrictions for members of the EU.

[\(01:09:40\)](#):

The UK was leaving the EU and therefore there was an opportunity to amend the regulation. It's an area that most of the British public are not aware of and not familiar with. and there is an association with GMO. So you know, the, you'll remember many of you, the controversy around Frankenstein foods and how hard it is to persuade the public that this sort of science mucking around with food is okay. And, you know, the, the, you know, it won't be unsafe. But after a number of years of discussion, consultation, working with environment groups and animal welfare and all sorts of other groups, there has been a change to the regulation. And much to my chagrin, nobody noticed it. It passed without any fanfare. Hardly anyone in the media is aware of it. I spoke to a special advisor in the relevant department who had forgotten about it, <laugh> like heartbreaking moment for me.

[\(01:10:34\)](#):

And yet it's a multi-billion pound industry. It's not the full thing that we wanted to, it wasn't the full fact version of the policy, to be honest. Matt Ridley said to me, it was like a B minus rather than an A plus, maybe a C minus, but, you know, it was better than what it was. So it was an incremental change, but it is possible to do stuff, but it just takes quite a long time. And that, so patients not being afraid, you know, these are qualities that one needs, I think, to work in an institution. And it means that you can't, you can't always move fast and break things, which is the sort of phrase of Silicon Valley. Anyway, sorry, I've talked to you much. Rachel wants to come in.

Rachel Wolf [\(01:11:14\)](#):

I was just gonna come very briefly on Ian's question because I think there are things that government's quite good at. So government's really good at allocating money differently. Tim did the furlough scheme, which in lots of ways is sort of about allocating money differently and putting different rules on money. the LLE, the lifelong loan entitlements. So to government's, I think quite good at money flows. And there are lots of things you can change with money flows. and I don't think they're bad at scaling things that have already started. I think what you have to recognise is if you're trying to start something which requires a fundamentally different way of doing things, or culturally it's implausible that a very big existing machine is gonna do that. So you need to figure out what your kind of fundamental problem is.

[\(01:11:56\)](#):

And then linking to the question of what next? it, it seems to me that therefore there are kind of categories of things on growth that are worth spending more time thinking about. So there are ones that are about broad allocations of money. Government's good at that things that you can relatively easily get into manifestos that are not monumentally politically salient, but significant. So I think devolution is a really good example of that. Skills policy might be a really good example of that. Potentially, and here I defer to all of the housing experts in the room who are convinced they have a secret way of solving the housing crisis. Maybe there are secret ways you can solve the housing crisis, but you need to figure out the areas where you can get things done with relatively small friction. I think.

Ben Reinhardt [\(01:12:44\)](#):

Can I, can I say something about optimism? so I, I think the, the thing to note is that yes, we're, we're talking about the, the hard things, but the reasons that we're all doing, if I can speak for, for all the other panellists, the reasons that we're doing what we're doing is because fundamentally we are optimistic that, that things can happen. And the, and, and, and perhaps like just to, to step way back and just say like, what, what like, could the world be? And we, we haven't really talked about that, right? We've been talking about oh yes, like there, there are all these things in these, these places that we could do things. But like, if we develop new technologies and we like drastically create more wealth, that will create more housing and, and we could still potentially create a world that is as different in 80 years from today, as you know 1950 was from 1880. It, it, it is just, and like I, I am optimistic that we could do that, right? <laugh>, despite all of that, the, the negativity. So I just wanted to, to put a pin in that, that like, we could do this mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Munira Mirza [\(01:13:55\)](#):

So some more questions Deirdre and then Fergus, and that, I'm just gonna take some people who haven't spoken yet, and then if we've got time, so David at the back as well. And then Chris.

Speaker 19 ([01:14:08](#)):

I have to say that, that I'm somewhat alarmed by this panel because the things, all the, all the things that are going to get done are by the state, and yet most of the prosperity and progress and stewardship that we have is by the private evolution having very little to do with the state. So it, it's surprising that there aren't any any advocates for for the, the private world.

Munira Mirza ([01:15:05](#)):

I think Ben's institution is private. Yeah,

Ben Reinhardt ([01:15:07](#)):

I I I run a private nonprofit.

Speaker 19 ([01:15:10](#)):

Yeah, you run a private non-profit, but all the conversation here has been about policy. Remember that in the 18th century, the word policy was used as being the same as the word police. It came from French. And so it's, it's all the coercive side of our lives. And I, and I find that odd.

Munira Mirza ([01:15:42](#)):

I mean, I think, sorry. No, no, go.

James Phillips ([01:15:44](#)):

I mean, from my perspective, I thought people like Sam Bowman and others have covered a lot of the deregulation side of things which I agree with, and certainly the earlier stages of technology readiness levels. I think there's a lot of, a lot of reason to think that the state has a very important role there and that the role that it's been playing has not been done very well. I mean, look at things like the Apollo programme, Manhattan, the classic examples, but also places like Xerox Park and Bell Labs were effectively regulated monopolies, right? They weren't really for-profit, private, competitive companies. They had a regulated monopoly on the market. And so many of those transformative technologies don't seem to arise in companies which, you know, are in very, very competitive markets. You can see it again with DeepMind and Google, Microsoft, Facebook Meta type things.

Munira Mirza ([01:16:30](#)):

I think the paradox is for government to do less and allow private enterprise and individual choice and freedom to flourish, you need good people in government. It's a strange paradox, but that's why policy sometimes is overlooked as an important part of the, the, the, I would say the conservative liberal tradition. Because suggesting getting rid of whole sections of government doesn't necessarily lead to better government either, but maybe that's a longer conversation to have. Fergus, and then there were a couple of other hands up.

Speaker 20 ([01:17:10](#)):

So my question is around public consultations. So if you look at when the UK decided to do nuclear power in 2007, the government had a white paper and they announced this, well, Greenpeace then took them to court and said, no, no, you promised you would do a public consultation before you committed nuclear. So, you know, the better part of a year, and I think over a million pounds, was spent talking to a few hundred people around the country about whether we should do nuclear power. And they still went

ahead and did it. So on one hand you could say there was a lot of money wasted and not really much gain. We still decided to do it anyway, we just wasted time. On the other hand, then, anytime someone criticised nuclear policy, you could reasonably say, well, we had a public consultation and, you know, people had the chance to make their views known. So I'd be interested to hear if the panel think that public consultations are cost of doing business or whether it's maybe better to work around them, do things quietly like we spoke about.

Munira Mirza ([01:18:03](#)):

Good question, Chris. I think you had your hand up. And then David, sorry, I think David has a microphone. So go ahead. And then Chris

([01:18:10](#)):

Speaker 26

([01:18:10](#)):

The, the best piece of advice that I didn't follow before going into government was to study public procurement law. And, and I'm interested in, in the panel's take on how government spends its money, that is not spending itself. And I can think of so many examples, and I'm sure others can of where a procurement decision went wrong with everybody knowing it was going wrong at every single step along the way, and still feeling like they were unable to stop it. And so, I mean, almost to take, take like Ian's question a step further. Like, can we fix public procurement law and the way that the government, or maybe not law, but the way that government procures, or should we just like stop doing processes that are designed for bad people to win these contracts and start setting up entrepreneurial ways for other people to go and be able to deliver things that government's not gonna do itself?

([01:19:07](#)):

Thank you, Chris.

Speaker 22 ([01:19:11](#)):

Hi. yeah, so I, in terms of organisations, I'm always interested in the concept of the Fog of War. Like, you know, I, obviously I'm very early in my career, but Stian, obviously you are, you know, executive chair and we learned about you know, terrible, terrible projects at the treasury, sometimes rightfully kills. Presumably they get that bad because no one really knows the happening and how bad it is. And of course, the families had the Covid pandemic plan, which people took off the shelf, and it was only after they sort of, you know, dusted off the moth, you know, the, the cobwebs like, oh my God, this is, this is not relevant and it's terrible. so I guess my question is, is that, is that level of, you know, fog of war inevitable in government, are there governments, do you think that, or organisations that do it better? or is there something you think you could do in a British government context to make that problem a little bit better?

Ben Reinhardt ([01:20:05](#)):

Could I say something very disagreeable?

Munira Mirza ([01:20:08](#)):

You can, in fact, I'm gonna other, can I just check if there are any other questions? 'cause I think we'll need to wrap up in a few minutes and then I'll ask, I'll come back to the panel for a final summary. this



hand at the back, Lucy has been waiting patiently and then Nico, and then can you try and keep your remarks very brief if, if possible. Thank you.

Speaker 23 ([01:20:26](#)):

Yes. hello Eamonn Ives from the Entrepreneurs Network. but last year I was a SpAd at the Cabinet Office. We've talked a lot about how can we get better at doing new things? One thing that frustrated me a lot was there was so much we were doing that just seemed kind of irrelevant and not necessarily bad, but certainly a waste of very kind of competent civil servant's time. I'm particularly interested in your thoughts on that Munira and Rachel's as well.

Speaker 24 ([01:20:54](#)):

Okay. Yeah, I just wanted to say that I think big institutions can make fantastic positive changes, but the direction does need to come from the top. and in, in several respects, I mean, I've been the beneficiary of a DARPA model that John Burt adopted. We had a, actually an ex DARPA director come and form our innovation team. Renata Dugan at Welcome Leap is one of the most inspiring. She was the first female director of DARPA, the most inspiring speaker you can never hope to hear. Now, this model is, is tried and tested, but it was developed quietly behind the scenes in order to get stuff without anyone knowing about it. I'm not sure that's what James is going to do, but on the other hand, why not? Because when people do find out about the projects in government, sometimes they do get stopped. But I also think you can reform the university system. And I'm just gonna say something very quickly, very

Munira Mirza ([01:21:47](#)):

Quickly that

Speaker 24 ([01:21:47](#)):

We're very aware that incumbents, say in fossil fuel, do not want to go and do not want to get changed. It's the same in the university structure. So that line of command that James, that James highlighted can be changed by applying new metrics. Discuss.

Munira Mirza ([01:22:04](#)):

Thank you. And then finally, Nico, again, very brief,

Speaker 25 ([01:22:09](#)):

Thank you. when we had David Sainsbury lecture earlier on, we talked a lot about learning from other countries, among other things we studied you know, change over the century in other countries. And I'm interested James particularly and Rachel, what exemplary stewardship in other governments either in Europe, the United States we talked a lot about, so maybe not the United States, Southeast Asia, you know, which some Civic Future fellows may be visiting in due course. You know, can we learn from what have inspired you and Stian on the question of how we select what we fund, there's an attempt to create a level playing field where, you know, everybody is equal, has a chance of getting funding and so on. How realistic is that? And how much is that ultimately gained by the people who are making the decisions about funding to the detriment of innovation and you know creating better research?

Munira Mirza ([01:23:09](#)):

Okay. Final comments, Ben, I know that you were very keen to jump in, so why don't you go first?

Ben Reinhardt ([01:23:13](#)):

Yeah, so just like listening to the, the questions I, I think that there, there may be something of a, a skiing into a tree phenomena going here on here. so if you're not familiar there's this phenomena in skiing where if you are skiing down a hill and you want to avoid a tree, the thing that you absolutely should not do is stare at the tree. 'cause that will cause you to run straight into it. And so many of the questions in our discussion have been about the, the like nitty gritty of, of government, like how to block or unblock government things that I, I would posit that, that maybe just like we're, there's a little bit of an overfocus on that and, and thinking about, okay, instead, like, what, what do we want to build? Like what are the, the things that we want to go for? and, and maybe maybe focusing a little bit more on that.

Munira Mirza ([01:24:09](#)):

Thank you.

Rachel Wolf ([01:24:11](#)):

I'm going to completely disagree. Can I completely disagree? Please, yes. 'cause I, I think it's amazing that that's what you're doing. I really do. and, and I fully expect you'll be a great success, but I fear that a lot of this conference has been people stating things that they obviously believe should happen and absolutely no thought about how they're going to make them happen practically in the next two years. And so we will end up in this conference in a decade in which everyone will say exactly the same things. Just as, like when I went to a conference like this a decade ago, people were saying exactly the same things because they're not bothering to get into the details of how you actually make things happen. So I would encourage all the brilliant intellectuals in this room, and you are also doing practical things, Ben, so I'm being slightly unfair. But we should all actually think, what am I going to do that makes it more plausible that things I like happen in the next 18 months? 'cause otherwise, what, why are we here? so that is why I'm doing boring nitty gritty

Munira Mirza ([01:25:08](#)):

<laugh>. I'm gonna disagree with Rachel <laugh>.

Ben Reinhardt ([01:25:12](#)):

I agree with Rachel <laugh> though. Rachel disagrees

Munira Mirza ([01:25:15](#)):

Well, I'm, I'm gonna disagree. 'cause I, I think if you actually, if you look at the delegate list, and I've spent a lot of time thinking about who's in this room, actually, majority of people in this room are working in some way, either in the private sphere doing some kind of startup alternative, all they're working government battling within the system. But there's quite a lot of thinking, I think, about implementation. What we don't do though is we don't learn the lessons of implementation and share them well enough. but I agree with you that it's not enough to have a great idea.

Speaker 7 ([01:25:45](#)):

I think we're all disagreeing with each other to make the same point.

Munira Mirza ([01:25:49](#)):

Anyway, Stian,

Stian Westlake ([01:25:51](#)):

I'm gonna answer Nico's question, but not the question you asked to me. I'm gonna ask the answer the question about different examples of things that work in other countries. And what I think is really interesting about that is we see lots of attempts to sort of pick examples of effective innovation policies from different countries, which are often a bit misbegotten because I think, and we, this was talked about a little bit earlier, the thing that is, I think a unifying force of countries that have really good innovation systems is what's sometimes called Cardwell's law. The idea that they basically have a huge external threat, Taiwan with China, South Korea, with North Korea, Israel with its kind of friendly neighbours, Finland, with Russia, the US during the Cold War. I mean, this is kind of a bizarre situation that all this happens. And what that means, the effect that that has is it basically creates lots of people who are keen to make institutions work and who work really hard to do that.

([01:26:43](#)):

So what that means is you can't go to, you can't get a plane to Israel and copy the office of the Chief scientist and bring it in. You can't go to Taiwan and copy ITRI. What you have to copy is this will to act what I think everyone was just talking about, the discussion now, a desire to work together to make things happen in these areas. And it almost doesn't matter which specific institutions you have if you do that so long as you're actually making those institutions thrive. So that is my, my lesson is don't look for lessons, look for cultures and mindsets.

James Phillips ([01:27:11](#)):

Look for adversaries it sounds like.

Stian Westlake ([01:27:13](#)):

Yeah. Look for enemies, James.

James Phillips ([01:27:16](#)):

no, I mean, just in, in terms of the, the global examples, I think we could set it up with very different principles to what was done a hundred years ago. But I think the German Max Planck Society and Fraunhofer societies have managed to stay remarkably stable and relatively free from political meddling for quite some time. I think a useful question to ask is, if you were to re create a new kind of Max Planck Society, what principles would it be founded on? And I think you could learn many lessons from some of the great labs after the war period, like the LMB here in Cambridge, Bell Labs, Xerox Park. and that's a, a challenge, which I think is, it could be some positive things come out of if it could be solved.

Munira Mirza ([01:27:54](#)):

Thank you. Just my final word to me because I can, 'cause I'm the chair <laugh> 1 outcome. One lesson from this panel I think is that one should try to engineer an existential threat within an institution in order to make it have the will to change. And there's one example of this recently, which I wrote about yesterday in a piece The Times, which is a UK passport office, which I think for the past year has been regarded as a complete basket case. But because they have been a basket case and we so many delays after covid, they digitised their processes finally. And now apparently you can get your passport again within a few days. So maybe crisis is the the midwife of opportunity or whatever the phrase might be. Right. Thank you very much. This has been brilliant panel. Thank you to our speakers.

This transcript was exported on Aug 09, 2023 - view latest version [here](#).