Readings Brief
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This short column will provide busy people with a quick review of developments in public management research and writing that might prove useful in their day-to-day work.

The Architecture of Failure

We all ask why governments fail, often spectacularly, to carry out their policy goals through bad implementation. When something goes wrong, we watch the arch of public attention rise, demands for accountability, governments move in to fix the problem. Then, we move on. We seldom go back and do a post mortem on failure. Come to think of it, we also seldom do one on successes either. Those who ignore history are condemned…..

There is a growing body of research on failures in government. This note focuses on two publications that are on the mark and are consistent in telling ways. From the United Kingdom, there is *The Blunders of our Governments* by Anthony King and Ivor Crewe, London Oneworld, 2013 and from the United States, there is *A Cascade of Failures: Why Government Fails, and How to Stop It* by Paul C. Light, Brookings Institute, available for download at https://www.brookings.edu/research/a-cascade-of-failures-why-government-fails-and-how-to-stop-it/. Both examined a series of government failures in their respective countries and came to surprisingly common conclusions on the sources. Briefly summarized, they are:

- **Bluster Leads to Blunder** when expectations of performance, timely delivery and anticipated savings are raised too high, deadlines come too fast and the actual cost of implementation is estimated. Has anyone heard of underpromise and overdeliver?
- **Cultural Disconnect** between the formulators of the policy or response and those who had to carry it out and those affected by the policy. Let's just call it elitism for short.
- **Announcement Equals Accomplishment** or maybe it's just a fondness for ribbon cutting and a distaste for the nitty gritty.
- **Handover Mentality** in which the designers of a policy, program or response ignore the messy part called implementation. Let's also call this operational disconnect.
- **Stupid Risk Planning** which is actually a whole category of bad moves that guarantee failure but also limit the capacity to respond to situations when they go wrong, such as:
  - **Killing Truth to Power:** Not encouraging combative debate or seeking gainsayers in both the design and setting up of implementation. Don't just shoot the messenger, exclude them from the process. Think Groupthink.
  - **Failure to Backwards Map:** Policy designers and implementers often are guilty of optimistic bias (What possibly could go wrong?) when, in fact, they should be looking at the end goal and working backwards to identify both what could go wrong, but how the whole process will roll out. Instead, they focus on the beginning, the announcement, the first stages.

- **Busy and Distracted** people and organizations are often proud of their capacity to react and handle many issues at once. If a policy is just the flavour of the week and something else is next week, it starts to lose momentum, needed attention, reaction and adaptation to inevitable challenges and gears start to slip. This is where effective implementation governance over time comes into play.
- **Churn of Actors** at both the political and bureaucratic level is a consistent theme in projects failing or in governments responding poorly to crises as they arise. The champion for a policy simply moves on and her successor is left to decide how much energy to put into someone else's pet project. Similarly, the rapid turnover of senior managers in government often leaves well intentioned people to respond to emergencies in areas where they have little experience.

There is no magic about what to do about these fault lines. Recognize they are there. Avoid optimism bias. Both authors strike some broad approaches to building the architecture of success:
- **Kick the Tires:** Give careful consideration to policy design that is fully implementable, rings true for the end user and is clear about what is happening here.
- **Test Drive and Shop Around:** Take time, when you have it, to either pilot or experiment. Get reactions from critics and curmudgeons as unpleasant as that can be – that's why you are paid the big bucks.
- **Sharpen the Mission:** Get clarity on what success and failure mean.
- **Clear the Way:** Stand down impediments such as unclear funding or presumed but unproved savings until victory can be achieved by actually doing rather than talking.