

Urgent need for Ministers to be trained in complex decision making

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Former NAO Director and Coronadiary author David Finlay says COVID Inquiry evidence of “bamboozled” PM and “chaos as usual” shows untrained Ministers out of their depth

In his book *Coronadiary: 100 days that changed our lives and three skills government had been told to improve* former National Audit Office Director David Finlay reveals a startling finding: Ministers had had no collective training in skills which would help them make the complex decisions they were responsible for during the pandemic.

The recent COVID Inquiry evidence has shown the consequences of this lack of professional training in how to make complex decisions. Chief Scientific Adviser Sir Patrick Vallance’s diary comments of Prime Minister Boris Johnson being “clearly bamboozled” by statistics and “chaos as usual” in Downing Street as the government “flip-flopped” between alternative courses of action during frantic WhatsApp messaging all indicate a lack of a disciplined approach to making complex decisions, Finlay asserts.

Also, Finlay’s research identified that the government had been warned before the pandemic to improve its skills in planning, making use of data and managing risks, skills which were central to making appropriate decisions in response to the COVID threat.

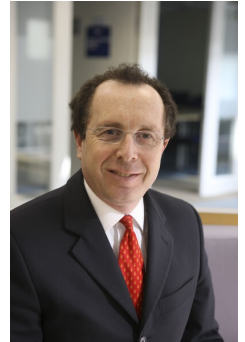
Finlay continues “The lack of formal training for Ministers in planning for emergencies, assessing data and managing risk, including assessing the trade-offs between alternative strategies, inevitably led to sub-optimal actions when Ministers were under pressure to make complex decisions.” Finlay makes a vivid comparison: “We don’t expect doctors or pilots to look after the public without suitable training and qualifications. But during the COVID pandemic we put our trust in Ministers to make decisions affecting our health, livelihoods and education without any training in how to deal with such complexity.”

Finlay underlines the difficulties Ministers faced “Ministers were not simply rubber stamping clear scientific advice, “following the science” as they often said. Very often Ministers were dealing with significant uncertainties due to a lack of data (for example, how fast the virus was spreading in the early stages) or differing opinions (the timing of when to lock down) or simply large unknowns (for example, whether the virus would develop new variants). Ultimately, it was Ministers who had to weigh up trade-offs and priorities (such as balancing protecting health with the wish to minimise disruption to businesses and schools).”

Finlay has a strong message “Ministers were trying to develop their COVID response through WhatsApp discussions rather than a disciplined approach to making complex decisions. Ministers bring their own personal backgrounds to their work in government but the lack of training means they don’t have a common skill set in analysing complex situations to arrive at effective decisions. We need to act now to give Ministers appropriate training for the responsibilities they bear.”

David Finlay is the author of Coronadiary: 100 days that changed our lives and three skills government had been told to improve (ISBN 9781802270792)

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