REFORM

EVERYTHINGISM: AN ESSAY

The pathology holding back the State

Joe Hill

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Reimagining Whitehall is one of the major work streams within this programme. This paper is part of our Reimagining Whitehall series.

ABOUT REIMAGINING WHITEHALL

This paper is part of the *Reimagining Whitehall* work stream. To effectively reimagine the State, major change must occur in the behaviours, processes, and structures of central government. This paper examines how the Government should fund the digital transformation of public services, to make them more effective and efficient. It sets out a model for HM Treasury to radically re-evaluate digital spending, focussing on an approach where approvals are proportionate to the size of the risk, and decision-making is far less bureaucratic.

Reimagining Whitehall Steering group

Reform is grateful to the expert members of the *Reimagining Whitehall Steering Group* who provide invaluable insight and advise on the programme. Their involvement does not equal endorsement of every argument or recommendation put forward.

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1. Introduction

Recently:

- The Planning Inspectorate recommended against a new nuclear power station on the island of Anglesey in part because of concerns that new workers would dilute the proportion of Welsh speakers in the area.[1]
- HS2 is building a one kilometre-long tunnel to prevent bats being harmed by high-speed trains, despite no evidence the trains would interfere with bats. The tunnel will cost over £100 million to build.[2]
- Hospitals and schools will be told by the Government to buy more British fruit and vegetables to support the farming industry, even if this raises costs for frontline services.[3]
- The Treasury is considering forcing pension funds to invest in UK assets in order to make capital cheaper for British firms.[4]
- The Town and Country Planning Act mandates that developers deliver "biodiversity net gain", an improvement in the overall quality of natural habitats by 10 per cent from any development.[5]
- The Department for Education's consultation on the new school curriculum asks consultees about how to shape the content of the curriculum to represent the diversity of British society.[6]
- Nutrient neutrality rules have blocked nearly 100,000 homes from being built across the country, despite widespread agreement that the new homes would have a tiny impact on pollution in the area.[7]
- The Metropolitan Police Service has discontinued its Gangs Matrix database because of a legal challenge on the basis that it is unlawful for it to over-represent men from ethnic minorities as potential intelligence leads.[8]
- The Teesside carbon capture project to offset CO2 in one of Britain's largest industrial areas commits industry to base at least 60 per cent of the supply chain in the UK, which will incur higher costs for taxpayers.[9]
- The Office for Nuclear Regulation almost forced EDF to install an additional safety vent in their reactor model despite it being unclear that there would be any safety benefit at

[1] Jim Pickard, 'Anglesey Nuclear Plant Could Have Undermined Welsh Culture, Inspectors Found', *Financial Times*, 7 February 2025.
[2] Louise Parry, 'Bat Safety Barrier Will Cost £100m - HS2 Chairman', *BBC News*, 7 November 2024.
[3] Kate Ferguson, 'FARM FAVOURITE Hospitals and Schools Told to Buy More British Food in Huge Boost to UK Farmers', *The Sun*, 22 February 2025.
[4] Mary McDougall and George Parker, 'Government Could Force Pension Funds to Invest More in UK Assets', *Financial Times*, 18 November 2024.
[5] Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, 'Collection: Biodiversity Net Gain', Web Page, 21 February 2023.
[6] Department for Education, *Call for Evidence: Curriculum and Assessment Review*, 2024.
[7] Sam Dumitriu, 'Building Back Faster', Web Page, Works in Progress, 24 February 2023.
[8] Law for Change, 'Challenging the Met Police Gangs Matrix', Web Page, 16 December 2024.
[9] Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and The Rt Hon Ed Miliband MP, 'Contracts Signed for UK's First Carbon Capture Projects in Teesside', Press Release, 10 December 2024.

> all, at the cost of tens of millions of pounds.[10] It is this approach, along with expensive environmental protections with minimal benefits like a 'fish disco', that means Hinkley Point C is set to be the most expensive nuclear power station of all time.[11]

These examples may appear arbitrary, but they have a common root. They all exemplify a powerful force taking over the State: Everythingism.

Everythingism is why the Government can't have a policy that delivers safe and cheap nuclear power quickly. Britain has some of the highest energy prices in the world, and with increasing geopolitical instability energy security is a key government priority. But because of Everythingism moving to safe and cheap nuclear power is impossible unless it also promotes the Welsh language, enhances biodiversity, and upskills the local workforce.

Everythingism is the belief that every proposal, project or policy is a means for promoting every national objective, all at the same time. Trade policy is not for getting cheaper goods, but for reshaping the global economy. Planning policy is not for getting high-quality housing near the best jobs, but creating local jobs, hiring more apprentices, and enhancing biodiversity. And Government procurement isn't for the best products and services at the cheapest price. It's about promoting "social and economic value", reshaping the British economy to promote Net Zero, regional economic development, and diversity and equality training.

Because of Everythingism, we never do any one thing well, we do everything badly. Housing policy becomes the main route for fixing the nitrogen imbalances in local rivers, and creating more social housing the main way of subsidising the welfare state. Trains must look after bats. Climate policy is to support the services sector.

Creating jobs, reducing pollution, and boosting biodiversity are all laudable policy aims. So how can pushing them be bad? Because in each example of Everythingism, the policy is to deliver those goals through systems which are fundamentally designed with other objectives in mind. The goals aren't always at odds, but often they are. Sometimes that trade-off might be worth it, but often it isn't.

This isn't a new problem. When Governments have failed in the past, the spectre of Everythingism has been there. Concorde was set up to simultaneously be a joint Anglo-French industrial project, a demonstration of the most advanced aerospace engineering, and commercially viable. The result was a beautiful but financially unsustainable aircraft that only a handful of airlines could use and required massive subsidies just to keep it going.

Britain isn't alone in Everythingism. In the US, Ezra Klein calls this "Everything-Bagel Liberalism", the propensity of policymakers in blue states, especially in leading cities, to see any project as an opportunity to advance multiple goals.[12] Affordable housing projects become unaffordable because of California's insistence on ideas about perfect development, which get in the way of plenty of ones which would be good enough. The security-critical semiconductor industry can't build new factories because of the National Environmental Policy

[10] Sam Dumitriu, 'Why Regulators Need a "Red Team"', Web Page, Notes on Growth, 6 March 2025.
[11] Rachel Millard, 'EDF Considers Plans to Revive "Fish Disco" at Hinkley Point Plant', *Financial Times*, 4 March 2025.
[12] Ezra Klein, 'The Problem With Everything-Bagel Liberalism', *The New York Times*, 2 April 2023.

Act, or Congress insisting on workforce diversity measures at semiconductor sites in the Inflation Reduction Act.

But Britain is also a place where Everythingism is deeply rooted, and a profound problem for the country. It isn't just that it feels like everything is going wrong, or that everything needs to be fixed. The problem is that we're relying on everything to fix everything else, everywhere, all at once. And so nothing works.

2. Everything to lose

The previous Conservative Government rejected plans for a new datacentre right next to the M25 on the grounds that it would "significantly alter the character and appearance of the area".[13] The land is currently a disused quarry, next to a major motorway, but its status as part of the Green Belt makes it easier to justify vetoing new developments.

In Bradford, a development to create 140 new homes was delayed because the proposal did not adequately consider the speed of cricket balls.[14] Britain's labyrinthine planning system builds in so many different requirements that it makes it easy for much needed developments to be blocked on the grounds that they disadvantage any one of a number of different goals.[15]

There are 27 kinds of public bodies listed by government guidance as statutory consultees on different kinds of development, each with their own opportunity to add new requirements or request changes to a development.[16] Internationally, we see far more homebuilding, and more affordable housing as a result, when jurisdictions allow simple processes which don't build in many complex requirements.[17]

Everyone loses from Everythingism.

Everythingism is rarely explicit, but frequently implicit in public policy – a guiding sentiment that if policymakers don't use every tool at their disposal to further all objectives, they are not being imaginative enough. A sentiment which is very appealing to the vested interests who want to see their specific objectives furthered regardless of the costs to others, and who stand to gain the most from the government trying to 'do it all'.

Everythingism is less common in the world of business; it's rarely tolerated for long by competitive markets. Successful teams tend to divide work and specialise. Successful companies are rewarded for focus – it's impossible to imagine Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg starting by trying a hundred different interconnected projects, at the same time, and doing them all badly. And globally, countries succeed based on the same principles, specialising in providing the goods and services they are best placed to trade.

Many theories underpin these more focused approaches. But all of them are supported by basic common sense: you can't do it all, some ways of doing things are better than others, and there are nearly always trade-offs.

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[13] Andy Silvester, '"Deranged": Government Blocks Data Centre Build next to M25 – in Case It Ruins the Green Belt', *City A.M.*, 6 November 2023.
[14] Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and The Rt Hon Angela Rayner MP, 'Bureaucratic Burden Lifted to Speed up Building in Growth Agenda', Web Page, GOV.UK, 10 March 2025.
[15] Samuel Watling, 'Why Britain Doesn't Build', Web Page, Works in Progress, 23 May 2023.
[16] Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2018 to 2021), and Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 'Consultation and Pre-Decision Matters', Web Page, GOV.UK, 1 April 2022.
[17] Alan Kohler, 'The Housing Crisis Is Global. What Are Other Countries Doing about It?', *The Guardian*, 28 September 2024.

Governments try to advance their objectives through many different instruments – policies, legislation, economic measures, national infrastructure and public services. Not only do they struggle to prioritise between the objectives, but also to identify which instruments are best used to deliver those objectives.

Policymakers shouldn't ignore complexity. After all, many policy instruments do affect many different outcomes, and pretending they do not would be misleading. The world is more interconnected than ever, by global markets, the banking system, the internet, and global migration. The sudden and far-reaching impact of pandemics, wars, technological developments and economic crises is proof that organisations, systems and countries are more intertwined than ever, and that the system requires deep systems-thinking to improve.[18]

But while complexity is helpful as a description of the situation, it is unhelpful as a prescription for action. It might be tempting to believe we can optimise every policy system for every policy objective, all at once, but that is fantasy. It leads to distraction, confusion, and paralysis. Ruthless prioritisation can be uncomfortable, but delivering any meaningful change through Everythingism is unrealistic.

In the past, exactly that kind of focus has rewarded British policymakers. Cases show you can succeed by ploughing through objections and vested interests, and setting clear focus and objectives, particularly in times of national crisis. The Vaccine Taskforce depended on officials working outside of the normal processes for procurement, hiring and public spending.[19] Academisation in education, which focused on freeing up schools to specialise, rather than getting them to do everything everywhere, has been a multi-decade success.

[18] Robert C. Seamans, Jr and Frederick I. Ordway, 'The Apollo Tradition An Object Lesson for the Management of Large-Scale Technological Endeavors', *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 2, no. 4 (December 1977): 270–304, https://doi.org/10.1179/030801877789801805.
[19] University of Oxford, ''Another War Is Coming', Kate Bingham DBE, Delivers Romanes Lecture', Web Page, 24 November 2021.

3. The price of everything

At best Everythingism is a distraction. Usually it involves a complete denial of trade-offs. At worst it is a recipe for institutional paralysis.

3.1 Distraction: everything but the kitchen sink

The Sullivan Review of data, statistics and research on sex and gender has found that by conflating data on gender and biological sex, public services have posed risks to members of the public.[20] As part of the move to give individuals the right to change records of their gender identity, health services risked accidentally putting patients at risk by having incomplete data on sex available when considering screening and treatment.[21]

If every policy is about every other policy, it's even easier for policymakers to get distracted and forget to 'keep the main thing the main thing'. Too often, policy levers are given equal equivalence, despite the evidence suggesting that in most areas, a small number of the causes generate the biggest effects.[22] James Q Wilson identified this "goal ambiguity" as a central problem of bureaucratic organisations.[23]

And while the mess of bureaucratic structures designed to navigate complex systems might seem inevitable, it also creates confusion about basic roles and responsibilities.[24] Systems which pursue complexity for the sake of complexity struggle to know what they should do, or who should do it.

Often, the messy and interconnected state of Everythingism lets policymakers pretend they are tackling a problem by pointing to lots of existing policies which 'connect', without actually changing anything. They allow the system to be distracted by its own work. Dame Louise Casey, former Head of the Rough Sleeping Unit and the Troubled Families Unit, and currently the Government's independent reviewer of social care, called the obsession of bureaucracies with rebadging existing interconnected projects "initiatitivitis".[25]

[20] Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, *Review of Data, Statistics and Research on Sex and Gender: Executive Summary*, 2025.
[21] Aoife Walsh and Euan O'Byrne Mulligan, 'Public Data Should Not Conflate Sex and Gender, Review Says', *BBC News*, 20 March 2025.
[22] Wikipedia, 'Pareto Principle', Web Page, 19 March 2025.
[23] James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy* (Basic Books, 1991).
[24] Blathnaid Corless and Neil Johnston, 'Covid Inquiry Diagram of Government Structure Likened to "Bowl of Spaghetti"', *The Telegraph*, 13 June 2023.
[25] Alona Ferber, 'Louise Casey: The Tories Are Done – and They Need to Go Away for a While', *The New Statesman*, 29 November 2023.

3.2 Denial of trade-offs: when you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail

In 2023 an internal Royal Air Force (RAF) inquiry found that targets the organisation set to increase the proportion of women and people from ethnic minorities in the RAF were unlawfully discriminatory against men applying for those roles.[26] The RAF now faces a pilot shortage with too few recruits in training, at a time when the Prime Minister has committed to "put boots on the ground and planes in the air" to secure a Ukraine peace deal.[27]

Policy instruments can be optimised for different goals. But none of the processes used in Westminster force policymakers to consider the very real trade-offs between using the same instrument for multiple goals at the same time.

The Government's new National Procurement Policy Statement requires public sector organisations not just to consider good value for money as the criteria for procurement, but also that all contracts "deliver social and economic value that supports the Government's missions", including areas like Net Zero and equalities policy.[28] This continues a practice from the previous government of "social value" procurement, where normally 10 per cent of tender evaluation scores are awarded based on the company's wider value to society, such as its impact on the environment and sustainability.

Clearly, the more government evaluates tenders based on other factors, and the less they evaluate them purely on value for money, the worse the value for money will be. Maybe the wider social value goals are important, but it's only worth using government procurements to secure them if you don't think there's a trade-off between them and getting good value for money for the taxpayer – otherwise government might as well take the money it could save on the procurement and spend that directly on other social value goals instead.

But this trade-off is never explicitly considered, it's just built into the process of social value procurement. There's no clear basis for the 10 per cent weighting of contract award scores, which seems to be applied across the board. Social value procurement is used in the biggest government contracts, and in the smallest ones. The way that 10 per cent is evaluated varies significantly from contract to contract, and social value is so broadly defined as to be meaningless and open to contradictory interpretations – how should public sector buyers weight the trade-off between local employment and Net Zero, as often offshore manufacturing is more energy efficient? But despite these thorny questions, the score available is always the same, and given the evaluation of many tenders is marginal that 10 per cent can make all the difference.

Now, if public procurement were a highly efficient and well-oiled process, trading-off some of that efficiency for other social goals might be worthwhile.[29] But it isn't. The head of the National Audit Office has identified procurement as one of five areas of spending where there are

[26] Jonathan Beale, 'RAF Diversity Targets Discriminated against White Men', *BBC News*, 29 June 2023.
[27] Tom McArdle, 'RAF Facing Pilot Shortage after Diversity Scheme Backfires', *The Telegraph*, 10 March 2025.
[28] Government Commercial Function, 'National Procurement Policy Statement', Web Page, GOV.UK, 12 February 2025.
[29] Hana Kapetanovic, 'How Can Procurement Help Deliver Labour's Missions?', Web Page, DEMOS, 11 December 2024.

significant inefficiencies.[30] We need more focus on economic value in public budgets, not less, but the trade-off to prioritise social value is baked in by government policy.

By denying the possibility of any real trade-off between policy objectives, Everythingism means policymakers produce a false economy, where they are conjuring up many better outcomes on paper but they either fail to materialise in practice, or just rebalance the system from one goal to another.

3.3 Institutional paralysis: everything, everywhere, all at once

Over time, the biggest risk of Everythingism isn't to individual policies, but to the system itself. Successive governments have responded to the complex web of problems by building increasingly complex systems, layering more and more policies on top of each other over time. By demanding that every system or instrument play a role in fixing every other one, we have created processes so complex and elaborate that taken together they make our problems harder to solve, not easier.

The complexity of the policy system is most evident in the challenges caused by policy being contested in the courts.

An immigration tribunal has recently ruled that the Home Office could not deport a foreign national offender to Albania in part because of his child's food sensitivities, sensory issues and difficulties communicating emotions – including his aversion to eating the type of chicken nuggets that are available abroad. The risk of legal challenges like this exerts a 'chilling effect' on policymaking. Any change can feel like it runs the risk of being called out for violating an obscure part of legislation, because the scope and complexity of public law has grown so vast, embedding Everythingism in statute. So additional processes and checks are layered into policymaking to show regard for legal risks, making it all slower and creating more excuses to not continue at all.

This "kludgeocracy" means developed economies are increasingly overwhelmed by the complexity of the policies they have created, such that any improvement in policy becomes impossible because it requires peeling back so many accreted layers of other policies.[31]

Rather than delivering everything, everywhere and all at once, Everythingism risks policies delivering nothing, nowhere, never.

[30] Gareth Davies, 'Innovation Key to Unlocking Gains in Productivity and Resilience', Web Page, National Audit Office, 4 February 2025.
[31] Steven M. Teles, *Kludgeocracy in America*, 2014.

4. Entrenching Everythingism

Few people start their day intentionally trying to ensure policy decisions run afoul of Everythingism. Its roots are as much behavioural as theoretical.

The Everythingist argument is rooted in certain common assertions. Criticism of 'siloed thinking' and arguments for 'joined-up government' can lead to the conclusion that every policy in all departments should deliver as many different objectives as possible.[32] Everythingists extend these (basically good) ideas to the extent that they become policy memes – ideas whose value is in signalling status in the policy community.[33] Like the inevitable calls for more 'cross-departmental working' no matter the policy issue or departments in question, these concepts can be applied to analysis uncritically and often falsely.

But Everythingism doesn't fundamentally come from policy analysis – its roots are social and institutional. Faced with competing objectives and finite resources (time, money, legislation), the existence of trade-offs is uncomfortable for individuals and organisations alike, and so both find coping mechanisms like Everythingism.

4.1 All good things correlate

In fact, it's become a powerful but implicit idea in policymaking that trade-offs *can* safely be ignored, with a whole industry of lobbyists (from the private, public and charity sectors) convincing policymakers that all good things always correlate, that those correlations are causal, and the causality can work in both directions. For those with strong vested interests in different policy outcomes, the idea that all their interests align, and that there are no trade-offs between them, is powerful – it lets them all win at once, even if the public ultimately loses out as a result.

Some examples:

- Campaigners and researchers argue that a four-day working week could boost growth, despite the risks of international businesses choosing not to create jobs in the UK in the first place.[34]
- The transition to Net Zero carbon emissions is often cited as a way to also grow the UK economy, principally by creating jobs.[35] Usually these analyses ignore the clear negative impact on jobs from the growth of industrial energy prices implied by transitioning to clean energy, prices which had already tripled between 2004 and 2021.[36]

[32] Gillian Tett, *The Silo Effect: The Peril of Expertise and the Promise of Breaking Down Barriers* (London: Little, Brown, 2015).
[33] Joe Hill, 'Policy Memes (and Where to Find Them)', *Reform Think Tank* (blog), 31 January 2024.
[34] David Eiser and Mark Mitchell, 'What Might Be the Effects of a Four-Day Working Week?', 8 November 2021.
[35] Anupama Sen, Harry Lightfoot Brown, and Fankhauser, 'Policy Brief: Getting a Good Deal on Net Zero', *Oxford Smith School of Enterprise and the Environment* (blog), May 2024.
[36] Ben Southwood, Samuel Hughes, and Sam Bowman, *Foundations: Why Britain Has Stagnated*, 2024.

Again, the issue isn't that these policy goals aren't worthwhile. Increasing people's leisure time, reducing carbon emissions, and ensuring opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds are all good aims. The problem is assuming they all actively support each other, and there are no trade-offs, which means governments don't prioritise the right measures to achieve any of them.

Policymakers find it even easier to ignore trade-offs because of systems which treat direct costs to the Government as more important than indirect costs to the economy.

Impact assessments for new regulations are usually only published after the regulations have been approved by Parliament, meaning we pass laws like "Martyn's Law" (which sets requirements on large establishments and venues to have additional security measures) the costs to society are estimated as seventy times greater than the benefits, even when those benefits include preventing loss of life from terrorism.[37]

Likewise, the requirement that all new buildings over a certain height should include a second staircase for fire safety reasons is estimated to cost the economy £2.6 billion, mainly in cost to developers.[38] Yet in that same assessment, the government found no evidence that the new rule would definitely save lives. Those additional costs to developers will, however, definitely increase costs for families, making it harder to afford bigger homes, or homes nearer to their places of work,[39] or homes with space to have children.[40] That means worse housing affordability, longer commutes and so lower productivity, and lower fertility rates.

Often, it's easier for governments to regulate and create extra costs for the rest of the economy, because those costs aren't comprehensively measured, than to tackle a problem by allocating public budgets (which are), or even simply deciding to do nothing. So regulation is increasingly used to deliver policies it is unsuitable for, because government feels it comes at little cost – multiplying the opportunities for Everythingism.

Even when costs are considered, we rarely weigh direct costs the same as opportunity costs. One reason the new Government has announced so many independent reviews and commissions since the election in July is that these come at little cost to the taxpayer, while the indirect costs of inaction on any of the issues being investigated go uncounted.[41]

4.2 "Plus-Oneism"

In practice, Everythingism isn't the outcome of comprehensive policy frameworks, but of many smaller, individual decisions. It is the result of a succession of "Plus One-isms" – requests (real or expected) from stakeholders, which over time accumulate to an unmanageable burden.

There are plenty of careers to be made in Plus One-ism, because the costs to an individual of suggesting one change or tweak to suit their preferred policy are relatively low. Being a

[37] Home Office, 'Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill: Impact Assessment', 17 September 2024.
[38] DLUHG, 'Impact Assessment on the Introduction of Second Staircases in Residential Buildings above 18m, Following the Consultation on Sprinklers in Care Homes, Removal of National Classes, and Staricases in Residential Buildings', 22 March 2024.
[39] Valentine Quinio, 'Is the Commute the Reason Why London Workers Are Reluctant to Return to the Office?', 1 June 2023.
[40] Jedidajah Otte, '"It's Money": The Britons Who Want Children but Feel They Can't', 2 April 2024.
[41] Faith Ridler, 'Labour Launch a New Review Every Two and a Half Days', 3 December 2024.

"stakeholder", be it as a senior civil servant, a single-issue campaigner, a corporate lobbyist, or working for a charity or think tank, there are strong personal incentives to twist another policy to suit your favoured objectives, and there's never a direct bill to pay in exchange.

Plus-Oneism is compounded in a civil service which is deeply conflict-averse and shies away from disagreement. In her evidence on the role of government scientific advice in the COVID-19 pandemic, Dame Angela McLean, the Government Chief Scientific Adviser, contrasted groupthink in the civil service with academic standards of challenge: "it is very frequent in a civil service meeting that as somebody stands up the very first thing they will say is 'I agree with everything that has been said', and you are sat there thinking 'well you can't have been listening then'."[42]

This distorts the focus away from the policies most likely to have the biggest impact on the problem, and spreads policy debate much more evenly across different policy levers, even if many of them will be too small to make much of a difference. Indeed, the push for any given transport policy to be "multimodal" (to work well for multiple different types of transport) is often heavily distorted by experts biases about what the right balance of modes (driving, public transport, active transport) is.[43]

But the cumulative burden of Plus One-ism on the system is intolerably high. It's precisely how Sizewell C's environmental impact assessment has become thirty times the length of the complete works of Shakespeare, even though nobody at any point sat down and decided that this is how the system ought to work.[44]

4.3 Institutional Everythingism

The Climate Change Act of 2008, for example, set duties on ministers to consider the impacts of all and any policies on climate change. The Public Sector Equalities Duty requires any and all policies to that might have an impact on groups with protected characteristics to have an impact assessment. And the way that the UK has chosen to interpret the Aarhus Convention has ended up capping the cost of legal challenges to government infrastructure projects, effectively providing government funding to help campaigners cost the State billions of pounds in delays for appeals they know they will almost certainly lose.[45]

These are examples of how policy objectives can become baked into the policymaking process, reducing the choice and autonomy of policymakers to make decisions without reference to other competing goals, and embedding Everythingism at the highest levels of government. It's enabled in part by decades-long constitutional changes in Britain, which have outsourced power from elected politicians to bureaucratic and legal structures, conditions which contribute to Everythingism flourishing.

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[42] Jim Dunton, 'Cultural Differences Pitched Civil Servants against Academics, Angela McLean Tells Covid Inquiry', 27 November 2023.
[43] Kelcie Ralph and Alexa Delbosc, 'I'm Multimodal, Aren't You? How Ego-Centric Anchoring Biases Experts' Perceptions of Travel Patterns', *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice* 100 (June 2017).
[44] Southwood, Hughes, and Bowman, *Foundations: Why Britain Has Stagnated*.
[45] Transport Action Network, 'Sir David King and Chris Packham Support Roads Climate Legal Challenge in Court of Appeal', 15 January 2024.

Legal duties to privilege particular policy goals, or the view of particular institutions, can often tie the hands of policymakers and prevent them making the right trade-offs. In the most extreme cases, the accretion of many different layers of scrutiny paralyses whole systems with Everythingism.

Along with legislative power, bureaucratic changes have moved more authority outside of direct ministerial control. Since the 1980s, more and more of the governance of Britain has been done by public bodies which are not directly responsible to ministers. 60 per cent of day-to-day public spending, and many critical state functions, are controlled by a large number of organisations classified as public bodies, of which there is no single comprehensive list (though estimates put their number at over 500).[46] One step removed from parliamentary and public accountability at the ballot box, public bodies are not forced to make trade-offs between different objectives, and can further their own goals no matter the costs to others.

Whilst often imperfect, democratic processes can force trade-offs between different priorities. Leaders inevitably must prioritise, and elected leaders can be voted out if they prioritise badly. In this way democratic processes also confer legitimacy for making trade-offs. Outsourcing policy decisions to institutions which lack the same legitimacy risks fewer trade-offs being made, and being made without the legitimacy of a democratic mandate.

Institutionalising Everythingism through processes like these creates what Dan Davies calls "accountability sinks" – systems which reduce individual discretion, and so reduce individual accountability, shifting that accountability onto a bureaucratic process which fundamentally cannot be held accountable by anyone.

> "For an accountability sink to function, it has to break a link; it has to prevent the feedback of the person affected by the decision from affecting the operation of the system." [47]

Even though Everythingism doesn't work, it is appealing to many people precisely because it undermines individual accountability. If no single person or organisation is on the hook for delivering a specific policy, it's much harder to identify whether they have succeeded or failed, and for the public or elected politicians to hold them accountable.

Everythingism is sticky. Even when governments try to establish the primacy of some objectives over others, that is no guarantee of success in a bureaucratic system which implicitly doesn't believe in the existence of trade-offs at all. Two months after the Government announced their plan to prioritise budgets towards their five Missions,[48] officials are already being accused of "mission-washing" their plans to try and rebrand their existing budgets as core to delivering the new priorities.[49]

So not only are policymakers asked to try and deliver everything, everywhere, and all at once, but often they aren't being asked by a democratically-elected person at all – just a system

[46] Patrick King and Alice Semark, *Quangocracy: The Future of Public Bodies* (Reform think tank, 2025).
[47] Dan Davies, *The Unaccountability Machine: Why Big Systems Make Terrible Decisions - and How the World Lost Its Mind*, 2024.
[48] Keir Starmer, *PM Speech on Plan for Change: 5 December 2024*, 2024.
[49] Kiran Stacey and Jessica Elgot, 'Ministers "Mission-Washing" Spending Plans in Effort to Avoid Cuts', *The Guardian*, 14 February 2025.

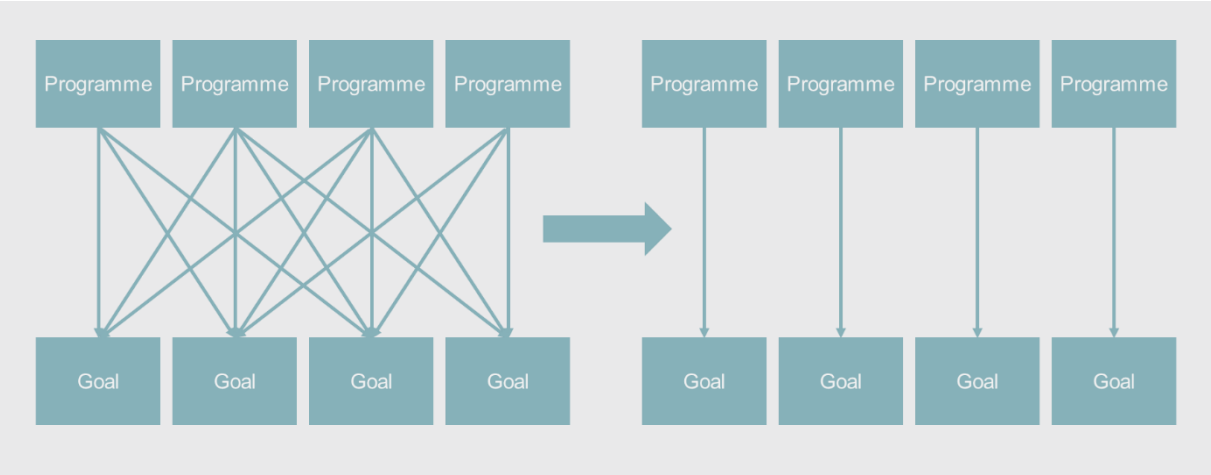
which they have no incentive to argue with, and no recourse to reason with, supposing they even foresaw any problems in the first place.

5. Instead of Everything

There is another way to make policy, based on ruthless focus and prioritisation.

Consider Figure 1 below. Both theory and evidence supports the model on the right as being a more efficient and rational way of managing policies with overlapping objectives. But the model on the left, as a description of Everythingism, is most policymakers' experience of their working environment. Given the costs of this complexity are both high and growing, the benefits of moving to a much more focused and streamlined State are considerable.

Figure 1: From Everythingism to 'focus' policymaking



Policies that try to combine even two goals often add up to significantly less than the sum of their parts. For example, Playpumps (water pumps which are also playground merry-go-rounds) were thought by aid organisations to be a 'win-win', using the power of children pushing the pump around to increase water availability. Instead, they performed consistently worse than traditional hand pumps, and children didn't want to play on them because of the extra effort needed.[50]

Focus doesn't mean ignoring the consequences that one policy can have for another goal. But often those are more than outweighed by the benefits of specialisation. There are simple ways policymakers can allow policies to offset their impact on other areas, and for the system to be more efficient overall. Mechanisms like the buying carbon capture offsets for emissions, rather than trying to ensure every business produces no new emissions at all, for example. The Government's plan for a Natural Restoration Fund, which development projects can pay into to offset their impact on the environment elsewhere, is a good model for restoring focus to the State.[51]

[50] William MacAskill, 'An Example of Do-Gooding Done Wrong', *Effective Alturism Forum* (blog), 15 May 2023.
[51] HM Treasury, 'Chancellor Vows to Go Further and Faster to Kickstart Economic Growth', 29 January 2025.

Critics of governments often bemoan the State's inability to prioritise. In a G7 economy with a large and expanding public sector, the level of prioritisation you would expect in a private company is unrealistic. But governments can prioritise how they use the policy levers at their disposal. The State will function significantly better if particular programmes, policies and legislation aren't continually being asked to do things beyond the goals they are most essential to serving.

Along with the rejection of Everythingism in policymaking, Britain will need bureaucratic reform to shift the decision-making power away from the vested interests who thrive in Everythingism. Returning more power to Ministers from public bodies, and stripping back legislation which ties policymakers' hands, will put politicians firmly on the hook for making the right trade-offs, and give no excuses for failure.

6. Everything is up for grabs

Everythingism is dangerous, but also fixable. It is not part of the fundamental fabric of our State, unlike our strong legal system, good democratic norms, and low levels of corruption in public life. It is a philosophy common to a relatively small number of policymakers in national and local government, whose minds can be changed. Its institutional power rests on bad legislation, but legislation which any Government could amend. We cannot underestimate how hard it will be to unwind the decades-long shift towards Everythingism, but it is fixable.

Most inadvertent proponents of Everythingism have good intentions. They see policy challenges everywhere, partial solutions everywhere, and frantically want to pull all the levers at their disposal to try and change things for the better. And the attention deficit of policymakers is so great that when they move onto another goal, they'll think about using those same levers to optimise for it instead, not remembering the consequences that this might have for their previous goal. But many already realise that the system can't go on like this, and are starting to change their approach.

Defeating Everythingism is a crucial step to rewiring the government and building state capacity. And greater state capacity is essential for solving Britain's problems, given how closely the modern state is intertwined with the levers needed to build a successful future – a growing economy, defence of the nation, and reliable public services.

If we reject Everythingism, there is a chance that we can start to fix everything that's going wrong.

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