



A UK-wide Commissioner for Future Generations?

Provocation

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Summary

There is an opportunity now for the Government to learn from the comprehensive Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act and establish an early form of a Future Generations Commissioner for the whole UK by October's Budget. The danger is that in the forthcoming spending cuts, short-term decisions will be made to the detriment of the long-term and future generations. If we want a political system that is open and engaged with citizens, and is future-focused and strategic, we can learn a lot by looking outside London.

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Introduction

Cameron's new cabinet faces a summer of cuts and difficult decisions over where to reduce public spending. In slashing budgets, it will have to juggle between distribution, efficiency and fairness. The danger is that in this potential "free-for-all", the loudest voices with most access will win out, and decisions will be made on a short-term basis rather than looking at longer-term considerations.

The dilemma of ensuring that government makes future-ready policy is always relevant. (It is something the previous coalition Government showed interest in, but with mixed success according to a recent [Public Administration Select Committee \(PASC\) inquiry on Whitehall's capacity to address future challenges](#)). But this dilemma is most acute at times of crisis, when people with little representation – facing major strategic policy problems with little short-term benefit – significantly lose out. To help resolve this dilemma, Whitehall could look at Wales, who, only two weeks before the 2015 election, passed the [Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act](#).

The idea of future generations

Who is more voiceless and yet deeply affected by our decisions today than future generations? Our children, their children, and their grandchildren are all going to have to deal with the financial system, the ecosystem and the relationships we leave them. But at the moment, their concerns are not taken into account. Thinking about the impact of our decisions on those future generations is one way to do so.

“Future generations” is a term and approach that is becoming increasingly popular to communicate the value of thinking about longer-term consequences today. Like Rawls’ “[Veil of Ignorance](#)”, the concept is a simple but powerful device to help us all think about fairness, not just across our community today, but also over time. There is a growth of innovative institutions in different countries around the world looking at how to apply this principle, and based in different political institutions including parliaments, ombudsmen, independent commissions, the civil service, and even ministerial positions in cabinet. There is also a social movement, supported especially by young people, to create a UN Commissioner for Future Generations.

Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act

Even among all this innovation, what Wales has done stands out because of its comprehensiveness, and how it targets the policy-making process.

It’s worth quoting from the Act’s overview: *“Why do we need this law? Wales faces a number of challenges now and in the future, such as climate change, poverty, health inequalities and jobs and growth. To tackle these we need to work together. To give our children and grandchildren a good quality of life, we need to think about how the decisions we make now will impact them. This law will make sure that our public sector does this.”*

The Act does three things. It defines what well-being in Wales means in practice, derived from conversations with citizens, that acts as a guide for public bodies. It then requires public bodies to promote this vision of Welsh well-being and follow five sound principles for longer-term policy-making. Finally, it provides institutional structure to support these public bodies by the Future Generations Commissioner (and hold them to account where necessary via the Auditor General). Of particular interest are the requirements for consultation, local well-being plans and boards, and a report on future trends facing Wales published the year before election.

You may well ask why we haven’t heard about the Act in either the national press or within policy conversations in Whitehall. Despite the endless fascination of the media for coalition crystal-ball gazing, it would have been appropriate for them to have covered such a major domestic innovation in public policy within the UK. Certainly, the Canadians, Australians, Germans, Dutch, Finns, Hungarians, and the UN thought it worth coming to an [international conference](#) on the Welsh Act and other similar approaches around the world. Unfortunately, no one from Whitehall did.

Extending the Welsh approach across the UK

Could this work across the whole of the United Kingdom? Well why not? It's an approach that Whitehall would do well to learn from. What the Welsh have got right is underlining that this is relevant to all issues – across domestic policies (as well as international ... you'd be surprised, it applies to a lot more than you think!). Some Future Generations institutions in other countries are firmly anchored in the environmental/sustainable development policy space to the detriment of their wider impact. But these principles are just as relevant for thinking about our investment in Trident or the British Council as well as addressing industrial or pension policy, or our investment in environment or education or health.

If we want to leave a decent, peaceful, prosperous and secure United Kingdom as a legacy for the next generation, we need a process for thinking about UK well-being that also encompasses the National Security Council, Her Majesty's Treasury and the Cabinet Office (among others), and not just the obvious departments for Climate Change, International Development or the Environment. The requirement to develop a UK-plan around the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in September 2015 is yet another opportunity for starting this conversation this summer.

As the Cabinet Office machinery and priorities shift around in the coming months, Oliver Letwin, as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Cabinet Office, could make a commitment to learn from the Welsh example and establish some early form of Future Generations Commissioner by October's Budget. This new Government has indicated its appetite to reform the civil service and policy making process. If we want a political system that is open and engaged with citizens, and is future-focused and strategic, we can learn a lot by looking outside London.

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