**Overload, decline and government failure: A review of 60 years of UK crisis and crisis literature**

**Abstract**

Following the 2008 financial crisis and Brexit it has been argued that the UK is in a ‘permacrisis’ with declining public services, declining legitimacy of political institutions and a long period of slow economic growth. Yet, the idea of Britain in crisis or decline is not new. Indeed, going back to the 1960s there has been a significant body of literature focusing on the crisis of the British state. The aim of this review is to examine the changing nature of the ‘crisis debates’ from the 1960s to the current day. This review argues that while there is considerable disagreement on the causes of crisis, often on ideological grounds, there are a number of commonalities, including a recurring focus on institutional weakness, overcentralisation, the erosion of state capacity, and the failure to develop a coherent long-term political economy.

**Introduction**

The United Kingdom seems to be at a point of acute political and economic crisis. Following a long period of low economic growth, the 2008 financial crisis resulted in falling living standards, a consistent pattern of poor economic performance and worsening services in the public sector. At the same time there is substantial distrust in politicians and disillusionment with public institutions. There is now a growing body of literature by academics, journalists, politicians, and even celebrities, discussing and analysing the current malaise. This sense of doom has spread beyond the commentariat. According to the Guardian journalist Rafael Behr (2024), ‘In a recent survey by More in Common…voters were asked to describe the UK in a word. The top choices were ‘broken’, ‘mess’, ‘struggling’, ‘divided’, ‘expensive’, ’poor’ and ‘chaotic’.’ The explanation of the crisis—or perhaps the set of interlocking crises—is many fold but often focuses on Brexit, austerity policies, neo-liberalism or from different perspectives an inflexible and unproductive labour market, and an entrepreneurial class limited by over regulation. The idea of Britain in crisis or decline is not new. Indeed, going back to the 1960s there has been a significant body of literature focusing on the crisis of the British state. During the 1980s this sense of crisis developed into a ‘Britain in decline’ industry producing myriad accounts of why the UK seemed to be performing so badly. However, from the 1990s the combination of cheap credit, a liberalised labour market, low energy prices and China’s economic expansion drove a period of sustained economic growth (the period from 1992-2008 was the longest period of continuous growth in the postwar period). The economic growth allowed the 1997-2010 Labour Government to undertake a significant investment in public services (Smith 2014), which was allied with a renewal of public spaces. Consequently, the issue of decline slipped off the agenda. For many it seemed that Britain had broken out of its spiral of decline and it was back as a leading world economy.

The belief that boom/bust economic cycles had been consigned to history was hubris. The financial crisis of 2008–9 demonstrated the fragility of credit led growth. The crash, which of course affected many countries around the world, led to a long period of austerity in the UK with significant cuts in spending for public services. In addition, the decision to leave the European Union in 2016 further destabilised the economy. The subsequent economic shocks have reignited the debate about the problematic nature of the British economy and polity and led to a renewed debate about the British crisis. The aim of this review is to examine the changing nature of the ‘crisis debates’ from the 1960s to the current day. This review argues that while there is considerable disagreement on the causes of crisis, often on ideological grounds, there are a number of commonalities, including a recurring focus on institutional weakness, overcentralisation, the erosion of state capacity, and the failure to develop a coherent long-term political economy. More importantly, while much of the focus is on economic factors, politics and the process of governance play a key role in understanding the problems facing the United Kingdom. Indeed, it seems that limited state capacity, adversarial politics and lack of continuity of political economy have led to inconsistent and contradictory economic policies, which have led to a decline in public services.

**Government failure in the United Kingdom**

There is a growing sense that Britain is suffering a deep crisis largely as a consequence of austerity, Brexit and growing spatial and economic inequality. While Brexit was seen by some as a response to the impact of austerity it has paradoxically exacerbated some of the factors that it was meant to resolve. For Mcleavy and Jones (2021: 449):

the aftermath of the referendum has seen the forces acting in and through the state working to resolve the ‘Brexit crisis’ through the strategic use of the ‘left behind’ as a policy and political category… state elites have sought to (re)structure assemblages of power and so enable the continued governance of contemporary capitalism. Instances of failure (such as the implementation of neoliberal policies that ignore uneven development…) have been used as a basis for EU withdrawal that looks set to further compound the problems.

Brexit was in some ways a post-austerity political economy strategy that was unable to accept the logic of its position. This was illustrated by the rapid demise of the short-lived Prime Minister, Liz Truss. What Truss (2024) identified was a need for a post-Brexit economic shock. What she missed was that the strategy lacked the necessary political superstructure and it was rejected by the economic institutions, the markets and the public. Nevertheless, Truss recognised the scale of the problems and the need for something more than leaving the EU to break out of the UK’s low growth cycle. She saw, like many commentators of all persuasions, that UK governance is in a state of crisis with a growing view that things in the UK are just not functioning as they should. The period since 2010 has seen a significant decline in the scale and performance of the public sector. The IFG’s 2023 public services performance tracker highlights the way in which the public sector has been underfunded since 2010 and, as a result:

Public services that have for years been creaking are now crumbling. The public is experiencing first-hand the consequences of successive governments’ short-term policy making – perhaps most starkly in the forced closure of more than 100 schools just days before the start of the new academic year in September 2023, for fear they may collapse. In the NHS, the elective waiting list reaches a new record high every time figures are published, industrial action by doctors is now into its eighth month and patients find it increasingly difficult to get an appointment with an ever-shrinking number of GPs (IFG 2023).

According to the report nearly every service in the public sector is struggling: NHS spending has continued to be well below the OECD average with the UK, for example, having half the number of CT scanners as the OECD average and waiting lists up to 7.8 million in 2023. An increasing number of local authorities are declaring themselves effectively bankrupt. There is a growing loss of experienced staff and capital underinvestment is leading to decaying working environments. As the report points out, reflecting the siloisation and short-termism of Treasury funding (Richards et al 2024), these problems are systemic and there is considerable spillover between policy areas, which ultimately increases costs to government.

The scale of governmental failure is extensive: there are failures in transport with trains, with or without strike actions, being seen as unreliable and expensive, the abandonment of the northern section of HS2, a crisis of potholes on Britain’s roads and crumbling concrete damaging many public sector buildings. The 2024 Darzi review concluded that the NHS ‘is in serious trouble’ and identified significant failures in primary care, accident and emergency and cancer care (Darzi 2024). In addition, labour shortages are damaging productivity, and an aging sewage system is leading to continual discharges into rivers and seas. The United Kingdom appears to be subject to a polycrisis, in which multiple crises intersect, making the whole more dangerous than the sum of its parts because of feedback and contagion across systems (Tooze 2021). Indeed, the Labour government elected in 2024 views the situation as worse than anyone realised and so proposing a further period of austerity in order to rectify the situation. The question is whether this crisis is particular to the post austerity period or a consequence of a long-term and deep structural problems with the British economy and governance arrangements. Indeed, the discussion of the UK’s crisis has a long history.

**Crisis, overload and decline: the previous debate**

This sense of Britain is in crisis is not new. Since the 1960s (or perhaps the since the 1956 Suez crisis) there has been a widespread view of deep-seated problems in the British economy with periods of stop/go economic policy and relative decline in relation to the UK’s competitors (Tomlinson 1996 sees this debate going back to the 1950s; Diamond et al 2024). Despite the post war boom the UK under performed every OECD economy in the 1960s and 1970s.

Perry Anderson wrote in 1964 (1964: 260), in words that could be used today:

British society is in the throes of a profound, pervasive but cryptic crisis, undramatic in its appearance but ubiquitous in its reverberations. As a result a Labour Government seems imminent. So much everyone agrees. But what do these phenomena mean? What kind of crisis is it?

Anderson suggests that the foundations of the crisis lay in the failure of the bourgeoisie to establish a modern state leading to a situation where a powerful economic powers confront a weak state, with the UK never establishing the sort of bureaucratic governance that developed in other European powers. For Anderson (1964: 261):

Today, Britain stands revealed as a sclerosed, archaic society, trapped and burdened by its past successes, now for the first time aware of its lassitude, but as yet unable to overcome it. The symptoms of the decline have been catalogued too frequently and copiously to need repetition here: a torpid economy, a pinched and regressive education, a listless urban environment, a demoralized governing class, a wretched cultural provincialism.

To some degree the sense of the UK in crisis was lessened in the early period of the 1964-70 Labour government. Labour initiated a period of economic growth and modernization with the expansion of the Universities, the development of comprehensive education, increased living standards and a raft of social reforms. However, by the late 1960s Britain seemed to have reached the limits of social democracy. In 1969 the Labour government was faced growing economic problems and was forced to cut public spending (Bale 1999, Stones 1992). This was followed in the 1970s by a set of rolling economic and industrial relations crises culminating in the Labour government asking the IMF for a loan to underpin the value of sterling (Burk and Caincross 1992; Ludlam 1992). With the IMF seeking spending cuts in return for the loan, in the words of the then Prime Minister, James Callaghan, ‘the party is over’. The IMF crisis was seen as the end of the postwar boom and as demonstrating the contradictions of the UK’s limited social democracy (Whitehead 1985). The economic travails of the 1970s led to the development of a broad range of literature attempting to account for the malaise of the British economy. First there was a set of literature focussing on the events of the 1970s and then later a particular focus on the factors leading to Britain’s relative decline.

**Legitimation crisis and overload**

Following the Second World War, most developed economies adopted some form of Keynesian economic policy framework combined with comprehensive welfare systems which stimulated postwar economic growth. The assumption was that government could manage the peaks and troughs of the economic cycle through demand management and so avoid the destructive depressions that marked the interwar years. However, in the 1970s government seemed to confront the limits of growth. Countries across ‘the West” faced energy crises, inflation, industrial relations problems and slower growth and it seemed that the Keynesian tools were no longer effective in the face of global economic problems. For writers on both the Left and the Right it seemed that the state was facing a deep-seated crisis as a consequence of governmental overload leading to a growing legitimation crisis. There was a divide in the literature between the Marxist oriented approach which saw the economic problems of the 1970s as a general crisis of the state and those from a liberal perspective that saw it as a particularly British (and to some degree US) issue (this is a comparison highlighted by Held (2006)). According to Samuel Brittan (1975:129) ‘liberal democracy suffers from internal contradictions’ that according to him would see its demise in the next generation. The contradictions were a consequence of ‘excessive expectations’ amongst voters and ‘the pursuit of group self-interest’. Consequently, government was expected to do too much and provide to citizens and groups what was beyond the means of government or society. For King (1975: 172):

Britain, then, had become harder to govern. The reason it had become harder to govern is that, at one and the same time, the range of problems that government is expected to deal with has vastly increased, and its capacity to deal with problems, even with many of the ones it had before, has decreased. It is not the increase in the number of problems alone that matters, or the reduction in capacity. It is the two coming together.

King saw a growing gap between what voters expected from government and what it could deliver, and this crisis of overload increasingly undermined legitimacy.

Whereas King defined this as a problem of the government and the people, ‘the German school’ of legitimation crisis identified a more fundamental crisis with capitalism. Offe (1984) saw the postwar welfare state as contradictory with the capitalism and attempts by the state to intervene in markets to resolve problems only enhances the contradictions (a viewpoint not far from the new right critique of state intervention). For Offe and O’Conner (1973) the expansion of welfare in the context of crisis riven capitalism led to a fiscal crises of the state whereby expenditures outpace revenues (indeed leading to the sort of crisis that the Labour government faced in 1976–7).

Habermas (1976) developed Offe’s insights into a discussion of a broader legitimation crisis. For Habermas the legitimation crisis of the 1970s and 1980s was a consequence of capitalism undermining the moral basis of community that underpinned the commitment to the existing social order. A legitimation crisis occurs when attempts to resolve the economic problems of what he call late capitalism create problem in the social cultural sub system. In addition, there is a rationality crisis when the state can no longer produce policies that protect capitalist accumulation that also produce legitimation. So, for example, in the UK both Labour and Conservative governments attempted to use incomes policies as mechanisms for controlling inflation. In doing so they increasingly lost legitimacy amongst the Trade Unions and working people. Moreover, the state’s interventions to resolve economic crisis undermine the mystery and legitimacy of the market as an effective allocator of goods. Hence, like O’Conner and Offe, Habermas sees crisis as endemic in the capitalism systems. Attempts to resolve one set of problems creates problems elsewhere (Habermas 1976; Held and Simon 1976).

The crisis in the 1970s is at some levels defined as a crisis of capitalism and the failure to resolve the conflict between the demands for welfare and the demands of profit. Yet, there is a particularity to the UK case as the crisis was especially acute because of the failure to develop cooperative relationships between the Unions and the government and because it appeared that the crisis coincided with a broader relative decline in Britain’s global economic position. It was this relative decline that led to a booming field from the late 1970s attempting to understand the recurrent crises in the British economy.

**Relative decline**

During the postwar period, 1950-1973, Britain saw its strongest period ever of economic growth:

but at the same time relative decline proceeded at a rapid rate vis-à-vis its European peer group such that by the end of the period Britain had been overtaken by seven other countries in terms of real GDP per person and by nine others in terms of labour productivity (Crafts 2012: 22).

Much of the discussion of overload and legitimation or fiscal crisis was seen as a general problem of Western democracies. It was an attempt both to explain and to analyse the impact of the end of the postwar boom. However, the UK seemed to be the apotheosis of the crisis. The economic problems lead to increased political instability in the UK with growing partisan dealignment, trade union actions and the Heath Government of 1970-74 and the Labour Government of 1974-79 seeing their programmes undermined by external events. There was a growing view that Britain was suffering a deeper crisis than its competitors and was in relative economic decline in relation to its major competitors in Europe and the Anglo world.

This growing perception of Britain in relative economic decline led to the explosion of a ‘decline literature’ that blossomed from the late 1970s until the end of the 1980s (although elements of it continued much later). Like the crisis literature of 1970s the decline debate could be categorised in largely, but not wholly, left/right lines (see Coates 1993). Much of the original decline literature could be linked back to the Anderson/Nairn thesis that Britain’s failure to undergo a bourgeois revolution leading to the failure to modernize either the state or the economy and so depending too much on rentier rather than productive capitalism. The view that the UK failed to properly transform itself from an agricultural to industrial society (in terms of governance) received considerable attention from a wide range of perspectives.

For Wiener (1992), the explanation for Britain’s economic failure was as much cultural as economic. He suggested that it was the aristocratic culture that disdained industrialism and focused on the rural, high art, literature that was dominant in the UK and led to the UK elite focusing on the City and the civil service. The man who makes money in industry is the boorish Mr Bott in the *Just William* novels not the cultured, arts educated man of the city or government. For Wiener an anti-industrial culture was imbued in all levels of British society. Industry was a sign of failure and ill-education, not success. The notion of ‘gentlemanly capitalism’ was developed most fully in the work of Cain and Hopkins (2016, first published 1993). For them the decline of the aristocracy led not to the rise of an industrial class but the development of a ‘gentlemanly’ class who achieved much greater wealth through finance and services than manufacturing and, indeed, it was their interests that shaped economic policy. They demonstrate the ways in which the focus on free markets and small state reinforced the interests of the City over industry. As they suggest (2016: 155), ‘the City developed a strong sense of self-esteem and, not surprisingly, assumed that its own interests were those of the nation’s’. The general view was that it was the City, supported by strict monetary policy, that was the foundation of the UK’s economic strength.

The notion of the dominance of the aristocracy led to a wider set of arguments about the dominance of the city and the failure of post-war Britain to create a ‘developmental state’ able to do more than Keynesian adjustments and create a programme for the industrial modernization of the UK (Marquand 1988, Hall 1986, Gamble 1981). Ingham (1995) and others have suggested that the dominance of the City and finance capital led to underinvestment in the industry. Indeed, for Ingham the City works through trading assets and not long-term industrial investment and in the UK there was a separation between finance and industry that did not exist in other countries. Others have pointed to the ways in which in countries such as West Germany and South Korea there was always a strong link between the stock market and the financing of industry (Hall 1986; Jiang and Zhang 2020). A widely held analysis is that the dominance of the City has been such that it has shaped the economic orthodoxy in the UK focusing economic policy, not on industrial development, but on free trade and markets, a strong currency, controlling inflation resulting in the development of a parasitic rather than productive capitalism.

As Eatwell (1982) argued the UK was stuck in a free trade policy which, as the German economist Friedrich List pointed out, was only in the interest of the UK when it was the global economic power. Once its dominance in the global market was challenged, free trade no longer made sense. This led to a substantial body of literature (mainly from left of centre thinkers) that suggested that the failure of the British state lay in its inability or unwillingness to create the sort of developmental state that led to economic growth in countries as diverse as South Korea, Japan, Germany and France (Eatwell 1982, Marquand 1988,). Indeed, Hall’s (1986) comparative study of France and the UK highlighted the ways in which a combination of poor industrial relations, the dominance of finance, poor planning capacity and constant policy change led to a weaker performance in the UK than in France.

Those of the right tended to see the problem from the other end. Obviously for the right, and the increasingly influential Hayekian perspective, the state could never make sound decisions because state actors could not replace the subtleties of the millions of market decisions that would ensure optimal levels of economic activity. The problem was too much government (which was overloaded) and economic problems were a combination of policy errors (Middleton 1989) and the government squeezing out private investment by absorbing too much expenditure (Bacon and Eltis 1978). Moreover a public choice perspective on government saw officials and ministers more interested in bloating the public sector than allowing industry and markets to flourish.

The problem with all the decline literature is that it generally failed to recognize the UK’s relative decline as a structural readjustment (although Strange (1971) locates this decline in the context of the declining power of sterling as an International currency). As Tomlinson (2014, 2016) highlights, the decline/growth narrative is misleading and a ‘better “metanarrative” would focus on the process of de-industrialization’ (Tomlinson 2016: 76) Britain was essentially shifting from being the world’s leading economy in the mid-nineteenth century to a significant, but medium sized, European economic power in the mid- to late to twentieth century. The British economy was seeing strong competition from the US and Germany in the late 19th Century and the economic impact of two world wars, the loss of Empire and the rebuilding of European economies with postwar Marshall fund investment was bound to lead to a relative decline in relation to competitor economies in Europe, not to mention Japan and South Korea in Asia (and more recently China, India, Brazil etc in the 21st Century). For Edgerton (1997), while the post war period was one of ‘relative decline’ the reality of was actually a successful economy that through an intervention state managed successful technological development, increased productivity and sustained economic growth. From his perspective declinism was a political device intended to legitimise the Thatcherite strategy of free markets and deindustrialisation rather than a substantive decline in Britain’s economic position.

Consequently, it may have been that the decline or readjustment could have been less traumatic if the governing elites had been more prepared to recognize the UK’s changing position, if industrial relations had been better managed, that the economy was less distorted by the dominance and concentration of finance capital in the southeast of the country. Moreover, under the Thatcher government the economy was largely left to the market to redistribute the productive economy with little reference to the long-lasting social impact. While the Thatcher government claimed to have reversed decline, the literature suggests perceptions and explanations of decline are about ideology rather than the real economy. What is probably most significant is the continual failure of the political elite to readjust the conception of the United Kingdom from an Imperial state to one that is an increasingly weaker, relative position both economically and politically. As Edgerton (1998) argues the loss of Empire was not a tragedy but the political elite has failed to negotiate the transition to a post-Imperial UK and as Stanley et al (2025: 3) astutely note:

In this new geopolitical game, the UK lacks the capacity to compete to a level commensurate with its historical status and self-perception as a leading economy and world power. Those self-perceptions generate unfavourable comparisons to the US (with its “exorbitant privilege”, vast energy resources, and unparalleled trade and consumption power) and to the EU (with its supranational fiscal resources, geopolitical influence, and access to integrated supply chains).

By the mid to late 1990s the decline ‘debate’ appears to have run its course, partly because Britain’s ‘relative’ decline slowed in relation to European competitors, but also because of a perception, pushed by the Conservative government, that Thatcherism has tackled the rigidities of the British economy and permitted a period of market-led growth (Senker 1989). Moreover, the period from 1997 ushered in a sustained period of low interest rates, global economic expansion and economic growth in the UK.

**Understanding the current crisis**

While debate around British decline diminished in the 1990s, a new sense of crisis was created by the failure to recover quickly from the 2008 financial crisis. As discussed at the beginning of this paper, there is a growing sense that the British polity is in crisis. Both the international and domestic press with the New Yorker asking what has happened to Britain after 14 years of Conservative government and Der Spiegel sees Britain in a deep hole:

Things aren’t going well for the United Kingdom these days. For the past several months, the flow of bad news has been constant, the country’s coffers are empty, public administration is ineffective and the nation’s corporations are struggling. As this winter came to an end, more than 7 million people were waiting for a doctor’s appointment, including tens of thousands of people suffering from heart disease and cancer. According to government estimates, some 650,000 legal cases are still waiting to be addressed in a court of law. And those needing a passport or driver’s license must frequently wait for several months (Schindler 2023).

While it may not be a surprise that The Guardian should ask: ‘Britain is broke. What will fix it?’ (The Guardian 23/11/2023). It is perhaps more concerning that even Daily Telegraph claims: ‘Britain is fast becoming a failed state’ (The Daily Telegraph 01/03/2024). Even internationally questions were raised with the New Yorker asking what has happened to Britain after 14 years of Conservative Government (Knight 2024) and Der Spiegel suggesting that Britain has a steep climb out of a deep hole (Schindler 2023).

The sense of a state in crisis and decline has led to a new body of ‘popular’(Bell 2024; Esler 2023; Freedman 2024; Foster 2023; O’Brien 2023; Sopel 2024; Vorderman 2024; Shipman 2024)] and academic literature (Innes 2023, Dorling 2023, Clarke 2023, Bevan 2023, Bell 2024; Stanley 2022). One of the interesting elements from the popular literature is the focus on a political, rather the, economic crisis.

For example in Freedman’s (2024) account (probably the most informative and insightful of them all) previous crises were social and economic while the current one is a ‘crisis of governance’:

Our problem is the total failure of our political institutions to deal with the more limited challenges we have. Britain’s constitution has always been an oddity among developed countries. None of our institutions were designed but rather evolved incrementally through precedent, convention and occasionally crisis (Freedman 2024: 5).

Much of the analysis for the general reader focuses on individuals and their intentions. For James O’Brien (2023:7) the blame for the crisis lies in the influence of right wing think tanks to infiltrate ‘every aspect of public life’. Others partly see it in terms of Boris Johnson’s chaotic style of governing and his unwillingness to stick to the ‘good chaps’ theory of government (Seldon and Newell 2023; Shipman 2024) or Liz Truss’s ideologically driven singlemindedness (Seldon and Newell 2024). Underneath this is the way in which the constitution has permitted cronyism and in what in other political systems would be seen as corruption in terms of Lords appointments, the awarding of contracts (particularly in relation to Covid.

There is a developing consensus in this literature that much of the problem lies with the limits of the British constitution and the fact that the centralisation of power and adversarial politics has led of poor and often contradictory decisions (see Hindmoor 2024). Moreover, the situation has not been helped by Brexit. For Foster (2023), Brexit has led both to significant economic and political costs. While Brexit has damaged trade and productivity and increased food bills, more damaging has been the political cost, which has:

undermined the foundations of the British state and constitution, straining relationships between the government and parliaments; politicians and judges; ministers and civil servants; and the government and the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, where Brexit issues have caused the collapse of the devolved government (Foster 2023: 123).

While the focus on much of the popular literature is on politics and to some degree individuals, much of the academic literature is focussed on ideology and economics. Like the crisis literature of the 1970s there is a body of literature that sees the current crisis as a general one as a consequence of 2008 crash and the subsequent period of austerity (Blyth 2013; Stanley 2022; Peck 2010, Peck et al 2009). Nearly all Western economies suffered a significant economic downturn following the financial crisis with some such as Greece, Portugal and Italy going through a major economic collapse. For many commentators the damage that austerity did to public services and real incomes caused both economic and political damage. Austerity highlighted the tensions between capitalism and democracy (Thompson 2022) as its economic effects undermined trust in politics and its ability to deliver (raising again some of the issues raised in the 1970s crisis literature). There is considerable consensus between Peck (2010) and Davies (2016) that the 2008/9 financial crisis revealed the limits and contradictions of neo-liberalism.

One of the key factors in terms of driving political disenchantment and the rise of populism is growing inequality (Dorling 2023; Kirk 2024). As Wolf (2023: 88) suggests: ‘A dominant feature of the period since the early 1980s has been increasing inequality in both wealth and incomes’, with income inequality higher now than for the past 50 years with the US and the UK as the most unequal countries amongst OECD countries. Both Thompson and Wolf see the crisis is lying in the structure of modern capitalism and indeed the ways in which the liberalization of financial markets led to the securitization and expansion on debt, and the increasing dependence and China for both credit and cheap manufactured goods.

The notion of global economic crisis has been developed for some into a ‘polycrisis’ – a general crisis of neo-liberalism as the result of overlapping economic, political and environmental problems that are interconnected and currently unceasing (Tooze 2021). This notion suggests a general period of global uncertainty. According to Lawrence et al (2024: 2) a ‘global polycrisis’ is ‘the causal entanglement of crises in multiple global systems in ways that significantly degrade humanity’s prospect’. It is then a series of multiple events that were interconnected. Although Lawrence *et al* suggest their approach is different to notions of ‘systematic risk’ it has considerable similarity with Beck’s (1992) notion of a risk society and the assumptions of complexity theory. For Lawrence et al (2024: 5) the world is currently in a polycrisis:

Constituent crises include the lingering health, social and economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic; stagflation (a persistent combination of inflation and low growth); volatility in global food and energy markets; geopolitical conflict especially between assertive authoritarian regimes (including Chine and Russia) and the democratic West which is leading to a partial decoupling of American and Chinese economics; political instability and civil unrest in in countries both rich and poor ranging from economic insecurity, ideological extremism, political polarization and declining institutional legitimacy and increasingly frequent and devastating weather events generated by climate heating. These crises are destroying livelihoods… Moreover, they are certainly interconnected, although exactly how remains unclear.

While it is clear that the world is faced by numerous problems their ahistorical, teleological pessimism seems to underplay the extent to which human life has always been racked by uncertainly and threats to individual and collective security (see Gamble 2013). For many authors what is seen as a polycrisis is just another example of the recurrent crisis of capitalism (Jayasuriya, 2023; Penner, 2023).

However, as in the 1970s, there seems to be a particularity to the British crisis that marks out from broader worldwide problems. For several analysts the extent to which the UK adopted neo-liberalism has changed the nature of the state and the economy and reduced its resilience (Peck, 2010). For some the crisis has a strong political component. The crisis is partly characterised as a consequence of Brexit. Brexit has created problems for the political class because firstly it was based on false promises and the Conservatives failed to develop an agreed vision of a post-Brexit political economy. Brexit has also exacerbated the divisions within the Conservative party and it overstretched the flimsy capacity of the central state (and to some degree parts of the state responsibility for implementation in relation to border control) (Rutter 2024, Diamond 2023).

For several authors the UK crisis is of a particular kind and intensity as a result of the way in which austerity has been built into the fabric of public policy and exacerbated the tendencies of neo-liberalism and new public management. For Kirk and others, the crisis started with austerity and in his view (Kirk 2024: 3):

The present crisis in the UK certain qualifies as another example of a combined or systemic crisis for UK capitalism. It is indeed probably the most serious in living memory. This is because of its deep, extensive, interlocking long-lasting and continuing memory.

The combination of austerity, economic uncertainty, declining real incomes, rising house prices and more recently inflation has resulted in a turn to populist politics. For Clarke (2023: 164):

the current crisis of the state has three distinctive…aspects. First, there is a crisis of capacity involving the state’s ability to manage social, political, environmental and economic disorders. Second, there is a crisis of legitimacy that condenses varieties of anti-state scepticism alongside a deepening mistrust of politics… Third,… a crisis of authority in which the dominant bloc has found it harder to command popular support for its projects, policies and promises.

Clarke sees the severity of the crisis in the UK as the consequence of a particular conjuncture, ‘a distinctive configuration of time and space’, (Clarke 2023:2) in which both international and domestic factors around the economy, neoliberalism, the UK’s colonialism, Brexit, environmental, state failure and the rise of populism have condensed to create a unique and intense crisis for Britain.

Innes (2023) continues this theme arguing that the integration of New Public Management and neo-liberalism into the state has created a system where an apparently market led approach has been driven by a target culture that results in the UK becoming a soviet like planning system which has undermined the functioning of public services. Similar arguments are made by Bevan (2023) who sees the crisis very much a consequence of the marketisation of governance but like Dorling (2023) adds the impact of embedded geographical inequalities. According to Innes (2023: 379):

The sorry punchline, however, is that Britain’s neoliberal revolution has produced a state far closer to the hyper-centralised, arbitrarily intervening, bureaucratically rigid and captured mercenary behemoth of the original public choice fever dream than its post-war state, however imperfect, ever was.

While Innes may overstretch her analogy with the idea of late Soviet Britain, there is no doubt that privatisation and contracting out has seen resources sucked from the public to the private sector with situations like Thames Water being close to bankruptcy, while borrowing billions and paying billions to shareholders. Moreover, UK governments’ commitment to the free market has been continually compromised by an inability to accept the logical outcomes of markets and so producing a complex structure of regulations, accountability and performance targets. The focus on reducing public spending, cutting taxation and using public funding to purchase private services has seen growing inequality. Similarly Jessop (2017: 134) sees the UK’s current crisis being a consequence of a combination of the inherent crisis tendencies of capitalism, combined with weakened state capacity and the particularly British form of neo-liberalism:

The integral economic context domestically was a protracted crisis of Britain’s flawed post-war Fordist economy and, relatedly, of its insertion into the circuits of Atlantic Fordism and the world market, evident from the mid-1960s onwards. Politically this was associated with a crisis in the state form and state strategies. This crisis occurred because the state lacked the capacities to engage in statist intervention, effective corporatist coordination, or a consistently rigorous laissez-faire line and therefore oscillated uneasily among different strategies that all failed in their different ways in different conjunctures.

There is considerable consensus in the literature in terms of how neo-liberalism has undermined living standards and increased inequality leading to a wider political disillusion prompting increased support for populism and indeed Brexit. However, there is a tendency to exaggerate the scale and impact of neo-liberalism in the UK. While there has clearly be an expansion of markets and private organisation in the supply of public goods, it is still the case that the state plays a major role in the provision of welfare, health, education and infrastructure. Indeed, neo-liberalism has always been partial and complex in its implementation (Marsh and Rhodes 1992) and to see the period from the 1980s simply as a rise of hegemonic neo-liberalism is an oversimplification (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Davies and Jackson 2024). Austerity has seen public spending reduced from around 41 per cent of GDP to 35 and the impact on public services has been significant. Yet what the crisis literature going back to the 1960s demonstrates is that this is part of a deeper malaise in the British system and one where the framework of the state sees market solutions as the predominant tools when faced with problems. Indeed, Hindmoor (2024), picking up on some of the themes Foster highlights, sees the apparent reoccurrence of British crisis (or crises) being a consequence of political processes. Perhaps unknowingly he repeats some of Samuel Finer’s conclusions (1980) and suggests that ‘one underlying – and increasingly acute – problem is the dominant role accorded to adversarial politics’ (Hindmoor 2024: 495). The inability of a consensual approach to politics means the rapid change of policy and an inability to develop any long-term strategy (see also Diamond et al 2024).

**Conclusion**

What the recurrence of crisis literature demonstrates is the degree to which decline is embedded in the British psyche but also how it is often constructed from an ideological perspective with explanations of decline reflecting political positions and arguments rather than empirical evidence (Hay 1996). Indeed much of the current debate about crisis is around attempting to frame an alternative to what is seen as an exhausted neo-liberalism (Byrne et al 2020) and perhaps what accounts for the growing resonance to many voters of populist positions. However, what is also apparent from the literature is that discussion of crisis is not a recent phenomenon. For most of the post war period it has been suggested that the British polity and economy has faced some sort of crisis.

The decline/crisis literature highlights three foci of explanation which are sometimes run together. One goes back to Anderson and focus on the failure of the UK to reform to the new world order in which it finds itself. There is within the political elite a group that think Britain is still a great power and only needs to reassert its greatness in order to resolve its problems In 2024 a quickly deleted Conservative Party tweet extorted: ‘Don’t let the doomsters and naysayers trick you into talking down our country. The UK is as strong as ever.’ This sense of greatness was embedded in the deferential conservativism of the 1950s to 1970s (Jessop 1971) but has been reignited by a populist informed Brexit campaign which sought to reassert British sovereignty. Hence, failure to recognize the constraints, anachronisms and limits of the British state have blocked any attempt at systematic reform (see Richards et al 2024). The second is the notion that this is a generalised crisis of capitalism of which Britain is a particular, and perhaps bad, variant. The third and related is the idea that the British crisis is particular because of the extent to which neo-liberalism has been incorporated which means that it has both hollowed out the state and strengthened the state at the same time (Ward and Ward 2023; Ward, Ward and Kerr 2024; Marsh, Richards and Smith 2024).

The current crisis is a combination of the old and the new. In many ways the continuation of highly centralised club government in the context of an increasingly fragmented delivery system (as Innes 2023 suggests) has further affected trust and seen an increasing party dealignment. This disillusionment and failure to reform a 19th century form of government has been exacerbated by the economic destabilisation of austerity and Brexit which has suppressed real wages and seen increased inequality.

What is difficult to disentangle is the extent that this is a generalised problem of the state as suggested by Thompson and Wolf; a result of the tensions between democracy and capitalism or whether it is a crisis particular to the UK. Of course, what is true is that the period since 2008 has seen increased destabilisation in the world which is in some part a result of the decline of the West but also the impact of economic crisis, Covid and political destabilisation in Russia and the Middle East. The West can no longer police the world or impose its values and at the same time is increasingly vulnerable economically to rising powers and the problem of immigration.

The UK state seems particularly ill-equipped to deal with the crisis. There is the absence of any political vision that unites the nations, no mechanism for building political consensus and considerable weakness in the governance and finance processes to provide the sort of strategic leadership that would allow for the development of a new political economy post austerity and Brexit. In this sense the problem is not a demand issue as suggested by the overload literature but a supply problem; the British state lacks the capacity to deal with the scale of problems that it faces. UK parties and government seem unable to develop a vision for either the failures and contradictions of the neo-liberal experiment or for the consequences of that has sufficient legitimacy with the electorate. Indeed recent elections seem to highlight the inability of any party to build a broad coalition of support and without proportional representation there seems to be no institutional mechanism for building such a coalition. Moreover, the failure of consecutive governments to break the grip of over centralisation means that British government continues to have power without capacity. The centralised system cannot deal with the fragmentation of the delivery system.

The unique crisis in the UK how governance failures have led to economic problems. Short-termism and adversarial politics has led to the absence of a consistent and agreed economic framework. The over-centralisation of spending control and lack of capacity means that the centre is trying to micro-manage an increasingly complex governance system. Indeed, there is no consistent framework for local delivery with services being governed by a fragmented and overlapping system of local services. Hence the crisis is ideational, political and economic. There is a lack of a shared vision of where Britain should go or what sort of country it should be, the Westminster model continues to dominate political process despite an ever fragmenting system of policy delivery and there is an absence of a post-Brexit political economy that can deliver the sustained economic growth necessary to resolve the recurring problems of Britain’s public services.

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