

Who will rid us of these hopeless “independent” bodies?

Politicians of all parties have this century been in a hurry to shed responsibilities for anything difficult. There has been a rush to create more arms length bodies from government and to transfer more powers and money to the many quangos we already had. The politicians thought that this would remove them from responsibility for outcomes, and would improve outcomes. Neither of these ideas came true.

The Bank of England is responsible for monetary policy and inflation. It has a prime aim of keeping inflation to 2%. It let it go to 11% by debauching the currency but most politicians declined to criticise or comment. The government got blamed for the inflation, and the government joined the Bank in blaming the Ukraine war.

NHS England with its high paid CEO and large Board and top management team is responsible for running the NHS, for recruiting, grading, rostering and paying all the many staff. A series of strikes hit the NHS. The executives denied all responsibility for staff relations, pay and grading and said the dispute was a matter between Ministers and the Unions. It is difficult for Ministers to resolve the disputes when they cannot hire, promote, regrade, alter shift patterns or reward anyone in the NHS as all that is controlled by senior executives. Whatever goes wrong in the NHS the senior executives always blame a lack of money, however much extra the government provides. The government gives large sums to get the waiting lists down only to see them go up.

The arms length Post Office is regulated and monitored by UK Government Investments. They approved senior management, paid them large salaries and bonuses and just watched as they lost a stunning £1400 million as well as sending many innocent staff to prison for fraud and wrong accounting they did not carry out. Ministers intervened to try to get criminal charges quashed and compensation paid, only to find the Post Office was still holding back in many cases.

The Rail Regulator, HS 2 and the nationalised Network Rail run by well paid senior executives have presided over a big loss of passenger numbers and revenue, and have racked up huge losses for taxpayers. Parts of HS 2 have had to be cancelled owing to the absurdly large overruns on cost and timetable. Ministers are blamed for the results.

This could be a very long list. Many cases would reinforce the obvious points of these first three. High pay is a reward for poor outcomes. No-one makes the senior managers responsible. Opposition parties have no interest in criticising the managers or holding them to account before they go so wrong, but delight in blaming the government when they do. Government is too cautious about intervening, fearing the Opposition would complain if they did. Both sides mouth the doctrine of independence, with the Opposition

contradicting it often in the same interview by blaming Ministers for failures. So overpaid managers get away with disaster after disaster and the taxpayer ends up with a huge bill.

Parliament and Ministers need to go back to accepting responsibility. They need to monitor, influence and if necessary change these top managers before disaster strikes. If someone wants private sector levels of CEO pay to run the railways or the Post office they should expect private sector levels of surveillance and should expect no bonus or the sack if they make big errors. Ministers need to institute regular review meetings and proper reporting to them as shareholders or leading stakeholders in these bodies, so they see problems as they develop and require fixes before they get out of hand. Those few of us who warned of the likely inflation or sided with the sub post masters were ignored.