

## [But this is the basic problem with government doing things](#) [1]

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Philip Johnston has an interesting piece here. It's interesting both because it's perceptive and also almost willfully blind at the same time. Which is pretty good when the two are on precisely the [same subject](#) [3].

What do the following have in common: the poll tax, the Exchange Rate Mechanism, Individual Learning Accounts, the Assets Recovery Agency, the Child Support Agency, the NHS patient data system, ID cards, HS2 and Universal Credit? They were all policies to which ministers stubbornly stuck despite warnings that they would fail ? until they did, whereupon they were either abandoned or salvaged only at vast cost to the taxpayer.

This is obviously true: and something all too rarely stated. That the problem usually isn't with the things that government tries to do it's with the things that government won't stop doing. So that's the perceptive part: but then there's the unperceptive part. Johnston goes on to wonder is this is something peculiar to the British political system. Or whether our political class is particularly blind to the warnings of experts (another name for which is people who actually know what they're doing). And the reason that that is unperceptive is that it's nothing at all specific to the British system.

It's a general failure of attempts to use politics to do things rather than markets. Just for the avoidance of doubt here I should point out that some things really do need to be done by politics. But the problem with doing so is that there is no kill switch.

It takes great effort to get government to do anything. And that great effort comes from the inertia of the system: meaning that it takes great effort to get something started and an equal amount of effort to get something stopped. This is in contrast to the market where yes, it takes great effort to get something working. But the system does contain that kill switch: bankruptcy. If something's not working then it doesn't take great effort to stop it. It just runs out of money and stops.

And that, I am afraid, is one of the reasons why politics is a bad way to get things done. Simply because they won't stop doing things even when it's obvious that they are the wrong things to be doing.

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