

[Measuring government performance](#) [1]

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What is 'good government'? How would we know, for example, that this government is better, or worse, than the last or than UK government in previous centuries. This should be of interest to scholars and other citizens but the last thing any government would wish is an objective measurement of its own performance.

John Stuart Mill famously proposed that the role of government was twofold; the protection and development of the benefits of its citizens. He assumed democracy was best but did not justify any of those things. And he omitted justice, freedom, [government] transparency, the interests of minorities and minimalising corruption (the use of power for personal gain).

He did, of course, write about justice which can be seen as existing outside government, that is to say, government is subject to justice, not vice versa. But then government does pass laws and limit rights. And Mill wrote about liberty as limiting governmental powers: 'the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.' On that basis, government should not prevent us doing anything which may harm ourselves, but not others.

One could argue that a government should be assessed on the extent to which it does what it said it would do in its pre-election manifesto but that too has a number of problems. The present coalition had no pre-election manifesto. The less demanding the manifesto, the more easily it is delivered but that does not prove the government to be better than one that one just misses a far more challenging manifesto.

This government is setting up its UK happiness index but there will be no comparative figures and Downing Street will be quick to distance itself from any poor results.

This blog may simply be exposing my own ignorance but my question is whether UK government in the 21st century is better or worse than in the time of Adam Smith. How would we know? Should we ask the National Audit Office?

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