**Political Short-Termism**

*Simon Caney*

**How do you analyze the present status and situation of political short-termism?**

Many governments focus on the short-term and they neglect the interests of people in the long-term. The short-termist character of current political institutions is widely recognized by many distinguished political analysts. For example, Claus Offe argues in *Europe Entrapped* that because citizens are focused on the short-term their democratically elected governments are unable to tackle the deep structural problems that afflict the European Union. As he puts it, “the problem is one of ‘time inconsistency’: The implementation of promising long-term strategies is obstructed by the failure of ‘presentist’ electorates fixated on a short-term time horizon to grant them green light, unless political leaders can persuade their constituencies to adopt a more far-sighted perspective” (Offe 2015, p.42). Similarly, Thomas Piketty has argued that the failure of the French and German governments to tackle the political and fiscal problems facing the Eurozone stems from their “shortsighted selfishness” (Piketty 2016, p.103). A similar note is sounded by Wolfgang Streeck in *Buying Time* (2014). In his diagnosis of the challenges facing democratic governments, Streeck writes that “too many things have to be tackled at once, short-term fixes get in the way of long-term solutions; long-term solutions are not even attempted because short-term problems take priority; holes keep appearing that can only be plugged by making new holes elsewhere” (Streeck 2014, p.14).

We find short-termism in many policy areas, and not just those concerning macroeconomic policy. Consider foreign policy. One familiar pattern is that politicians decide to engage in military action and commit the country to it, but they fail to plan for the long-run and do not have in place an exit strategy or post-conflict plan of action (Krebs and Rapport 2012). Indeed one of the findings of the recent *Iraq Inquiry* into the UK’s participation in the 2003 invasion of Iraq was that there was insufficient preparation for the post-conflict period (Chilcot 2016a, especially §§590-637 (pp. 78-86)). Sir John Chilcot’s report argues that “optimism bias”, among other factors, led to a lack of foresight, with calamitous effects (Chilcot 2016b, volume 8, p.502).

Of course, it is important to recognize that focusing on the short-term is not always undesirable. Sometimes acting in pursuit of short-term gain is entirely appropriate. We need, then, some criteria by which to determine when focusing on short-term interests is unjustified (what we might term *harmful short-termism*) and when it is not.

I think we can identify two ways in which a policy might be an instance of *harmful*...
think we can identify two ways in which a policy might be an instance of harmful short-termism. First, focusing on the short-term can harm the enlightened self-interest of current generations. It can, for example, result in a failure to tackle a problem as it first emerges. It thereby allows a problem to develop in such a way that it leads to the adoption of policies which both do not provide as much protection as an earlier pre-emptive policy would have done and, at the same time, are much more expensive than earlier action would have been. One good example is disaster preparation. As a general rule it is better to invest in good protection against such disasters since not only do these provide better protection of people’s lives, property, buildings and businesses, but they also do so for a lower cost. For example, two political scientists, Andrew Healy and Neil Malhotra, found that in the case of Hurricane Katrina, citizens ended up paying 15 times more on post-disaster work than preparation would have cost (Healy and Malhotra 2009, p.387). Short-termism can, thus, result in harmful effects on the enlightened self-interest of current generations.

The second reason stems from our responsibilities to future generations. One clear case of short-termism is climate policy. Governments across the world have failed to engage in aggressive mitigation policies. The upshot of this myopia is that future generations will inherit a world with increased temperatures, rising sea levels and more severe weather events. This will jeopardize people’s fundamental rights to life, health, food and water, and more generally it will leave millions unable to enjoy the standard of living to which they are entitled (Caney 2010).

Governments often fail to honour their responsibilities to future generations in other ways as well – such as failing to invest in education, employment, housing and infrastructure, thereby leaving younger generations unable to secure jobs or afford homes.

For these two reasons (enlightened self-interest and responsibilities to future generations) focusing on the short-term can have unacceptable effects.

**In your opinion, how will the situation likely evolve over the next five years?**

The extent to which the situation is likely to evolve depends on whether political leaders are willing and able to take the initiative, and whether their citizens support them in this. There has been an increasing recognition of the need to take a long-term perspective. For example, at the international level the Secretary-General of the United Nations issued a report in 2013 on ‘Intergenerational Solidarity and the Needs of Future Generations’ (2013). This acknowledged the importance of responsibilities to future generations, and recognized the need to address our current failure to comply with those responsibilities. It also explored some possible institutional mechanisms for better protecting the rights of future generations, including creating a High Commissioner for Future Generations. (See also Caney 2014b.)

Also, at the state level, some have campaigned for reforming existing political institutions to make them more forward-looking. For example, the Welsh government has implemented a number of measures to overcome an undue focus on the present. Its ‘Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act’ was passed in April 2015. This offers
“Well-being of Future Generations (Wales)” Act became law in April 2015. This affirms a commitment to sustainable development, and a set of performance indicators; and it requires Welsh Ministers each year to report on progress towards realizing long-term goals (“the well-being goals”). Furthermore, 12 months before a General Election, Ministers in the Welsh Government must publish a “Future Trends Report”, outlining future social, economic, environmental and cultural trends and the challenges and opportunities they create. The Act also creates a Future Generations Commissioner, who is charged with, among other things, producing a report on the steps public bodies must make to comply with the principle of sustainable development.[2] In 2014, Sweden created a new post of Minister for Strategic Development and Nordic Cooperation (known as ‘Minister for the Future’), whose mandate is to address “policy issues of strategic importance for Sweden’s future development”. The Minister leads the ‘Council for the Future’, whose role is to advise the Prime Minister’s Office.[3].

So there is some awareness of the problems and some steps have been taken. Much more, however, needs to be done. Furthermore, in a recession it is hard to persuade politicians and the public to focus more on the future, especially if that is seen as requiring sacrifices now. This notwithstanding, these examples suggest that some politicians are aware of the problems and are willing to take steps to address them.

What are the structural long-term perspectives?

Addressing the problems identified above faces some serious challenges. There are two powerful drivers, which combine to encourage a short-term perspective.

First, various features of human psychology leave people ill-equipped to address long-term problems. These include: (i) a concern for our own interests over those of others, (ii) tendencies to ignore problems that are not present and visible (‘out of sight/out of mind’); (iii) failing to detect “creeping” problems, that are gradual in nature and creep up on us slowly (Glantz 1999); (iv) the “identifiable victim” syndrome (whereby people respond well to threats to specific concrete others but not to ‘statistical lives’) (Jenni and Loewenstein 1997); (v) related to this, the tendency of persons to respond well to ‘vivid’ risks, ones that they experience or witness (so called ‘hot’ mechanisms), and not to respond well to information derived from general social scientific trends (‘cold’ mechanisms) (Weber 2006); (vi) tendencies to procrastinate and postpone tackling difficult challenges; (vii) weakness of the will and temptation; and (viii) “positive illusions” - such as “over-estimation of capabilities”, “illusion of control over events” and “perceived invulnerability to risk” (Johnson and Levin 2009, p.1597).[4].

Second, there are several crucial institutional factors. First, democratically elected governments have an incentive to focus on the next election, and this naturally makes them devote resources to short-term goals. Second, there is the obvious – but nonetheless crucial – point that children and future generations are unable to represent themselves. One of the key promises of democratic governance is that it enables people to protect their own interests, by voting and campaigning against policies that harm them. It provides a forum where people, through open discussion and debate, can convey to others how policies affect them. Clearly, however, children and future
generations are unable to represent their own interests and point of view - putting them at a disadvantage.

These two factors do not mean that short-termism is inevitable. It is a mistake to be a political determinist. Some states do plan better for the long-term (Jacobs 2011). Furthermore, there are steps that democracies can take to counteract the cognitive and other biases noted above. They can build concerns about the future into the legislative process. They can, for example, require governments to issue a statement of their plans to address a list of long-term problems and opportunities that have been identified by independent scientific councils (a ‘Manifesto for the Future’): this would force Governments and the Opposition to confront future developments. They can also build into the legislative process certain days when the focus is on the long-term – to ensure that long-term problems are not ignored. Just as there is there is a ‘Queen’s Speech’ in the British system (where the Queen announces the Government’s planned policies) and there is a ‘State of the Union’ Address in the USA (where the President sets out his planned policies), there could be ‘Visions of the Future’ Days where the government sets out its ‘Manifesto for the Future’, and responds to questions and objections in a process of public deliberation and justification. The Opposition and civil society groups could be given the opportunity to present alternative visions and to scrutinise the Government’s plans for the future. By introducing this initiative into the legislative process it makes the future visible – not easily ignored – and part of the agenda today. It also makes it harder for governments to procrastinate and delay confronting difficult challenges. We could also introduce a voice for children and future generations into the legislative process by creating a Committee for the Future, whose role is to scrutinise all legislation for their impacts on children and future generations.[5]

In addition to these institutional proposals, we could revise the economic methodology that many governments employ – which tends to operate with a high social discount rate, thus giving insufficient weight in their models to the interests of future generations (Caney 2014a).

Modern societies often take steps to insert reminders of the past into the present - through memorials, monuments, plaques, educational curricula, days of remembrance, national festivals, and national holidays (Hartog 2015, esp chapters 4 and 5). They do so in order to encourage their citizens to remember past sacrifices, traumas, debts, injustices and achievements. Although it is, in some ways, more difficult to do this for the future (the past, after all, unlike the future, can be richly described), the proposals above represent some ways of incorporating the future into our daily social and political life, and rendering it more vivid, more salient, and less remote.

Jo Guldi and David Armitage write in The History Manifesto that “a spectre is haunting our time; the spectre of the short term” (Guldi and Armitage 2014, p.1). There are powerful factors that encourage short-termism. However, it is possible to implement some changes which can mitigate these pressures, and which can thus enable us to better protect our own long-term interests and the legitimate claims of future generations.
endnotes:


[5] For these and other measures see Caney (2016).

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First, various features of human psychology leave people ill-equipped to address long-term problems. These include: (i) a concern for our own interests over those of others, powerful drivers, which combine to encourage a short-term perspective. Addressing the problems identified above faces some serious challenges. There are two tendencies to ignore problems that are not present and visible ('out of sight/out of mind') and which are often more costly in the long term than in the short term. These include: (i) a concern for our own interests over those of others, powerful drivers, which combine to encourage a short-term perspective.


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