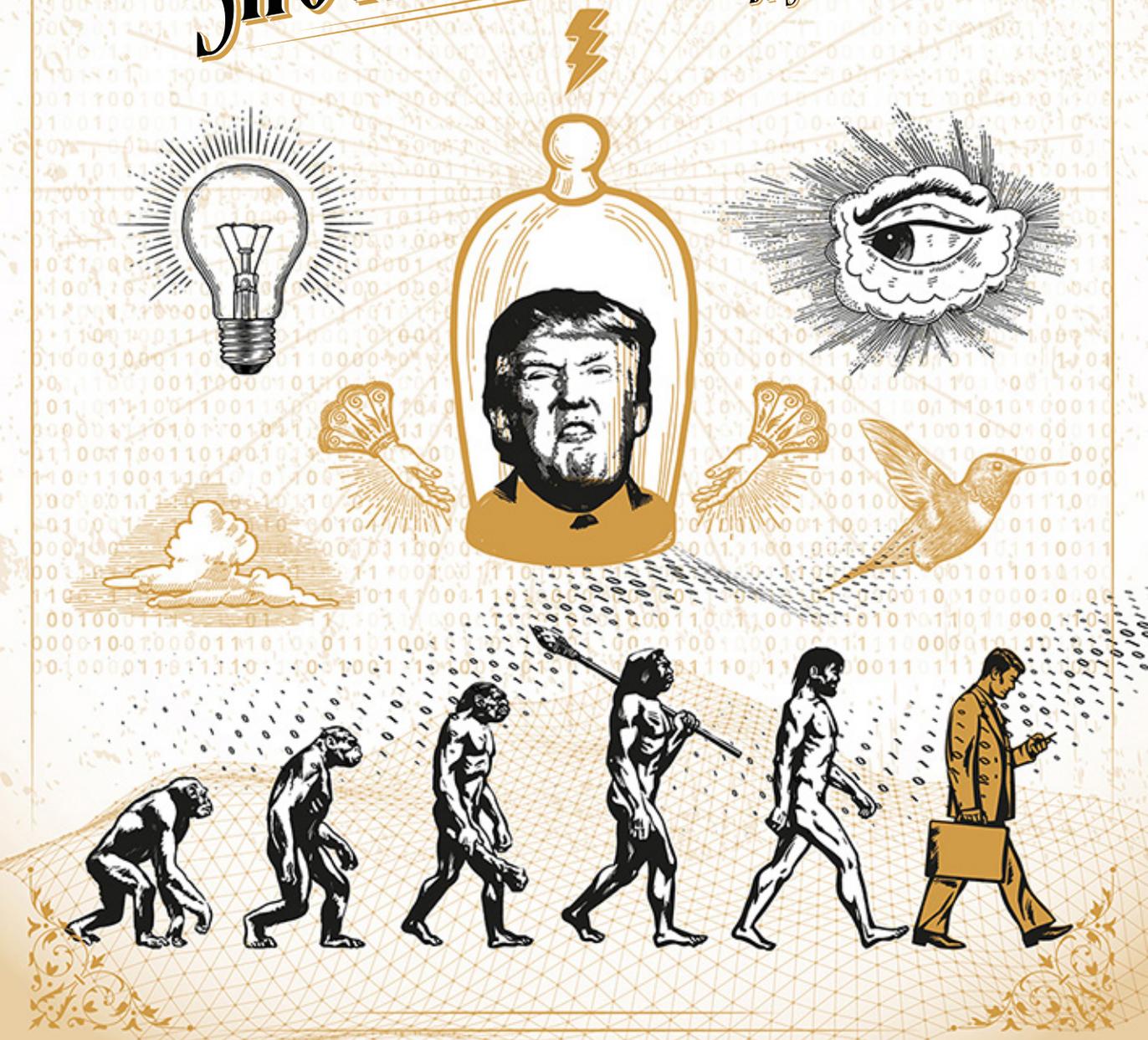


# HOW DONALD TRUMP SHOWS US THE FUTURE

BY STEPHEN MUERS



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**L**ove him or loathe him, it's hard to argue that Donald Trump doesn't have a distinctive style of political leadership. Compared to other Presidents, Prime Ministers or Chancellors, he seems remarkably uninterested in policy detail – or, indeed, policy at all. He is in constant, direct dialogue with the public and the media, mainly through Twitter, and provides a stream of comment on issues that would normally have been seen as well outside the realm of politics. He has shifted the tone of public debate and changed the boundaries of what politicians can say; many would argue he has done profound political damage as a result. This essay doesn't argue the rights or wrongs of President Trump's views or the tone he adopts. But there is a strong case that his approach points the way to a different type of leadership, well attuned to the challenges of governing in the twenty-first century.

There is a long tradition of scepticism about whether policy makers at the centre of government can expect their decisions to ever be delivered. Back in the 1980s, Michael Lipsky coined the concept of “street-level bureaucrats”: the front-line workers in any public service system who determine what actually happens day to day.<sup>1</sup> A new criminal offence only has an impact if police officers on the beat decide to arrest people for it. A new curriculum will only change what pupils learn if teachers respect it sufficiently to teach it effectively. Driving through any policy change against the cultural grain and motivation of those expected to deliver it is extremely difficult.

There is also good reason to believe this challenge is getting harder. If front-line workers and the citizens with whom they interact have rapid real-time data on what is going on, they will respond to it. Those responses will decide what happens in public service delivery long before anyone in Whitehall or Washington knows what is happening.

Such use of data is already underway. Most schools now track pupil progress and adapt teaching priorities accordingly. The NHS ‘Friends and Family Test’ provides simple, immediate public feedback on the quality of a service. Via an app, charities and local housing departments receive alerts from the public on rough sleepers who

may need assistance. As data processing and analysis becomes more sophisticated, we should expect more of the service quality and outcomes that citizens care about to be driven from the front line.

There is strong evidence that the public already recognises their leaders have little to do with the services they experience. This evidence comes from the way they vote - research shows voters neither reward past good performance in delivering outcomes nor the promise of future policies they like. On past performance, Aachen and Bartels' recent work has shown that random natural events - for example shark attacks in coastal towns - are at least as important to voter choice as any action the politicians take.<sup>2</sup> Another classic example comes from the 1983 General Election in the UK: based on the issues voters said were most important and the party they said had the best policies on them, you would have expected a landslide victory for the Labour Party.<sup>3</sup> Instead, Thatcher's Conservative government achieved the most decisive election victory in nearly forty years.



It is therefore futile for national political leaders to promise, or attempt to deliver, detailed policy propositions. Front-line responses to data will simply move too fast and overwhelm instructions from the centre, and they won't be rewarded by voters for either trying or succeeding. So if this is the future, what role should those leaders play?

All these front-line interactions, and the choices voters make, take place in a social context: new technology doesn't mean people are acting in isolation from what is around them. How we respond to data and analysis is shaped by our worldview and the narratives we use to make sense of a confusing and fast-paced environment. We also all carry a set of moral norms about what is acceptable and unacceptable, what is fair and what is just. These too shape how we respond and make choices.

Governments, too, can affect norms and narratives, and in fact do so whether they like it or not, while their ability to deliver services and outcomes is much weaker than has often been assumed. In this analysis, policy statements are not descriptions of what a government will do - they are tools for sending symbolic messages about what matters and what a society should value.

And so we return to Donald Trump. He clearly uses policy statements in this way, and voters understand that he does so. His best known electoral promise was his commitment to build a wall on the Mexican border and have the Mexican government pay for it - yet on the day of his inauguration, an opinion poll showed only 14% of the population believed he would actually do it.<sup>4</sup> The wall was a symbol of his approach to immigration and to other countries, not a deliverable promise. And on Twitter, Trump is sending a stream of signals from the most powerful position in the land about which worldviews are true, what language and behaviours are acceptable, and what is fair and reasonable.

What is not clear is whether Trump has a firm intention to operate with a different model of leadership, or whether it has simply emerged as an expression of his personality. But the approach has some traction and could be used, intentionally,



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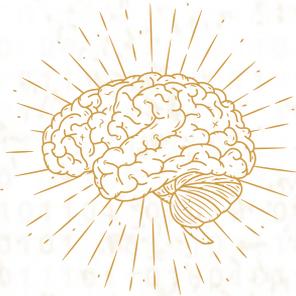
by different leaders in different government systems, and with completely different goals and values. What are the capabilities a government of the future needs if it is to enable this shift towards context-shaping and away from policy design and control?

Such a shift also calls into question the value of the tools and skill-sets designed to help make detailed policy choices and see them through to delivery; cost-benefit analysis is irrelevant for a wall that is intended to stand as a symbol rather than as real steel and concrete. That symbolic wall also won't need a programme management methodology or a risk register. But leaders who want to take their responsibility for context-shaping seriously will still need serious professional tools – even more so if they are attempting to play this role in a more nuanced and positive way than Donald Trump. Government needs to invest in an understanding of how narratives are built, which types of symbols resonate and why, and how people use values and assumptions to simplify complex decisions. We need therefore to create a Government Anthropology Service, give departments Chief Psychologists and incorporate the skills of story-telling into the core curriculums of public policy courses alongside law and economics.

What might government look and feel like if it built these new capabilities? Take as an example my old role in charge of criminal justice policy in the Ministry of Justice. Discussions with ministers on sentencing policy often involved a political desire to “send a message” on some type of crime by toughening sentencing. But in the civil service, we had little understanding of how such a message would land with potential criminals, or what other ways there might be to achieve the same political messaging at perhaps a lower cost. My hypothetical Anthropology Service would have immersed itself in the sub-cultures of the intended audience for this message, understanding what framing and symbols would work. Discussing messaging strategies would be second nature to senior policy officials like me.

Taking this approach might also open the way to a more decentralised model of government. One of the main arguments used against local control is the fear of the “postcode lottery”: that outcomes are different in different places. Of course, in reality, outcomes diverge anyway: the NHS may be a “national” service with plenty of centrally-imposed targets, but local quality still varies. Focusing on context-shaping could liberate central government from worrying about this (inevitable) divergence: we could dismantle some of the top-down control regimes and devote those resources either to building the new capabilities outlined above or transferring them to local level.

The famous concept of “evidence-based policy” would also change: policy-makers would need different types of evidence. A policy-maker interested in symbols and narratives wants to understand the process by which a policy is understood, interpreted and discussed, rather than whether or not people have followed the right procedures. Evidence around subjective outcomes, including the impact on values, becomes much more interesting.



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Taking a historical example, the Thatcher government's privatisation programme was, in part, explicitly aimed at changing norms in society towards greater commitment to the capitalist system. There are many studies that look at the economic impact of the privatisation programme. But I have been unable to find any systematic attempt to look at whether the intended impact on shaping culture and values actually took place. In the future this kind of assessment would be prioritised as a matter of routine.

To the person on the street, things might not feel so different: their experience and understanding of government is already one of symbolic promises and a gap to delivery. There is perhaps the potential for a more honest relationship between government and the governed. If politicians stop claiming they are going to deliver precise reform plans, instead talking openly about values and symbols, it opens up a different set of debates. Do we agree or disagree with the values that someone espouses? Are they the national symbols we want, and what do they say about our society? Debating these issues in their own terms, rather than by proxy through policies that everyone knows will never be implemented, feels a step forward.

The point about honesty is crucial. There could be a danger that Chief Psychologists become Chief Manipulators, and skilled story-tellers just skilled liars. Professional ethics and independence are as important, if not more so, in these new professional disciplines. Just as we have a strong set of standards around how governments use and publish statistics, we will need to develop similar safeguards for new ways of working.

Of course, many traditional policy functions and skills also remain essential. Central governments still need to set overall taxation and expenditure levels. They need to create the criminal and civil law and the institutions of government themselves. These building blocks will not emerge easily from data-driven responses at the front-line (although there may be interesting ways to draw out that data to inform relevant decision-making).

But the realities of how government functions will be delivered in a world of proliferating data, and how voters already behave, mean that a model of political leadership promising big reform programmes should be a thing of the past. Whether by accident or design, Donald Trump is showing us a new approach. Hopefully others will find ways to use and adapt it for positive social change.



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1. Lipsky (1980) *Street-level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York, Russell Sage Foundation
  2. Achen and Bartels (2016) *Democracy for Realists*. Princeton, University of Princeton Press
  3. Butler and Kavanagh (1984) *The British General Election of 1983* London, Macmillan
  4. CBS (2017) <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/eight-in-10-americans-think-u-s-will-pay-for-u-s-mexican-border-wall/>





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