

How to Govern

Lessons from experience

Sir Michael Barber



This is the second of two publications based on Sir Michael Barber's talks convened by CDE during his visit to South Africa in November 2023.

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Introduction

In November 2023, CDE brought the internationally renowned Sir Michael Barber, a leading expert on governance, reform and service delivery, to South Africa for a series of talks and engagements with policymakers, business and civil society leaders. Barber is a well-known global expert on policy implementation and large-scale system change. He has supported governments, cities and national departments around the world to deliver services that citizens need. Founder and chairman of global advisory firm, Delivery Associates, he set up the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit for the Tony Blair government in 2001. He was knighted in 2005 for his contributions to improving government.

This report pulls together lessons from his experience on how to turn a government around from an ineffective failure to one that delivers for the whole country and 'doesn't make taxpayers crazy'.

Getting into government

Improving the way government performs often requires that reformers first get into power through the electoral process. However, a challenge that such reformers have to confront is that getting elected requires a different set of skills than the skills needed to actually run a government. At the same time, elements of a successful democratic campaign can provide the base and generate momentum for an effective reform programme.

Barber identified key elements crucial for winning an election. First and foremost, you need a 'guiding coalition'. He argued that no individual, however brilliant, can win an election on their own. They need a group of eight to ten people that are loyal and committed, that can help build a campaign. The candidate needs a small group of trusted people around him/her who believe in the candidate's vision and will do everything they can to get the job done. This is the group the candidate takes with him/her into office once they have, hopefully, been elected.

Barber argued that, "if your guiding coalition believes that you can win, it will convince more people to support your side. This will then build the momentum of the campaign and create new nodes of leadership and enthusiasm in other parts of society".

He also highlighted the character traits that, in his opinion, make for an effective politician. "A good politician", he said, "should be honest throughout his/her campaign. If they are not, they will get caught". Good politicians are also plain spoken and humble. They do not attempt to obfuscate, and their messaging is consistent. At the same time, effective politicians, perhaps above all, have a capacity for creating and building relationships.

Barber argued that, rather than attacking the opposition and characterising them as unredeemable, politicians should be seeking to keep communication lines open with the other side. This creates the possibility of persuading them and even turning them into supporters. He explained that Hillary Clinton's description of the opposition as 'deplorables' in her campaign against Donald Trump, was a big mistake. It meant that all those who felt targeted by that slur would become implacably opposed to Clinton and never vote for her. He is much more in favour of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's approach. He declared that supporters of the opposition should not be seen as "bad people", but rather as "our neighbours".

Leaders, in Barber's opinion, need to be optimistic. "Even in these troubled times in South Africa, you have to be an optimist about the future," he said. He illustrated this with one of his favourite quotes from Hillary Clinton's husband, Bill, who famously said "nobody wants to be led by a pessimist". Pessimists will never produce a compelling vision of the future.

He also felt strongly that effective politicians cannot be populists. In his view populists pretend that change is easy and look for scapegoats to blame. This ensures they will never succeed. "To change the way a country works, to change the government, to change the economy is very difficult and requires concerted, careful and consistent effort," he said.

Lastly, he pointed out that the small things really matter. He argued that it is usually the people whom you have worked with for many years and whom you notice and appreciate that relate to you as a leader. He remembered that Tony Blair was always interested in how his staff was doing and would ask after their families' welfare, and would always remember everyone's name, addressing them by their first names even when he hadn't seen them in years.

Adopting the right approach once you are in government

Once you are elected, you need to adopt the right approach to govern effectively. Running a government is not like running a business, said Barber. "When a business is failing, you can sell off assets or close it down. You can't do that with a government". You can make governments smaller, but generally when departments are failing, they will have to be fixed eventually.

Barber discussed eight principles for effective government:

First, you need to **identify clear priorities and stick with them**. These priorities are the four or five things that you believe will change the country for the better. For example, the recent Harvard Growth Lab report lists a few things to get economic growth and inclusion going. The South African President made a State of the Nation Address in 2023 that listed four or five priorities. But these priorities need to be accompanied by measurable outcomes, i.e., when the work will start, what the targets are, by when you plan to reach the targets, etc. "It is not enough to commit to 'reducing unemployment' – you have to get specific," Barber said.

Second, **you must not try to reorganise everything all at once**. A government bureaucracy is a large, complex machine, and it's difficult to change. That does not mean you should leave it as you find it, but it is easier to redesign parts of government at a time. Barber's recommendation is that you first build effective parts of government around the priority goals you have chosen. Those can then act as 'demonstration points', to show sceptics and cynics that you are capable of delivering, and that further improvements will follow.

Third, you should **insist on and incorporate competence as a value above all others**. You need to work with people who have the ability to actually do the work required of them. In Barber's words, "You depend on competence to get the job done." He acknowledged "that is easy to say, but difficult to do", especially because once you have political power, people clamour to become involved, and to be rewarded for their loyalty.

Fourth, as a political leader, **stick with your guiding coalition**, the seven to ten people who have been loyal to you from the start, and try to expand this group. They are competent, will work with you, believe in your mission, and get the job done. These should be people with whom you can be honest about how awful things are, how frustrated you are, or if you have made missteps. They need to be able to tell you when things are going wrong. Having those honest conversations is crucial for learning and improving.

Fifth, **if you want public servants to change, they need to feel two things simultaneously: the pressure to change – the feeling that they cannot be complacent – and the sense that they are receiving the support and the skills they need to do things differently**. Barber illustrated this with an example from education. "If you are a teacher and the government says, 'You've got to teach reading better or we'll fire you,' then you are not going to know what to do, and you might oppose the government's decree. But if you have that pressure to improve and at the same time the government says, 'Here is a way of teaching reading that we know will work,' then you will implement the change." He emphasised that having one but not the other – either just the pressure or just the support – will never work.

Sixth, you should **strive for quick wins** that you can showcase as part of your reform strategy.

Seventh, you need to anticipate that **when you start implementing big reforms, things will almost certainly get worse before they get better**. You may create chaos and there will be a lot of opposition and noise in the media. Barber advised: "You need to be ready for that and be able to take people with you on that journey." It is useful to adjust your approach where necessary, but without panicking. "Stick to your guns," was his message.

This is also why it would be useful to be able to point to notable 'quick wins', to keep people on your side when the going gets tough.

Lastly, it is absolutely crucial to **communicate continuously with people in the government system and the public**. You need to have people within your guiding coalition who are constantly explaining what government is doing, and why. You should not pretend that you are omniscient, but you do need to give people the sense that you have a clear vision, a well thought-out strategy to get there, and that you are optimistic about success. Being a good communicator is a "tough political skill, but absolutely and critically important", said Barber.

Focusing on delivery

Policy implementation is crucial. Real change will only come from the effective implementation of strong goals.

Coming up with policies is one thing, but the difficulty is in actually doing them.

This is where the **establishment of an effective delivery unit is vital**. This should be a small unit in the government which maintains a constant focus on established priorities and ensures the ongoing implementation of policies.

From his extensive experience in establishing delivery units from the United Kingdom to Canada, Barber has learnt that **success comes from routinely asking five questions**. These questions are "What are you trying to do?", "How are you going to do it?", "How, at any given moment, will you know whether you are on track?", "If you are not on track, what are you going to do about it?", and finally "Can we help?". Barber notes that the delivery function is not to respond to crises, but diligently and doggedly to pursue the selected priorities in the face of everything else.

In response to the first question, "What are you trying to do?", one should identify clear priorities and measurable goals. The priorities should be narrow in focus and not try to cover everything. The goals should be very specific, quantifiable outcomes of success. For instance, in the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit in the Tony Blair government, as part of health care reform, a maximum waiting time was specified for patients in accident and emergency departments, which allowed the delivery unit to measure their success.

Once the goals are established, an action plan must be formed under the second question, "How are you going to do it?". This action plan outlines the exact steps for getting things done – actions and responsibilities are defined, along with their trajectory and an estimate of their impact on the desired outcome. This trajectory is not linear, but the point is to see the impact of the actions versus the impact you projected and to adjust as necessary. The plan should also make clear the delivery chain – the mechanism through which the plan will be enacted. In the case of education reform, you have to ask: what connects the Minister of Education to a teacher in the Eastern Cape? The teacher answers to the head teacher, who in turn answers to the provincial head of education and so on. At every stage of this delivery chain, there must be pressure to change and support to enable that change.

But in order to know if you're on track – to be able to answer question three – you need to have data which you regularly monitor. It is crucial to build a routine of monitoring and evaluation, with regular stocktakes embedded into the data system. According to Barber, it is this delivery routine which shifts the government, in his evocative terms, from "governing by spasm to governing by routine". Routine enables better relationships amongst people and better results. Routine shifts the conversation to one of problem-solving and allows leaders to stay focused on their priorities whilst the delivery team implements and monitors the reforms.

With a government by routine with consistent data monitoring, problems reveal themselves much quicker. But, if you are not on track, what do you do about it? Instead of running away or hoping it gets better, Barber recommends standing and facing the problem head-on. This will help you to understand it and come up with a solution fitting the problem. In Barber's opinion, governments too often provide band-aid solutions which do not reach the source of the issues and correct the fundamental problems. Delivery is not about knee-jerk responses to crises, but a systematic pattern of behaviour.

Delivery comes from the people tasked with delivery asking the question "Can we help?" Barber outlines three steps you can take to help the government deliver, the first being to keep the focus. A key task of a delivery unit is to ensure that priorities don't change, and that they are pursued without distraction. Even though the President and other parts of government may have to deal with unexpected crises, delivery comes – in part – from having one component of the government that cannot be distracted from their priorities. The second step is to intuitively understand problem-solving techniques and to learn from a wide range of experiences which techniques work. This cannot happen if delivery is siloed. The delivery unit must work and encourage cooperation with all the components and departments of government.

Finally, Barber explains that a delivery unit acts to build the president's political capital – the unit works alongside departments and behind the scenes, with credit going to the departments themselves. A government by spasm, which is in constant crisis mode and dismisses people in response to failure only works to spend the president's political capital. Routine problem-solving and delivery, on the other hand, helps presidents achieve their priorities and thereby to build their popularity.

What to do when confronted with dysfunction and opposition

Michael Barber's insights into how to attain power, employ it effectively and make sure that the state delivers on its mandate are based somewhat on his experiences during Tony Blair's campaign and prime ministership in the United Kingdom. These might be described as fairly ideal circumstances, in one of the world's oldest democracies and in a state full of well trained, fairly motivated bureaucrats. The question that arises, and that a number of South Africans asked, is how one proceeds in a less than ideal South African situation, of a failing state, high levels of corruption and low levels of competency. How can any ambitious reform programme take root in such circumstances?

Barber has worked extensively outside of Britain, especially in Pakistan, a place that is easily as challenging as South Africa. He understands therefore that in places like these it is often the case that everyone knows what needs to be done, but nothing happens because the operational challenges seem too great, or because very few people are enthusiasts for change, and an equal number of people have a stake in the failing system.

To get through that, to eventually turn the situation around, it is helpful to think about a distribution that takes the form of a classic bell curve. If one takes an example of reformers who want to change the policing system, one can imagine them confronting a set of political actors distributed across a bell curve diagram. On the far-left end of the curve there will be small number of people in the police force who are enthusiastic supporters of reform. They want to be part of the solution, and will be early, vigorous supporters of an ambitious reform programme. They should be encouraged to come on board as early as possible. At the other end of the curve there will be, perhaps an equivalent and equally unambiguous group, who are adamantly opposed to any change at all. They may be corrupt, and/or naturally destructive people, or they may be utterly demoralised. They will perhaps never come around to supporting reform, and trying to get them aboard at the early stages of the process will be a debilitating waste of time.

The large middle space of the distribution can be divided into two groups of roughly equal sizes. On the left are the people who are sceptics and too cautious to commit to new initiatives. They mostly assume reform efforts are going to fail so they are unwilling to be part of something that won't work anyway. However, once they start to see results and come to believe that the reform programme is actually happening, they will quickly get on board. However, if all they hear is just another speech from another politician, with no leadership and plan behind it, then they are highly likely to stay where they are and studiously avoid participating in any half-hearted initiatives.

On the right-hand side of the bell-curve is a large group of more serious opponents. Their attitude is that they feel very comfortable with their job as it is. They are happy to operate at low levels and/or low standards, and they see any reform initiative as something that will be disruptive and threaten their cushy, undemanding situations. However, once you start making progress and start pulling in the other, less oppositional group, it will become increasingly difficult for the opponents on the right half to continue their resistance. To get them on board you will need to put them under some pressure, but you should always balance that with sufficient support to make it relatively easy for the recalcitrant to learn the new ways and to perform at a higher level. You need to give them the skills to change. Pretty quickly they will begin to see that it is easier and in their interest to participate in the change, and soon the situation would have moved from one where there seemed to be nothing but headwind and opposition, to a constructive, dynamic environment for change. Then you can isolate the hard-liners and give them a clear choice of moving out or getting on board.

This is, of course, an idealised description, and one shouldn't underestimate the challenges of initiating reform, but the worst strategy is to wait for better circumstances before you initiate change. The critical issue is to get the ball rolling and to push a reform programme through in the most effective way possible. That will take strong leadership, a dynamic guiding coalition, persistence and determination and a clear and carefully thought through plan.

Concluding thoughts

Barber's views are deeply rooted in extensive and varied experiences at the highest levels, as well as years of careful reflection. For a country where unfulfilled promises have created a widespread sense of disappointment and perhaps, cynicism, Barber's best insight may be the importance of bold leaders taking action and initiating ambitious, well-designed programmes. Rather than endless conversations hoping to build an illusory consensus, Barber argues, leaders backed by highly competent and loyal teams committed to implementing realistic plans, can make a big difference. And as they achieve demonstrable successes, more and more people will want to be part of the change.

This is probably the only practical way to turn the tide against the corruption and inactivity that have taken over the South African state, which, in turn, is the primary reason why we face the interlinked challenges of state failure, economic dysfunction and rising poverty.



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