

Blumler's deepening 'crisis of public communication' is now endemic in the UK

Civil service 'capture'



In his first speech in October 2021 Britain's most senior civil servant, the Cabinet Secretary Simon Case, pledged his allegiance to "our most important customers, the people of this country and their elected representatives".

Trust in government, he argued, "is vested in the impartial advice we offer; and in the truth we speak unto power".

Senior civil servants colluded in enabling illegal parties to take place during Covid lockdown. Even the former Head of Propriety and Ethics was fined by police.

Taxpayers' money mis-used

Since WW2, the UK government's public communications machine has been tasked with delivering impartial and objective public communication that is seen as trustworthy and value for money. Government publicity funded through taxation must not be "used to boost individual ministers". Internal safeguards and codes regulate "a body of technically expert staff which knew how to conduct publicity without incurring the charge of propaganda." **So, what went wrong?** (UK Archives, 1945)

'Good' democratic communication

Blumler consistently referred to the need to identify what makes 'good' public or civic communication in a democracy. The crisis he and Gurevitch identified in 1995 was a crisis of **public**, not just **political**, communication (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995).

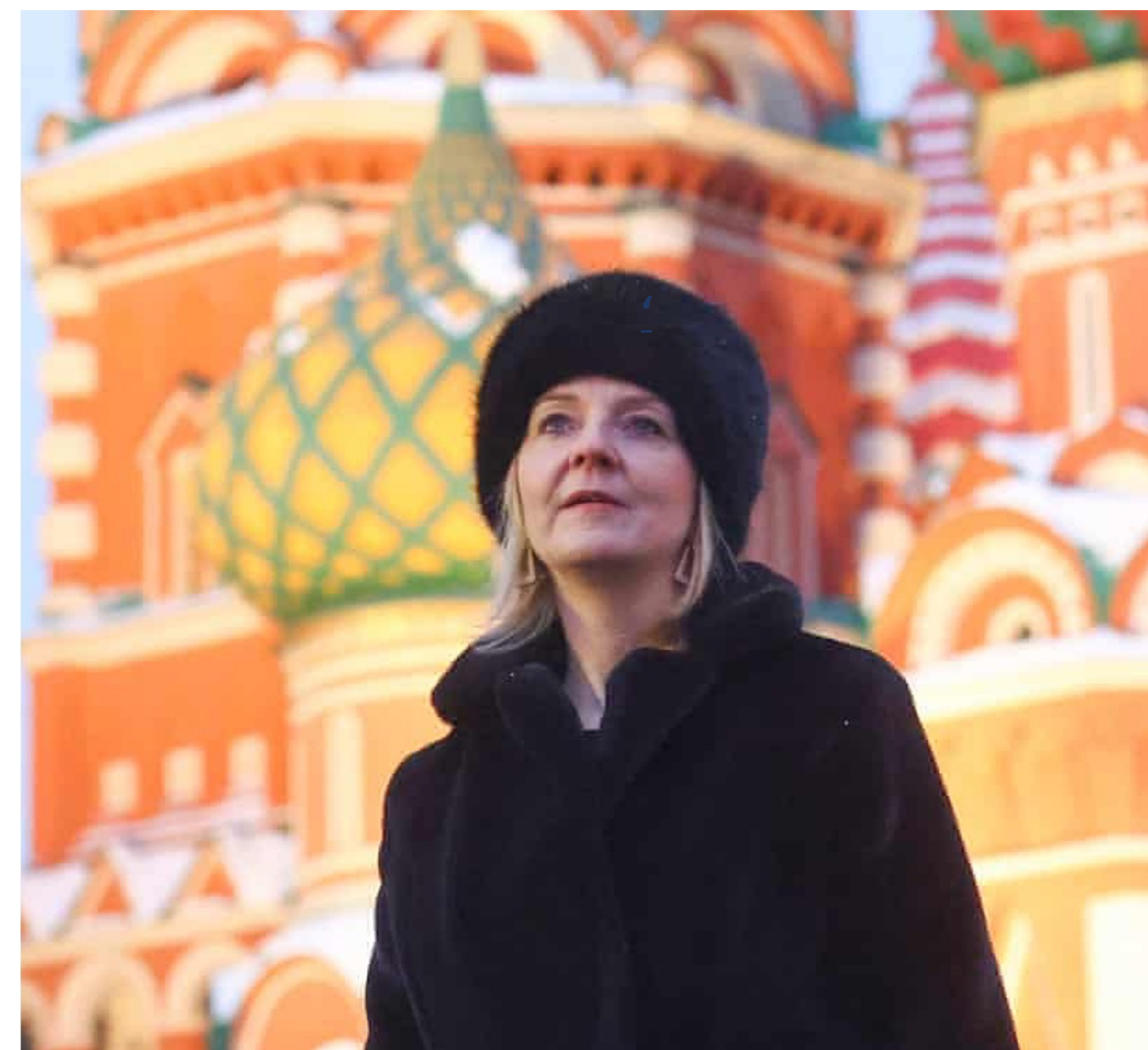
With Coleman (2015) he proposed these principles of democratic communication that recognise the power asymmetries between governments and citizens and ensure meaningful choice:

- all citizens are equally well informed and considered when decisions are made;
- holders of significant power must account for the way they exercise it in the public interest;
- effective channels of exchange and dialogue exist between citizens and decision makers.

Current research shows that citizens overwhelmingly agree (Renwick, 2022).



Above: 'Boris Johnson - the visionary' (Publicity photo: Tim Hammond, Downing Street)



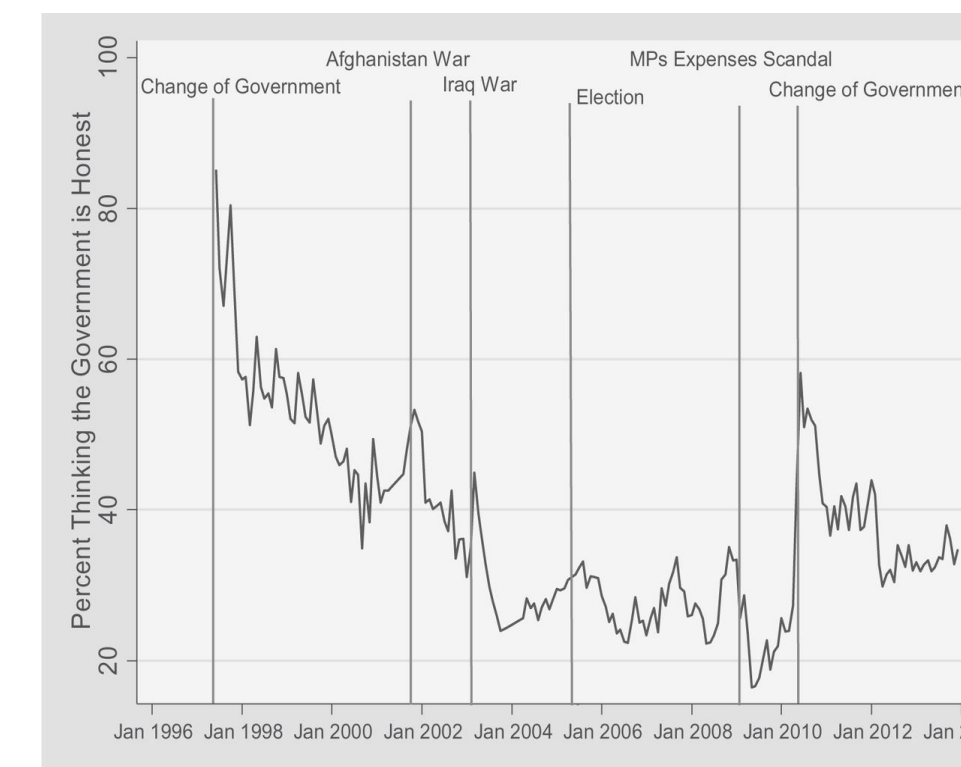
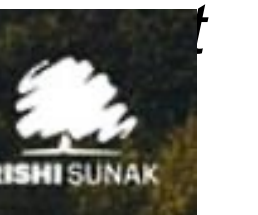
Right: Liz Truss - 'a modern-day Thatcher?' (Publicity photo: Simon Dawson, Downing Street)

The crisis has become constitutional

Three decades of growing systemic failure in public communication has led to a decline in trust. Civil servants, including public communicators, are accountable only to Ministers, not parliament or citizens. A new statutory role is needed (Institute for Government, 2022).

Permanent campaign

- Successive governments, driven by the executive powers of Prime Ministers to reshape the executive, have breached the already limited post-war safeguards.
- Government publicity is sloganised, inconsistent, non-transparent and politically dominated especially at the centre which operates under siege conditions.
- The Chancellor used *personalised branding* (right), a misuse of government communications.
- Through media collusion and the 'revolving door,' political aides manipulate government news priorities. They see their political masters as their clients, not the public who pay their wages.



Above: Perception that British government is honest and trustworthy: 1997-2013 ((Whiteley et al, 2016)

Pandemic remakes 'the public'

- The global pandemic challenged governments' capacity to influence public opinion and behaviour.
- Many adopted regular televised briefings and accountability through parliament and the media, in alliance with trusted scientific and medical authorities. This facilitated unexpectedly high public compliance (Garland & Lilleker, 2021).

Consensus lasted while the political survival of the governing party coincided with controlling the pandemic but fell apart when the hypocrisy of government officials and ministers was laid bare.