



Re-imagining  
Government

the MONA  
Tasmania  
February 2015

*Barry Quirk.*

# my local challenges

- 295,000 socially diverse people with intense socio-economic deprivation
- a “full service” Council with a Directly elected Mayor plus 54 elected councillors
- £1.1bn total operating budget; of which £260m is “net revenue”. Made £90m savings in past three years; another £95m over next three years

six years on Board of HM Revenues & Customs  
two years on Board of Goldsmiths, London University  
mentor to Police Commanders and Hospital Chief Executives

## my pre-occupations

- budget savings through service redesign
- organisational renewal
- the impact of London’s economic growth
- health & social care interface (hospital with rising deficit)
- child protection
- counter-terrorism

# four strands to this talk

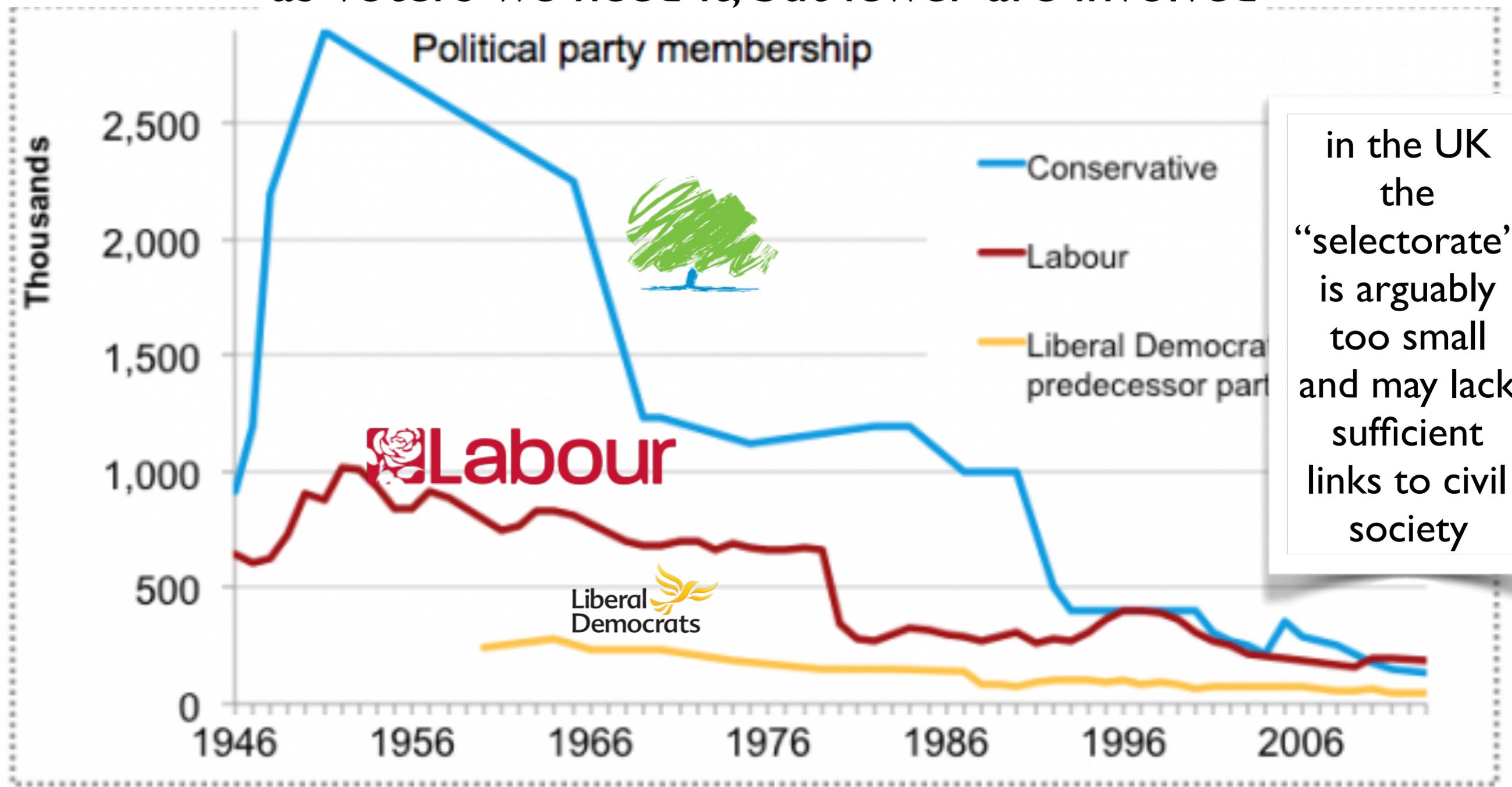
1. focus on politics not politicians
2. new challenges to good governance
3. uncertainty, complexity and adaptive problem solving
4. the psychology of change



“public sector managers  
complaining about politicians is  
like scuba divers complaining  
about the water”

# representative politics

as voters we need it; but fewer are involved



Source: House of Commons library standard note SN05125

The waiting list for membership of the MCG (230,000) is more than twice the number of people in Australia's three main political parties. The total membership of Labour and Liberals could get into the MCG!

# 21st century challenges

## **fiscal squeeze**

the risk of irrelevance  
demographic discontinuities

**capital is global, most of us are local**

the automation of work

the globalisation of “almost everything”

social acceleration and network effects

# “too big for the small things ...

the political geography of most developed nations (set in the 19th century) rarely accords with their 21st century economic geography

**19th & 20th centuries:** the rise of the nation state involved state building; defence; central reserve banks & currency management

**21st century:** the growth of city regional economies  
civic, industrial, manufacturing, smart & liveable cities

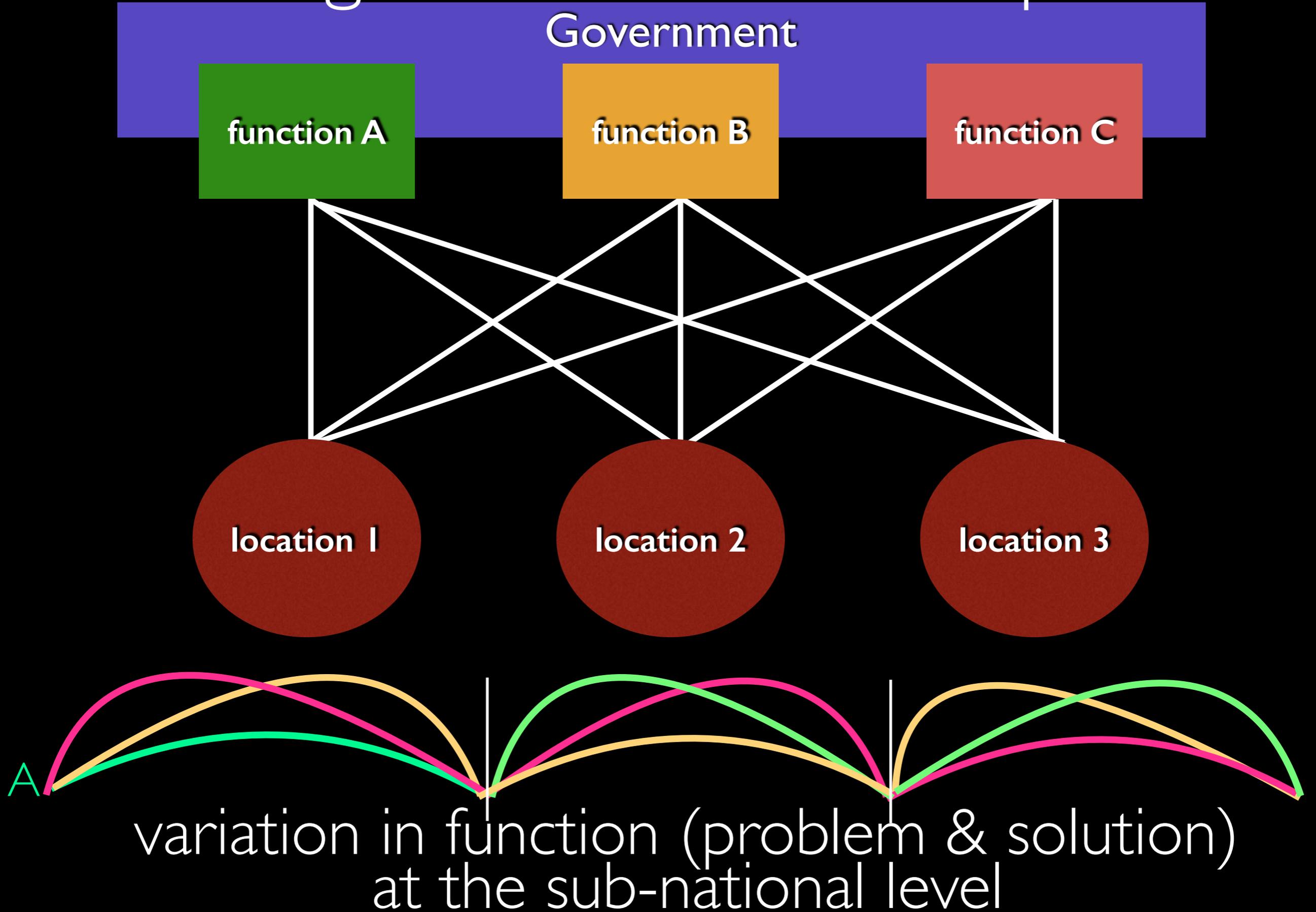
57% of Australia's GDP derives from four of its cities

# how to change . . .

- public agency
- problem solving
- how we work



# “tiers of governance: it’s complicated”



# uncertainty $\neq$ risk



**uncertainty**

**risk**

**certainty**

**General uncertainty:** “it’s uncertain whether the Monarchy will exist in 2050”

**Specific uncertainty:** “it’s uncertain whether Kate will have a third child”

**Risk:** “There is a risk Kate’s next child will look uncannily like Prince Philip”

**Certainty:** “You can be certain that the next child won’t be called Barry!”

if you want to pursue simple problems through linear thinking by using “common sense” solutions ...

**don't work in the public sector!**

# types of problems

- urgent pressures to act today
- slow burn problems that need to be solved over the medium to longer term
- public problems involving simple trade-offs
- knotty, complex and persistent problem with multiple causes

# types of advice

- Scientific, clinical and technical
- Professional, based on subject expertise
- Managerial, administrative and operational
- Policy: intent; instrument; implementation; impact
- Political

# abstract reasoning; practical wisdom

- **Ideology** approaches problems from a stance; from within a political framework or set of convictions
- **Analysis** breaks things down: it decomposes, deconstructs **problems** into their constituents
- **Synthesis** draws things together in a conclusion about "what is to be done" by way of **solutions**
- Trial & error; compromise & pragmatism

evidence based policy and the  
UK's “what works” centres

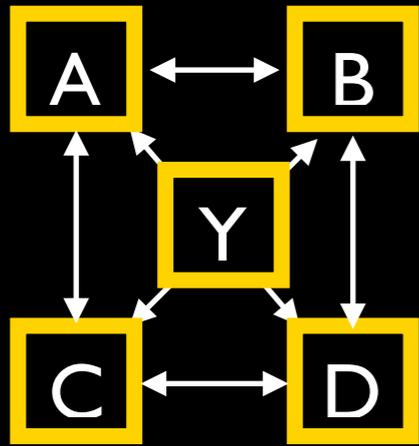
“Man prefers to believe what  
he prefers to be true.”

Francis Bacon

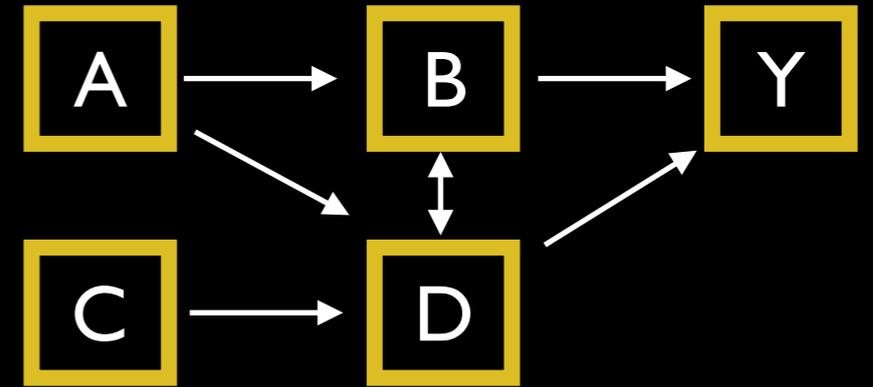
1561-1626

# causation

complex

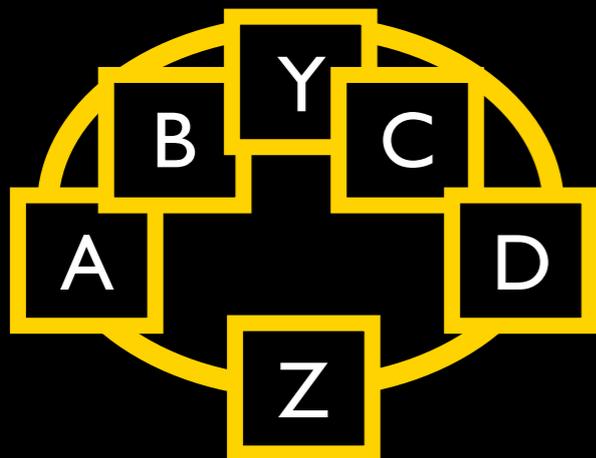


complicated



none

chaos



simple

A plus B causes Y

# complex

problems & solutions are evolving  
there are no right answers

lightly bounded action

**“experimental practice”**

# complicated

problems are open-ended  
range of possible answers  
analytical, investigative, but bounded

**“expert practice”**

disorder

# chaos

unclear what data is problem or solution  
there are no answers

creative action & crisis management

**“novel practice”**

# simple

problems & answers are well known  
there's one or a few right answers

**“best practice” (SOPs)**

# a good public decision?

1 **fair & ethical processes - “means”**

the WAY that things are done, reveals positive civic or public “virtues”

2 **positive consequences - “ends”**

the OUTCOME of what is decided is what matters ...



# Four “isms”

politicians:  
machine politics and  
“**clientelism**”

public  
professionals:  
unaccountable  
“rent seeking”  
**careerism**



**choosing in  
the public  
interest**

service users:  
self-interested  
**particularism**

citizens & taxpayers:  
“tyranny of the majority”  
and mass **populism**

- 
- A photograph of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, California, taken from a high vantage point. The bridge's iconic orange-red towers and suspension cables are prominent against a clear blue sky with soft, wispy clouds. The bridge spans across the water, with the city of San Francisco visible in the distance. The lighting suggests it is either early morning or late afternoon, with a warm glow on the bridge's structure.
- the case of whether to build a “suicide prevention net” under the Golden Gate Bridge and the issue of who should pay for it and why?

- how do we decide what is in the public interest?
- what are the demands of “public reason”?
- what is the public value that flows from this decision?

**any new public policy starts  
with “claims making”**

# reducing costs

**radical redesign of  
public services**

de-layering

merging  
functions

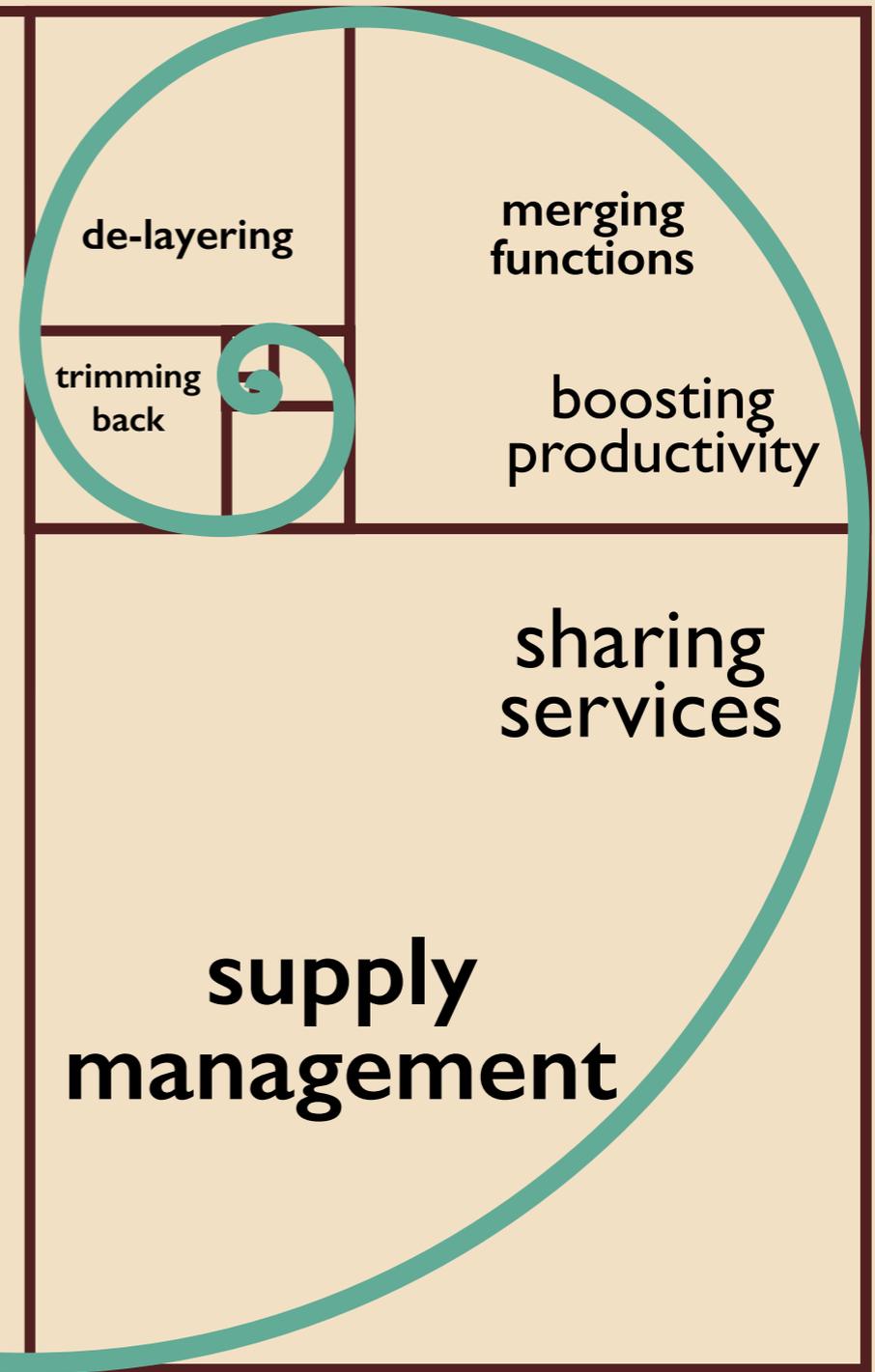
trimming  
back

boosting  
productivity

sharing  
services

**demand  
management**

**supply  
management**



# leading organisational change

$$(AG + ANS) \times DCR > OI$$

AG = agreement on goals

ANS = agreement on next steps

DCR = dissatisfaction with current reality

OI = organisational inertia

# Machiavelli's challenge

“Whosoever desires constant success must change their conduct with the times.”

but ... “No man is so wise that he knows how to adapt his own nature ...

Both because he cannot deviate from the path to which his nature inclines him.

And because he cannot be convinced to abandon a well-known path that has always brought him success by his following it.”



# fate and will



“how can decision makers master their fate?”

## **Fortuna**

“fate”

“the un-ribboning, unceasing flow of unpredictable events”

## **Virtù**

“willpower”

“the exercise of resolution, imagination, determination and courage”

# public leadership

**Conduct** that  
encourages others to  
**act responsibly** in the  
public interest, so that they  
achieve more **together**  
than they would have achieved  
separately and/or on their own.

# the complacency of now

“given all these complexities, let’s just focus on what we can do now, in the role that we have at the present time”



“how’s the water boys?”

“what is water?”



The most

**obvious** and

**important realities**

are often the ones that are

**hardest to see**

and **talk** about ...



Public servants add most value through their focused awareness of the needs of others.

Awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight, all around us, all the time ...

that we have to keep reminding ourselves, and our staff, over and over:

This is water.  
This is water.

# thank you

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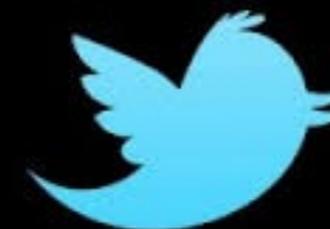
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