

The Time for Performance is Over

Adam Tugwell | 29 August 2026



The time for performance is over. The music has stopped, and the old system no longer has a chair.

For years, British politics has carried on as if the stage were still set in the old way. Leaders step forward, deliver their lines and reassure us that the familiar rhythms still apply: make the right choices, pull the right levers, announce the right reform, and the country will respond as it once did.

But the stage has changed. The machinery behind it has changed too, and many of the people standing beneath the lights have not yet grasped how completely.

What I Mean by ‘the System’

By ‘the system’, I mean two things that have fused into one. The first is Britain’s post-1980 operating model: an economy organised around growth, consumption, finance, property, flexible labour, centralised fiscal control and the promise that market incentives will allocate resources better than public institutions can. The second is the establishment worldview that treats this arrangement not as one political settlement among others, but as common sense itself.

That worldview is not simply a club of powerful people. It is a shared mental map, carried through the Treasury, Whitehall, political parties, business, the media and much of public life. It assumes that growth will return, that fiscal management is the first test of seriousness, that decisions are safest at the centre, that incentives can repair most failures, and that institutional continuity is preferable to disruptive change.

For a long time, those assumptions worked well enough to look like laws of nature. Growth created room for compromise. Cheap energy and dependable supply chains kept costs down. Borrowing and rising asset values softened conflict. Public services could be asked to do more because the wider model usually produced enough movement to disguise what was being lost.

That is the causal chain at the heart of this essay. The old assumptions shaped the institutions; the institutions narrowed the choices available to government; repeated use of those choices weakened capacity and resilience; and, as the world became less stable, a model built for continuity became less able to absorb change. What looks like a failure of individual leadership is often the final, visible consequence of a much deeper design failure.

This is why capable people can enter government with good intentions and still end up making versions of the same decisions. They are trained to operate the inherited machinery, not to question the worldview that designed it.

The Human Tragedy

If there is a tragedy here, it is not that politicians have suddenly become uniquely foolish or uncaring. It is that they were prepared for a world that is disappearing.

They learned how to build teams, negotiate policy, manage a news cycle and communicate through a crisis. Those skills mattered in a system with functioning levers and thick enough buffers to absorb mistakes. They matter less when the levers are no longer connected to the outcomes they are meant to produce.

So they do what they know. They perform. They reassure. They reorganise a department, rename a programme, launch a review and promise delivery. When the policy meets

depleted local capacity, fragile supply chains, high costs or Treasury limits, it slows, shrinks or quietly disappears. The announcement survives longer than the action because the state can still produce language more easily than results.

You can see the strain in the repetition. Every government arrives promising renewal and leaves speaking of 'tough choices'. Every minister discovers that the service they were asked to reform is tied to half a dozen other systems already under pressure. Pull one thread and the fabric does not become neater; it begins to tear.

None of this absolves leaders of responsibility. People in power still make choices, and choices still have consequences. But blame on its own explains very little. The more useful question is why different people, parties and temperaments are repeatedly funnelled towards the same narrow set of answers.

The answer is that the system does not merely constrain action. It defines what respectable action is allowed to look like.

The Structural Reality

Britain's operating model depended on conditions that were never permanent: affordable energy, stable geopolitics, reliable imports, manageable debt, rising or at least tolerable living standards, and public institutions with enough spare capacity to absorb shocks.

As those conditions weakened, the model did not adapt. It compensated. Low pay was supported through benefits. Housing costs were carried through household debt and public subsidy. Local government was asked to preserve social stability with fewer resources. Infrastructure maintenance was deferred. Public services pursued efficiency until efficiency became the removal of every margin that might once have absorbed a bad year.

Each response made sense within the worldview of the system. Together, they made the country more vulnerable. When wages lagged behind costs, support payments prevented immediate hardship but also became indispensable to the functioning of the lower half of the economy. When local capacity was cut, central control appeared more necessary. When growth disappointed, more weight was placed on the next forecast of growth. The remedy for each weakness deepened dependence on the model that had created it.

The pandemic exposed this structure and temporarily concealed it. Government could still write cheques on a scale large enough to hold everyday life together. That spending bought time and prevented far worse damage, but it did not rebuild the underlying capacity. It left a more indebted state facing the same structural problems in a harsher fiscal and geopolitical climate.

Today, governments have less room to borrow, institutions have less room to improvise and households have less room to absorb another rise in costs. The runway is shorter because the margins have been spent.

This is why politics feels repetitive and strangely weightless. The language of control remains, but the capacity behind it has thinned. Ministers speak as if the machine were merely jammed. In reality, many of its parts were removed in the name of efficiency, while others were designed for conditions that no longer exist.

The Domino Field

People naturally ask what will set the next crisis off. Energy? Food? Debt markets? Supply chains? AI? A geopolitical event nobody has yet named?

At this stage, the first domino matters less than the field on which it falls. A resilient system contains failure. It has stores, slack, alternative suppliers, institutional memory and people with permission to act. A vulnerable system transmits failure.

Britain has spent decades tightening the connections while thinning the buffers. Energy feeds into food and transport; food and transport feed into inflation; inflation feeds into interest costs and household distress; those pressures feed into public services and political legitimacy. A shock travels because there are fewer places left for it to stop.

The danger is therefore not one spectacular event but a chain: an external pressure raises costs; households and firms cut back; tax receipts weaken while demand for support rises; fiscal rules narrow the response; public and local institutions are asked to carry more with less; delays and failures multiply; trust falls; and the state becomes even less able to mobilise consent for the changes it needs.

AI belongs in this picture as one dependency among many, not as a magical cause or a singular villain. It may raise capability in some places and fragility in others. What matters is whether the systems around it have the energy, skills, governance and resilience to use it without becoming more exposed.

The next crisis will be defined less by where it starts than by what it lands on.

What This Argument Is - and Is Not

This is not a prediction of imminent collapse. Systems can limp on for a long time. Britain remains wealthy, capable and institutionally resourceful, and decline is never a straight line. Nor is this generic declinism: the comforting habit of declaring that everything was better before and that national failure is inevitable.

The argument is more specific. A particular operating model is losing its ability to turn inputs into the outcomes it promises, while the worldview around it keeps excluding

alternatives. That can produce sudden crisis, but it can also produce years of drift, uneven deterioration and local adaptation. The point is not to forecast a date. It is to recognise the mechanism while there is still time to change it.

Nor does acknowledging fragility mean denying agency. Quite the opposite. If the problem were simply fate, there would be little to do. If it lies in institutions, assumptions and the distribution of power, then those things can be redesigned.

The Lament

There is no satisfaction in watching the old assurances lose their force. No vindication. Only the weight of what it means for people who rely on services already stretched, for households with no cushion, and for public servants asked to hold together systems that no longer have the strength to hold themselves.

A lament is not despair. It is the honest recognition of what has been lost: spare capacity, local knowledge, institutional confidence, time to think, and the belief that public action can shape the future rather than merely manage decline.

It also asks us to see the people inside the system as people. They are neither all villains nor all fools. Many are conscientious, intelligent and trapped inside incentives that reward continuity. They reach for the familiar because the familiar is what their institutions recognise as serious.

That recognition is painful, but it clears the ground. Once the performance stops, we can ask not how to revive the old rhythm, but what kind of country could function without depending on it.

The Opportunity That Still Exists

The alternative is not a grand blueprint lowered from Whitehall. It is a different distribution of security, capacity and power: a national state strong enough to guarantee a floor and coordinate what must be shared, alongside local institutions trusted and funded to solve what must be rooted in place.

Start with security. A basic living standard would establish a reliable floor beneath income, housing, energy, food and essential services. The purpose would not be to withdraw people from economic life, but to remove the permanent emergency that prevents them from participating in it. Security gives households room to plan, workers room to retrain, carers room to care and communities room to organise.

Then rebuild local capacity. Give councils and community institutions dependable multi-year resources rather than short competitive grants. Let places retain more of the value they create. Restore teams able to plan housing, energy, transport, care and skills

together, because those systems meet in real lives even when Whitehall keeps them in separate departments.

Make resilience a practical test of policy. Ask not only whether a service is cheap in a normal year, but whether it still works in a difficult one. Maintain strategic stocks where dependence is dangerous. Support diverse suppliers instead of single brittle chains. Invest in repair, maintenance and redundancy. Treat spare capacity not as waste, but as insurance.

Use national policy to create common standards and long horizons, then allow local variation in how they are met. A coastal town, a former industrial city and a rural county do not need identical institutions. They do need equal dignity, clear rights, accountable decision-making and access to the resources required to act.

Change the measures that govern decisions. Growth can remain useful without being the sole proof of success. Security, health, ecological stability, household resilience, institutional capacity and the time people have to live should matter too. What we measure becomes what officials are permitted to defend.

None of this is quick, and none of it removes the need for hard choices. It changes what those choices are for. Instead of repeatedly sacrificing capacity to preserve the appearance of control, we would invest in the ability of people and places to withstand shocks, learn and adapt.

The new model would be more distributed, but not abandoned to postcode luck; more local, but held within national guarantees; less dependent on endless consumption, but not hostile to enterprise; more cautious about concentrated power, but more ambitious about public purpose.

That is the opportunity hidden inside this moment: not a promise of perfection, but the possibility of building something that works in the world as it is.

The Chair Is Gone

There is a moment in any long performance when the audience realises the actors are still speaking but the play has already ended. The lines continue, the gestures continue, the familiar choreography continues - but the story has moved on.

That is where Britain is now. The rituals of politics remain, but the system that once gave those rituals meaning no longer has the same strength beneath it. The chair the old model relied on - growth, stability, buffers and room to manoeuvre - has been pulled away.

This is not a moment for triumph or fatalism. It is a moment for honesty: about the limits of the inherited model, about the worldview that keeps it in place, about the human cost of pretending, and about the work required to build something else.

The performance is over. The music has stopped. The old system no longer has a chair.

What comes next depends on whether we keep reciting the old lines, or finally face the silence and begin building a system that fits the world as it is - not the world as we once hoped it would remain.

Further Information

To explore more of Adam Tugwell's writing, including the online edition of this post, please visit:

www.adamtugwell.blog

Copyright Notice

Copyright ©2026 Adam Tugwell

All rights reserved.

This publication reflects the personal experience, views, and opinions of the Author.

No part of this work may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted, adapted, translated, or otherwise used in any form or by any means - electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise - without prior written permission from the Author.

The Author asserts the moral right to be identified as the creator of this work and to object to any distortion or misrepresentation of it.

This work may be downloaded and stored for personal, non-commercial use only.

Any unauthorised reproduction, plagiarism, or misattribution constitutes a violation of copyright.

The Author accepts no responsibility for, and makes no endorsement of, content accessed through external links, PDFs, digital platforms, organisations, or individuals referenced herein.

Readers remain solely responsible for evaluating the accuracy and suitability of all external material.

This copyright notice shall be governed by and construed in accordance with the laws of England and Wales.