



EP#164 BUILDING TRUST AND  
ENHANCING GOVERNMENT  
RESILIENCE

WITH ADRIAN BROWN

# TRANSCRIPT

---

Adrian Brown:

The nature of the challenges we face in society, many of which are complex, unbounded, evolving, difficult to get your hands around. Some people call those wicked problems, right? With those kinds of problems, apparently on the rise and certainly the most pressing challenges we face, climate being one of the most obvious ones. The question we're asking is whether the institutions of government that we have built over decades, centuries are actually fit for purpose, for tackling those kinds of challenges. I remember speaking to people in the earlier stages of the pandemic and there was a hopefulness actually from those of us who are working in and around government that this could represent an opportunity for the kind of shift in approach and thinking that you are describing.

What we at CPI are encouraging governments and other institutions to adopt are those mindsets that are more open, iterative, adaptive, experimental in their approach to policymaking.

Introduction:

Welcome to the GovComms Podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication. Now, here is your host, David Pembroke.

David Pembroke:

Hello everyone, and welcome to Gov Comms, a podcast that examines the practise of communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke, thanks for joining me. My guest today is Adrian Brown, the executive director of the Centre for Public Impact, a global not-for-profit with the mission to improve how government meets the needs of citizens in this increasingly complex and contested world that we live in. Before taking on this role with the centre, Adrian completed his Master of Arts in Management Studies at the University of Cambridge and earned an MBA degree from the Harvard Business School.

He worked for over 20 years in the UK government in areas including the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit, the Strategy Unit, and as a policy officer in the Prime Minister's Office. He has also spent time as a fellow at the Institute for Government in the UK. He joins me from Sweden, Adrian, welcome to GovComms.

Adrian Brown:

It's great to be here, David. Thanks for having me on.

David Pembroke:

Adrian, we come together in interesting times, a change of government in the UK, an assassination attempt in the United States, a war in Europe, and a hotly contested geopolitical context here in the Indo Pacific plus climate change. And then you add in the domestic challenges of the speed of technological change on people's work and their private lives, and increasingly fragmented and contested information space, cost of living pressures, high interest rates and shortages of housing. And the widening wealth gap between the old and the not so old. Is it any wonder that government is really struggling to deliver?

Adrian Brown:

Well, yes. So, that's an enormous list to throw at me in a first question, but I agree with the premise. And that is actually what we've been focusing on at the Centre for Public Impact over the last few years is the recognition that the nature of the challenges we face in society, many of which are complex, unbounded, evolving, difficult to get your hands around, some people call those wicked problems. With those kinds of

problems apparently on the rise and certainly the most pressing challenges we face, climate being one of the most obvious ones fitting that category very, very well.

The question we're asking is whether the institutions of government that we have built over decades, centuries are actually fit for purpose for tackling those kinds of challenges. And as you might guess, the answer I'm suggesting is no. And that actually the institutions that we've built that have succeeded in many, many domains and in many ways over many years are actually fundamentally ill-suited to the types of complex challenge that you just listed in your introduction there.

David Pembroke:

So how do you start the process of change?

Adrian Brown:

I suppose the first important stage is a recognition of the need for change. The trap we can fall into is that because something's worked in the past, we can just continue to do that thing. And I think many people are now acknowledging that the way our governments operate, the way they relate to citizens, the way they developed policy, whilst there have been of course significant gains over the years, they are just ill-suited for today's challenges. So, the step number one is recognising that what worked yesterday is not necessarily going to work today and certainly isn't going to work tomorrow with the complexity that you've outlined.

With that recognition, we can then ask ourselves, so what do we do? And there's a lot to unpack in what comes next, but step one has to be a recognition that the systems we're working within are fundamentally broken, one might say.

David Pembroke:

So, in terms of achieving that recognition that things have to change. We did have the opportunity of change through COVID where governments tend to respond and they do tend to work well in times of crises. But I know here in Australia there is that sense that there's been a rebounding back to the old ways. Once the crisis has passed, everyone settles it's like, "Okay, well let's just go back to what we've always done." But not even in a mindful sense, but just through an operational reality. So, how do you change that? How do you get people to see that, yes, that was a better way of operating, how do we sustain that as opposed to let's just go back to what we've done before?

Adrian Brown:

Well, you're absolutely right that crises and COVID being an extremely good example of this are an opportunity to, through necessity, often throw the rule book out the window. So, you can completely reset your assumptions about what's feasible, what's acceptable, how we should frame problems, how we should approach problems and COVID did indeed create that opportunity. And at the time, I remember speaking to people in the earlier stages of the pandemic, and there was a hopefulness actually from those of us who are working in and around government that this could represent an opportunity for the kind of shift in approach and thinking that you are describing.

But I'd agree again with the premise of your question that actually what has happened subsequently is we have actually really just gone back to the way things were, rather than them being a fundamental reset. I think the reason why there hasn't been a fundamental reset is what we've yet to really articulate is what these new approaches of governing and of policymaking look like in practical terms. So, often the language around these new ways of working, talks about complexity, talks about systems change, talks about redistribution of power, and we can come up with examples that illustrate those.

But ultimately, politicians want to make promises and they want to deliver on those promises and the old ways of thinking and working, which are around setting those objectives and then managing through to try and deliver the outcomes that people want. Those are strong, those are powerful ways of viewing the world that unless we can come up with a powerful counter narrative, will always, I think, regain the dominant position in our thinking.

David Pembroke:

So, about that counter narrative that does perhaps work against the reality of elected officials wanting to come into power and to achieve things, because most politicians stand because they want to make a change, they want to do things. What is that counter narrative? And again, how do you start to build sustainable change?

Adrian Brown:

So, the counter narrative starts with a recognition of the complexity and irreducibility of the challenges as we were discussing a moment ago. So, if you're a politician that says, "I actually do want to make a difference to one of those domains." I have a choice as to whether I position myself, I suppose, as making perhaps more limited, but let's say measurable and achievable change within a particular timeframe, which of course has its attractions. Or am I the type of politician who thinks beyond that short to medium term framing and asks, "What can I do that's actually going to shift this system in a more profound way over and have an impact over a longer period of time?"

And there are politicians, of course, I can be cynical like anybody else about politics, but there are politicians I do believe that have that more visionary longer-term lens and genuinely do want to shift systems in a positive direction over a longer period of time. And whilst of course they need political wins in the short term, and that absolutely has to be part of this narrative as well, they're not oriented wholly around that. And they are also asking themselves, "What does the longer-term story look like? What does the longer-term change look like?" That goes beyond any individual political career and is about change more profoundly in our society.

David Pembroke:

So, a lot of the work for the Centre for Impact is about working with government to perhaps change the delivery arm of government, the way the policy is developed, the way services are delivered. And you speak about experimentation and learning and improving that muscle inside bureaucracies. What is it that you are trying to do in changing that type of behaviour inside bureaucracies?

Adrian Brown:

So, we're trying to encourage a recognition that government doesn't always have all the answers, that not all problems can be solved from the top down, that not all policy challenges have neat policy solutions. And if those things are all true, then we need to adopt a more humble, adaptive, experimental approach to the way we think about government and policymaking. Then perhaps you might call a more heroic hierarchical approach of I've got the answer and we're going to implement it and roll it out and it's going to solve everybody's problem.

So, what we at CPI are encouraging governments and other institutions to adopt are those mindsets that are more open, iterative, adaptive, experimental and humble, therefore, in their approach to policymaking. Which we believe is more likely in the medium to long term to achieve better outcomes for citizens than saying upfront, "We recognise your problem and we think we've got the answer, and then we're going to introduce a programme that's going to be rolled out over the next X years that's going to solve it." Because we know that that rarely, actually addresses the challenge that's been initially identified.

David Pembroke:

And it's interesting, isn't it? In the week that we're having our conversation, the OECD, I think it might've even been last week that the OECD's most recent survey into trust has come out. And really, they've said pretty much just exactly what you've just said there, that governments need to build better ways of engaging with citizens and stakeholders. They need to better explain themselves, they need to bring the evidence to the table, they need to engage better and they need to strengthen that capacity internally to listen. So, it really was straight out of your playbook, wasn't it? The results of this OECD survey?

Adrian Brown:

Yes. And of course, this issue of trust, declining trust, declining legitimacy in government has been playing out over a number of years now. These are trends that we're seeing in many countries around the world with different types of government who've tried many different approaches. So, this seems to be something that's, this is a problem which is quite fundamental, I think, recognition of the failures of government to connect. Regardless of the political stripe or actually the model of government that we see in different parts of the world.

I know I'm not a government communications expert. I know that you and many of your guests are experts in how to connect and share stories with an audience and with the public from a government perspective. But what I do think is enormously important is that when we think about government communications in the context of trust and legitimacy, we are not just thinking about how to get a message out. But we're thinking along the lines of what you were just describing about how to build connections and how to bring people into the understanding of issues and the exploration of what the best approach to addressing those issues look like.

And treat the public as a partner and of course multi various aspects of the public, but treating them as interlocutors in a conversation rather than a audience just to be broadcast out. And I think that's what my understanding of what really top-class communications is about. It isn't just about broadcast, it's about engagement.

David Pembroke:

Well, and indeed in that OECD survey, it found that 69% of people who believe they have been heard, that they have been listened to, that they have got the information, trust government when they have the information, when they feel. So, the evidence is growing both from the Centre for Public Impact at the OECD that this is the way to go. But how then do you take that evidence base and move it into a practise such that policy makers when they're starting to think about and defining and understanding what the problem is?

Because sometimes the problem that they think that they're trying to solve is not the problem that they need to solve because they haven't gone and understood because they haven't listened. But again, I'm intrigued about how do you believe as the executive director, the centre for public impact, that that process, that learning, that understanding that method can be more embedded and more popular as a way of building greater trust and performance in our public institutions?

Adrian Brown:

Well, let me give you one example of how this thinking can play out. So, in many of our systems, I think this is true in Australia, as it is in the UK as elsewhere, we tend to think quite hierarchically. So, we tend to think about an answer being developed in a room somewhere by some clever people who have, maybe they've listened, maybe they've not. But they've got whatever evidence together and they've done the research and they've pulled together what they think is a good solution to a policy problem, and then they roll it out. That is a very hierarchical and quite reductionist way of thinking about the world, which I think denies the complexity of the challenges that we were discussing earlier.

The alternative is to say, "Actually, it's impossible for us to come up with the answer." We're not going to come up with the answer and then tell you how great it is and roll it out. Instead, what we're going to do is yes, do the research, yes, do the listening, but then ask how can we empower people in the system at different levels of the system to experiment and learn to improve that system iteratively over time rather than thinking that we can come up with one big answer. And if we see our role, if policymakers and politicians at the top of the system see their role more as systems stewards rather than as directors or managers of the system, then simply that change of framing can allow us to take very, very different approaches.

And then that changes the way we think about how we communicate as well. Because rather than us saying our objective in this communication, and I did listen to the Alex Aitken episode you did a few months ago, and I know he's got some great frameworks for thinking about how to communicate effectively in Oasis, starts with the objective. Rather than objective being we have the answer or look how great this programme is and sharing that more hierarchical lens. The objective will be how can we engage people at different levels of the system in a conversation about what's actually happening and how we can respond to it so that you don't end up with that one answer to fit everything.

You end up with something which is much closer to a self-improving system that is constantly, you're listening, constantly learning and constantly adapting as a result.

David Pembroke:

What are the skills that need to be adopted to make this type of approach work?

Adrian Brown:

Well, I think you've highlighted one important one in your earlier question and that's listening. So, when we listen, even if we're just in a conversation like this, we can listen to just process what the other person's saying and then line up the next question or whatever. Or we can listen at deeper level to really start to understand where that other person's coming from to get to more the heart of the exchange rather than just the intellectual elements of it. And I think government often when it listens to community, when it says it's listening, it's doing more of a survey or a focus group, or actually it's a fairly high-level view of listening.

Whereas, what we should be trying to build are systems that have listening built in. So, it's not just as part of the focus group or as part of the survey where we heard people's views and took it into account at that point in the policy cycle. But rather how can we constantly be listening, learning and sharing stories in the system that help us to improve our collective understanding of what the problems are and our collective understanding of how we might tackle those problems. So, I would say listening and with humility is perhaps the first skill you could highlight.

David Pembroke:

I was going to pick up the word because you used this notion of humility a little bit earlier. In the position that you are where you do sit across and have a global view of government and the operation of government. Do you see a lot of humility in government around the world?

Adrian Brown:

It depends what you mean by government, I suppose. If we think about public servants, if we define government broadly as the wider public sector, then I see enormous amounts of humility, of care, of empathy reflected in the work of public servants across many, many different services. So, if we just imagine that social care in any country that is often staffed by people who just have enormous empathy and care as part of their DNA, right? That's how they see the world, that's how they view the world.

And if we think of them as being something other than government or other than the public sector, then I think we're making a mistake because we are dismissing actually the large swathes of people who work in this field. The people who sit at the top of the tree, and as you said in your introduction, I spent my time in Whitehall, I worked in the Prime Minister's office. So, I've sat in those rooms, I've sat at that position in the system, and actually from that position, it's incredibly hard. It's incredibly hard to say, "Well, we don't know. We don't know what the answer is." Of all of the incentives are oriented towards you saying, "Don't worry, we've got this covered, we've got the answer, we can fix this."

And that is very rarely true in my experience, it's very rarely the case. And that's why one of the values we emphasise at CPI is this idea of humility. Not that it's always possible in all circumstances, but we think a little bit more humility, a little bit higher up the system would do an enormous amount to shift the way we think about the problems we face and the solutions we try and develop.

David Pembroke:

But is that realistic when you have a media that certainly aren't going to allow for that? You can't come out and say, "Well, listen, I actually don't have the answer." They'll get hound down, they'll get chased down the street. There's that aggressiveness really to the pursuit of elected politicians who don't have the answer, who may seem like they're a little unsure about themselves. So again, how do you increase the humility quotient in this hostile information, febrile environment in which we all live?

Adrian Brown:

I would agree that it's enormously challenging and getting worse, arguably. So, if we roll the clock back 20 years, we might have complained about the tabloid newspapers or right-wing radio, whatever. These days, it's perhaps more social media and the environment that anyone in the public domain finds themselves immediately just harangue from all sides for almost anything that they say. However, I think if politicians set themselves, set their stage, set their platform up as the people who are going to fix your problems, that this is ultimately still going to get to the same place.

Which is disappointment, people feeling let down, people's trust declining and the legitimacy of government declining. So, we have to find a way to break that cycle. One way to break it is to suggest, I think that people at the top of these organisations and politicians, instead of saying, "I'm here to fix all your problems," they say, "I've got an enormously important role to play here. I'm sitting in a very powerful position at the top of this organisation or in this government, and my role is to help all of the parties that have got an interest in this problem to come to together and work together better so that we can make more progress."

And that is a slightly different framing to we've got the answer. So, if we can find, and I know it's difficult, but I think that for me feels sellable that you say nobody's saying they can fix the climate crisis on their own, nobody is even put position forward. I think what we haven't had such a clear articulation of is how are these leaders playing their roles within the systems of their domains so that they can encourage better collaboration, better learning, better adaptation and improvement over time?

What role are they playing to lead to healthier systems and ultimately happier systems? I would say that's a framing I think you could sell, especially with the kinds of comms professionals that you have on your podcast regularly.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Well, it's interesting, there's a framing that's emerged in Australia recently around major challenges such as the defence of Australia, such as climate change. And the government starting to talk about whole of government, whole of nation approaches to solving these problems. So, there is this distribution of responsibility that the defence force, for example, is not responsible for the defence of Australia. It's

responsible to lead the defence of Australia, and therefore from there you can then distribute the responsibility to wherever it needs to fall.

And so, I do think that that message is getting through, and I think that's a powerful message that there needs to be this greater distribution. And again, this comes to the point of communication and the importance of communication and language and nuance. And making sure that you're telling that story in such a way that you are moving people along that curve of engagement and acceptance of, "Well, okay, I'm not, what can the government do for me?" It's more, "Well, where do I fit into the system and what can I contribute?"

But do you see that as an emerging opportunity globally? Are you seeing any of that elsewhere in the world? That there is this sense of, we don't have all the answers, but we must work together?

Adrian Brown:

Well, if you'll forgive me for being a bit parochial. So, as you said in your introduction, I'm talking to you from Sweden, I'm British myself, but I've lived in Sweden these last seven years. And something I wasn't aware of until I moved to Sweden was an annual festival that takes place on an island called Gotland off the east coast of Sweden in the Baltic Sea. And this festival is a political festival, so it's a bit like a party conference, but with all the parties represented and not just the political parties in businesses there, civil societies there. And it's an open festival for the general public, I think it's even broadcast on the national TV station.

And what happens during this week is that Swedish society, if you like comes together and says, "What are the issues we're facing? What are the different ideas that people are putting forward for how we might make some progress on those issues? And let's talk, learn, share from one another. We don't have to agree with everything that everybody said, but let's have an open civilised conversation in the form of this week-long festival." Now, that kind of approach I imagine is difficult to conceive of in other political settings.

But the fact that it happens in Sweden I think is instructive to all of us that it is possible, that it is possible. And Sweden has got its issues, right? Sweden has had over recent years, quite a backlash against immigration, many of the same issues that other European and other countries are facing. But nevertheless, I think this idea that we can come together and have a different type of conversation, which isn't about point scoring, it's about understanding others' views collectively. And then trying to work together to ask what the future could look like, that if we can find ways of creating those spaces, and I'm not suggesting everybody goes onto a Swedish island.

But can we find other ways of creating those spaces that allow for that different type of conversation? And colleagues in government comms have a huge role to play in helping us to imagine what those kind of spaces could be. Because this is about creating that sense of inclusiveness and trust and safety so that people are willing to share their stories. People are willing to listen with intent and from the heart so that we can have that quality of conversation.

David Pembroke:

How long has that event run for? How many years?

Adrian Brown:

I think it started in the 60s. It was Olaf Palme who was sadly assassinated when he was Prime Minister of Sweden, but I think before he became Prime Minister, he went to this island and gave a speech. I think is how it came about, and what grew from that was this annual event. So, it's been going on for decades.

David Pembroke:

And does it have a track record of affecting national policy from the discussions that have emerged and ideas that have emerged from it?



Adrian Brown:

I would say so, yeah, because it's almost inevitable. Once you've got that kind of group of people coming together, the media, or the newspapers, the TV are there, civil society, as I say. With everybody there, it's very difficult for that group of people who are all intelligent, informed, coming at it from their perspectives with their interests to come together and for interesting things not to emerge, right? It's like if you bring a group of people together and give them the time and space to think and reflect together, I certainly believe that that's almost always going to arrive at something interesting.

David Pembroke:

So, just to wrap things up, if you look to your work programme there at the Centre for Public Impact, and we've discussed about the context and the challenges and the opportunities that exist. What are the two or three things that you are going to focus on over the next 12 months to continue to work towards this incremental change in improvement?

Adrian Brown:

So, there are a number of programmes of work that we've had in the recent past and will continue into the future that I think are important. The first I'd highlight and is perhaps of most interest to your listeners is what we're calling Storytelling for Systems Change. And this is actually led by my colleague Thea Snow out of our Australia and New Zealand office. So, it's something which for those of your listeners that are in that part of the world, this is actually pretty local. And that work is asking, when we're thinking about systems change, especially at the local level, what role can storytelling play?

And the idea there is that storytelling in that context isn't just about saying what's happened or sharing the success. Storytelling is actually an integral part of a system being able to understand itself, if you want to put it that way. Or more clearly allowing different groups within communities who've got different interests to come together and have exactly the kind of conversation that I was just talking about, the national level in Sweden. So, that is work that we've been doing over a couple of years now in Australia.

I think it's hugely important and interesting and encourage anyone who's interested to go to our, it's just search for Storytelling for Systems Change and all of that work will come up led by Thea Snow. The second area where we've been working, and I think we'll continue to work, is around the international development sphere. So, as I was saying earlier, the hierarchical approach to government and governing whilst being challenged in many settings is really embedded in international development and global development. Because of the nature of donor countries, the international institutions like the UN and others, and just the nature of how they relate then to those bits of the world that they're trying to help.

So, we have a programme of work and we're continuing to build this out through something called The Collective, which is about people who work in that space who want to imagine a different way of working. Which is tough when you're working in these systems, which are all oriented towards a more hierarchical way of thinking. We're creating a space for those people to come together, share and learn from one another and experiment with different ways of working. So, that's my first example with Storytelling for System Change was like local community work.

This other work now is on the international level, it's at the global level, similar kind of principles, slightly different approach, but that's also enormously exciting. And that's challenging often the inherent power dynamics within those systems. Who gets to decide what's important, what's not important, how we measure success, where the money flows? All of that stuff. That's the second area I'd highlight. And then the third area is an area we've working on is more of a methodology that we've been working on for many years.

It's not particularly new, but I think it is helpful in the way helps create innovation and new ways of thinking, which is challenge prizes. So, we've worked on a whole range of different challenge prizes where an entity

says, "Look, this is a problem, we don't necessarily have the answer. We'd love to hear answers from whatever, whichever groups are eligible to enter." And we've worked on many challenge prizes in the city innovation space. We helped develop the Earthshot Prize, which is the Royal Foundation International Environmental Prize, which is now I think in its third or fourth duration.

And we're also, and we're now increasingly working with the Google Foundation on challenge prizes around technology and particularly how AI is creating opportunities, but also creating disruptions and risks in society. So, we've run many different challenge prizes on different aspects of those topics, and I think we'll continue to do that. The challenge prizes, they don't solve everything but I think there are really interesting way of getting new ideas, new thinking, and stimulating innovation in systems which have perhaps got a bit stuck in a particular mode.

David Pembroke:

Well, we will resist the opportunity to open the AI box because that's probably another hour plus conversation that we could continue. But Adrian Brown from the Centre for Public Impact, thank you so much for giving up some of your valuable time to share with us today and indeed your encouragement and recognition of the importance of the function of effective communication. But also, your great advice to those listening, that it's not about talking, it's as much about listening and getting those spaces working and learning and understanding and being quite iterative as you learn from those engagements with people.

So, thank you so much for your time today and very encouraged by the work of the Centre for Public Impact. And indeed, I have seen a lot of Thea Snow's work, and I indeed would encourage people, prolific on LinkedIn if you'd like to go and follow Thea there in the work that she's doing on that very important project there from the Centre for Public Impact. So, a very big thanks for Adrian Brown for coming on very early in the morning for him over in Sweden, later in the afternoon here in Canberra, Australia.

But very grateful as always, audience for coming back once again. The promise is to bring you more interesting people from around the world as we continue to explore the function of communication in government and the public sector. And I'm sure there will be many more very good conversations to be had in the weeks, months, and years ahead. Now, if you do listen regularly, a rating or a review is a valuable exercise for us because it does help the podcast to be found. So, whatever catcher that you use to gather up your podcasts, you can go on and give us a rating or review, and that will help the programme to be found.

So again, thank you very much to Adrian Brown from the Centre for Public Impact for joining us today. And thank you for the audience for coming back once again. We'll be back at the same time with another episode of GovComms in a fortnight's time. But for the moment, my name is David Pembroke, and its bye for now.

Voice Over:

You've been listening to the GovComms podcast. If you enjoyed this episode, be sure to rate and subscribe to stay up to date with our latest episodes.