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# INSTITUTIONAL INTRANSIGENCE

The reluctance of institutions to adapt or embrace new ideas, methods, technologies, or cultures often poses the most significant barrier to innovation.

The word 'institution' encompasses a swathe of societal structures, from government bodies and churches to corporations and charities. These entities are rarely governed by a single individual but operate within established rules, systems, and processes. With time, this can bring about intransigence and the fostering of comfort with the status quo. While institutions may work smoothly for a time, when circumstances shift, the establishment can become sluggish, creating challenges for people, other institutions, or the broader environment.

The following pages touch on some causes of institutional intransigence, its negative impacts, and innovations that disrupt established norms to provide positive change.

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# The Future of Government Policymaking

**H**umans often struggle to anticipate what is coming down the road, says one central government civil servant as they drew up a chair. "With over 400,000 civil servants, change can be slow," says a colleague. As with other organisations, those in government tend to stick to what worked yesterday, creating resistance to innovation. When the future arrives faster than expected, as with Artificial Intelligence (AI), it can present extra challenges.

No Government minister can grasp every detail, so they rely on their advisors. If civil servants become entrenched in current practices and past experiences, it can become difficult to foresee future challenges. A reactive approach can prove costly, as the government responds to crises instead of preparing for them.

## LEARNING FROM HISTORY

The coal mining industry during the 1980s was reactive policymaking. A phased withdrawal from coal mining could have lessened the economic and social impacts on communities as the government, Coal Board, and Unions had already agreed that 40% of coal mines were unviable by the late 1970s. The inability to act preemptively led to rapid closures in the 1980s, with devastating consequences still felt today.

Parallels with AI and other technologies can be drawn, impacting sectors like clerical, retail and customer service roles.

## REGULATING EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

In the late 1990s technologies, like Google search and Amazon web services, often emerged with little regulation. Early oversight might have placed safeguards on the digital economy, but was initially viewed as niche. Now, regulating tech behemoths has become a colossal challenge with global consequences.

AI has received more regulatory attention, partly because its risks are better understood. Writers like Isaac Asimov warned of AI dangers decades ago, yet regulation has lagged behind its rapid advancement. The recent Bletchley Park agreement attempts to establish ground rules, but balancing AI's risks and rewards remains a complex task.

## PATH AHEAD

The challenge for all levels of government will be formulating policies that balance these rapid innovations with regulation. Technologies like AI hold vast potential but bring considerable risks. A faster shift to proactive policymaking is essential to enable progress while managing its downsides, concluded the interviewees.

*'The statement elaborates on the dual nature of AI — representing disruptive potential and offering transformative opportunities but also posing major risks regarding human rights, fairness, transparency, safety, accountability, ethics, and bias mitigation.'*  
*(Bletchley Declaration, 01 November 2023).*