The Myth of Democratic Myopia*

Gerry Stoker

University of Canberra and Southampton

Paper for “Democratic Institutions and Long-Term Decision-Making: The Design Challenge” Panel, ECPR General Conference 2014, Glasgow, 4-6 September

Section: New Developments in Democratic Innovation Research Panel Number P066

Abstract

Contrary to the views of those who claim there is an inherent myopia to democratic politics this paper argues that the presence of a strong group politics, participatory mechanisms and political stratagems can play a part in delivering long-termism in policymaking in democracies. All of these factors are contingent in their impact but the chances of long-term policy making can be bolstered by focusing on some issues rather than others, building trust in government bodies and devolving decision-making authority. Fears about democratic myopia are overplayed which in turn suggests that the persistence of its narrative reflects other forces and factors.

* The paper is a revised and extended version of a chapter to be published in J. Green and C. Hay (eds) The British Growth Crisis (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming) in draws on research funded by the UK’s ESRC (RES-000-22-4441) undertaken by teams from Sheffield and Southampton Universities and the Hansard Society.
Introduction

A challenge for any government is to be able to operate effectively in the short-term and to think and act for the long term. A capacity for long-term politics is not easy to achieve in any circumstances in democratic politics and has arguably become harder to muster with the emergence of a 24 hour news cycle, a marketed politics of “dog whistle” issues and sound bites and a more narrow focus on leaders and their personalities rather than more institutionally ingrained policies and parties. Making effective policy short-term or long-term is hard and democratic practices cannot assure success.

There are some that argue democratic practices automatically guarantee failure at least when it comes to long-term policy making; that short-termism is inherent to democratic politics. Their prescription appears to be that the only hope for long-term policy processes to emerge is to take issues away from democratic politics. This paper challenges the view that democratic politics cannot deliver long-termism by offering a framework for analysis that identifies some of the ingredients necessary to deliver a politics that is capable of managing loss and building coalitions for long-term policy. A further section considers the settings and conditions that are most likely to see a politics of long-termism emerging. The paper concludes by reflecting on why given that democratic myopia is a myth it appears to have such a grip on popular discourse about the failings of democratic politics.

Shifting Democracy: Reasons to be concerned

A surface review of developments in the practices of contemporary democracies might lead to a view that a politics for the collective good, requiring short-term sacrifice, has become more problematic as politics has become consumerist rather than collectivist in style (Stoker 2006). The role of political parties as bastions of collective loyalty and identity has shifted more to a practice of catch-all institutions looking to market themselves to a wide range of free-floating voters. The major institutions of engagement including trade unions, churches and formal membership associations have seen their role decline and instead interest politics is more dominated by single issue campaigns and organisations that demand not loyalty and engagement from their membership, but rather funding and fees to support professional and sleek campaign organisers. Moreover, citizens at the start of the twenty first century in many established democracies relate to politics through a complex mix of broadcast, print and internet media but rarely directly through face-to-face contact with politicians or
campaigners. Many public service delivery mechanisms operate in a world beyond the formal levers of government and representative democracy and through instead the murkier world of governance. Citizens may be surveyed, consulted and provided for but forms of public accountability often appear either opaque or non-existent, save for the sense that you can as a citizen look for another provider to meet your needs, give an unsatisfactory rating to your current provider or protest to the market regulator about your public service provider. Whether it’s the relationship between voter and politician, campaigner and interest group or client and service provider the citizen is cast as a consumer first and a citizen hardly at all.

This emergence of consumerist political practice has been matched by the rise of a neo-liberal understanding of the public realm. Neo-liberalism constitutes the most successful ideology of the last three decades which has shown a resilience and capacity to survive even in the context of an economic downturn. Neo-liberal thinking offers a powerful critique of the idea of the civic and the public realm. As Raymond Plant (2004) explains, the starting point for neoliberal thought is that liberty is the key goal, and that the only form of liberty that can and should be promoted is freedom from coercion. So when the collective is constructed it needs to be done in a way that keeps what can be done by government to a minimum. A framework of non-coercion and civil rights to protect citizens from interference is all that is needed. The goal of neo-liberals is a minimal state to frame and support free markets and to allow individuals to pursue their own good.

We are left after this period of neo-liberal hegemony with two additional factors that work against the search for a political solution towards promoting long-term policy. First politics appears to be, for many citizens, a rather unedifying process that they would rather not have much to do with. Attempts by most citizens to engage in politics are ad hoc and sporadic. Most substantial politics is done by a mixed, but small, cadre of elected politicians, unaccountable officials, specialist lobbyists, narrowly focused experts and professionalized protesters. That world, in turn, is reported to us by a media that focuses on personality conflicts, controversy and a mix of reporting and commentary that can enlighten, but more often confuses. The average citizen is alienated from politics and far from convinced of its value. As an ideology, neo-liberalism has helped to undermine the case for politics and any faith that politics might deliver something of collective value.
The second issue is that even when politics does engage citizens it does so only on the basis of short-term promises and delivery, something that appears at odds with the long term delivery and intervening sacrifices required by new economic strategies and models. This short-termism is seen as a flaw of modern policy making by observers from across the political spectrum. The Adam Smith Institute, a right-wing think tank that strongly promotes a broad neo-liberal ideology, comments:

how do you deal with the fact that politicians typically only think as far as the next election, and as such do not as a rule pay much attention to the long term effects of their decisions? Short-termism in politics is a chronic affliction, manifesting itself both in inaction (let’s not bother reforming social security – its eventual collapse is going to be someone else’s problem) and in action (let’s have a fiscal giveaway now and worry about the deficit once we’ve bought ourselves the next election) (Cloughterly 2011).

For the Right, short-termism enables sloppy and inappropriate government intervention and the rolling back of the state. From a more left or progressive perspective, short-termism in politics is seen as something that disables effective government intervention, undermining the prospects for reform. According to Victor Andersen (2011) writing in The Guardian

The problems of the market are often reflected in problems in political systems. The short-termism of the way markets often function, creating instability for business and for whole national economies ...can unfortunately be amplified by the short-termism of democratic political systems. Where we should be able to look to politics and government to correct, regulate, or compensate for, the failings of the market, we often instead get “political failure” alongside “market failure”. For the “good transition” to a green economy, the problem of short-termism in government and politics is a key problem.

For some environmentalists and many scientists democracies are also seen at fault for failing to deal with issues such as environmental change and global warming that require long-term policymaking. The outspoken James Lovelock speaks for many scientists in his critique of modern democracy and its short-term practice which is seen as a key obstacle to the taking of meaningful action when scientific evidence demands it. In an interview in 2010 he argued:
Even the best democracies agree that when a major war approaches, democracy must be put on hold for the time being. I have a feeling that climate change may be an issue as severe as a war. It may be necessary to put democracy on hold for a while (Hickman, 2010).

In short a common feature of public commentary on politics is that it is bent towards short-termism and in a particularly ineffective way in that does not engage most citizens and where politicians and the democratic processes are widely distrusted. We have a political system that hardly seems to be in a robust condition to deliver long-term policy goals ‘that require governments to arrange losses and gains in a particular temporal order: to impose social costs long before most benefits will arrive’(Jacobs 2008). It would appear many current political practices in established democracies are very ill-suited to the task of delivering long term policy goals.

Arguing that long-term policy making is not easily achieved is one thing but others take argument further and suggest that democratic practices are just not compatible with long-term policymaking and subsequently some argue that the only way forward is to take decisions out of normal politics. The justifications for these various options to by-pass normal politics tend to rest on a sense of pressing crisis but also implicitly, and sometimes, explicitly on a particular understanding of politics offered within a rational choice framework of thinking in which all actors are viewed as self-interested in their motivations and instrumental in that selection of courses of action.

A formal model of democratic myopia

The logic provided by a rational choice framing of issues offers a powerful narrative. The collective choices of societies led by democratic governments are inherently short-term because of the dynamics of electoral competition. Politicians have no incentive to focus on the long-term and as a result in the words of William Nordhaus (1975: 188), the author of a key original substantial theoretical statement on the issue, is that ‘democratic myopia’ creates a problem in a whole range of policy issues that require long term commitment. His work based on a stylised model of a representative democracy, views politicians and voters as driven by self-interested calculation. Voters will judge parties on their performance in delivery for them in the short run and incumbent politicians are therefore under irresistible pressure to deliver short-term gains or risk being voted out of office. As a result democracies
‘will make decisions biased against future generations’ (Nordhaus 1975: 187). In the economic field, in particular, the result is a ‘predictable pattern of policy, starting with relative austerity in early years and ending with the potlatch right before the elections’ (Nordhaus 1975: 188). With respect to public spending then the pattern is prudence followed by a big giveaway. More generally the model predicts that ‘politicians should never be willing to impose short-term costs for future gain’ (Jacobs 2008: 201).

When reflecting on long-term policy choice much of our thinking in both academic and wider public debate is framed by variations of this rational choice paradigm. The Nordhaus model has received serious attention and multiple developments and there is some evidence to suggest that economic and spending policy does tend to follow the cycle that the model suggests (Alt and Dreyer 2006). The rational strategies inevitably favoured by citizens and politicians mean a virtually iron-grip for short-termism. Politicians may start off with a commitment to austerity and sacrifice but as election time draws near the pressure to please voters in the here and now becomes too great.

How can the sacrifices be delivered in the context of an electoral cycle that demands a focus on short-term delivery by politicians to citizens? Staying with the confines of the rational choice framing developed by Nordhaus and many others it is possible to think of some ameliorative measures. Familiar ones are discussed by Nordhaus but dismissed as likely to be ineffectual. The idea that additional information or independent audit would transform voters from inattentive judges to more long-term reflectors is viewed as implausible. Extending election terms to a sufficient degree to meet the challenges of overcoming short-termism would lead to a loss of democratic legitimacy that would undermine any gains made. If Nordhaus had been presented the option of hiving off decisions to unelected EU bureaucrats he might have doubted whether the solution would work on similar grounds.

Most of the options considered more viable by those with a rational choice perspective involve somehow or other removing decision-making from the normal run of politics. Politicians set broad guidelines so legitimacy is preserved but detailed decisions are left to unelected regulators. For example decisions could be passed to an independent group of actors not bound by electoral constraints. The practice that is seen as an exemplar of this is the passing on the control of monetary policy to an independent central bank. Equally legislation could be passed binding both politicians’ and citizens’ hands on balancing the
budget or climate change targets. Indeed given the problem of short time horizons it is rational to try to bind the hands of both yourself and your successors. Through different mechanisms for delivering ‘credible commitments’ it would appear that short term time horizons do not count automatically against the potential for far-sighted policy-making. The key is not to allow the inherent short-termism of politics to railroad the process by putting decisions at one remove and limiting the discretion available to future decision makers.

There is no sense among advocates of these kinds of mechanisms that they are confident that any measures will guarantee a longer term focus to decision-making. They appear to recognise that short term political pressures could lead to pressures on “independent” decision-makers to change tack and that binding commitments can be unbound or honoured in some way that takes away their bite. What we are offered at best is a number of interventions that in benign circumstances could deliver long term policy-making.

For the remainder of this paper it will be argued that this rational choice inspired form of thinking runs the risk of creating a rationality trap where, given assumptions that actors have full information and act in a self-interested manner, there appears no way out of the social dilemma identified. But there is an argument to suggest that these prescriptions are based on too limited an understanding of what politics can and cannot be expected to deliver. Indeed far from limiting political discretion it could be suggested that it would be good encourage it if long term policy making is the goal. But to make sense of that proposition it’s necessary to go beyond the simplified model of the operation of representative democracy knowingly offered by Nordhaus and it would appear, naively adopted, by others.

The ingredients for long-term politics: an analytical framework

The sense that we are constrained by a rationality trap that preordains short-termism in democratic politics is mistaken. Democratic politics is not inherently myopic. To understand how political space can be constructed for the long-term policy-making three factors need to be considered; each if present could support long-term policy making. First, the potential importance of attentive organised interests as opposed to the inattentive public in the policy process means that backing for long-term solutions can emerge without direct citizen initiation; especially if institutions supporting power sharing among interests are present. Second, strategies for promoting long-term policy making including insulating and mitigating devices are available to politicians in structuring their relationship to citizens. More radical
options for greater engagement with citizens are also possible to identify that could support a politics of the long-term. This section of the paper looks at each of these factors in turn.

(1) Organised interests where power is dispersed

The elected politician-citizen relationship is not like that of the buyer and supplier at the time of a purchase, most of the time citizens are not paying attention to politicians and a lot of the time politicians are not paying attention to citizens. Nearly all citizens fail to follow politics in detail, indeed the dominant feature of most liberal democracies in the inattentiveness of most voters. Politicians, in turn, are not so much driven in their decision-making by a focus on citizens but rather their relationships with international partners, party or coalition colleagues, powerful organised interests and the media, which provide a set of significant and more proximate influences. In short politicians are more insulated from electors than the Nordhaus inspired models of representative democracy recognise. Moreover they can use that insulation to present policies in ways that allows space for long term decision-making.

Politics is about groups and interests as much as it is about citizens and the state. Policy can be made and unmade in the world of organised interests. Organised interests usually have professional staff and act to represent the interests of particular functional groups, causes, projects or programmes. They matter to elected politicians because they can mobilise public opinion and voters. They can through funding support particular political parties or candidates. Their leaders can be networked and even have social ties that give them access to political representatives and unelected officials. As well as these options for positive influence interest organisation often are in position where they need to be taken into account in decision-making because they are central to effective implementation or because their welfare is central to that of so many citizens (as in the privileged position of business in market economies given their importance to job and wealth creation) (Lindblom 1977).

The presence of organised interests changes the calculus more in favour of long-term policy (Jacobs 2008). The leaders of interest organisations are attentive and able to track policies and be concerned about their implications way beyond the time framework of an election cycle. The institutional character of interest organisations provides a capacity for investing in the future. That is not to deny that interest organisations are concerned with short-term issues but they are also attuned to routinely seek policy consequences that are advantageous in the long-term.
The commitment from organised interests to make an investment in long-term policy may be enhanced in settings where power is dispersed. As Jacobs (2008: 206) puts it: ‘all else being equal, the broader the coalition required for policy change in a given context, the harder it will be for one social group to shift its own long-term problem onto another’. A political system that disperses power creates more veto points and at the same time makes cross-sectional redistribution harder, opening up the door for inter-temporal policy choices which meeting the challenge of long-termism that usually involves giving up something now for something later. If an organised interest can shift burdens on to others it will not accept short-term pain for long-term gain. But if that avenue for cross-sectional redistribution is blocked an organised coalition of interests, willing to partner in some shared pain for long-term gain, becomes a possibility.

Organised interests matter in politics and the dynamic of their interventions is affected by the institutional frame in which they are operating. If political leaders have special relationships with particular interests then those interests will exploit that relationship to extract favours for themselves and put costs on to others. Systems of the Westminster-style may be particular prone to such problems; while those with more dispersed power may be more open to long-term policy development. There are, of course, many countervailing factors that would be required to be considered in any full assessment of what is the right institutional framework to encourage long-term policy making and the empirical evidence is a far from conclusive but dispersing power, perhaps counter-intuitively for some, might be the key to triggering long-term orientation at least among organised interests.

(2) Citizens are inattentive and mitigating strategies can employed

The response of citizens remains central to any politics of the long-term but the relative inattentiveness of most citizens to politics, a feature of democracies exasperated by the consumerist politics of the last three decades noted earlier, means that there are opportunities for politicians to manage citizens’ expectations in ways that a rational choice model of myopic politics does not take into account. The general inattentiveness of citizens to politics reflects a number of factors. Some explanations can be taken from the stealth model (Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse 2002) of politics developed to explain how in many democracies politics takes place undetected by citizens’ political radar; just as stealth technology delivers “invisible to radar” air fighter planes. How does this occur?
Citizens have no strong views on most issues and are therefore willing to concede decision-making authority to others, as long as decisions appear to be being made in the public interest or more particularly are not being usurped by self-interested politicians or organised interests. Under these circumstances citizens will not spend large amounts of effort in reasoning about the short or long-term consequences of policy and instead rely on cues or heuristics to judge their support or otherwise to what is going on. Some citizens may be particularly likely to mobilise against changes in policy that are likely to impose losses on them in the short-run but mobilisation is only a reluctant choice. Under these conditions it is easy to imagine that there are a myriad of opportunities for political leaders to manipulate citizens to gain their acquiescence, at least, to long-term policies demanding short-term sacrifices.

Studies suggest that there are many strategies for managing pain and making the case for long-term delivery rather than short-term satisfaction (Pal and Weaver 2003). Adapting work on how governments go about avoiding blame and inflicting loss suggests that three broad categories of manipulation might work. First procedures can be changed to lower the visibility of the policy playing on the inattentiveness of citizens. Classic examples of this kind of strategy involve delegating decisions to regulatory or other governmental bodies so they have to impose the losses and shoulder the blame for them rather than the elected leaders who make the decision. Cuts or unpopular decisions can be passed to local or regional governments to make. Military chiefs can be asked to shrink their budget but given discretion over where the axe should fall, diverting attention to their decisions. In a similar manner long-term policies could be passed to a low profile agency for implementation in the hope that they remain below the radar or if they do become contentious politicians are left with a “plausible deniability” strategy.

The next option is manipulating perceptions. Obfuscation of the damaging implications of long-term policy changes is an option and, for example, is quite common in taxation policy. Another option is very clearly to identify a scapegoat for long-term decisions that have short-term unpopular consequences. Useful targets here include previous governments and their failings (look at the deficit, lack of infrastructure, divided society etc they left us). International forces or organisations or markets that can be presented as offering no choice but to make painful long-term decisions are another option. Or perhaps one section of society can be the target for scapegoating: migrants, the unemployed or perhaps even bankers. Another option for getting to “there is no alternative” is to get cross-interest or cross-party
support for what you are doing. The rhetoric of the UK’s coalition government in its first year 2010-11 made heavy use of that line (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker 2011). The Labour government from the mid-2000s onwards developed a policy for a long-term shift to using a greater proportion of nuclear power as part of the energy mix in the UK- a policy that was carried considerable political dangers given both financial and safety fears created by nuclear- but sort, deliberately, to buy into the process the then main opposition party by involving its shadow minister in decisions, meetings and conferences in developing the policy (Baker and Stoker 2011, 2012).

The final option open to political leaders seeking to justify short-term losses for long-term gains involves manipulating pay-offs. One option is to try to share the pain as widely as possible. Another is to concentrate it on particular citizens who for some reason will struggle to fight back. Another option is to give compensation to those who might be particularly prone to protest or exempt them from some of the worst effects of the long-term policy. When shifting the basis of a pensions’ policy over the long-term those coming up to pension age may lose fewer benefits; while those a long way from retirement may face the full force of the change but feel less immediate angst and therefore, again, be less likely to mobilise against the policy.

It is important to recognise that just as proponents of long-term policies can use some of the strategies identified so too can opponents; using variations of the tactics to undermine long-term policy options (Pal and Weaver 2003). They can work hard to increase the visibility of the policy. They can take on proponents for change in the battle of perceptions. They can extend the scope and range of citizens that notice they are adversely affected by the policy. Above all they can expose the manipulations by supporters of long-term policy for what they are. The point is that the long term policy can take its chances in the play of power and politics. It is not a mission impossible.

The stealth depiction of the way democracy works is both an empirical depiction of what is commonplace political practice and is normatively underwritten by claims that it’s reasonable for citizens not to pay attention to politics and that as long as elites compete then citizens still have choice as to whether to go along with long-term policies or move against them. The stealth understanding draws on a long tradition of how democracy does work and should work through competing elites but gives it a particularly strong realpolitik or amoral twist
(Stoker 2012). Manipulation does not guarantee success for long-term policy but rather it opens up opportunities that can be exploited and indicates that while myopia is a feature of democratic politics it is a feature that can be addressed by political practices that have been familiar to humankind from the days of Machiavelli and before.

The underlying claim of this section is that democratic politics is not an arena where information and understanding flows freely but rather one where claims are subject to manipulation and conflict and in that process the long-term policy making is a potential result in a way that that would undermine claims that myopia is an automatic output from democracy. There are some that argue that this political jousting provides not only a pragmatic way to long-termism but also a legitimate route. Others may express more doubt. They argue that the inattentiveness of citizens most of the time makes long-termism possible but there is fragility to approaches that rest on manipulations to exploit that situation. This morally loaded critique does, however, offer its own formula for raising the prospect of long-term thinking from citizens.

(3) **Citizens are engaged through mechanisms of democratic innovation**

Contrary to the idea that smart leaders can get to long-term policy making by manipulating public opinion there is a strong school of thinking that suggests that it is by including citizens in decision-making and trusting their judgement that you can better still get to same outcome. The sunshine perspective on democracy (Neblo et al 2010) is one which favours greater engagement of citizens through mechanisms of democratic innovation and points to another path to long-termism. Democracy needs the “sunshine” of more public debate, shared information, mechanisms of accountability and openness to citizen engagement. Again this is a perspective that has a normative position and reflects a long tradition of participative commitment in democratic thinking (Stoker 2012) but its advocates also argue that there is an empirical base to its claims. Citizens from the evidence of this perspective are inattentive because they judge they are powerless, given the dominance of special interests in politics and if they felt that politics was more open to influence and if the right mechanisms could be found then they would engage (Stoker and Hay 2012). Moreover, implicit in a lot of the arguments for democratic innovations, involving deliberation and decision-making by citizens, is that given access to information and institutional mechanisms that encourage thinking about issues in an “other-regarding” manner, a long-term perspective can emerge.
Deliberation-inspired democratic innovations could inspire respect for, and focus on, the needs of future generations not just the concerns of those who can be engaged in a decision in the present (Ekeli 2009).

Involving citizens to a greater degree, through more deliberative and reflective mechanisms, might be valued as an intrinsic expression of full citizenship. But it might be seen as a route to long-termism because of its impact on the way citizens decide and its legitimating quality. Deliberation claims to have a transformative effect on the way that citizens approach an issue. A combination of information and awareness of the perspective of others encourages more reasoned decision-making and public-spiritedness. Having to publicly defend a position encourages reasonableness and participation over time will foster civic virtues, making citizens more reflective and more willing to think long-term. Deliberation and engagement can also enhance the legitimacy of decisions by involving all those affected by the decision which matches a widely held sense of fairness and could enhance the “stickability” of a policy, in the sense that it might be more difficult to overturn if it had been through a process of widespread endorsement.

There are a myriad of democratic innovations that have been put to practice which could be bent to the purposes of long-termism (Smith 2009). For example, referenda on major constitutional issues are often presented as once in a generation decisions that then have to last a generation and the same principle could be applied to some long-term policy-making issues. Deliberative fora about climate change and its implications, with detailed evidence about the long-term changes likely to affect individual communities, have been shown to sweep aside positions taken in the inattentive phase of citizens’ political practice and although consensus may not emerge a more reasoned debate can occur (Hobson and Niemeyer 2011). Might such mechanisms be capable of generating a long-term policy perspective and support for short term sacrifices? It might even be possible to build a future oriented system of checks and balances into political systems, building on the idea put into practice in the Israeli Knesset for a commissioner for future generations (Ekeli 2009). Perhaps a second chamber elected, as proposed by the UK Coalition Government in 2012, with long, non-renewal tenure, would encourage a greater willingness to think in terms of the long-term in decision-making?
None of these democratic innovations can take away from a fundamental feature of politics that there may be significant differences about what constitutes the interests of posterity or more generally what is the right long-term choice. The point is that democratic innovations could plausibly get long-termism on to the agenda of policy-making. We know from survey evidence that both stealth and sunshine understandings of democracy are widely present among citizens in several established democracies (Stoker and Hay 2012). What emerges from the discussion of the stealth and sunshine responses is that short-termism present in democratic politics could be addressed whichever understanding is to the fore.

**The conditions for success of long-term policy making: issues, institutional forms and cultural factors**

Any strategy for long-term policy making is likely to involve some mix of the ingredients identified above. A long-term policy programme would need the buy-in of a range of organised interests and some mix of presentational and engagement strategies aimed at citizens. This section of the paper explores under what conditions a successful long-term policy is likely to emerge and investigates how that might reflect the nature of the issue in contention, cultural factors including trust in government and the institutional environment for decision-making.

**Issues: sources of conflict**

The construction of long-term policy making does not require the taking away of the very rationale of politics. It does not require the removal of conflict. Consensus is not essential, rather, what is essential is the political capacity to manage conflict. Conflict between interests is not an inherently undermining factor as far as long term policy making is concerned. A never-ending series of conflicts is characteristic of established democracies and market societies, and these conflicts can be managed as long as they are divisible, that is conflicts over actors getting more or less. Such conflicts lend themselves to compromise and the art of politics. Yet they are never finally resolved ‘once and for all’ but the goal of long-term policy making is to extend the time horizons of the policy area as much as possible and keep future negotiation to matters of detailed implementation rather than first principles.

What can be disabling to long-termism and a cause of failure is conflict where the issue is not divisible. Conflicts which are driven by matters of religion, race, language or ideology, which
have an ‘either-or’ character present considerable difficulties (Hirschman 1995: Chapter 20). They are not inherently irresolvable but in so far as they figure strongly they are likely to make the politics of long-termism more problematic. The issues at stake in economic field tend to be more divisible and as a result it might be more possible to manage short-term sacrifice for long-term gain in this arena than in others. Value or identity based conflicts may create decisions that are unbridgeable but issues around material issues are perhaps more open to give and take or can, perhaps, be more effectively constructed as positive sum rather than zero sum games in which in the end everyone gains something.

Pal and Weaver (2003) identify different categories of loss imposition. Some may be framed as conflicts between groups where a deal can be cut or where one of the participants are not strong enough to block the loss. Losses imposed on one group are driven by a combination of deal making and the power dynamic in operation. Another category is geo-graphically concentrated losses, such as closing a particular factory or military base. Here the key is to contain the conflict to the local arena. Value-based conflicts and issues which involve threats to ways of life are undoubtedly the most problematic to manage because government will find it difficult to compensate losers, by for example by “splitting the difference” or compensating losses in some way. If your position is that something should be a social norm you are unlikely to be persuaded that it is OK for you to follow the norm and others to ignore it. Long-term policy making then is easier over some issues rather than others.

**Culture: trust and complexity**

The political strategies, whether of the manipulative or deliberative variety, associated with long-termism also require that the government offer of some sacrifices in the short-term but benefits in the future is viewed as credible. Given that acceptance of the policy and its delivery take place inevitably non-simultaneously there has to be some belief that what the government says it will do, it will do. There are two tests involved: a test of good faith, can the government be trusted and a test of capacity, can the government do what it says? Beyond that there may be an element of a leap of faith, where lack of sufficient evidence means that there is no reason to take a chance but a commitment still emerges.

Let us assume that citizens like other decision-makers are inclined to be short-term in their policy orientatons, such an assumption would be consistent with the presence of bounded rationality in decision-making. All things being equal citizens prefer short-term to long-term
pay offs. A rare study (Jacobs and Matthews 2012) has explored however what it is that drives short-termism. Using an experimental design to test responses among citizens to a range of long-term policy options Jacobs and Matthews find that it is not so much impatience or a desire to smooth out consumption that drives interest in short-termism, it’s rather that citizens do not trust government or doubt its ability to actually deliver, even if its commitment was genuine. In the absence of these factors citizens would be left to reason with a leap of faith and say for example that for reasons of solidarity or because we are all in this together we will make a commitment to long termism despite any real sense that success will occur. The spirit of ‘I would rather die in a ditch with you than live without you’ is a motto that might be embraced in families and communities of various sorts and could provide a base for long-termism but how can it be conjured up?

Long-termism demands, then, what the political culture in many established democracies appears to conspicuously lack: trust in the good faith in government in keeping its promises and its word and trust in the competence of government to deal with the complexities of delivery in the context of long-term policy. Beyond that a capacity to trigger a leap of faith that would enable citizens and organisations to commit to a long-term approach is, again, in much of modern governance is a scarce commodity. While the tractable nature of the issues embedded in economic policy, perhaps, lend themselves to long-termism it would appear that the political culture to provide a context for trust and credibility is likely to be harder to deliver. Again the argument here is that the prospects for long-term policy-making are contingent and not pre-determinately doomed. Creating a political culture supportive of long-termism requires a sense that governments in future can and will deliver. It’s a major obstacle to be overcome but a challenge that could be met with a successful political strategy.

**Institutions: Devolved Decision-Making**

To consider the range of institutional factors that might support a politics of the long-term would require far more space and detailed empirical understanding than is available to this author. Instead in this section I will concentrate on one general issue which emerges as an important dividing line in the literature (Jacobs 2008; Pal and Weaver 2003): whether centralised or decentralised governance systems are better at long termism?

The case for central control would appear to be that decision-makers can be insulated to some degree from a range of competing forces, develop a shared vision of what needs to be done
and have the capacity to act to provide the resources, legal instruments and administration necessary for the delivery of long-term policy. A centralised system is less easily blown off course. The case for a devolved system is that when power is shared citizens and organisations are more inclined to accept the demands of others and accommodate themselves to some losses in the hope of future gains.

As Jacobs (2008: 219) argues ‘the likelihood of policy investment should rise as it becomes more difficult for social groups to redistribute their long-run burdens’. The particular case he explores is one where a centralised decision-making environment with a strong leader and strong executive government under Mrs Thatcher made less progress than the checks and balances, multi-veto system of the United States in developing long-term reforms to pension plans. In the UK close ties between some organised interests and the government led to the lay-off of costs on to other interests with less access and influence. In the USA the greater dispersal of power meant that a more radical long-term policy became possible. Other evidence (Pal and Weaver 2003) suggests that the relative advantages of centralised systems in redirecting pain is mixed, so the argument for a dispersed form of institutional power as a better context for long-termism is not conclusive but it should be enough to challenge assumption that long-termism requires a form of benign dictatorship; it may on the contrary demand a form of considered devolution of power.

I would argue in this light that local and regional government may have a particular role in promoting long-termism for the reason that it is an expression of dispersed but often relatively stable representative politics (because electoral competition is often more limited given the concentration of preferences and interests in different populations). Long-term policies and long-term coalitions of support especially around issue of economic development have been a feature of local politics for some time (Stoker 1995). Local government is free to use both manipulative and deliberative strategies for reaching out to citizens and can appeal to local identity and community as a basis for “leap of faith” partnership with both citizens and organised interests. Add that these considerations that local government tends to be seen as more trustworthy than central government (Stoker 2011), at least in the UK, and might also be seen as a more competent long-term deliverer and the case for local and/or a regional institutional lead on long-termism becomes stronger.
Conclusions

The paper argues that long-termism is not some kind of mission impossible for modern democratic government. It may require different political processes and mechanisms especially if citizens themselves are going to play a greater part in engaging in long-term policy making. Yet the main argument of this paper is that mainstream politics does have a remarkable capacity to deliver in extremely difficult circumstances. The play of power and the effective manipulation of information, the tools of persuasion and the forging of alliances especially at the level of organised interests can give politics a creative and sustained dynamic that many analysts overlook.

Neglecting the forces that could support long-termism and focusing narrowly on factors driving short-termism suggests surprisingly unbalanced scholarship. Not least as any objective review on policy making in many contemporary democracies would conclude that there is lot of it about! Look for policy arenas where organised interests are in balance in terms of their access to power and therefore have stronger incentives to co-operate and you will find long-term policy-making. The supporting evidence is available in many serious studies of policy making along with associated developed model building and theoretical work. Consult Sabatier (2007) for a review and note in particular work on punctuated-equilibrium theory (where the issue is how a long standing direction in policy can be shifted) or advocacy coalition framework (where the issue is how interests can coalesce to deal with wicked problems loaded with conflicting goals, technical challenges and multi-layered actors). Look to institutions of devolved, local and urban government with capacity to build policy regimes (for a review of that extensive evidence and theory see Stoker, 1995; Mossberger and Stoker, 2001) for the long-term and you will again find further reasons to challenge the idea that democratic myopia is the default setting for politics.

So why does the sloppy assumption of democratic myopia persist? Why the myth? The most favourable judgement is that analysts saw forces driving towards short-termism in politics, focused on them and their strengthening impact and so concluded that politics has become defined by short-termism. There is a case to be made that long-term policymaking has become harder but that does not explain support for the idea automatic democratic myopia. So why does the myth have such a grip? First short-termism plays into the general neo-liberal agenda that premises its world view not so much on the case for limited government but
rather rests its argument of the pointlessness of government. “Governments can’t” is the mantra and the claim of myopia just embellishes that perspective. Second some from the worlds of business or with a more technocratic perspective are just uncomfortable with the premise of democratic politics: that is solutions are always temporary, never final, always contingent and never trumped by knowledge and expertise. In short the myth of democratic myopia is pushed by those who are doubters of government or democracy or both.

References


Notes

1 Potlach is a festival of giving.
2 The discussion below draws on Ekeli (2009).