SECURITY AND PUBLIC TRUST

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Dr Frens Kroeger *on why national security depends on solving the public trust crisis*

The UK government needs to get a handle on the crisis of public trust it is facing – and fast. Otherwise we will be increasingly likely to face the challenges of deepening polarisation and home-grown terrorism.

Trust is an indispensable ingredient to security. I have studied its central role both within security agencies – how can they strike the right balance of trust and distrust? – and between agencies and their external networks – how can they manage trust relations with partners and key audiences? Beyond this, however, our national security will be crucially affected by the degree of trust that the public holds – or does not hold – in the government.

Speaking at the Cabinet Office in 2018, I warned that the UK was facing a trust crisis of historic proportions. While met with interest at the time, it appears that trust

fell off the agenda again quite quickly afterwards. That is not unusual. While most of us are broadly aware of low trust in government, we tend to focus in on the issue only when it makes the news – recent coverage of David Cameron's conduct in the Greensill lobbying affair springs to mind. Once the turbulence has passed, we direct our attention back to (supposedly) 'harder' realities and forget about trust and trustworthiness again, until the next scandal erupts.

This pattern cannot be allowed to continue for much longer. We finally need to give our undivided attention to the bigger picture of trust or suffer the consequences. This becomes readily visible when considering the numerous anti-lockdown protests around the country or the violence that recently erupted on the streets of Bristol in response to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill: they

are merely symptoms of a much wider problem, namely flagrant distrust of the public in the British government and politicians more generally. This level of distrust has been bubbling away for decades and the pandemic has merely brought these feelings to the surface.

But is this really new? While it may be true that there has always been a degree of suspicion in politics and politicians, there are a number of alarming trends that show that the trust crisis we are facing now is one of a kind. It is not just that all surveys and other research indicators consistently show that trust decline in the UK is accelerating; not just that the crisis is expanding, increasingly pertaining not only to trust in government but also in once-resistant institutions like courts or the police. This crisis is historical in nature because it is of a new quality: the public no longer merely distrusts *this* government, but more and more people are beginning to harbour a deep distrust of *all* government, of politics, increasingly even of democracy itself. The new quality of this crisis is that it questions not just the individuals involved or their decisions, but increasingly the system as a whole, the mutual consensus that forms the foundation of co-existence in our communities.

As a result, in the UK, as in many other countries, we are seeing new and unprecedented coalitions in the streets: business owners protesting alongside left-wing conspiracy buffs, suburban anti-vaxxer mums shoulder-to-shoulder with hardened anti-establishment activists from the far right. We need to acknowledge these new realities and confront them head-on; and trust needs to be foremost among our concerns, because the only thing that unites these seemingly so disparate groups is their distrust of the status quo.

So how did it come to this? I would argue that the government's trust problem is homemade. Like many other governments, it has made the grave mistake of regarding trust purely as a communication issue. That is, at regular intervals (usually triggered by one of the abovementioned scandals) they turn their attention to existing trust problems and ask: "What do we have to say so people will trust us?" That is the wrong question to ask. Really, what they would need to ask is: "What do we need to do in order to earn people's trust?" or perhaps even more fundamentally: "Who do we need to be, and what does our internal culture need to be, so that people will trust us?"

Instead we have been caught in a vicious cycle of communication for years. Most governments still choose to ask the simple question ("What do we have to say?"), hiring spin doctors, communication professionals and the big four consultancies to answer it. Inevitably, the PR professionals devise a new communication strategy or slogan, which will often even create some trust in the short term because it *sounds* trustworthy. However, as long as trust and trustworthiness are regarded purely as communication issues, this same strategy will produce long-term distrust. If no substantive actions follow to back up the communication, people tire very quickly of what they perceive as mere lip service. For trust, more than anywhere else, actions speak louder than words, and words on their own are perceived as 'cheap talk'.

This is precisely how we got into the mess we find ourselves in today. Once this cycle has been repeated enough times, even those who were ready to invest trust on the basis of polished government communications are likely to become increasingly cynical. This is where

true distrust dynamics kick in. Importantly, distrust is much more than mere lack of trust – it is the active assumption that whatever the distrusted entity says is likely to be a lie. This means that no communication, however cleverly honed and professionally polished, can reach these people and pull them back from the brink. They are likely to immediately discount what you say and, more often than not, retreat deeply into their echo chambers on social media instead. There, driven by algorithms that favour tight-knit groups, their distrust of government, politics and even democracy is likely to deepen further. Polarisation and radicalisation are known to find fertile ground under these conditions.

MORE PEOPLE ARE BEGINNING TO HARBOUR A DEEP DISTRUST OF ALL GOVERNMENT

Considering this dire state of affairs and the self-reinforcing nature of these dynamics, what – if anything – can be done to start rebuilding public trust? Two approaches promise to begin mending the deep rifts between the government and the public, as well as between different factions within the public itself, but both are big undertakings that require stamina.

The first task is to break the vicious communication cycle just described; it could be called an 'anti-communication' approach to trust. This involves shifting the focus from *sounding* trustworthy to actually *being* trustworthy, from lip service (however professional and/or highly priced) to putting your money where your mouth is. That is, rather than hiring the same spin doctors and consultancies over and over, governments need to make trustworthiness a part of everything they do, to build it into the DNA of how government operates.

Because the public can trust or distrust government in so many different respects – from racial equality over climate change to vaccinations – rather than planning 99 important things to do and scheduling another communication initiative to address trust problems as the 100th, this would mean that a real commitment to trustworthiness will need to pervade each of the other 99 as well. What is 'trustworthy' in each context needs to be defined in a process that combines listening to the public with a systematic comparison against the values that the government has defined for itself. In this, the latter values need to be broken down so that they are not mere commonplaces that no-one could ever seriously object to (would anyone disagree with 'doing what's best for the country'?), but instead feature value choices: no-one would speak out against either keeping the public safe and healthy or keeping the economy running – but what if the two are at odds and you have to make a choice?

One could even imagine a National Office for Integrity to do this job; but it would be imperative that any office or ombudsman entrusted with this function be *inward* facing, communicating to everyone within government, not trying to extol the government's newly found virtues to the public. Truly committing to trustworthiness, *being* trustworthy, produces trust on its own – more slowly perhaps (which is unnerving to

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politicians who may be thinking in five-year terms at best), but more steadily and lastingly. Once such trust has been built, it remains stable even in the face of bigger challenges.

The second task is an equally big but necessary one. It is to change our electoral system. Why? Because in its present form it facilitates polarisation and distrust and can ultimately provide fertile ground for extremism and violence.

It is important to acknowledge that at its heart, the logic of a first-past-the-post system like the one in the UK, which favours two dominant parties, allows candidates to aim for the support of 51 percent of the population, with little thought or worry given to the remaining 49 percent, even if they are deeply unhappy or violently opposed. In the US with its similar voting

NATIONAL SECURITY IS AFFECTED BY THE TRUST THE PUBLIC HOLDS IN THE GOVERNMENT

system, this was clearly Trump's logic; it led to deeper polarisation than ever before, and ultimately to the storming of the Capitol. It is also reminiscent of the Brexit referendum, whose narrow result of 52 percent to 48 percent divides the country to this day. Wherever the '51 percent logic' is pursued, it drives polarisation and radicalisation because it makes it unnecessary, and therefore over time increasingly unlikely, for the

opposing camps to find common ground and engage with each other productively.

In a system of proportional representation, such tactics tend to be much less valid. In such electoral systems, a party that lets itself be dominated by extreme views will struggle to find coalition partners needed to form a government. Parties thus typically remain more within a frame that is acceptable to bigger majorities within the public — at least to a degree that allows for productive debate and compromise with political opponents. In addition, votes for parties other than the two dominant ones have a much higher likelihood of actually counting, reducing feelings of being 'left out' and remaining unheard among their supporters and increasing their trust in the political process. Polarisation and radicalisation are much less favoured by such an electoral system.

Both of these approaches are big endeavours that require commitment and stamina, and it is questionable whether this or any other government will want to commit to the risk of undertaking such Herculean tasks. However, doing nothing at all seems the bigger risk now. If we do not break the vicious cycle of distrust that we have been caught in for decades, we can clearly see ahead of us a path that parallels that of the US: one of worsening polarisation, deepening distrust, increasing radicalisation and a growing danger of homegrown terrorism. Our own storming of the Capitol may be less far off than many of us would like to believe. We have arrived at a watershed moment, and we need to act now to address the historic crisis of trust that we are facing if we don't want to frivolously gamble away the security and liberty we value so much ●

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