

Event insights

What next for Public Innovation?

With Sir Geoff Mulgan

Public innovation, trust and “boring plumbing”



This event invited public leaders to step back from day-to-day pressures and reflect on what effective, trustworthy government requires now and into the future. Geoff Mulgan shared insights from decades of work across public institutions, innovation systems and policy design. The following highlights capture the themes and practical provocations that emerged from the lecture and discussion.

The core proposition: trust needs proof

Trust rests on two proofs: **competence** and **integrity** — and expectations are rising.

- Governments are operating in a context of high turbulence (economic volatility, social media, AI), while bureaucracies risk internal rigidity.
- Innovation is not a side project or a luxury: it is how government keeps pace, delivers results, and earns public trust.

The three provocations: paranoia, hunger, theft

Mulgan framed the posture public institutions need now as a deliberate mix of:

- Paranoia (a little): stay alert to threats and complacency; small, vulnerable countries often innovate faster because they cannot afford to stand still.
- Hunger: actively search for better ways of working — from micro-practices (meetings, contracts, team design) to system-level change.
- Theft (ethical borrowing): reward smart adoption from elsewhere; don't reinvent what can be adapted and scaled.

What leaders must balance:

- Front-of-house vs back-of-house: Communicating progress and responsiveness without undermining delivery, implementation and institutional stability.
- AI opportunity vs AI risk: Building real capability at the centre to govern AI use, rather than relying on vendor claims or isolated pilots.

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What systems must change:

- Data and trust: Creating ways to join up data for public value while addressing trust through stewardship, transparency and new intermediaries.
- Regulation: Shifting from static, compliance-heavy models to adaptive approaches such as sandboxes and fit-for-purpose regulators.
- Institutional design: Moving beyond traditional hierarchies toward organisational forms better suited to complexity and long-term challenges.

Reflections from the room

Participants highlighted several practical implications:

- Innovation can be small and everyday — changing a meeting, briefing process, or stakeholder timing can unlock better outcomes.
- A key barrier is risk–reward asymmetry: failure is punished more than learning is rewarded, discouraging experimentation.
- Governments duplicate too much across agencies; trust and sharing could significantly reduce this, particularly in AI.
- Reflection and simplification matter: bureaucracy expands unless it is actively culled.



“The task ahead is to build institutions that are strong without being heavy — capable of action without the weight of 20th-century bureaucracy.”

- Sir Geoff Mulgan

Recommended reading

Geoff Mulgan, *[Another World Is Possible](#)*

Geoff Mulgan, *[Big Mind: How Collective Intelligence Can Change Our World](#)*

Geoff Mulgan (forthcoming), *Governing with Innovation*

OECD, *work on public sector innovation and innovation climate: [OECD OPSI](#)*

OECD, *[Global Trends in Government Innovation 2024](#)*