

Elon Musk's DOGE debacle has done us all a favour

It is difficult for disruptive outsiders to reform the system – but the Tesla boss's attempts offer valuable lessons

by Fraser Nelson, The Times

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Elon Musk is a man of epic failures, as well as achievements. When a rocket or an idea explodes, he sees it as a chance to learn and he has been spoilt for choice during his sojourn in politics. His critics will be delighted to see him limp out of the White House, with his Department of Government Efficiency in disarray. The lesson, it seems, is that his Silicon Valley methods don't work in government. But the more important question is why they didn't work. If Musk got it wrong then who, or what, might get it right?

This is an experiment for the world, not just America. The “disruptor” model that Donald Trump embodies is being hawked in every democracy in the world. Upstart parties are arguing that outsiders can do what compromised insiders cannot. Lack of experience is being used as a claim for power. This is Nigel Farage's message, now proving so popular that opinion polls suggest it may take him to No 10.

But any fool can disrupt, as Liz Truss demonstrated. The trick is to build, and few in modern industrial history have done this better than Musk. His iconoclasm and workaholism have revolutionised online payments, the car industry, space exploration and more. His war cry is “delete!”, a drive for minimalism. Why does the rocket need landing gear, he'd ask. Delete! And so the famous launch-and-catch tower was born. By pushing the costs of rocket launches down 90 per cent, he has opened a world of possibilities.

When Musk offered his services to government, it captured the world's imagination. What if he succeeded? What if the costs of healthcare halved and quality doubled? What if the costs of construction fell, as the cost of computing has? Border control, passport security, crime prevention: all addled with waste, all ripe for reform. Government was waiting for the tech revolution and in Musk we had a proven revolutionary.

For years, populist parties have touted this, blending anti-establishment rhetoric with appeals to private sector efficiency. Sweep out the politicians! Get the smart outsiders in! This is not about left v right but establishment v disruptor; insider v outsider. This framing started reshaping British politics this month when voters entrusted Reform UK with ten local authorities and handed a mandate for radical change to absolute beginners.

Yet what if it's all based on a false premise, and even the tech bros end up in the same quagmire? Musk's tools didn't work in government because he did not command. This is why business and military leaders, no matter how brilliant, come adrift in government. “An extraordinary affair,” said Wellington, after his first cabinet meeting as prime minister. “I gave them their orders and they wanted to stay and discuss them!”

Democracy is like that: you need to persuade. Without doing so, it's hard to achieve much. Britain had a taste of this six years ago when Dominic Cummings tried to hire a team of outsider “weirdos” and sideline elected ministers. Boris Johnson gave him free rein. The results were mixed, to put it politely. Lockdown let Britain experiment with a top-down, expert-led, no-debate model. The debacle served as a reminder of the need for scrutiny.

Musk wants efficiency, not to run a country, but the main opposition he faced has been legal. He worked with maniacal intensity and America responded in time-honoured fashion: it sued him. Fourteen state attorneys general took legal action, with 30 lawsuits in total. That's before you take in the hundreds of Freedom of Information requests, which vexed Trump so much he begged the Supreme Court to make it stop.

Musk didn't factor how much reformers need to be masters of lawfare. That's true here too, and for more than politics. One of our most shocking recent cases was when Next was found guilty of paying warehouse workers too much. It was discrimination, said campaigners, because the mainly female shop floor workers were not on the same amount. Next argued that warehouse jobs are harder to fill and the positions should pay more, relative to other staff. It lost its six-year case.

When employers are being sued for pay rises rather than mistreating staff, we're in crisis. It's hard to build or repair anything. Legalese and regulation explain why the nuclear power plant being built at Hinkley Point will be the most expensive property in the world, save for Mecca's Great Mosque. Why the two English reservoirs "fast tracked" this week won't open until 2040. For as long as such laws are protected by other laws then no one – Musk, Wellington or Thatcher – would be able to enact the serious reform that politicians promise and voters want.

Musk used to talk about \$2 trillion of Doge savings; he now speaks of \$150 billion and even that looks like a pipe dream. Some studies suggest that, once redundancy payments and other legal costs are factored in, his efforts will end up costing more than they save. Starmer's much-hyped purge of regulators and quangos may well come to naught: the system creates more red tape, whether No 10 wants it or not.

This would not be the first time a country was seen as unreformable. Half a century ago, trade union power appeared unbreakable and Edward Heath called an election on the question "Who governs Britain?" The remedy came, not by political blitz, but a careful battleplan quietly put together by politicians and industrialists. This was the 1977 Stepping Stones document, a blueprint for the Thatcher revolution.

Those years were a success from which the Tories never fully recovered, and drawing lessons from them is often a sign of desperation. But lawfare is, today, what trade union hegemony was back then. Now, as then, we are asking: who governs? The answer, increasingly, is not parliament or the unions but the courts.

Trump will struggle: legal reform is hard in the US system and the courts may soon become his real opposition. But in the UK, parliament has complete control over the law. A democratic restoration, the sweeping away of snares used to thwart government policy, can be implemented at any time. Even by Starmer, a legal knight.

Meanwhile, Farage claims to be ready with a crack team of outside experts to Doge his new councils. It might well be that Reform's local heroes go on to embarrass other councils with their cost-cutting and service quality. In which case, Farage may start to look like Starmer's successor (he is already the bookmakers' favourite).

For all his failings, Musk has done the world a service: he stress-tested a dream. His failure shows the limits of Silicon Valley methods, the durability of lawfare and the need for proper strategy. What he "deleted" was the illusion that outsiders can fix government without first learning how to run it. He promised urgent radicalism when America needed credible radicalism. The next election could very well go to who best offers it here.