RETHINKING GOVERNANCE

THE MISSING KEY TO AI'S FUTURE: What a Century of Disasters Lays Bare

The Case for a Statutory Governance Profession

A Public Proposition for the 2027 UN & Geneva AI Discussions | Tim O'Hanlon | 14 November 2026

THE UNDERLYING PROBLEM

The international debate on AI governance is addressing increasingly consequential questions about the safety, control and accountability of artificial intelligence. Yet it leaves a critical governance dimension unresolved: who establishes and independently assures the competence, conduct and continuing fitness of the governing-body members entrusted with final authority over these decisions? This proposition sets out the missing professional layer and invites its consideration within the major UN and Geneva AI discussions in 2027.

I have spent over 40 years working in governance across the public and private sectors, consolidating that experience over the past decade through detailed analysis of major governance failures spanning more than a century.

This work has exposed a fundamental deficiency: governance itself lacks the comprehensive, consistently defined and mandated professional architecture needed to establish and independently assure common standards of governing competence, conduct, delivery and accountability.

I developed the Integrated Governance Framework (IGF) and its three constituent frameworks to address that deficiency, providing the substantive architecture upon which I propose establishing governance as a recognised statutory profession for governing-body members exercising final authority. The framework architecture and its supporting published definitions are available at www.tosmsgroup.co.uk.

The accelerating debate around artificial intelligence has brought one particular aspect of that proposition sharply into focus.

I listened closely to the UN Security Council briefing on artificial intelligence and international security on 23 September. Across very different contributions from Sam Altman, Dario Amodei, Yoshua Bengio, governments and others, there was striking agreement around many of the mechanisms now considered necessary: human control, common requirements, capability and risk assessment, independent evaluation, verification, assurance, transparency, monitoring, incident reporting, auditing, accountability, liability and international cooperation.

What I could not find in any contribution was the corresponding question:

What qualifies the governing-body members exercising authority over this extraordinarily consequential technology to make those judgements?

And beyond their individual competence, what comprehensive governing discipline requires them to identify and manage systemic interdependencies, rigorously examine alternative long-term scenarios, make properly resourced strategic commitments, and demonstrate that those obligations are being fulfilled?

The emerging AI governance architecture is becoming increasingly detailed in what it expects of AI systems, the organisations developing them, and the controls, assurance and safeguards surrounding their use. Yet it leaves a fundamental professional dimension unresolved: there is no comprehensive statutory governance profession establishing and enforcing the governing accountabilities, knowledge, experience, competence, conduct, continuing fitness and performance required of the governing-body members who ultimately exercise authority over these decisions.

THE CASE FOR A STATUTORY GOVERNANCE PROFESSION

The proposition I am tabling addresses this missing dimension. It calls for an internationally recognised statutory governance profession that becomes an integral part of the arrangements through which consequential AI decisions are governed and independently assured, and those exercising governing authority are held accountable. This is not confined to AI and goes beyond the existing landscape of voluntary governance codes, standards, director institutes, professional bodies, qualifications and development programmes, as well as the partial statutory and regulatory obligations already applying to specific industries and jurisdictions.

Existing governance codes, institutes, professional bodies, qualifications and development programmes have contributed important knowledge, education, guidance and good practice.

But they do not collectively constitute a statutory profession in which governing-body members must demonstrate and maintain competence, professional conduct and continuing fitness as a condition of exercising governing authority.

Many of these arrangements have existed throughout much of the century-long period examined in my ten-year analysis of major governance failures. Yet serious failures of governing competence, judgement and accountability have continued to recur, notwithstanding the extensive guidance, specialist expertise, professional support and regulatory arrangements available to those exercising governing authority.

At its fullest, the proposition is that governing-body members who exercise consequential authority should be subject to a statutory governance profession requiring:

- a defined body of governance knowledge;
- appropriate education and demonstrated experience;
- independently assessed competence before appointment and throughout service;
- binding standards of professional behaviour and conduct;
- continuing professional development;
- continuing fitness to govern;

- an individual professional record covering competence, conduct, development and performance in office;
- independent professional governance audit of how governing bodies actually govern;
- examination of the assumptions, information, evidence and other basis on which major decisions were taken;
- assessment of how those decisions were reached and how effective they proved to be; and
- removal from governing roles where the required statutory professional standards are not met.

Independent professional governance auditors would apply this to governing bodies and their individual members across governments, international and state institutions, and public and private corporations. The right to continue exercising governing authority would therefore depend on continuing to meet the statutory standards of the profession, with proportionate enforcement, due process and the safeguards required by each jurisdiction's constitutional and legal arrangements.

A critical component of this oversight requires governing bodies to demonstrate the effective discharge of integrated governing responsibilities, including the identification of systemic interdependencies, the development of credible high-road and low-road scenarios, long-horizon strategic planning, appropriate resourcing, implementation oversight, periodic reassessment and accountability for actual results.

WHY HUMAN OVERSIGHT ALONE IS INSUFFICIENT

AI provides an unusually powerful test of this proposition because virtually everybody now agrees that meaningful human oversight and accountable human judgement must remain central even as the technology becomes increasingly capable. Sam Altman, for example, argued that increasingly powerful systems should remain under human control and that consequential decisions should not simply be left to AI laboratories; other speakers repeatedly called for independent evaluation, verification, assurance and accountability.

My concern is that “human oversight” does not by itself answer the governance question. It tells us that a human must remain involved. It does not tell us whether the governing-body member exercising authority is demonstrably competent to do so, who establishes that competence, who assures its continuation, or what happens when that authority is exercised negligently, improperly or without the necessary capability.

My analysis of major governance failures spanning more than a century demonstrates a consistent pattern: governance failure is not simply the result of inadequate rules or deficient systems. Failures recur when those exercising governing authority lack the necessary competence, independence, judgement, discipline or accountability, while no statutory professional governance audit exists to independently assess whether those entrusted with that authority are meeting the required standards. We have repeatedly established systems intended to control risk without establishing an equivalent professional mechanism to assure the competence, conduct and performance of the people ultimately responsible for governing them.

To further clarify this key issue: technical expertise and governing competence are not interchangeable. Governing-body members need not personally possess every specialised capability within the organisations they oversee. But they must possess the professional governing

competence to recognise the limitations of their knowledge, challenge the evidence and assumptions presented to them, understand critical interdependencies, demand integrated assurance and establish accountability for the combined outcomes of their decisions.

With frontier AI, the potential consequences are such that I question whether we can afford to repeat that pattern.

A CHALLENGE EXTENDING BEYOND AI DEVELOPERS

My concern is also broader than the governance of the AI companies themselves.

AI exposes a much wider governance problem. Decisions of enormous consequence are being taken across governments, international and state institutions, and public and private corporations, yet the governing-body members who exercise that authority are not required to belong to a statutory governance profession or to demonstrate and maintain defined standards of knowledge, experience, competence, conduct, continuing fitness and performance.

Governments in particular must make decisions whose consequences extend far beyond normal electoral cycles. They will need to establish and fund regulatory and technical capability over long periods, determine infrastructure and energy priorities, manage strategically important supply chains, address profound economic and social consequences, cooperate internationally while retaining national accountability, and remain answerable for the consequences of their decisions. The governing arrangements needed to sustain these long-term and intergenerational commitments must be protected against disruption by short-term political and electoral cycles, without removing legitimate democratic scrutiny or properly governed revision.

The central issue, therefore, is not simply whether AI systems and the companies developing them are adequately regulated. It is whether the governing bodies and their members exercising consequential authority across governments, international and state institutions, and public and private corporations are themselves subject to a comprehensive statutory governance discipline with enforceable standards of knowledge, experience, competence, conduct, continuing fitness and performance, including independent professional governance audit and removal from governing roles where the required standards are not met.

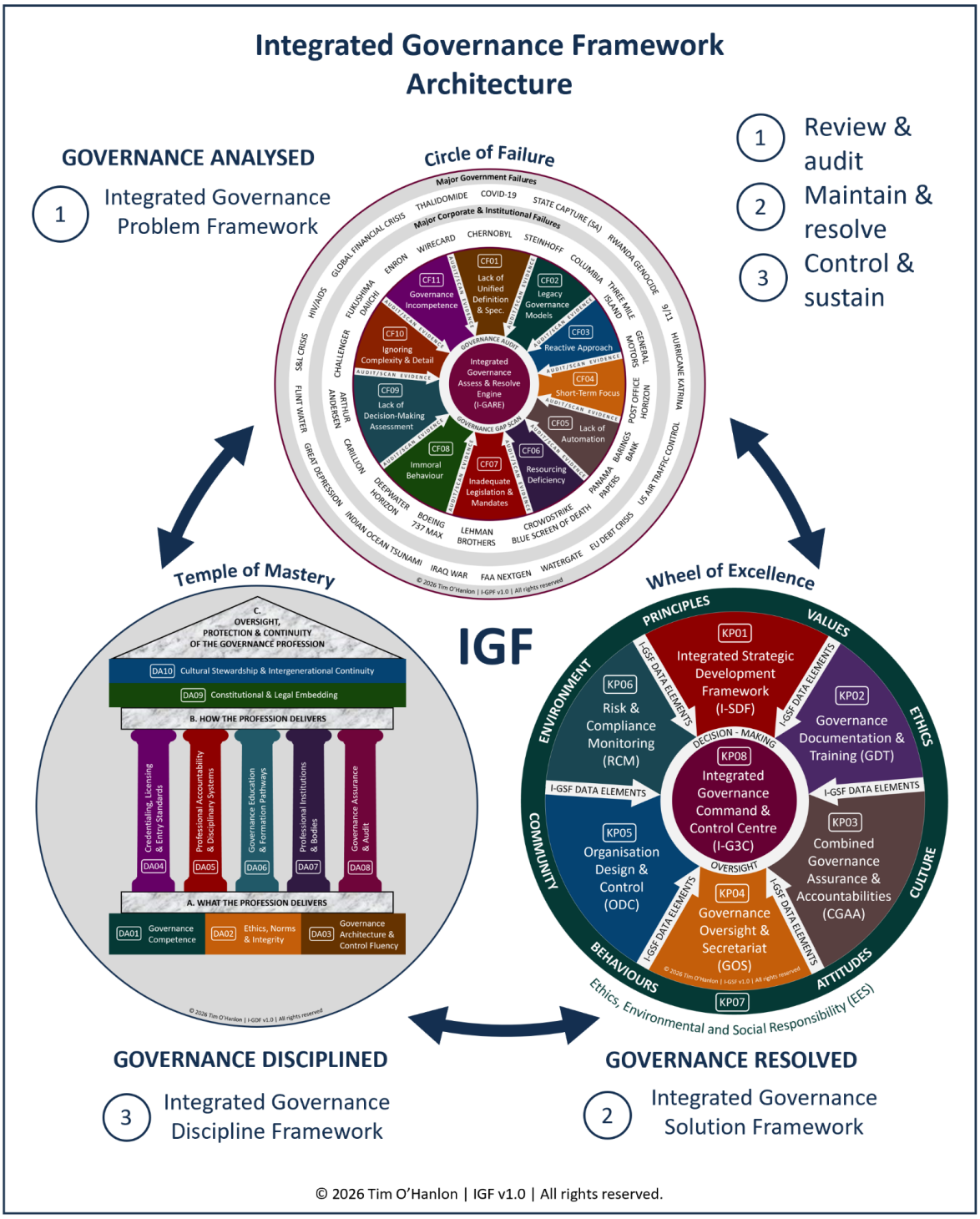
The IGF provides the defining architecture proposed for governance requirements; the statutory profession establishes binding requirements for those exercising governing authority; and independent professional governance audit provides continuing assurance against those requirements, with enforceable consequences where standards are not met. This is a governance issue extending well beyond AI.

THE INTEGRATED GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

The Integrated Governance Framework (IGF) represents the consolidation of decades of practical governance experience and more than ten years of detailed analysis, development and specification. A fundamental finding of this work is that governance lacks a comprehensive and consistently defined architecture against which governing arrangements, competence, conduct and performance can be established, assessed and independently assured.

The international aviation sector demonstrates why such a foundation matters. Through the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), countries operate within a common framework of

internationally agreed safety standards, national implementation and regulatory oversight, supported by systematic international audits of each state's safety oversight capabilities. Sovereign responsibility is preserved, but the standards against which safety is assessed are not left entirely to individual national interpretation. Where failures can have catastrophic consequences, clearly defined requirements, demonstrable competence and independent assurance are fundamental safeguards. Governance warrants the same rigour – enter the Integrated Governance Framework (IGF) shown below.



The IGF has been developed to provide that foundation through three interconnected frameworks:

Governance Analysed — identifying and diagnosing the systemic faultlines and failure points responsible for recurring governance failures.

Governance Resolved — specifying the seven Keystone Pillars and their supporting Success Anchors, integrating strategy, documentation and training, combined assurance and accountability, oversight, organisational design and control, risk and compliance, and ethics into effective and sustainable governance arrangements.

Governance Disciplined — establishing the discipline and professional architecture required of those entrusted with final governing authority, including independent assurance of their competence, conduct and performance.

Together, these provide an integrated basis for understanding why governance fails, defining what effective governance requires, and establishing the professional standards and accountability necessary to sustain it. The IGF architecture, its Level 1 and Level 2 components, and the published definitions of the IGF and its Level 1 components are available for examination at www.tosmsgroup.co.uk.

The IGF is proposed as the substantive foundation of the internationally recognised governing profession. Its requirements would be subject to rigorous professional examination, institutional agreement, continuing research and periodic review. It would be maintained and updated as governing knowledge, institutional experience and the consequences of emerging technologies evolve.

INTERNATIONAL PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS WITH SOVEREIGN NATIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

The proposed statutory governance profession requires an international institutional architecture through which participating nations can establish and maintain the common professional discipline.

A representative international body, supported by appropriate independent professional, academic and institutional expertise, would oversee the development and continuing maintenance of the agreed requirements, with the IGF at their centre. Its responsibilities would include professional standard-setting, evaluation of implementation, international learning, independent scrutiny and the periodic review of the governing discipline itself.

National sovereignty is a fundamental principle of this proposal.

Each sovereign nation would determine the constitutional, legislative and regulatory route that it considers most appropriate for giving effect to the internationally agreed professional requirements within its own jurisdiction. The legal traditions, constitutional institutions, democratic arrangements and established responsibilities of each participating nation would be respected.

The common international discipline would establish the professional requirements and outcomes that participating nations undertake to achieve. Their domestic legal and institutional arrangements would determine how those requirements are implemented, independently assured and enforced.

The international institution would assess whether national implementation genuinely fulfils the agreed professional standards rather than merely recording declarations of compliance. It would not replace elected governments, national courts or constitutionally authorised regulatory bodies.

The objective is an internationally coherent professional governing discipline, implemented through sovereign national authority and supported by independent international examination of its effectiveness.

THREE QUESTIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL CONSIDERATION

This leads to three questions that I believe the emerging AI-governance architecture now needs to confront.

First, given what the historical record tells us about repeated failures by governing-body members exercising consequential authority, can we afford to construct another international governance regime without establishing a comprehensive professional discipline that defines what the knowledge, experience, competence, conduct and continuing fitness should be, and how the individual members and governing bodies collectively should be independently examined and assured? Does this constitute a material gap in current AI-governance thinking?

Second, could a representative international governance institution establish and maintain an internationally agreed professional governance discipline, with the IGF as its substantive foundation, while each sovereign nation determines its own appropriate constitutional, legislative and regulatory implementation pathway – and what authority and independent assessment arrangements would be necessary to establish whether participating nations are genuinely fulfilling the agreed professional requirements?

There are precedents in other domains for retaining national sovereignty while creating international expectations that have practical consequences. International civil aviation is one example. ICAO assesses whether states have effective safety-oversight systems, including qualified personnel, licensing and certification arrangements, continuing surveillance and mechanisms for correcting serious deficiencies. Its framework is therefore concerned not simply with technical rules, but with whether participating states possess the institutional capability required to oversee aviation safely.

The Financial Action Task Force provides a different precedent. Jurisdictions are subject to mutual evaluation and follow-up, and those with significant strategic deficiencies can be placed under increased monitoring with agreed corrective action plans and continuing international scrutiny.

I cite these not as models for a governance profession, but as evidence that international arrangements can require demonstrable capability, subject it to independent scrutiny and attach practical consequences to serious deficiencies without displacing national sovereignty.

The relevant question is whether we can establish an equally consequential international arrangement for governing competence, professional accountability and the independently verified implementation of agreed governing requirements.

Third, are we defining the AI-governance problem too narrowly if attention remains concentrated on AI technologies, frontier AI developers and their leaders? Consequential AI decisions will also be taken by governing-body members across governments, international and state institutions, and public and private corporations. Should the emerging international debate therefore address not only the governance of AI systems and their developers, but the professional competence, conduct, continuing fitness and performance of all those governing-body members who exercise consequential authority over AI?

This matters particularly where decisions must be sustained across electoral cycles, involve major public expenditure, infrastructure, energy and supply-chain commitments, or create consequences extending across societies, jurisdictions and generations.

This is the missing professional layer within the emerging international AI-governance architecture. The underlying problem is not confined to AI: it concerns the suitability and accountability of those exercising governing authority across governments, international and state institutions, and public and private corporations.

AN INVITATION FOR INTERNATIONAL CONSIDERATION

This public proposition is offered for examination by the international AI, policy, academic and governance communities, and by those developing the agendas for the major UN and Geneva AI discussions in 2027.

I welcome informed perspectives, institutional dialogue, introductions and support from those who see merit in establishing an internationally recognised statutory governance profession, founded upon the IGF, supported by sovereign national implementation and independently assured through comprehensive professional governance audit.

My immediate objective is to secure an opportunity to present this proposition personally to influential international stakeholders, so that its foundations, practical implications and institutional implementation can be examined and considered as part of the emerging AI-governance arrangements.

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