

***UNDERSTANDING GOVERNANCE: ten years on***

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## **A personal introduction**

The study of political institutions is central to political science. With political theory, it forms the twin pillars of the discipline (see for example, Rhodes et al 2006). For those students of political science who specialise in Public Administration the link to organization studies is even closer. For the young Turks of the 1970s, organizational studies and policy analysis were at the cutting edge of our subfield (see Rhodes 1979). My heroes as a postgraduate and novice were Michel Crozier, Philip Selznick, Herbert Simon and, a choice that is a tad more eccentric, Sir Geoffrey Vickers. In my first job at the Institute of Local Government Studies of the University of Birmingham in the 1970s, contingency theory was flavour of the month and Bob Hinings was the guru (see Ranson et al 1980). The study of organizations was central to my academic discipline and an integral part of my early career development. The invitation to contribute to the 'Peripheral Vision' section of *Organization Studies* could have induced, therefore, a nostalgic frame of mind. However, any suggestion that the links between political science and organizational studies lie only in history would be misleading (see for example, March and Olsen 2006; Olsen 2005).

My story starts with *Understanding Governance* in 1997, which drew together my long-standing research interests in policy networks and British government (Rhodes 1988; Marsh and Rhodes 1992). However, in drawing this work together I also had to reassess my earlier arguments because the 1980s saw Margaret Thatcher tearing up the post-war consensus on the Keynesian welfare state (see among many accounts Kavanagh 1990). My original account of policy networks was based on research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council

between 1979 and 1985. By the 1990s, much had changed. I asked what had changed, and why, in central government, in local government, and in our relations with the European Union (EU). I explored the implications of these changes not only for the theory of policy networks but also for how we studied British government. The study of networks mutated into the study of governance and positivism gave way to an interpretive stance.

The first section of this article provides a summary of where we are now in the study of governance by summarising the key concepts. I show how the analysis of networks and governance was influenced by organizational studies. The second section engages with my critics. I do not try to rebut every criticism. My aim is to open new directions of research. So, I concentrate on the key issues of: the context of policy networks, explaining change and the role of ideas, the decline of the state, rescuing the core executive, and steering networks. Under each heading, I offer an answer to the question, ‘where we go from here?’ I build on my discussion of a postmodern public administration in the final chapter of *Understanding Governance*, and sketch a decentred approach to the study of governance. Finally, I restate the case for focusing on governance. I argue that my suggestions for future research, with their focus on beliefs, practices, traditions and dilemmas, converge with the ‘interpretive turn’ in organizational studies.

### **The story so far**

I cannot assume readers of this journal will be familiar with debates in political science. As a first step, therefore, I introduce the core ideas in *Understanding Governance*: policy networks, governance, core executive, and hollowing-out.

### Policy Networks

As used in the analysis of British government, the term policy network refers to sets of formal and informal institutional linkages between governmental and other actors structured around shared interests in public policymaking and implementation. These institutions are interdependent. Policies emerge from the bargaining between the networks' members (and for a comprehensive review see Rhodes 2006). The other actors commonly include the professions, trade unions and big business. Central departments need their co-operation because British government rarely delivers services itself. It uses other bodies. Also, there are too many groups to consult so government must aggregate interests. It needs the 'legitimated' spokespeople for that policy area. The groups need the money and legislative authority that only government can provide.

The phrase 'sets of institutional linkages' should be the give-away for readers of this journal. The roots of the idea of policy networks lie not only in the political science literature on intergovernmental relations (see Rhodes 1981: chapter 4 and citations), but also in the interorganizational analysis literature. My main influences were Kenneth Benson (1975), Michel Crozier and Jean-Claude Thoenig (1976) and James Thompson (1967). To this day, exchange theory lies at the heart of policy network theory. Thus, 'an organization has power, relative to an

element of its task environment, to the extent that the organization has the capacity to satisfy needs of that element and to the extent that the organization monopolises that capacity' (Thompson 1967: 30-31). Rhodes (1981; 1988; 1999) elaborates this idea arguing that any organization is dependent upon other organizations for resources. In order to achieve their goals, the organizations have to exchange resources. The organization's dominant coalition employs strategies within known rules of the game to regulate this exchange relationship (paraphrased from Rhodes 1981: 98-9; 1999: 78-9).

Policy networks are a long-standing feature of British government. They have developed consensuses about what they are doing that serve the aims of all involved. They have evolved routine ways of deciding. They form a private government of public services, scathingly referred to by the New Right as producer groups capturing government for their own sectional interests.

The government of Margaret Thatcher sought to reduce their power by using markets to deliver public services, bypassing existing networks and curtailing the 'privileges' of professions, commonly by subjecting them to rigorous financial and management controls. But these corporate management and marketization reforms had unintended consequences. They fragmented the systems for delivering public services and created pressures for organizations to co-operate with one another to deliver services. In other words, and paradoxically, marketization multiplied the networks it was supposed to replace. Commonly, welfare state services are now delivered by packages of organizations. One answer to the question of what is new in British government is the

spread of networks. Fragmentation not only created new networks, but also increased the membership of existing networks, incorporating both the private and voluntary sectors. The government swapped direct for indirect controls and central departments are no longer either necessarily or invariably the fulcrum of a network. The government can set the limits to network actions. It still largely funds the services. But it has also increased its dependence on multifarious networks. Devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland simply adds a further layer of complexity that will fuel territorial networks.

If networks are the defining characteristic of governance, how do they differ from such more widely understood notions as markets and bureaucracies? If contracts are characterised by prices and competition and bureaucracies by authority and rules, then networks are characterised by trust and diplomacy (and for a more detailed discussion see Rhodes 1998). Shared values and norms are the glue which holds the complex set of relationships together; trust is essential for co-operative behaviour and, therefore, the existence of the network. As a working axiom, networks are high on trust, while contracts are low on trust. With the spread of networks there has been a recurrent tension between contracts on the one hand, with their stress on competition to get the best price, and networks on the other, with their stress on co-operative behaviour.

### Governance

In much present-day use, governance refers to: a *new* process of governing; or a *changed* condition of ordered rule; or the *new* method by which society is governed. Of course,

nothing in the social sciences is ever that simple. Kjær (2004) provides the best introduction. She distinguishes between governance in public administration and public policy, governance in international relations, European Union governance, governance in comparative politics, and good governance as extolled by the World Bank (see also Pierre 2000). And to be frank the several uses have little or nothing in common, leading Watson (2005: 170) to include it in his *Dictionary of Weasel Words, Contemporary Clichés, Cant & Management Jargon*. Like Humpty-Dumpty, I have to assert that ‘when I use a word it means what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less’ (Carroll 1965: 269).

Wearing my public administration and public policy spectacles, I use governance to refer to the changing boundaries between public, private and voluntary sectors. For many policy areas, these actors are interdependent, so decisions are a product of their game-like interactions, rooted in trust and regulated by rules of the game negotiated and agreed by the participants. Such networks have significant degree of autonomy from the state - they are self-organising - although the state can indirectly and imperfectly steer them (Rhodes 1997a: 53). In sum, governance refers to governing with and through networks; to network steering. For clarity’s sake, it is best if the word always has a qualifying adjective. Here, I talk of network governance. It is a scalpel or diagnostic tool for exploring the extent to which governments work with and through networks and networks are self-organising.

The term network governance has two faces. First, it describes public sector change whether it is the increased fragmentation caused by the reforms of the 1980s or the

joined-up governance of the 1990s, which sought to improve co-ordination between government departments and the multifarious other organizations. Second, it interprets British government; it says the hierarchic Westminster model of responsible government is no longer acceptable. We have to tell a different story of the shift from government with its narrative of the strong executive to governance through networks. The term always refers to the changing role of the state after the varied public sector reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. In the UK context, where there is no state tradition comparable to the continental tradition of *rechtsstaat*, the literature on governance explores how the informal authority of networks supplements and supplants the formal authority of government. It explores the limits to the state and seeks to develop a more diverse view of state authority and its exercise.

### Core executive

There is a conventional debate about the British executive that focuses on the relative power of the prime minister and cabinet (for examples see King 1985). Many have pointed to its limited nature (Rhodes 1995) but it continues to this day as commentators talk of Blair's presidentialism (see Bevir and Rhodes 2006: chapter 6). This mainstream analysis assumes the best way to look at the executive is to look at key positions and their incumbents. Instead of such a positional approach, the executive can be defined in functional terms. So, instead of asking which position is important, we can ask which functions define the innermost part or heart of British government? The core functions of the British executive are to pull together and integrate central government policies and to

act as final arbiters of conflicts between different elements of the government machine. These functions can be carried out by institutions other than prime minister and cabinet; for example, the Treasury and the Cabinet Office. By defining the core executive in functional terms, the key question becomes: 'who does what?' (Rhodes 1995)

There is a second strand to the argument for a focus on the core executive rather than prime minister and cabinet. The positional approach assumes that power lies with specific positions and the people who occupy those positions. But power is contingent and relational; that is, it depends on the relative power of other actors and, as Harold Macmillan succinctly put it, 'events, dear boy, events'. So, ministers depend on the prime minister for support in getting funds from the Treasury. In turn, the prime minister depends on ministers to deliver the party's electoral promises. Both ministers and the prime minister depend on the health of the American economy for a stable pound and a growing economy to ensure the needed financial resources are available. This power-dependence approach focuses on the distribution of such resources as money and authority in the core executive and explores the shifting patterns of dependence between the several actors (see Rhodes 1995; Smith 1999). Thus, Norton (2000: 116-7) argues, 'Ministers are like medieval barons in that they preside over their own, sometimes vast, policy territory'. Crucially, 'the ministers fight - or form alliances - with other barons in order to get what they want' and they resent interference in their territory by other barons and will fight to defend it'. So, the core executive is segmented into overlapping games in which all players have some resources with which to play the game and no one actor is pre-eminent in all games.

In sum, the term ‘core executive’ directs our attention to two key questions: ‘Who does what?’ and ‘Who has what resources?’ If the answer for several policy areas and several conflicts is the prime minister coordinates policy, resolves conflicts and controls the main resources, we will indeed have prime ministerial government. Alternatively, if power-dependence characterises the links between both barons and the barons and prime minister, then cabinet or ministerial government will be a better shorthand description.

### Hollowing out

The ‘hollowing out of the state’ means simply that the growth of governance reduced the ability of the core executive to act effectively, making it less reliant on a command operating code and more reliant on diplomacy. In what ways has the capacity of the British core executive been eroded? The state has been hollowed out from above (for example, by international interdependence); from below (by marketisation and networks); and sideways (by agencies and the several species of parastatal bodies).

While the British core executive was already characterised by baronies, policy networks and intermittent and selective co-ordination, now it has been further hollowed out by the unintended consequences of marketisation that fragmented service delivery, multiplied networks and diversified the membership of those networks (see Rhodes 1994; Weller et al. 1997). Devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland further constrained the

centre's command operating code. Externally, the state is also being hollowed out by membership of the EU, other international commitments and globalisation.

Few would consider the problems of steering a more complex, devolved government machine and, for example, being bypassed for constitutional, history-making decisions in the EU as evidence of the core executive's capacity to act effectively. It is important to distinguish between intervention and control. Indisputably the British centre intervenes often but its interventions do not have the intended effects and so cannot be considered as control.

What of the centre's diplomatic skills? 'Diplomacy' or management by negotiation is the hands-off alternative to hands-on management. Such skills are commonly associated with international relations, but they also lie at the heart of steering networks. As Ferlie and Pettigrew (1996: 88-89) found for the National Health Service (NHS), the web of interagency alliances prompt a shift to matrix management styles with chief executive officers increasingly concerned to build and uphold links and institutionalise strategic alliances.

In short, the task confronting British government is to manage packages; packages of services, of organizations and of governments. Such skills are not new. As Sir Douglas Wass said 'finesse and diplomacy are an essential ingredient in public service' (cited in Hennessy, 1989: 150). Such skills lie at the heart of steering interorganisational networks.

## Summary – the differentiated polity

The phrase ‘the differentiated polity’ is my preferred summary term for my account of British government, although it is also described as ‘the Anglo-Governance School’ (Marinetto 2003) and ‘the Governance narrative’ (Newman 2005: 8). The Westminster model of British government is best understood by exploring such core ideas as a unitary state, parliamentary sovereignty, strong cabinet government, ministerial accountability, majority party control of the executive, and institutionalised opposition (see Rhodes and Weller 2005). The differentiated polity narrative challenges the Westminster model’s account of British government. Its core ideas are policy networks, governance, the core executive, and hollowing out. It argues there has been a shift from government by a unitary state to governance through and by networks. Differentiation became more extensive in the 1980s and 1990s, which saw significant changes in the functional and territorial specialisation of British government. The arguments that networks have multiplied as an unintended consequence of marketization; that the degree of international interdependence is greater and that, as a result, the core executive’s capacity to steer is reduced or hollowed-out serve to reinforce the interpretation that centralisation and control are incomplete and Britain is best viewed as a differentiated polity - a disUnited Kingdom (Rhodes, Carmichael et al 2003).

## **Key criticisms and the way forward**

There are many criticisms of the differentiated polity and its core notions of policy networks and governance. I will not even try to reply to every criticism; much of the debate will seem unduly esoteric, even self-absorbed, to readers of this journal (see Rhodes 1997a: chapter 1; and 1999: chapter 6 for earlier replies). There are dead ends; for example, typologies of networks have become deeply uninteresting. There are long-running spats. For example, in the UK, there have been vigorous exchanges between proponents of rational choice and critical realists with their dialectical approach (see for example Dowding 1995 and 2001 versus Marsh and Smith 2000 and 2001). The two sides have irreconcilable differences of epistemology, theory and method. Since 1981, I have revised and reinterpreted my ideas on networks and earlier critical exchanges are no longer relevant let alone of interest. My emphasis falls, therefore, on where we go from here and I develop a decentred, actor-focused analysis of the games people play in networks. To do so, I structure my remarks around the criticisms that seem to me to have some force; namely, the context of policy networks, explaining change and the role of ideas, the decline of the state, rescuing the core executive, and steering networks. My aim is to open new directions of research into networks and governance.

### The context of policy networks

This set of criticisms focus on whether my approach places the analysis of networks in a broader socio-economic context (see for example, Kjær 2004: 204-5; Marsh, Richards and Smith 2003; and cf. Rhodes 1988: 48-77, 372-87 and figure 5.1). I take the general point that changes in networks and governance must be placed in a broader context and

latterly I have sought to do so through the analysis of both traditions and dilemmas. For ease of exposition, I focus on traditions here (see below pp. xx-xx on dilemmas).

A tradition is a set of understandings someone receives during socialization. A certain relationship should exist between beliefs and practices if they are to make up a tradition. First, the relevant beliefs and practices should have passed from generation to generation. Second, traditions should embody appropriate conceptual links. The beliefs and practices that one generation passes on to another should display minimal consistency. At the heart of the notion of tradition used in this article is the idea of agents using their reason to modify the beliefs they have inherited (see Bevir 1999: 174-220; Bevir and Rhodes 2003 and 2006).

This stress on the constructed nature of traditions should make us wary of essentialists who equate traditions with fixed essences to which they credit variations. For example, Greenleaf (1983, 15-20) describes the British political tradition as the dialectic between libertarianism and collectivism. But Greenleaf's categories of individualism and collectivism are too ahistorical. Although they come into being in the nineteenth century, after that they remain static. They act as fixed ideal types into which individual thinkers and texts are then forced. The idea of constructed traditions differs also from that of political scientists who associate the term with customary, unquestioned ways of behaving or with the entrenched folk-lore of premodern societies (see Oakeshott 1962: 123 and 128-9).

Governance broadly conceived explores the changing boundary between state and civil society and this notion exercises historians of twentieth century Britain. For example, Jose Harris (1999: 66-7) argues that one of the 'tacit understandings' about political community at the beginning of the twentieth century was 'a belief among politicians of all complexions that the relationship between government and society was essentially a limited one'. Civil society was 'the highest sphere of human existence', while the state was 'an institution of secondary importance'. The corporate life of society 'was expressed through voluntary associations and the local community'. Between the wars, they were sustained not just by professional civil servants, who favoured a return to more limited government, but also by the British public who 'resumed their Victorian habits of voluntary action and self-help'. However, the Second World War led Britain to develop 'a far more powerful centralised wartime state than any of her more metaphysical-minded, state-exalting continental enemies' (Harris 1999: 77 and 91). It also fuelled a reformist mood, which led to a 'profound break with some of the major conventions of the previous hundred years'. 'Promises, programmes and planning' became the new norm. Harris (1999: 96-7 and 113) concludes that we should not write the history of the twentieth century as a battle between collectivism and the free market because they 'advanced in tandem at the expense of other more traditional social arrangements such as philanthropy, the family and the local community'. In short, Harris provides a historical story of the spread of organizational networks tied to the state. These networks are common to both the days of centralised planning and giant corporations and the days of governmental minimalism and neo-liberal economics (see also Lowe and Rollings 2000).

In short, the history of governance during the twentieth century appears as a shifting balance between government and governance. It is through such an historical analysis of the shifting boundaries between state and civil society that I would seek to explore the context of network governance.

### Explaining change

The most common and recurrent criticism of policy network analysis is that it does not, and cannot, explain change (for a summary of the argument and many more citations see Richardson 2000). I agree that policy network analysis stresses how networks limit participation in the policy process; decide which issues will be included and excluded from the policy agenda; shape the behaviour of actors through the rules of the game; privilege certain interests; and substitute private government for public accountability. It is about stability, privilege and continuity. So, there is force to the argument that the policy networks literature in general pays too little attention to change and the role of ideas in change. My work with Mark Bevir seeks to develop a decentred analysis of British government that addresses this set of criticisms.

Decentred analysis produces detailed studies of people's beliefs and practices. It begins from the insight that to understand actions, practices and institutions, we need to grasp the relevant meanings, the beliefs and preferences of the people involved. As John Stuart Mill (1969 [1840]: 119-20) remarked:

By Bentham ... men have been led to ask themselves, in regard to any ancient or received opinion, Is it true? And by Coleridge, What is the meaning of it? The one took his stand outside the received opinion, and surveyed it as an entire stranger to it: the other looked at it from within, and endeavoured to see it with the eyes of a believer in it ... Bentham judged a proposition true or false as it accorded or not with the result of his own inquiries ... With Coleridge ... the very fact that any doctrine had been believed by thoughtful men, and received by whole nations or generations of mankind, was part of the problem to be solved, was one of the phenomena to be accounted for.

I ask, after Coleridge, 'what is the meaning of it', where 'it' is British governance. So, the approach denies we can read off people's beliefs from their institutional position or their social class. A decentred study of a tradition or an institution unpacks the ways in which it is created, sustained, and modified through the beliefs, preferences and actions of individuals in many arenas (and for a detailed exposition see Bevir and Rhodes 2003 and 2006). It encourages us to recognise that the actions of these individuals are not fixed by institutional norms or a logic of modernization, but, on the contrary, arise from the beliefs individuals adopt against the background of traditions and in response to dilemmas.

If historical analysis is the way to explore traditions and the context of networks, then ethnographic analysis is the way to explore the beliefs and practices of people. Policy network analysis should make greater use of such ethnographic tools as: studying individual behaviour in

everyday contexts; gathering data from many sources; adopting an 'unstructured' approach; focusing on one group or locale; and, in analysing the data, stressing the 'interpretation of the meanings and functions of human action' (paraphrased from Hammersley 1990: 1-2). The tool kit is varied. It is not limited to participant observation, although it is a defining method. It also encompasses textual analysis, historical archives, official documents, biographies, oral histories, recorded interviews, and informal conversations as well as statistical and survey techniques (Shore's 2000: 7-11). The task would be to write 'thick descriptions' or our 'constructions of other people's constructions of what they are up to' (Geertz 1973, 9, 20-21). We should focus on the social construction of policy networks through the ability of individuals to create meaning. Rhodes's (2003; 2005; 2007) ethnographic studies of British government provide several examples of decentred analysis (and for examples of organizational anthropology see Bate 1997; Linstead 1997; and Van Maanen 1998).

Decentred analysis places agency and meanings at the heart of network governance. It focuses on the diverse practices of governance, practices that are themselves composed of multiple individuals acting on changing webs of beliefs rooted in overlapping traditions. Patterns of governance arise as the contingent products of diverse actions and political struggles informed by the beliefs of agents as they arise in the context of traditions. This approach focuses on beliefs and ideas, on the games people play, and on the role of both in the explaining how the practices of network governance change.

The decline of the state

Pierre and Peters (2000, 78 and chapter 5) challenge the idea that there has been a decline of the state. They see a transformation rather than a weakening of the state (see also Jordan et al 2005; Kjær 2004; Newman 2005; Marsh, Richards and Smith 2003; Skelcher 2000; Taylor 2000; Walters 2004; and the earlier exchange between Rhodes 1997c and Saward 1997). I agree with Scharpf (1994: 38 and 40) that, although hierarchical coordination 'remains a relatively rare phenomenon', self coordination among units takes place in 'the shadow of hierarchy' because, for example, hierarchical structures 'define the context within which negotiations take place' (on which see Rhodes 1999: 114-6). However, the weight of criticism meant I had to reconsider my discussion of the changing role of the state

From a decentred standpoint, the account in Rhodes (1988) is unsatisfactory because it appeals to inexorable, impersonal forces such as the functional differentiation of the modern state or the marketization of the public sector to explain the shift from hierarchy to a new governance of markets and especially networks. In sharp contrast, a decentred approach rejects any essentialist definition of the state, arguing for a more diverse view of state authority and its exercise. All patterns of rule arise as the contingent products of diverse actions and political struggles informed by the varied beliefs of situated agents. So, the notion of a monolithic state in control of itself and civil society was always a myth. The myth obscured the reality of diverse state practices that escaped the control of the centre because they arose from the contingent beliefs and actions of diverse actors at the boundary of state and civil society. The state is never monolithic and it always negotiates with others. Policy always arises from interactions within networks of

organisations and individuals. Patterns of rule always traverse the public, private, and voluntary sectors. The boundaries between state and civil society are always blurred. Trans-national and international links and flows always disrupt national borders. In short, state authority is constantly being remade, negotiated, and contested in widely different ways within widely varying everyday practices.

A decentred approach appeals to the notions of traditions and dilemmas to explain changing conceptions of state and governance. Traditions explain how rule, power, order, norms arise and sustain patterns of governance within civil society. Dilemmas explain how people are able to bring about changes in beliefs, traditions, and practices (Bevir 1999: 221-264; Bevir and Rhodes 2003; and 2006). A dilemma arises for an individual or group when a new idea stands in opposition to existing beliefs or practices and so forces a reconsideration of the existing beliefs and associated tradition. Political scientists can explain change in traditions and practices, therefore, by referring to the relevant dilemmas. Traditions change as individuals make a series of variations to them in response to any number of specific dilemmas.

A decentred approach also highlights the importance of dilemmas for the study of governance. Any existing pattern of rule will have some failings. Different people will have different views about these failings because they are not given by experience but constructed from interpretations of experience infused with traditions. When people's perception of governance failure conflicts with their existing beliefs, the resulting

dilemmas push them to reconsider their beliefs and the traditions that inform those beliefs. Because people were socialised in diverse traditions, there arises a political contest over what are the failings and what should be done about them. Rival positions promote their particular sets of theories and policies. This contest leads to a reform of governance. So, any reform can be understood as a contingent product of a contest of meanings in action. Moreover, the new pattern of rule will display new failings, pose new dilemmas, and be the subject of more competing proposals for reform.

In Britain, the reforms of the New Right in the 1980s and New Labour in the 1990s orchestrated a shift from hierarchy to markets to networks (and on this shift worldwide see Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000). While this shift is widely recognised, a decentred approach suggests, crucially, that it takes many diverse forms. For the police, the shift from hierarchy to markets to networks poses specific dilemmas: they know how to rewrite the rulebook, manage a contract or work with neighbourhood watch but they struggle to reconcile these ways of working, believing they conflict and undermine one another (Fleming and Rhodes 2005). For doctors, the equivalent shift poses different dilemmas: the key issue is how to preserve the medical model of health and medical autonomy from managerial reforms that stress hierarchy and financial control (Hardy and Rhodes 2003).

So, decentred theory challenges the idea that inexorable, impersonal forces are driving a shift from government to governance. Instead, patterns of rule arise as the contingent

products of diverse actions and political struggles informed by the beliefs of agents as they arise in the context of traditions and confront dilemmas that are understood differently in contending traditions.

### Centralisation and the core executive

Several commentators reject the differentiated polity's contention that the core executive is subject to many constraints, argue it remains strong, and claim the prime minister is now analogous to a president. As one example among many, Poguntke and Webb (2005: 5 and 7) argue presidentialization has three faces: the executive face, the party face, and the electoral face. Presidentialism occurs when there is a shift of 'political power resources and autonomy to the benefit of individual leaders' along each face and 'a concomitant loss of power and autonomy of collective actors like cabinets'. They argue these various shifts 'generate a greater potential for, and likelihood of, this "presidential" working-mode' irrespective of regime (Poguntke and Webb 2005: 347). In other words, not just in Britain but in parliamentary governments world-wide, power is increasingly centralised on the core executive, which has grown bigger, coordinates the other central networks, and intervenes both regularly and effectively across policy sectors.

The empirical evidence supporting such claims is inconclusive at best (see Bevir and Rhodes 2006: chapter 6 for a survey of the evidence, commentary and citations). However, a decentred approach would not focus on the search for law-like generalisations about presidentialism but on the rise and fall of prime ministers; on the contingent relationships in

the core executive. Elgie (1997) suggests we use the several models of core executive politics to analyse prime ministerial and semi-presidential systems. For example, he suggests relationships can vary from monocratic government with personal leadership by prime minister or president to collective government by small, face-to-face groups with no single member controlling; from segmented government with a sectoral division of labour among executive actors with little or no cross-sectoral coordination to shared government in which two or three individuals have joint and equal responsibility for policy making. The advantage of this formulation is that it gets away from assertions about the fixed nature of executive politics. While only one pattern may operate at any one time, there can still be a fluid pattern as one succeeds another. It also concentrates the mind on the questions of which pattern of executive politics prevails, when, how, and why did it change. Focusing on the power of prime minister and cabinet is limiting whereas these questions open the possibility of explaining similarities and differences in executive politics (Elgie 1997, 231 and citations). However, for this focus on the politics of the core executive - on 'court politics' - to be consistent with a decentred approach, with its stress on the beliefs and practices of individuals, we need a political anthropology of the executive's court politics. We need to observe prime ministers, ministers and cabinets 'in action'.

The obvious objection is that the secrecy surrounding court politics limits the opportunities for such work. The point has force, but we must not succumb to the rule of anticipated reactions and just assume access will be denied. We must seek access, and persist. After all, as Rawnsley (2001: xi) observes, 'they have to tell an outsider because they are so worried about whether it makes sense or, indeed, whether they make sense'.

There are examples of outsiders gaining good access whether biographers (Seldon 2004), journalists (Peston 2005, Rawnsley 2001), or academics (Shore 2000). Biographers probe the reasons. Journalists with their exposé tradition probe actions to show ‘all is not as it seems’. Each has their explanations of the changes in the court politics of executive government. Both observe people in action. If we want to know this world, then we must tell stories that enable listeners to see executive governance afresh. A political anthropology of the executive’s court politics may be a daunting prospect but it behoves us to try.

### Steering networks

The instrumental or steering view of networks sees them as both a structure to be managed and a tool of greater central control (see for example Kickert et al 1997; Koppenjan and Klijn 2004; Perri 6 et al 2002; Rhodes 1997b; Skelcher 2000; Stoker 2004). It is the mainstream view (see, for example, the calls for evidence-based policy making and for joined-up government in Cabinet Office 2000 and 2001). This work treats government departments, local authorities, markets and networks as fixed structures that governments can manipulate using the right tools (and for a survey of such tools see Salamon 2002). It seeks to improve the ability of the state to manage the mix of hierarchies, markets and networks that have flourished since the 1980s.

A decentred view of such steering raises two problems. First, local networks cease to be local networks when they are centrally manipulated or directed. In effect, when networks

are centrally managed, horizontal relationships are transformed into vertical relationships. Such relationships are better described as exercises in official consultation; at least this phrase does not imply any local discretion. But the effect is that central management of local networks threatens their autonomy, distinctiveness and effectiveness. This threat arises because any pattern of governance is a product of diverse practices that are themselves composed of multiple individuals acting on all sorts of conflicting beliefs which they have reached against the background of many traditions and in response to varied dilemmas. So, a decentred approach sees network governance arising from the bottom-up (see for example Bang and Sørensen 1999) and implies that central intervention will undermine the bottom-up construction of governance.

Second, this bottom-up strand in decentred analysis has normative implications. The theory of republican democracy argues for ‘the ideal of many semi-autonomous powers recursively checking one another rather than a few autonomous branches of governance’. So, ‘it is better to have many unclear separations of public and private powers than a few clear ones’ (Braithwaite 1997: 312). If local ownership and a degree of independence from central government are defining characteristics of network governance, then multi-level governance with its many policy networks approximates to ‘many unclear separations of public and private powers’. Central interventions blurs this separation of public and private.

A decentred approach also undercuts the idea of network steering as a set of tools by which we can manage governance. If governance is constructed differently, contingently,

and continuously, we cannot have a tool kit for managing it. This line of reasoning challenges the idea of expertise as a basis for policy making. An interpretive approach encourages us to give up management techniques and strategies for a practice of learning by telling stories and listening to them. While statistics, models and claims to expertise all have a place within such stories, we should not become too preoccupied with them. On the contrary, we should recognize that they too are narratives about how people have acted or will react given their beliefs and desires. No matter what rigour or expertise we bring to bear, all we can do is tell a story and judge what the future might bring.

Decentred narratives offer a different approach to policy advice. Instead of revealing policy consequences through insights into a social logic or law-like regularities, they enable policy makers to see things differently; they exhibit new connections within governance and new aspects of governance. In short, a decentred approach treats policy advice as stories that enable listeners to see governance afresh. There is now a growing literature on this 'interpretive turn' in policy analysis and public administration (see: Fischer 2003, Hajer and Wagenaar 2003, van Eeten et al. 1996, and Yanow 1999). This facet of the 'interpretive turn' is also well known to readers of *Organization Studies* through the work of, for example, Gareth Morgan (1993) and Karl Weick (1995).

Given that much of this argument about policy-advice is general, it is important to bring it down-to-earth. Most, if not all, policy advisers will accept that the art of storytelling is an integral part of their work. Such phrases as 'Have we got our story straight?', 'Are we

telling a consistent story?’ and ‘What is our story?’ abound. The basis for much advice is the collective memory of the department, its traditions. It is an organized, selective, retelling of the past to make sense of the present. Advisers explain past practice and events to justify recommendations for the future. In short, my stress on storytelling is not an example of academic whimsy. This approach overlaps with the everyday practice of advisers.

### **Whither governance**

In conclusion, I make some concessions, restate the case for the differentiated polity, summarise the decentred approach, and point to the convergence between political science and organizational studies.

I concede three points. First, when trying to repair a gap in the map of British government, there is always the danger of appearing one-sided. I seek to counter the dominant view of British government which stresses Britain as a unitary state with a strong executive. That latter argument has been put so often by so many that it needs no restatement by me. I do not dispute the British executive can act decisively. Obviously, the centre co-ordinates and implements policies as intended at least some of the time. But defenders of the Westminster model attach too little importance to the sour laws of unintended consequences. Governments fail because they are locked into power-dependent relations and because they must work with and through complex networks of actors and organisations. To adopt a command operating code builds failure into the

design of the policy. Such centralisation will be confounded by fragmentation and interdependence which, in turn, will prompt further bouts of centralisation.

Second, I plead guilty to using rhetorical devices. But I still like phrases such as ‘from government to governance’, ‘the hollowing out of the state’, ‘the sour laws of unintended consequences’ and ‘the differentiated polity’. I prefer to state arguments baldly, and then qualify them. I think my rhetorical devices are transparent and further my aim of provoking new ways of seeing British government.

Third, one colleague asked, ‘why should the rest of us, who do not live in this tiny country across the Channel, pay any attention to your grand narrative of governance?’ He is correct. *Understanding Governance* is too parochial. And because I have taken this book as my starting point, I compound the original fault. It is crucial to show that my toolkit can travel and illuminate governance practices in other countries. That journey has begun (see Bevir et al 2003, Rhodes et al 2007; Rhodes and Weller 2001; and Weller et al 1997).

The differentiated polity identifies important empirical gaps in the Westminster model and key changes in British government. It opens new avenues of exploration on key issues confronting policy-making and policy-implementation in the 1980s and 1990s, including: the sectoral character of policy-making; the mix of governing structures; the philosopher’s stone of central coordination; devolution to the constituent territories of the UK; and the relentless rise of intergovernmental diplomacy. The differentiated polity

narrative is best seen as a corrective to the traditional Westminster model. I use it to develop a new way of seeing state authority in its relationship to civil society.

This narrative is not just a story that academics tell to one another. It is hard to draw a clear-cut distinction between academic commentators and elite actors. Tivey (1988: 3) uses 'the image' to denote 'a set of assumptions about "the system" ... and how it works'. Some images 'have gained currency among those who study politics, and diluted and distorted they have reached the practitioners' (Tivey, 1988: 1). That is the case for network governance, so elite actors talk of holistic governance and of joined-up government (see Cm 4310 1999).

This journey to find 'new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking about' British government (Rorty 1980: 360) has no end. My story of network governance continues. Marinetto (2003: 605) concludes that the Anglo-Governance School has 'to undergo an intellectual crisis wrought by the growing weight of criticism' and the extent to which this 'critical response is underway, albeit gradually' will become clear over the next few years. I too expect to see 'alternative ways of conceptualising the institutions, actors and processes of change in government'. I have argued decentred theory is that new way.

A decentred account of differentiated polity represents a shift of *topos* from institutions to *meanings* in action. It explains shifting patterns of governance by focusing on the actors' own interpretations of their *beliefs and practices*. The everyday practices arise from

agents whose beliefs and actions are informed by *traditions* and expressed in stories. It explores the diverse ways in which situated agents are changing the boundaries of state and civil society by constantly remaking practices as their beliefs change in response to *dilemmas*. It reveals the *contingency* and contestability of narratives. It highlights a more diverse view of state authority and its exercise (and on the debate about decentred theory see Bevir and Rhodes 2006: chapter 3; Finlayson et al 2004; McAnulla 2006; and Hay 2002).

If the language of the differentiated polity is unfamiliar to readers of *Organization Studies*, then the decentred approach should be all too familiar. The interpretive or constructivist turn and qualitative methods have long featured in its pages. But the approach is a fringe preoccupation in British political science. The British Academy's study of the British contribution to political science in the twentieth century (Hayward et al 1999) illustrates the point. In a text of 511 pages, anti-foundational approaches in their multifarious guises are conspicuous only by their absence. The index has a mere three passing comments on postmodernism. There can be no defence that the book is about British political science because there many entries for American political science. In short, the mainstream writes the interpretive turn out of its story of British political science.

In anthropology, Inglis (2000: 112) opines that the work of such Anglo-Saxon philosophers as Charles Taylor, Peter Winch and Alasdair MacIntyre – to whom I would add Richard Bernstein and Richard Rorty – means that using the methods of the natural

sciences in the human sciences is 'comically improper'. Political scientists remain improper. We are rarely funny and the mainstream prevails (Bevir and Rhodes 2007). Organization studies are a buzzing, blooming confusion of ideas, approaches, even disciplines. The 'interpretive turn' in political science, whether decentred theory or some other variant, and the growth of interest in ethnographic methods, intersect with the research interests of students of organizations. We always studied political institutions. Now we study them in like manner. The spread of interest in the human sciences, as distinct from the social sciences, provides common ground. The horizons of British political science broaden, though slowly.

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