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## **THE DIFFERENTIATED POLITY AS NARRATIVE**

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There are two ways of replying to David Marsh's comments. We can rebut inaccurate or misleading claims, but that approach will close debate. We prefer to search for ways to open debate. We refer to our analysis of governance as a narrative or story, not a model. David Marsh's response to our work gives us an opportunity to explain why and move the discussion on. However, before doing so, just in case anyone assumes that this approach implies any agreement with Marsh's strictures, we must note several inaccurate and misleading claims.

First, of course 'there is a real world "out there"' but our anti-foundational epistemology (despite the claim in Furlong and Marsh 2007) argues our world is not independent of our beliefs and folk theories. Second, we have never said critical realism was positivist. Third, we devote much space to analysing traditions and are incredulous of the claim that we 'downplay' stability. Our continuing focus is the interplay between traditions, dilemmas and agency. Fourth, we use the metaphor of the 'oligopoly of the political market place', to describe the differentiated polity (most recently in Bevir and Rhodes 2006: 75 but see also Rhodes 1997a: 9). We are staggered any reader could treat oligopoly and pluralism as synonyms. Fourth, we have admitted repeatedly that hierarchy is important but prefer to explore its limits using the phrase 'it's the mix that matters' to refer to the interaction between markets, hierarchy and networks (see Rhodes 1986, 1997b and 2007). Fifth, we have not explored structured inequalities in Britain only because we had a different research question. Moreover, we noted often that policy networks privilege some interest, exclude others and are a form of 'private government' (see Rhodes 1997a: 9-10). Finally, we regret that Marsh believes we do not take him seriously. We try to engage our critics constructively whenever we have the opportunity.

## **On Decentring**

Marsh is right to point to a link between our interpretive approach and our accounts of Britain as a differentiated polity. But he does not get the link right. Many political scientists accept the differentiated polity model – or, more generally, the governance story – while rejecting our interpretive approach. So we need to ask: what difference does our interpretive approach make to the governance story? Our interpretive approach has prompted us to decentre governance and to recentre it using aggregate concepts such as ‘tradition’. To decentre is to unpack a practice into the disparate beliefs of the relevant actors. It is to recognise diverse narratives inform the practice of governance. To recentre using our concepts of ‘tradition’ and ‘dilemma’ is to accept political scientists can tell different narratives about governance depending on what they hope to explain. It is to accept that we can only tell particular stories from particular perspectives; we cannot identify a uniquely accurate model.

Our account of governance (and the differentiated polity) differs from others in that it combines decentring with the aggregate concepts of tradition and dilemma. Marsh recognises that we want to decentre but he does not allow that our aggregate concepts are pragmatic ones. He assumes we are offering a model of British government rather than a series of stories about it. In reply, we want to emphasise that our aggregate concepts are pragmatic, reflect on power and resistance, and reconsider the differences Marsh posits between the differentiated polity and the asymmetric power model.

## **On Tradition**

We will pass quickly over the relationship of postfoundational interpretivism to critical realism. As we have recently argued elsewhere, the concept of ‘structure’ is unhelpfully vague (Bevir 2007a; Bevir and Rhodes 2006b; Bevir and Rhodes 2007). Typically it is used to pick out natural kinds with essences that explain their causal properties. We believe, in contrast, that aggregate concepts in the human sciences are fuzzy ones. They can be justified only pragmatically by reference to our purposes in using them.

So, we reject reified and essentialist analyses of traditions as natural entities (with core features) waiting to be discovered by political scientists (Bevir 1999: 174-220; Bevir and Rhodes 2003: 33-35). We argue instead that political scientists should define traditions pragmatically depending on what they want to explain. Tradition is not an unavoidable influence on all we do: to assume that would leave too slight a role for agency. Rather, tradition is a first influence on people that colours their later actions only if their agency has not led them to change it.

Our pragmatic analysis of tradition implies political scientists can locate an individual in various traditions depending on what questions they ask. So, from our perspective, Marsh’s contrast between a dominant tradition and several competing traditions is a false one. Our pragmatic analysis of tradition implies it is fine to appeal to all kinds of traditions at all kinds of levels. If political scientists want to explain broad shared beliefs and actions across British politics compared with (say) other Westminster systems, they might appeal to a general British Political Tradition. If they want to explain conflicts and

differences within British politics, then their purpose would be better served by appealing to several competing traditions.

We do not rule out appeals to a dominant political tradition. We just argue that such appeals must be justified pragmatically. It is ironic that Marsh does not mention the close resemblance of his account of New Labour's constitutional reforms to our account. We see them as rooted in a tradition of liberal representative democracy that has dominated the Labour Party as well as British politics (Bevir 2005; Bevir 2007b).

### **Power and Resistance**

Our pragmatic concept of tradition suggests we can group people's beliefs and actions together as similar or pull them apart as different depending on our research interests. It leads us to adopt a distinct analysis of power. In our view, power and resistance alike are ubiquitous features of people interpreting and reinterpreting one another against inherited backgrounds that contain differences as well as similarities.

Given that power refers to the way the actions of others define what we can and cannot do, it appears throughout governance. Power appears wherever people interpret and respond to one another. Every actor is constrained by the ways in which others act.

Actors such as Blair, Brown, senior civil servants, doctors, local police officers, and everyday citizens all find their possibilities for action restricted by what others do. Our governance stories are studies of the ubiquity of power and resistance. They show how various actors restrict what others can do in ways that thwart the intentions of policy actors. They show how local actors – Whitehall bureaucrats, doctors, and police officers

– are able to draw on their different inheritances to resist policies inspired by the narratives of others in the policy chain.

Because Marsh privileges reified concepts and models, he appears to want a single uniform view of power in British government. In contrast, because we believe in pragmatic concepts and narratives, we offer diverse, overlapping accounts of power and resistance at multiple sites throughout British government.

If we focused on particular clusters of similarities and differences such as class, race and gender, it is possible we could write an account of British government like the asymmetric model. But the question would remain: why should we focus solely on that cluster of similarities and differences? We might choose to study different clusters of similarities and differences such as territory or bureaucracy and highlight different configurations of power. We might focus on the ways in which the similar Whiggish beliefs of many senior civil servants lead them to interpret government policies based on different beliefs in ways that tame and thwart them (Bevir and Rhodes 2003: 150-2). We might consider how the similar beliefs of police officers can lead them to reinterpret the ideals and practicality of community policing in ways that again thwart various policy initiatives (Bevir and Rhodes 2006a: 145-63).

### **Governance Stories**

Awareness of the equal ubiquity of power and resistance informs our rethinking of the differentiated polity (see also Rhodes 2007). This rethinking of the differentiated polity places it in a different relationship to the asymmetric power model from that described by Marsh. We need not reject the asymmetric power model for the differentiated polity

model. Instead, we might accept the asymmetric power model as a reasonable narrative at a specific level of abstraction depending on what the narrator seeks to explain. But then we would decentre the asymmetric power model. We would treat it as a reification to be unpacked into the contingent beliefs and actions of diverse actors. By so doing, we would open the possibility of other equally reasonable narratives couched at other levels of abstraction or designed to explain other features of British government.

To illustrate the point, we decentre the account of the British executive in the asymmetric power model (and for other examples see Fawcett and Rhodes 2007; and Rhodes 2007). Marsh claims British state is characterised by ‘strong government’ and a ‘strong if segmented executive’ (see Marsh 2007, Table 1). Elsewhere Marsh and his colleagues (2003: 323) make the argument less trenchantly. They accept the storyline of the differentiated polity narrative that the core executive is not a unified but segmented and characterised by exchange relationships, and they also note the constraints on the prime ministers. However, they argue actors in the core executive do not have equal resources so relationships are asymmetric and ‘power continues to be concentrated within the core executive and the majority of policy decisions are made at departmental level’.

This analysis of the distribution of power within the core executive is confusing. First, most definitions of the core executive do not include departments. So, to concede the majority of policy decisions are made in departments is to agree with the differentiated polity storyline about baronial politics as a major constraint on a dominant prime minister. Second, the argument about asymmetric relationships within the core executive resurrects the old argument about the power of the prime minister. All of Marsh’s examples are about the unilateral exercise of power by former prime ministers. The



Treasury is seen as only intermittently powerful because 'its role appears to have changed significantly over recent times' (Marsh et al 2003: 322). There is no mention of Gordon Brown as Chancellor of Exchequer, as 'a great crag standing in the way of a thoroughly monocratic government' (Hennessy, 2002: 21). In effect, 'Brown conceived of the new government as a dual monarchy, each with its own court' (Rawnsley, 2001: 20). The duopoly was, 'not interested in submerging their differences in outlook, but in making an exhibition of them' (Naughtie, 2002, p. 352) with Brown as 'the official opposition to Blair within the very heart of the Cabinet' for long periods (Peston, 2005: 13 also 353).

The argument about distribution of power between the core executive and other actors beyond Westminster and Whitehall has been rehearsed so often by so many that it needs no restatement. In *Governance Stories*, we seek to counter this dominant view of British government. We 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 the asymmetric power model attaches too little importance to the sour laws of unintended consequences. The differentiated polity narrative turns the coin over and focuses on the sour laws. It explains how the strong centralised government can be resisted and confounded.

There are three long-standing limits to central steering. First, the centre has rubber levers; pulling the central policy lever does not necessarily mean something happens at the bottom. Such frustrations lead to colourful language. So, for the Department of Health, instilling financial discipline in doctors is likened to 'herding cats'. Second, ministerial or baronial government persists. Power-dependence characterises the links between the several barons, and between the barons and the prime minister. It forms the fault line at

the heart of the machine. All prime ministers intervene. Few control and then only for some policies, some of the time. Finally, at the heart of this argument about a strong executive is the claim that the centre can coordinate effectively. But we know that central coordination is the 'philosopher's stone' of modern government, ever sought, but always just beyond reach because it assumes both agreement on goals and a central coordinator (Seidman 1975: 190). So, the evidence supporting the arguments about the power of the core executive thesis story is inconclusive at best (see Bevir and Rhodes 2006: chapter 6 for a survey of the evidence, commentary and citations and Rhodes 2007).

However, while the debate on whether the evidence supports the asymmetric power model is fun, it is not the main difference between our approach and that of Marsh and his colleagues. A decentred approach does not seek a general model of power in the core executive or the power of the prime minister. It offers narratives of the contingent relationships in the core executive.

Elgie (1997) helpfully suggests we use the several models (or narratives) 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). 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'. Beckett and Hencke (2004, chapter 14) offer an 'oestrogen-fuelled', '*Girl's Own*, comic book' view of life at the No. 10 court. We do not need to accept their or any one else's account of life at No. 10 to accept the observation that court politics are an important feature of the British executive.

We have said repeatedly that our approach aims to find 'new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking about' British government (Rorty 1980: 360). If we want to know this world, then we must tell stories that enable listeners to see executive governance afresh. A decentred approach with its political anthropology of court politics holds out that prospect. It is a daunting one but it behoves us to try.

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