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## INTERPRETING BRITISH GOVERNANCE

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Interpretive approaches begin 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, Bentham asked ‘Is it true?’ whereas Coleridge asked, ‘What is the meaning of it? For Coleridge ‘the very fact that any doctrine had been believed by thoughtful men, ... was part of the problem to be solved. We ask, after Coleridge, ‘what is the meaning of it’, where ‘it’ is British governance.

### **On Interpretation**

In Bevir and Rhodes (2003), we use a postfoundational epistemology and an interpretive approach to understand changes in British government. We critically assess the claim there has been a shift from government of a unitary state to governance in and by networks. We develop the argument that people can engage in a practice only because they hold certain beliefs or concepts. So, political scientists can explore that practice by unpacking the relevant beliefs and explaining why they arose. For example, when individuals vote for the Labour Party, they may do so believing Labour will promote redistributive policies that are socially desirable and from which they will benefit. When political scientists so interpret beliefs, they provide insights into the behaviour of particular individuals. They describe the particular sets of reasons that led the relevant individual to act.

An interpretive approach moves back and forth between aggregate concepts and the beliefs of particular individuals. The distinction between aggregate and individual analysis is artificial. Whether we focus on aggregates such as traditions or on the beliefs of individuals will depend on the questions we seek to answer. The choice will

depend on the topic to be studied. On the one hand, we argue individuals are not autonomous, so they necessarily come to hold the beliefs they do within a social context that influences them. To explain the beliefs of a particular individual, we have to appeal to an aggregate concept, such as tradition, that evokes this social context. On the other hand, we argue discourses, ideologies, or traditions have no existence apart from in the contingent beliefs of particular individuals. To appeal to a tradition is always explicitly or implicitly to make claims about the beliefs and actions of particular individuals.

In Bevir and Rhodes (2003), we concentrate on an aggregate analysis of British political traditions. One of the dangers of so working is that we can neglect the differences in the beliefs of the individuals lumped together in a tradition. Recognition of this danger prompts us to decentre aggregate concepts such as tradition. To decentre is to highlight the diversity of an aggregate concept by unpacking the actual and contingent beliefs and actions of those individuals who fall under it. So, within the British political tradition, we distinguish Tory, Whig, Liberal, and Socialist traditions. We could have gone on to analyse the beliefs of particular individuals. Yet we do not do so. Our aim is to trace the patterns of thought informing British governance, and to do so we concentrate on the broader traditions informing general changes in the practices of British government.

Our interpretive approach differs sharply from present-day practice in British political science. The Whiggish roots of British political science are weaker; the nineteenth century heritage exerts less influence. The attention given to pressure groups, elections and public policy analysis shows the vast influence of modernist empiricism and even a positivism more usually associated with American political science. The

interpretive approach relies on an alternative epistemology to this modernist empiricism. It represents a challenge to this dominant or mainstream tradition.

Our criticisms focus mainly on the modernist empiricism, and even positivism, that informs much political science (see Bevir 2001). Positivism and modernist empiricism – from now on referred to as ‘positivism’ – share a broadly similar epistemology.

They postulate given facts divorced from theoretical contexts as the basis of legitimate claims to knowledge. In contrast, we reject explicitly the idea of given truths whether based on pure reason or pure experience: all perceptions, and so ‘facts’, arise within the context of a prior set of beliefs or theoretical commitments. As a result, we typically look suspiciously on any claim to describe neutrally an external reality. We stress the constructed nature of our claims to knowledge (Rorty 1980). Adherents of a positivist epistemology study political actions and institutions as atomised units, which they examine individually before assembling them into larger sets. They assemble such units into larger sets by comparing and classifying their similarities and differences. In contrast, postfoundationalism stresses that webs of beliefs informed by traditions construct political actions and institutions.

Although we defend an interpretive approach by appealing to a postfoundational epistemology, there are other reasons for doing so. We are sympathetic to the historical and philosophical approach to British politics found in the work of Beer (1965) and Birch (1964). More generally, constructivist theories of the human sciences also suggest that interpretation is ineluctable in these disciplines. For example, Collingwood (1993: 10-11) argues that historians ask questions and then answer them with stories that make sense out of ‘facts’, which in their raw form make no sense at all. He summarises his position by saying,

‘history should be (a) ... an answering of questions; (b) concerned with human action in the past; (c) pursued by interpretation of evidence; and (d) for the sake of human self-knowledge.’

Again, Collingwood insists knowledge is 'created, not discovered, because evidence is not evidence until it makes something evident' (Collingwood 1965 p. 99 italics in original). This does not mean there are no 'facts', only that historians in part construct those facts. The human sciences are constructed and shaped by their concepts and theories. The resulting interpretations are always incomplete and always open to challenge. Such a view of the human sciences contrasts markedly with those commonly found in political science where the influence of models drawn from natural science is great (see for example, Kavanagh 1991).

### **On Governance**

Although our interpretive approach resembles those of Beer (1965) and Birch (1964), we deploy it to study governance and to highlight the limitations of the Westminster model (and on the persistence of the Westminster model see Smith 1999). The term ‘governance’ signals that important changes have and are taking place. There are, however, many different accounts of these changes, each of which gives different content to the concept of governance. Governance can refer to a new process of governing, a changed condition of ordered rule, or the new method by which society is governed (see Rhodes 2000). One colleague described it as a ‘weasel’ word - slippery and elusive, used to obscure, not to shed light. He has a point. However, as authors, we do not seek to dictate what words mean. We do not believe that our account should be privileged because, as political scientists, we have a means of deciding which

accounts are true, which are false. Rather, our interpretive approach prompts us to explore governance through beliefs, traditions and dilemmas. So, we decentre the British tradition into various constituent traditions – Tory, Whig, Liberal, and Socialist – showing how each of these understands governance differently. When we describe these beliefs, we retell their theories of governance. We analyse governance by unpacking its constituent ideas and locating them in traditions and dilemmas. In effect, we tell a story about other people's stories. Our story has three parts.

First, the starting point is the claim there has been a shift from government by a unitary state to governance by and through networks. After 1979, the boundary between state and civil society changed. It can be understood as a shift from hierarchies, or the bureaucracies of the welfare state, through the marketization reforms of the Conservative governments of Thatcher and Major to networks. This emphasis on networks contrasts markedly with accounts of British government rooted in the Westminster model.

Second, we use our postfoundational approach, with its notions of tradition and dilemma, to decentre this governance story; that is, we identify the several ways in which individuals construct governance. History and ethnography are the best tools for constructing our story of other people's constructions of what they are doing; that is, thick descriptions of individual beliefs and preferences.

Finally, we argue that governance has arisen out of contingent and contested narratives. We present four narratives of governance: intermediate institutions, networks of communities, reinventing the constitution, and joined-up government. The actions of individuals are informed by their beliefs in one or other of these

narratives. Contemporary British governance is an unintended effect of these actions and the competing narratives.

These stories are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Narratives of governance.

	<b>TRADITIONS</b>			
	<b>Tory</b>	<b>Liberal</b>	<b>Whig</b>	<b>Socialist</b>
<b>NARRATIVE OF GOVERNANCE</b>	Wrecked intermediate institutions.	Building networks of communities.	Return to the organic constitution.	Joining-up government.
<b>STORYLINE</b>	Preserving traditional authority.	Restoring markets and combating state overload.	Evolutionary change.	Redefining the bureaucratic state.

We give a brief example of how each tradition interprets governance.

Inspired by the Tory tradition, Gilmour (1992: 198-224) portrays Thatcher's reforms as a 'series of tactical battles' that wrecked Britain's intermediate institutions, such as the monarchy, the church, the civil service, the judiciary, the BBC, and local government. These 'barriers between state and citizen' were torn down, he argues, in the drive to create an enterprise culture and a free market state. Gilmour values the pluralism of intermediate institutions and wants to return to moderation in the exercise of power. The Conservative party encompasses the paternal statism of the High Tories and economic liberalism but during the 1980s and 1990s, the former has become a submerged tradition.

For Liberals, the key to effective governance lay in market competition and bureaucratic reform. In her own words, Margaret Thatcher (1993: 48) 'preferred disorderly resistance to decline rather than comfortable accommodation to it'. But



the Liberal zeal in refashioning the state was also married to the notion of community. Willetts (1992: 71) wants to claim the notion of an ‘overlapping network of communities’ as a core principle in the Liberal tradition. So, liberalism reconciles markets and community with the idea of ‘micro-conservatism’ or ‘the particular network of communities which gives each individual life meaning’. The role of the state is to sustain ‘a political order in which this multiplicity of communities can survive’ (p. 105). Micro-communities populate the boundary between state and civil society, an image with a close affinity to nineteenth century notions of governance as private collectivism.

The Whig tradition lauds the capacity of British political institutions to incorporate and moderate changes. Its response to public sector reform, to return to the example provided by Hennessy (1995), is ‘wherever possible’ to use ‘traditional and familiar institutions for new purposes’ and so to ‘go with the grain of Westminster and Whitehall and their traditions’. Empathy with the British constitution leads to calls for a return to the organic constitution. In a similar vein Lord Bancroft (1983: 8), a former head of the home civil service argues ‘for organic institutional change, planned at a digestible rate’ so that reforms work with, and so perpetuate, all that is salutary in Britain’s constitution and political practice.

New Labour rejects the command bureaucracy model of Old Labour with its emphasis on hierarchy, authority and rules. New Labour rejects municipal socialism and nationalization and ‘does not seek to provide centralised ‘statist’ solutions to every social and economic problem’ (Mandelson and Liddle 1996: 27). Instead New Labour promotes the idea of networks of institutions and individuals acting in partnerships held together by relations of trust. It favours joined-up government or delivering

public services by steering networks of organisations where the currency is not authority (bureaucracy) or price competition (markets) but trust. It exemplifies the shift from the providing state of Old Labour and the minimal state of Thatcherism to the enabling state and the continuing socialist commitment to making the state work.

To tell stories about other people's stories, we have to recover their stories and explain them. Although we cannot separate the practices of understanding and explanation in this way, the analytic distinction highlights that we use two modes of inquiry. Understanding needs an ethnographic form of inquiry: we have to read practices, actions, texts, interviews, and speeches to recover other people's stories. Explanation needs a historical form of inquiry: we have to locate their stories within their wider webs of belief, and these webs of belief against the background of traditions they modify in response to specific dilemmas. In our analysis of governance, we merge these two modes of inquiry, reading a wide range of texts in relation to traditions and dilemmas.

The notion of governance signals, therefore, change in British government but, in our account, the stress falls on how these changes arose out of competing webs of belief informed by different traditions. Governance refers to the informal authority of networks as constitutive of, supplementing or supplanting the formal authority of government; to governing with and through networks. It points to a more diverse view of state authority as being located at the boundary of state and civil society.

## **Conclusion**

We claim four main advantages for our interpretive approach and its governance narrative. First, our narrative identifies important empirical gaps in the Westminster

model by identifying key changes in British government. The idea of governance, however constructed, undermines central notions in the Westminster model.

Second, our interpretive approach resolves theoretical difficulties that beset more positivist versions of the governance narrative. It decentres institutions, avoiding the unacceptable suggestion that they fix the behaviour of individuals within them rather than being products of that behaviour. It replaces unhelpful phrases such as path-dependency with an analysis of change rooted in the beliefs and preferences of individual actors. And yet it allows political scientists to offer aggregate studies by using the concepts of tradition and dilemma.

Third, our approach opens new research agendas. It poses distinctive questions about British government; for example, about reshaping the state through the beliefs and preferences of key actors. It also introduces distinctive techniques for addressing these questions. It points to ethnography as a means of capturing beliefs and actions, and history as a means of explaining such beliefs and actions.

Fourth, our interpretive approach identifies key theoretical issues that confront policy-making and policy-implementation in the 1980s and 1990s; for example, the issues of pluralising policy-making and the mix of governing structures. It also lends some support to bottom-up forms of decision-making as appropriate means for addressing many of these issues.

The governance narrative is a valuable corrective to the traditional Westminster model. It is an exercise in 'edification'. The governance narrative offers the hope of

finding 'new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking about' British government (Rorty 1980: 360). It does so by decentring networks and exploring how their informal authority supplements and supplants the more formal authority of government. We use the notion of governance to develop a more diverse view of state authority in its relationship to civil society.

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