Re-centring the British Political Tradition: Explaining Contingency in New Labour and the Coalition’s Governance Statecraft

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Introduction

The previous Labour Administration and the current Coalition government have, at face value, shaped highly distinctive governing projects. New Labour sought to develop a credible social democratic response to Thatcherism following the dismantling of the corporatist state after 1979, demonstrating that in contrast to previous eras, the party had the capacity to deliver stability and economic competence while reforming UK public services. In contrast, the post-2010 Coalition government has been wrestling with the implications of the financial crisis, adopting an austerity programme designed to remove the United Kingdom’s structural deficit and in so doing, recasting the boundaries of the British state to forge a ‘post-bureaucratic society’.

Nonetheless, there are important commonalities in these governing projects which are easily overlooked. Both New Labour and the present centre-right Coalition have been motivated by an
inclination to reform the topography of the state, devolving and decentralising power, while
initiating a more participative mode of governing in which citizens play a greater role in the
development and implementation of policy. Prior to 1997, Tony Blair boldly stated that: ‘The era of
big, centralising government is over’ (1996: 261). This led New Labour to seek to ‘join-up’
government, to initiate a sweep of institutional innovations, and to implement a programme of
radical constitutional reform. In similar fashion, David Cameron announced shortly after taking office
in 2010:

Today is the start of a deep and serious reform agenda to take power away from politicians
and give it to people. That’s because we know instinctively that the state is often too
inhuman, monolithic and clumsy to tackle our deepest social problems. We know that the
best ideas come from the ground up, not the top down. We know that when you give people
and communities more power over their lives, more power to come together and work
together to make life better – great things happen¹.

What is striking, however, is that in both cases the urge to overhaul and reform the structures of
power and governance in the British state quickly dissipates, as the governing elite is drawn back to
the Westminster model² where power is conceived as hermetically sealed within the central
institutions of the state, underpinned by an ethos of strong, elitist, centralising government. This
illustrates the challenge facing all governments in negotiating changes in the way citizens
understand and mediate their relationship to the state. Two basic assumptions of representative
democracy have come to be contested in western societies: first, the claim that technocratic experts
have the authority and knowledge on which to make rational and informed decisions; and second,

¹ http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/big-society/
² The Westminster model can briefly be understood as being built: ‘on the assumption that there is
Parliamentary Sovereignty; all decisions are made within Parliament and there is no higher authority.
Legitimacy and democracy are maintained because ministers are answerable to Parliament and the House of
Commons is elected by the people. Decisions are taken by cabinet and implemented by a neutral Civil Service.
This view is derived from the Whig notion of the constitution being in self-correcting balance.’ (Smith 1999: 10).
the belief that politicians should be trusted to take decisions in the public interest (Smith, 2012). The pronouncements of Blair and Cameron indicate a willingness, at least in theory, to acknowledge the inadequacies of the post-war, modernist state.

Crucially, the conception of decision-making where politicians are held to account but rarely seek to involve citizens in the policy process is strongly embedded within the Westminster model and the British Political Tradition (BPT). A core axiom of the BPT is the claim that ‘Whitehall knows best’; as Douglas Jay argued in *The Socialist Case*: ‘In the case of nutrition and health, just as in the case of education, the gentleman in Whitehall really does know better what is good for people than the people know themselves.’ Jay’s view is representative of the dominant tradition in British politics built on the precepts of Dicey (1915) and Jennings (1966) who maintained that politics should be limited to those elites who have the knowledge to make policy. While the British Political Tradition’s (BPT) normative validation of strong, centralising government has been increasingly questioned (Hall, 2011; Tant, 1993; Marsh & Tant, 1989), politicians faced with a series of complex challenges arising from a breakdown in the traditional conception of politics and statecraft have paradoxically been drawn back to the ‘comfort-blanket’ of the Westminster model, cementing support for the centralizing, modernist top-down state (Richards, 2008). Similarly, Marsh refers to the work of Bulpitt as highlighting:

> Both the reasons why governing from the centre was becoming more difficult in the last quarter of the twentieth century (thus anticipating much of the thrust of the governance literature), while emphasising the efforts that the centre continued to make to manage that increased complexity of governance (2012: 48-9).

What has occurred is not a linear shift from government to governance, but a complex process of state formation which reinforces and underpins the power of state elites (Le Gales, 2012). This paper will elaborate that claim by making the case for a centralizing, hierarchical tradition in British politics,
which can only be understood through a ‘centred’ analysis drawing on an aggregate concept of the
BPT. The first section argues for a ‘centred’ approach to the BPT and the Westminster model, in
contrast to the ‘de-centred’ interpretation of governance and power enunciated by Bevir and
Rhodes. The paper then elaborates why an aggregated understanding of the BPT as the dominant
tradition in British politics helps to explain why New Labour and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat
Coalition have been drawn back to a state-centric model of governance, despite an early rhetorical
appeal to change and reform. Finally, the paper applies this conceptual framework to the statecraft
projects of New Labour and the post-2010 Coalition government, drawing on a range of empirical
case-studies to demonstrate that the BPT acts as an aggregate and dominant tradition shaping the
development of the British state.

A centred approach to the BPT

Bevir and Rhodes (2001; 2006; 2010) have offered a useful addition to the tools of political scientists
in their attempt to outline an interpretivist approach to governance and government, particularly
the development of political and elite ethnography (Gains, 2012). Indeed, Bevir and Rhodes have
made an important contribution in reinvigorating and illuminating our understanding of the nature
of British governance. But their approach raises a number of issues. In particular, we contend that:

- The concept of tradition informing Bevir and Rhodes’ account is ambiguous and does too
  much work in their analysis: for Bevir and Rhodes, tradition is the process of transmitting
  beliefs and norms; tradition is a form of institution; and tradition operates as a mechanism
  of power.

- Moreover, insufficient attention is paid to the importance of power and power relations in
  the British state.
The Ambiguity of Tradition

Bevir and Rhodes present a ‘decentred’ analysis which aims to disaggregate various traditions and interpretations, focusing on the diverse actions and practices inspired by those traditions in the processes of governance. The decentring of British government is intended as a corrective to the misleading impression conveyed by the Westminster model and positivist accounts of governance, which reify human action and represent government as hermitically sealed within the central institutions of the parliamentary state (Judge, 2006). A decentred approach highlights, ‘a more diverse view of state authority and its exercise’, and focuses on how, ‘patterns of rule arise as the contingent products of diverse actions and political struggles informed by the varied beliefs of situated agents’ (Bevir & Rhodes, 2010: 16).

As such, a decentred analysis rejects the premise of earlier narratives of the state that institutions can fix human actions and practices, along with ‘unhelpful phrases’ such as ‘path dependency’ which ignore the beliefs of situated agents and the role of tradition in explaining why actors perform certain actions (Bevir & Rhodes, 2010: 17). In addition, the decentred approach conveys ‘shared truths’ about the shift from markets and hierarchies to networks which has apparently occurred over the last three decades through the New Right and New Labour (Bevir & Rhodes, 2001: 26). Moreover, attention is paid to the co-ordination mechanisms by which governments seek to steer and regulate the diverse agencies and bodies of which the modern state is comprised. Taken together, the decentring of British government has the potential to open up new research agendas in political science.

However, the ambiguity of Bevir and Rhodes’ interpretivism and the decentred approach is illustrated in their analysis of traditions. Bevir and Rhodes place traditions at the centre of their analysis. However, the notion of traditions is somewhat vague. They claim that ‘traditions persist’, as indeed they must, but traditions are initial beliefs that people hold, and ‘every strand of tradition
is in principle open to change’ (2003: 33) (which of course raises the question of when it becomes a
different tradition). They argue:

We define traditions, therefore, as a set of understandings that someone receives
during socialization. A governmental tradition is a set of inherited beliefs about the
institutions and history of government. Although tradition is unavoidable, it is so as a
starting point, not as something that determines later performance. We are cautious
about representing tradition as an unavoidable presence in everything people do in case
we leave too slight a role for situated agency…(W)e see tradition mainly as a first
influence on people (2006: 3).

Tradition, then, is a concept which does a tremendous amount of work for Bevir and Rhodes.
Tradition is a process of socialisation, ‘inherited beliefs’ (so different then to other types of beliefs),
the basis of institutions, and a set of power relations. Although tradition is unavoidable it is not, ‘an
unavoidable presence’. Whilst presumably it is transmitted through socialisation, those who are
doing the transmitting must have some ability to act outside of the tradition. Exactly what tradition
is doing and what it is sustaining, and what is not, is difficult to see. The causal relationship between
traditions and beliefs is unclear. As such, traditions exist but do not determine (Smith, 2008). They
are strong in that they socialise, but weak in not preventing other forms of beliefs; yet beliefs only
exist in relation to traditions.

Despite the apparent openness of traditions, and Bevir and Rhodes’ rejection of what they label an
‘empiricist modernist’ classificatory approach, they nevertheless present their own classification of
traditions within Britain. In terms of narratives of governance, Bevir and Rhodes identify four
traditions: Socialist, Liberal, Whig and Tory; they suggest that these traditions have ‘inspired
reforms’ (2006: 18). However, it is not clear why these four particular traditions have been selected,
or what the justification of identifying these traditions is in understanding British governance.
There is no doubt that some traditions have different interpretations of governance, and there are a variety of ways of narrating the changes that have occurred. However, it is more questionable what traditions or narratives actually tell us about the processes of change. Bevir and Rhodes identify, for instance, a ‘socialist’ tradition from the work of Mandelson and Liddle (1996), and identify ‘joined-up’ government as their narrative. The question which then arises is why these authors should be identified as defining a socialist tradition, and why joined-up government is identified as the key narrative of Labour’s approach to public sector reform? Bevir and Rhodes (2004: 134) claim that ‘New Labour rejects the command bureaucracy of Old Labour with its emphasis on hierarchy, authority and rules’.

There can be little doubt that rhetorically New Labour has rejected Old Labour, but again, in practice, when in government, New Labour did anything but reject ‘hierarchy, authority and rules’. Hierarchy, authority, and rules are the ‘iron cage’ of the modern world. Even governance networks are networks of hierarchies and not flat, decentralized organizations. Labour has often resorted to hierarchy and rules as a mechanism for policy delivery: it is revealing, for example, that after the 2001 ‘Foot and MOUTH’ crisis, Blair toyed with the idea of using the army as the most effective mechanism for delivering his goals because it seemed to be the only organization able to deal with the crisis in a decisive way (McConnell & Stark, 2002).

If anything, the narrative of New Labour has been about the need to reform public services to improve delivery and change social behaviour (again raising the question of how we judge a certain set of ideas as emblematic of a tradition). Given their emphasis on decentering, it is somewhat surprising that Bevir and Rhodes claim New Labour’s tradition is socialist, rather than a melded blend of traditions drawing on the Westminster model, new public management (and ideas from the new right) and social democracy (Richards and Smith, 2004a). Joined-up government was not a new
idea that occurred within a socialist tradition, but something first alluded to in the 1950s during the Churchill Administration, and more recently developed by the Major government in relation to welfare policy (Kavanagh and Richards, 2001). Joined-up government was a pragmatic response to fragmented governance, and a relatively small part of the reform process that emanated from a Labour government attempting to overcome a historical reputation for failing to deliver in office.

The notion of a socialist tradition does not provide a particularly coherent explanation of New Labour’s public service reforms. On the contrary, it could be argued that the reforms appeared to contradict and undermine many of the key social democratic traditions in British politics. Bogdanor (2005) has addressed the conflict between Labour’s proposals for devolution, and the traditional goals of social democracy using the instruments of centralised government to distribute resources and advance social justice. That Labour developed a pragmatic approach to reform based on an ethos of ‘what works’ (and was willing to concede a key role for ‘quasi-markets’ in public services) illustrates that alongside the influence of traditions are other factors, not least the role of politics and the ongoing salience of institutional power. As Lodge and Wegrich (cited in James, 2013: 16) remark: ‘the study of public administration seems to have lost its focus on one of its key aspects, namely the contribution of politics (if not ‘power’) to the design and practice of administrative arrangements’.

**Power relations and a centrist tradition**

As Bevir and Rhodes point out, the Westminster model is a legitimising myth; because politicians and officials believe in the myth, it can explain their behaviour some of the time. For instance, Bevir and Rhodes (2006: 119) ask a permanent secretary what he wants of a minister and the reply is, ‘clear leadership….engagement with us on the really difficult issues. I want a Minster to be very influential with their colleagues’. These are stock answers found in numerous studies of the civil
service (Marsh, Richards and Smith, 2001); they reflect how far officials are socialised into the view that Ministers are the key actors but they must have a symbiotic relationship based on trust with officials. As a myth, the Westminster model may represent how officials and ministers present the political system, but however strong their beliefs, it does not represent an accurate picture of power in Britain. We need, as Dowding (2004: 140) highlights, to distinguish between myth and reality; while there is no doubt that myth is important in explaining how the system works, it does not represent the reality about either the power of ministers or officials, and this is what political science needs to investigate. Moreover, Bevir and Rhodes do not adequately address the issue of power. Rhodes (2006: 14) states that for him, ‘power is structured in a few competing elites’. For Rhodes, power is not positional, ‘but power is contingent and relational; that is, it depends on the relative power of other actors’, and policy networks must be placed in a socio-economic context.

Of course, there is a degree to which power is indeed positional. Having a certain position provides potential power, resources and capabilities (Stones 1996: 34). Being Chancellor of the Exchequer gives an individual more control over economic policy than other ministers. The position provides resources and gives the Chancellor considerable power over the taxes we pay. In relation to citizens generally, the formal position of Chancellor confers substantive power and legitimacy. However, his or her position in relation to the Prime Minister is more fraught. They both have considerable resources and in that sense who ‘wins’ in a particular situation depends on contingency. If the economy is growing well and the Prime Minister lacks support in the party, the Chancellor may win an argument. If the Prime Minister announces on television that health spending will increase to European levels in the next five years, they have won a tactical victory over the Chancellor. Power changes, but resources tend to be more static, and not only subject to beliefs and traditions.

However, we are not convinced that Bevir and Rhodes’ theoretical and methodological framework allows them to explore the multiple and fluid layers of power relations. There is almost a conscious
avoidance of the issue; the only real discussion of power is the argument that tradition does much of
the work of power in a post-structuralist sense, but they imply that they do not see a tradition as
power (Richards & Smith, 2013). The focus on traditions and beliefs does not necessarily explain the
set of power relations, nor how they are shaped.

Centring tradition in British politics and institutional layering

In contrast, we argue the case for a ‘centred’ approach to the BPT and the Westminster model which
examines the processes of institutional ‘layering’ in the restructuring of the state, and the
asymmetrical power relations that constitute the British political system. The notion of a decentred
and differentiated polity which defines the work of Bevir and Rhodes over-emphasizes the diffuse
nature of power, and the extent to which the state has been ‘hollowed out’. Instead, we contend
that the British political system is more closed and elitist than the DPM acknowledges; rather than
being hollowed-out, the state has been reconstituted and the core executive still remains the most
powerful actor in the policy process (Marsh, Richards & Smith, 2003). These themes are reflected in
the ‘Asymmetric Power Model’.

The nature of change in the British state over the last three decades has been powerfully
conditioned by embedded institutional processes. Since the early 1980s, at the material level, there
has been considerable continuity in the evolution of the state (Tant, 1993; Ling, 1998; Marsh,
Richards & Smith, 2001; Evans, 2003; Hall, 2011). From an institutionalist perspective: ‘institutions
shape actors strategic choices’ (Steinmo, 2010: 14). Thatcher, Blair, and Cameron as political leaders
may well have had a particular vision of how they wanted to transform the state, but the decisions
their governments took were shaped, though not necessarily determined, by existing institutional
preferences. As a consequence, changes have been generally evolutionary rather than radical, and
based on a process of institutional layering (Steinmo, 2010).
Institutional theory illustrates the difficulty of reforming institutions and, more particularly in the UK case, the degree to which path dependency shapes policy outcomes, a concept dismissed by Bevir and Rhodes. To explain this, it is useful to invoke the concept of hybridity, as crystallised by Thelen’s (2002: 101) understanding of institutions:

On the one hand, a remarkable resilience of some institutional arrangements even in the face of huge historic breaks, and, on the other hand, ongoing subtle shifts beneath the surface of apparently stable formal institutions that, over time, can completely redefine the functions and political purposes they serve.

Deeply-embedded institutions, as in the case of the UK, exhibit considerable resilience even when confronting potential critical junctures. However, Thelen (2002: 101) points out that: ‘...even “sticky” institutions that persist over long stretches of time undergo subtle but significant changes in terms of their form and functions’. In Britain, the context of reform over time has been characterised by a growth in pressures for change, conjoined with a strong degree of political will for structural reform of the state. However, rather than radical change, what instead emerges is ‘institutional layering’:

New coalitions may design novel institutional arrangements but lack the support, or perhaps the inclination, to replace pre-existing institutions established to pursue other ends. While each individual change is consciously designed to serve specific goals, the layering of successive innovations results in institutions that appear more haphazard than the product of some overarching master plan (Schickler, 2001: 15).

In this context, institutional layering can be understood as path dependent, rather than a critical juncture leading to a paradigmatic shift. Choices for institutional reform occur within the context of existing organisational arrangements. In the UK context, this approach can be
adopted to explain why bouts of reform are not constructed on the basis of new institutions replacing old ones, but instead the layering of new institutional forms on top of existing systems.

It is against this backdrop that Richards and Smith’s (2004a) notion of the emergence of a ‘hybrid state’ in the UK can be understood as part of a layering process that stems from the scale of sunken resources within deeply embedded institutions. For the political class, it is often more attractive to adapt existing governance forms rather than develop new ones. As Alexander (2001: 254) puts it:

Actors support the status quo not because change stands to generate some costs – which is true of almost all changes – but because change imposes significant net costs at least in the short term. The longer actors operate within such a status quo, the more any shift to an alternative is unattractive.

For example, in the case of the Labour Government’s reforms, territorial devolution occurred within the context of the continuation of traditional conceptions of parliamentary sovereignty (Judge, 2005; Bogdanor, 2009). More importantly within the British context, there has been a strong institutional incentive over the last three decades for politicians to off-load responsibility for policy delivery, while ensuring that their resources remain untouched at the centre (Flinders, 2008). Steinmo (2010) illustrates how capitalist democracies evolve and adapt, arguing they do so within an existing historical and institutional context. Consequently, while the post-2008 crisis is pressurising states to adapt, how this occurs is shaped by multiple forces associated with a range of institutional pathways and the broader social and economic climate. The post-crisis response in Britain can be understood as an attempt to adapt to changed circumstances (not least the fiscal crisis of the welfare state), but conditioned by a particular set of inherited (sticky) institutional forms and traditions.
The BPT as an aggregate concept: The dominant tradition in British politics

As distinct from Bevir and Rhodes, we aver that an aggregated understanding of the BPT as the dominant tradition in British politics may help to explain why New Labour and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition have been drawn back to a state-centric model of governance, despite an early rhetorical appeal to change and reform. In the UK case, the nature of reform is strongly shaped by ideas associated with the British Political Tradition (BPT). British politics is organised around an ideational framework advocating an essentially uniform, elitist and top-down system that delivers strong, seamless but accountable government (Oakeshott, 1962; Birch, 1964; Beer, 1965; Greenleaf, 1983a; 1983b; 1987). Critics of the BPT have argued that the British political system derives its character from specific historical processes which reflect elitist notions of responsible and representative government (see Tant 1993, Evans 2003, Marsh and Hall 2007, Richards 2008, Hall 2011).

Crucially, this led over time to the perpetuation of a ‘power-hoarding’ governance paradigm (Richards & Smith, 2004b). The argument is that the BPT has a unique shaping effect; the political class - ministers and civil servants - are socialised into a tradition predicated on preserving central power and resources. The paradox of this tradition is that in the last three decades, different governments have been rhetorically committed to reducing the role of the state and devolving power from the centre, as they respond to a broader crisis in state-society relations and citizen’s view of the state. However, each has retained a belief that a strong state is crucial for achieving their governing aspirations (Gamble, 1994; Richards, 2008; Hall, 2011). It reveals the extent to which Britain’s institutional framework is constructed by a ‘power-hoarding’ rather than a ‘power-dispersing’ model, with strong incentives operating for the retention of power at the centre (Richards & Smith, 2004b). From this perspective, reforms have not led to a sizeable dispersal of power from the centre, but instead reflected a process of overlaying new, often contradictory governance processes on to existing institutional forms. We illustrate this empirically by drawing on
a comparative case-study of the statecraft projects pursued by the New Labour Government, and the post-2010 Coalition administration, examining the process of reform at the centre of government.

The ideational framework: the third way and the big society

The role of ideas in governance and statecraft is important, and Bevir and Rhodes consistently emphasise the role of the ideational in structuring political outcomes. ‘The third way’ and ‘the big society’ are the labels most regularly attached to the ideational framework around which the statecraft projects of New Labour and the contemporary Conservative party have coalesced. There are, of course, distinctions between these approaches, but also striking similarities. The argument underlying New Labour’s third way was that traditional hierarchical structures associated with the Weberian model of bureaucracy were no longer appropriate to the needs of a more complex and diverse society. The third way accepted that state-society relations had been drastically restructured by Thatcherism; rather than promising to roll back these reforms, Labour modernisers sought to reconcile the neo-liberal settlement with the traditional goals of social democracy (Richards, 2007). There would be no return to a traditional, top-down, centralising state, but new mechanisms and agents of delivery would be sought; services would be delivered through a combination of markets, hierarchies and networks; and power would be devolved beyond Westminster. The third way had a significant impact on New Labour’s ideational approach to the state.

Cameron’s Conservatives argued that New Labour had failed to translate the rhetoric of the third way into reality. To break from the prevailing cyclical pattern of reform in UK politics, characterised by the grafting-on of change to the existing institutional settlement, an ideational alternative was required in the shape of ‘the Big Society’. This was presented as a means of structurally recalibrating the state by divesting provision of collective goods to non-state providers. The Big
Society narrative sought to foster a: ‘...new culture of voluntarism, philanthropy, social action’ (Cameron, 2010b), requiring a more extensive role for the private and third sectors. Nonetheless, since 2010, the programme has delivered somewhat mixed results. The former Chief Executive of the Big Society Network, Paul Twivy (2012), recently declared the programme had failed:

The Big Society suffered from a number of intractable problems. It was seen as a fig leaf for the shrinking state and spending cuts. Or as a cynical repackaging of the civic activity that has quietly kept British society intact for hundreds of years. It was party-political, ergo tribal and divisive. The farther away from London and the south-east one went, the more toxic it became.

These concerns reflect a variety of problems that have emerged with the Big Society as a viable alternative to the post-war welfare state. There is contestation over what vision for state-society relations the Big Society offers: is it a strategy for encouraging voluntary activity as a way of reinforcing values of altruism and building social capital; or does it provide an alternative model where the role of the welfare state is weakened in terms of collective provision, replaced by non-state institutions.

Nevertheless, it is striking that both ‘the third way’ and ‘the big society’ have a similar commitment to greater pluralism and the devolution of power, captured in the rhetoric of Tony Blair and David Cameron in opposition. In both cases, these pluralising instincts have been checked by the material reality of a state-centric mode of governance pursued by New Labour and the Coalition administration, both of which have continued to robustly defend the Westminster model.
Unlike Bevir and Rhodes, who argue that change in Whitehall should be understood in terms of a decentred, interpretive approach, we argue that it is necessary to understand the actions of ministers and civil servants as defending or ‘reconstituting’ the Westminster model and state-centric mode of governance in a changing political world. Labour layered a pluralised notion of policy delivery on to traditional institutions, while reconstituting the core executive’s power, notably by strengthening the centre of government (Richards and Smith, 2006).

This account advocates the need to posit the Westminster model and the aggregate concept of the BPT at the heart of any analysis of Labour’s reforms. In particular, it identifies the extent to which over time, the model has shaped the Labour Party’s strategic policy choices and influenced how it has approached government. Labour has embraced the Westminster model because it allows it to sustain and legitimise an elite-dominated system of government which it sees as necessary to securing its political goals (Marquand 1997). The Westminster model is understood as the aggregate concept which: ‘... explain[s] how British Government works with the beliefs and preferences of the relevant actors as the basic building blocks’ (Bevir and Rhodes 2003b: 25). This is not to say that other influences have not conditioned New Labour’s approach to Whitehall (Evans, 2003; Richards & Smith, 2004b). But they can only be understood within the broader setting defined by the Westminster model.

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3 The interviews which inform this paper were carried out between September 2011 and October 2012. Interviews were carried out under the ‘Chatham House’ rule, but some participants subsequently agreed to have specific quotations directly attributed.
Labour’s reform programme Mark I: ‘Wiring up’ the British state and modernising government

Initially, the emphasis after 1997 was on ‘joining-up’ government to improve policy co-ordination combined with initiatives to modernise the civil service. Labour’s programme sought to overcome debilitating Whitehall turf wars which led to disputes between departments over territory, resources and power. The Next Steps reforms and the principle of concentrating delivery around operational agencies were consolidated by the new government. However, Next Steps did not address the weakness of policy co-ordination. The case for ‘joining-up’ government was articulated by one of Blair’s advisers, Geoff Mulgan (2001: 21):

The ‘tubes’ or ‘silos’ down which money flows from government to people and localities have come to be seen as part of the reason why government is bad at solving problems. Many issues have fitted imperfectly if at all into departmental slots. Vertical organisation by its nature skews government efforts away from certain activities, such as prevention – since the benefits of preventive action often come to another department. It tends to make government less sensitive to particular client groups whose needs cut across departmental lines. It incentivises departments to dump problems on each other – like schools dumping unruly children onto the streets to become a headache for the police...Over time it reinforces the tendency common to all bureaucracies of devoting more energy to the protection of turf rather than serving the public.

The Modernising Government White Paper (1999) committed the civil service to major changes: New Labour was concerned not only with improving efficiency, but redefining the role of Whitehall as a delivery agent. However, the capacity of departments to work together was constrained by the doctrine of ministerial accountability (Flinders, 2010). Moreover, New Labour was mistrustful of large sections of the civil service. This was not ideological mistrust, a belief that Whitehall mandarins had a hidden agenda. The concern was that civil servants lacked the capacity to effectively develop
and implement policy: New Labour procured policy advice from a range of external agents and institutions. A plethora of tsars, taskforces, and *ad hoc* bodies were created curtailing officials’ monopoly of advice, alongside the appointment of unprecedented numbers of special advisers (Jones & Blick, 2010; Richards, 2010; Seldon, 2006).

The granting of executive powers to Jonathan Powell (Number Ten Chief of Staff) and Alistair Campbell (Number Ten Director of Communications) to instruct civil servants, alongside the creation of the Strategic Communications Unit (SCU) in Number Ten were attempts to consolidate the centre’s grip over the machinery of state. One senior minister in the New Labour years argued vociferously: ‘It was an inspired decision...creating a Chief of Staff who would act within Number Ten as a pivotal point between the civil service, the political advisers, the communications staff, and government relations’. As Blair remarked, ‘I was conscious of the fact that if you didn’t have a strong centre, you weren’t going to be able to enforce the culture of New Labour throughout the system’.

Nonetheless, there was growing frustration at the inertia of the state bureaucracy, an acknowledgement that the centre needed to push harder for change. In 1998-99, the NHS experienced one of the worse ‘winter flu crises’ for half a century, focusing attention on Labour’s failure to deliver sustained improvements in public sector performance (Barber, 2007; Riddell, 2006). This made a ‘command bureaucracy’ attractive to frustrated, apparently impotent, politicians operating the ‘rubber levers’ of the traditional Whitehall machine. The levers were pulled with ever greater force after 1997. However, there was a dawning realisation that too often they were not connected to anything.

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4 Interview with a former Cabinet minister.
5 Interview 12th October 2012.
6 Interview with a former Number Ten official.
Labour’s reform programme Mark II: state-centric core executive ‘command and control’

As a consequence, New Labour’s second term entailed further changes in the political and administrative machinery of the state. The Number Ten Policy Unit more than doubled in size, re-established as the *Prime Minister’s Policy Directorate* (PMPD) after the 2001 election. The PMPD’s role was not only to provide policy advice to the Prime Minister, but to oversee departments through a network of ministers and special advisers. Within the Cabinet Office, an array of prime ministerial units was created, including the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit (PMDU) and the Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit (PMSU). The Delivery Unit co-ordinated bi-monthly meetings between the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State, agreeing the indicators by which success should be measured through Public Service Agreements (PSAs). This created a line of accountability directly to the centre in 10 Downing Street.

The aim of the reforms was to shift the balance of power towards the centre, institutionalising departmental dependence on Number Ten over politics and policy. This was combined with an approach to public sector restructuring aimed at improving productivity and outcomes through centralised control, including sanctions and targets (Newman, 2005). The mind-set leading to the centralisation of core executive capacity during the New Labour years is captured by one of Blair’s most senior ministerial allies:

Blair thought the Cabinet and large swathes of the civil service would have blocked what he was trying to do. And therefore what you had to do was step around them...operate a sort of *force majeure* that didn’t give them the chance to fight back.\(^7\)

Number Ten enhanced its implementation role by establishing relationships with front-line providers and local agencies, launching delivery initiatives from street crime to school truancy that by-passed

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\(^7\) Interview with a former Cabinet minister.
departments (Blair, 2010; Barber, 2007). In relation to education, the City Academies initiative was conceived in 10 Downing Street, while Number Ten advisers continued to directly manage and oversee the programme alongside departmental officials (Adonis, 2012; Blair, 2010). There was little confidence that the Department of Education and Skills (DfES) had the capacity to deliver the reform agenda.

The post-1997 Labour Administration argued that the traditional public sector model did not provide the most effective delivery of public goods; it was rigid (‘one-size fits all’); cumbersome to reform; and often focused more on the producer than the consumer. The problem was that the delivery of public services was controlled by producers. In Le Grand’s (2003) terms, public servants were ‘knaves’ as well as ‘knights’, motivated by self-interest as much as altruism. Choice was a way of handing power to consumers. The tension within the government was that many key players, notably the Chancellor, did not want to set markets free within the public sector.

Instead, Labour opted to control public service producers through increasing consumer choice, aligned with core executive oversight. For example, it increased central controlling capacity in public delivery terms, by using targets and the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit as a mechanism for ensuring that public services did what the government wanted. Labour sought pluralism in the public services, but within a highly controlled context. This hybrid between the marketization of neo-liberal forms of public management and the retention of a hierarchical state became increasingly apparent throughout the period after 1997 (Richards, 2011). Labour layered a pluralised notion of policy delivery on to the traditional institutions of the Westminster model, while reconstituting the core executive’s power, notably by strengthening the centre through unit-building (Richards & Smith, 2006).
The cumulative impact of New Labour’s reforms over thirteen years has been significant in changing the nature of the state and the UK core executive:

- Critical accounts such as the *Better Government Initiative* (2010) and Foster (2005) emphasise that Labour was intent on centralising and politicising Whitehall, marking a wholesale transformation in the governance of Britain. Previous governments strengthened the capacities and resources available to the Prime Minister. Under Blair and Brown, there was a fundamental change in the size and influence of the centre (Richards, 2008; McAnulla, 2006; Marquand, 2004; Heffernan, 2003).

- There were major alterations in the nature of the policy-making process, which became more empirical and guided by performance data (Richards, 2008; Barber, 2007). Performance indicators within Public Service Agreement’s (PSA) meant that departments were increasingly held to account by the centre.

- The structure of dependency shifted: Number Ten had direct contact with front-line providers at ‘street-level’ (Richards, 2008; Marinetto, 2003). The role of the centre went beyond co-ordination, intervening directly in the process of implementation (Richards, 2008; Barber, 2007; Marquand, 2004).

What is striking is the determination of ministers to preserve and uphold the ethos of strong government, elitist political rule, and executive dominance (Flinders, 2009; Marsh & Hall, 2007; Judge, 2006). Despite the radical constitutional reform agenda and the rhetoric of transferring power back to localities and citizens, it is necessary to consider how far the Westminster model acted as a constraint blunting the impact of structural and institutional change in the British polity.
Rhetorically the Coalition government has rejected what it has seen as Blair’s over centralised core executive and interestingly has done so by appealing to a notion of a re-invigorated Westminster model (HM Government, 2012). The Government has stated (CM 7996 2011: 8).

Across Government we are committed to ending the top-down decision making and the tendency in Whitehall to develop one-size-fits-all solutions which ignore the specific needs and behaviour patterns of local communities.

The Coalition’s approach initially set out to re-establish ‘Cabinet government’ in riposte to New Labour’s supposed ‘sofa-style’. This relied on reducing the role of special advisers and restoring power to departments and ministers. At the same time, it reaffirmed one of the core tenets of the Westminster model: ‘Policy will be decided by ministers alone, with advice from officials. Boards will give advice and support on the operational implications and effectiveness of policy proposals, focusing on getting policy translated into results (Cabinet Office, 2010b). The Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit and the Strategy Unit were abolished, and replaced by a new Efficiency and Reform Group [ERG] chaired by the Cabinet Office Minister, Francis Maude. Significantly, unlike the New Labour model, central policy capacity under the Coalition is provided by civil servants, not political advisors. This reinforces the traditional Westminster model of a core executive built round the minister-civil servant relationship.

**Governing at the centre**

There are elements of the Coalition’s agenda, in particular the drive for greater pluralism, which appear to challenge the Westminster model. *The Civil Service Reform Plan* (HM Government, 2012) illustrates how the government is re-envisioning the central state. It is committed to a 23 per cent reduction in the civil service by 2016. In addition, like the previous government, there is a desire to pluralise the policy process. First, in terms of policy formulation by moves to further break-up Whitehall’s traditional monopoly on policy advice through the introduction of a Contestable Policy Fund as a mechanism to: ‘draw directly on thinking, evidence and insight from experts beyond
Whitehall’ (HM Government, 2012). Second, in terms of policy delivery, replacing: ‘...the old binary choice between monolithic in-house provision and full scale privatisation by...joint ventures, employee-owned mutuals and entering into new partnerships with the private sector (HM Government, 2012: 8).

Moreover, the Coalition is rhetorically abandoning a key element of New Labour’s governance statecraft - the use of targets to retain central control over a more pluralised form of public sector delivery. After May 2010, the Government set about formally abolishing the use of targets in areas such as criminal justice, education, housing, local government, and the health service. PSAs and Departmental Strategic Objectives were replaced by Departmental Business Plans that purported to offer a different form of control and accountability, eschewing the language of targets. Priorities and transparency became the accepted lingua franca of public services. Whitehall’s new mantra was the shift from ‘bureaucratic accountability to democratic accountability’. This was predicated on a different mode of governance - that of direct accountability to the public through enhanced transparency:

...to enable the public to hold politicians and public bodies to account; to reduce the deficit and deliver better value for money in public spending; and to realise significant economic benefits by enabling businesses and non-profit organisations to build innovative applications and websites using public data. (David Cameron, 2010d).

Government and public sector web sites were identified as an alternative to the target-based, central bureaucratic control from the centre of the previous regime, acting as the key medium to deliver a new form of democratic accountability. However, the actual use of targets in everything but name soon re-emerged. An analysis of the Coalition’s Departmental Business Plans identified that the number of strategic objectives they contained had actually risen relative to the last year of the New Labour Administration (see Table 1 below).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>New Labour Targets (2010)</th>
<th>Coalition Targets (Average for 2011 and 2012)</th>
<th>Increase in Number of Targets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>+19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treasury</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>+22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Office</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>+28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defence</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>+21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>+31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMRC</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Office</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>+7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>+30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energy &amp; Climate</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>+11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work and Pensions</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>+29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>+13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Int’l Development</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>+14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>+9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture, Media, Sport</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>+23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local Government</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Cabinet Office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
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<td>----------------</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Talbot (2013: forthcoming)

Contained within the 2012 Civil Service Reform Plan are a detailed set of objectives for each Departmental Permanent Secretary to be met over a designated period, specifying business delivery objectives, performance measures, and milestones (see Gov.UK, 2012). So while the rhetorical appeal to ‘targets’ has formally been removed from the Whitehall lexicon, their use, firmly established by the New Labour Administration as a tool to retain state-centric control over public service delivery, has certainly not disappeared under the Coalition. From the centre downwards, a vibrant ‘cascading culture of target-setting’ remains intact (Gains, 2003; Richards, 2008; Talbot, 2013).

Nevertheless, while rejecting targets the Coalition has embraced and extended the implicitly centralising notions that underpin the Behavioural Insight Team. The work of this unit is interesting in the context of the government’s underpinning philosophy. On one side, behaviour change is presented as an alternative to ‘regulation and fiscal measures’ (House of Lords 2010-1: 11). The Coalition to this extent appears to believe that government should do less, and has been highly resistant to new forms of regulation in areas such as the environment. On the other hand, ‘nudge’ is a highly interventionist form of policy-making. For example, it assumes government knows what is right in terms of obesity and exercise, and is in an illiberal way attempting to change personal behaviour (Ariely, 2008; Smith, 2009; Prabhaker, 2010).
Reform, New Localism and Devolving Power from the Centre

Elsewhere, the Coalition has attempted to pursue its commitment to the Big Society through its ‘new localism’ agenda. Both partners have expressed a strong commitment to return power to local communities. This commitment materialised in the 2011 Localism Act. Lowdnes and Pratchett (2012) argue that this act is a radical measure. At its core is the idea that it gives a ‘general power of competence’. In other words, local government can do anything that an individual can do, as long as it is not illegal. This is a reversal of the previous Westminster model definition of local government acting within a framework set by Parliament. Local government is being given greater control over local services and with the abolition of the Regional Development Agencies, economic development has passed to Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) which allow local authorities to lead on economic development in the regions.

Nonetheless, while the Coalition has demonstrated a strong rhetorical commitment to localism, it is played-out within the structured context provided by the British constitution and the BPT – sovereignty formally resides in Westminster and decisions on the direction of policy are determined at the centre. Localism is being pursued in an environment where local government is undergoing a sizeable retrenchment in the size of the budget it receives from the centre. The 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review outlined a twenty-seven per cent [£5.5 billion] reduction in the local government budget - from £29.7 billion in 2010/11 to £24.2 billion in 2014/15 (HM Treasury, 2010: 81). One of the consequences is the large number of job cuts; the Chair of the Local Government Association identified 200,000 local authority redundancies by mid-2012 (see also the Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2013). Lowndes and McCaughie (2012: 3) argue that after 2017, more severe cuts will occur:

...particularly as the percentage of the population over 65 rises to above 20 per cent.

National debt looks set to hit 90 per cent of GDP by 2016, which is more than twice pre-crisis levels. The Local Government Association estimates that the costs of adult social
care will absorb 90 per cent of council expenditure by 2020, suggesting the services
most popular with the public (libraries and leisure facilities) could effectively wither on
the vine.

Central government is specifying the scale of the retrenchment at the local level, but deflecting
criticism by arguing that it is up to local government to determine how the available money should
spent. Councils have responded by making substantial cuts to key services, sometimes in
contentious areas; for example, care for the elderly and in children’s services relating to the Sure
Start programme. This has created tensions with the centre on the grounds that such cuts challenge
the Government’s commitment to protect ‘front-line’ services; but also that cuts were seen as:
‘...politically-driven and too deep’ (Cameron, 2011a).

A further irony is that the Government’s attempt to pluralise policy delivery has changed the
relationship between central and local government. This has meant the establishment of more
academy schools independent of Local Education Authorities (LEAs) based on bilateral, contractual
arrangements with the Department for Education in Whitehall. Following the 2010 Academies Act,
the number of academy school has increased from 203 to 1635 by mid-2012. In addition, the
Coalition has supported ‘free schools’ set up by parents or third sector organisations, but funded by
central government. Accountability for the performance of ‘free schools’ now resides directly with
the department rather than at the local LEA level.

Elsewhere, health offers another example in which there has been moves to pluralise delivery. The
2012 Health and Social Care Act outlines the Coalition’s commitment to devolving health care
provision to an increasing number of private and third sector bodies. Yet the services delivered
continue to be predominantly funded by the state, and hence are subject to considerable central
government control. These examples highlight the layering of new institutional forms, but also the
tensions in the Coalition’s strategy between devolving and pluralising policy, and a well-worn tendency to revert back to centrist management.

What we can see within the British political system is a political and institutional imperative in which politicians continue to draw on the Westminster model and BPT in defining, shaping and legitimising their behaviour (see Richards, 2008: 199). In so doing, interventionism has remained their dominant modus operandi. These two imperatives are closely interlinked. The political imperative is the view of ministers that they need to deliver ‘results’ using the interventionist, top-down precepts of the BPT to drive through policies that will secure their re-election, fostering a perception of governing competence.

The irony is that while the Coalition has been keen to stress a vibrant new localism agenda devolving powers away from the centre across an array of policy areas, reforms have tended to be enacted in a highly centralist manner, true to the exigencies of the BPT. As Jones (2010) observes: ‘Ministers are essentially promoting sub-localism, taking powers from councils allegedly to give to ‘Big Society’ actors below the local-authority level, but ineluctably sucking up key control functions to Whitehall at the same time. In a sense what is more significant is the development of a contradictory notion of the state that is developing within the coalition. There is within the Conservatives at least a strong opposition to the Nanny state, an opposition to ‘welfare dependency’ and a belief that the size of the state should be shrunk. Indeed, some Conservative MPs have called for radical cuts in spending (Carswell 2012). At the same time, the Coalition is prepared to use the powers of the Westminster model to impose spending cuts and essentially to maintain a ‘national’ polity.
**Conclusion: The layering of ‘new politics’ on the British Political Tradition**

This paper has offered an analysis of the New Labour administration and the post-2010 Coalition Government’s statecraft projects. Given the institutional framework of British government and the deeply embedded political culture of the core executive, the pursuit of a radical restructuring of state/society relations confronts a series of contingent factors which alter the original trajectory of the reform agenda. Indeed, the governing strategy of both administrations has offered ample evidence of an ongoing commitment to the BPT. Rather than delivering on the rhetorical claim of a ‘bottom-up revolution’, familiar governance patterns emerge built around a strong core executive approach.

In the light of this, the decentred analysis of Bevir and Rhodes appears somewhat inadequate. Such an approach cannot elucidate the contingency underlying New Labour and the Coalition government’s statecraft approach. Nor is there an adequate theorisation of power relations in the British state which can explain the ongoing commitment to a ‘power-hoarding’ model, the tendency of both New Labour and the Coalition to revert to a state-centric conception of governance, and the asymmetric power relations constituting the state. This paper avers that governing elites have responded to a crisis in the nature of representative democracy and citizen’s relationship with the state by acknowledging the case for decentralisation and reform in opposition, but then reconstituting the centralised, hierarchical Westminster model in power.

New Labour was committed to reforming the state and returning power to communities, but pursued its goal through a top-down strategy concerned with reinforcing the capacity of the centre, revealing the on-going relevance of the BPT. In particular, the New Labour government was characterised by a layering of devolved forms of government on to a centralised core executive. The desire for political success, both in electoral and policy terms, led Labour to reinforce the capacity to drive through policy at the centre.
The Coalition Government argued that the need to respond to the 2008 crisis opened up a ‘window of opportunity’ to recalibrate the British state. It evoked the narrative of a ‘new politics’ as part of a bottom-up revolution in governing: the reform of parliamentary and governing practices; of pluralism; localism; a commitment to reducing the size of the state; and encouraging the Big Society. Yet the initial rhetorical claims that the Coalition’s reforms would signal the death-knell of the BPT, delivering the ‘biggest shake-up in British democracy since 1832’ (Clegg 2010), in hindsight appear as little more than post-election hubris.

In a climate of austerity, the pressures for strong, powerful, potentially unpopular, political leadership based on command and control looms large. This paper has highlighted why the Coalition, like New Labour, has succumbed to pressures to strengthen ministerial power, particularly at the centre of British government. Command and control are key characteristics of the Westminster model’s formal and informal code of governing. We argue that focusing on the long-established ‘power-hoarding’ approach to governance drawn from ideas associated with the BPT offers a rich explanatory framework. This is underpinned by an aggregate concept of political tradition, in which centralised hierarchies continue to loom large across the British state.
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