Interpretivism and deep politics


Andrew Taylor

Department of Politics, University of Sheffield, S10 2TU

a.j.taylor@sheffield.ac.uk

*Please do not quote or cite without author’s permission*
Introduction

Bevir and Rhodes’ (hereafter B&R) interpretivist agenda – *Interpreting British Governance* (2003), *Governance Stories* (2006) and *The State as Cultural Practice* (2010) and their many papers – is substantial and influential. Bevir and Rhodes’ contend networks are supplanting hierarchy (2003, 6) producing a more permeable state that has implications for the distribution of power, accountability and responsiveness. Interpretive political science focuses on actor meanings, preferences and beliefs. Explanations of events are best understood as narratives, constructed by actors responding to dilemmas; so agency is critical. This is explored using a methodology combining ethnology and history. The selection of actions is determined by an individual’s beliefs and related traditions that they use to interpret the dilemmas they confront. Traditions are modified by both interaction and new situations that cause individuals to question current traditions and beliefs. Dilemmas produce change and change modifies tradition. Governance is about the location and determination of the relationship between state and society, so an important question is: does interpretivism better capture the architecture and working of liberal democracy than competing interpretations? One can only applaud B&R’s desire ‘to make corrections to the existing map of British politics’ but do their maps enable ‘citizens and politicians alike to know what journeys they can and cannot take’ (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 10)? After all maps are social constructions.

This paper moves away from, first, interpretivism’s actor-centredness to issues of structural power and, second, its emphasis on networks as a new and dominant form of governance, arguing that underlying structures influence network behaviour. This is not just a level of analysis problem. Network governance as framed by Bevir and Rhodes often ignores asymmetrical power relations (Goodwin and Grix 2011, 537); Börzel (2010, 2011), building on Scharpf (1993, 1994), argues hierarchy casts a ‘long shadow’ over other modes of governance, and remains the key determinant of politics and policy. This means that actor behaviour cannot be reduced to de-centring narratives and traditions. The first section argues that ‘deep politics’ offers an explanation because of its emphasis on power inequalities and the influence of structures; the second section uses the 1989 Hillsborough disaster to show how systemic and systematic bias determined the dominant narrative; and the third section, rather than focussing on agency to explain outcomes, focuses on aspects
of metagovernance (secrecy and public order) that are central to both Hillsborough and the wider conduct of politics. The paper concludes that hierarchy is prior to network and whilst networks capture surface politics, surface politics are influenced by deep continuities, such as organisational culture, that are resistant to change. Networks do not constitute a transformation of governing style but a response to complexity; underlying structural influences, robust patterns of beliefs, attitudes and behaviours socialise individual and bureaucracies into ways of thinking and acting. The state is not as hollow as we think.

**Deep politics**

This section does reject interpretivism, rather it emphasises that the exercise of power is multi-layered and needs to be analysed accordingly. Interpretivism (and governance) studies ‘surface politics’ (directly observable and relatively easy to navigate), where actors are willing to speak to outsiders, dilemmas and outcomes are visible, and networks are easily identified. I do not reject interpretivism but argue that the exercise of power is multi-layered and must be analysed accordingly. What I want to argue is that there exists what Peter Dale Scott calls ‘deep politics’; analogous is the British Political Tradition (BPT) with its a top-down view of democracy, parliamentary sovereignty, majoritarian single-party government, secrecy, and a ‘government knows best’ ethos that emphasises ‘the continued importance of the role of hierarchy, inequality and a dominant political tradition’ in structuring politics (Marsh 2008, 251). Dale Scott (1996, for example) argues deep politics deals with meanings, beliefs and preferences operating in, and through, organisations with interests to advance and defend. The result is akin to the structure induced equilibrium (Shepsle 1979, for example). These sub-surface layers condition, not determine, surface politics and can be challenged. Deep politics is not a crude conspiracy thesis but points to the significance of organisational cultures (and historical institutionalism) that are extremely difficult to change but which can co-exist with an ‘open’ polity that represents a different version of reality.

I interpret tradition as the product of organisational micro-practices and competing meanings in the same organisation in relation to an organisation’s interaction with its environment. Deal and Kennedy (1998) define organisational culture as ‘the way things get done around here’, which in extreme cases produces ‘groupthink’ (Janis 1972) and culture is
the most difficult aspect of organisational change. Organisations do not have a single
culture; cultures overlap and conflict, and which predominates is the result of an exercise of
power. Ravasi and Schultze (2006) interpret organisational culture as shared mental
assumptions that guide actor interpretation and action by defining what is appropriate and
thinkable behaviour. The fostering of norms such as trust and reciprocity encourage
coordination and coherence. Organisations are also motivated by the need to avoid blame;
a network’s members are attuned to its (or organisation’s) external reputation and their
reputation relative to other participants. When failure occurs (which it invariably does) they
will engage in blame-avoidance (‘we are all in this together’) but this weakens intra-network
trust and undermines cooperation; blame-avoidance is particularly important in dilemmas
involving high political risk or where failure is catastrophically manifest (Moynihan 2012).
There is a wider question relating to B&R’s portrayal of networks as a wholly new form of
governance. Theirs, and others’, use of networks is frequently metaphorical and descriptive
whereas Social Network Analysis (SNA) can be used to generate explanatory models of the
can be used to explore systematically the creation and evolution of networks and which
interests determine a network’s operation, norms, and who gains (Taylor et al 2012, 26-29).

Whereas interpretivism stresses agency, ideas, and change; this paper stresses structure,
the material, and stability, and the importance of historical institutionalism and
organisational cultures as ‘hardened power’ but path-dependence is not determinist, rather
it constrains and facilitates current behaviour and outcomes. It is not necessary to plunge
into the Differentiated Polity Model (DPM) versus Asymmetric Power Model (APM)
debate (Rhodes 1997; Marsh et al 2003). These stress different layers and levels of analysis so are
not exploring power in one, or the same, dimension and governance does not necessarily
indicate a hollowing-out of the state (Taylor 2000; Taylor et al 2012). Governance as
networks can strengthen the state because power-dependence and functional
segmentation require a coordinator as well as an institution determining the rules of
coordination (Offe 2009, 555). Networks, in this perspective, simply describe how business
is done. Following on from this first point, diverse and contested traditions help us
understand agent behaviour but diversity, contestation and agency do not necessarily signal
diffuse power. This is the ‘Ship of Theseus’ paradox. This has many versions but an example
is the knife possessed by an individual for many years but during this time the knife has had two new blades and three new handles: is it the same knife? Aristotle, for example, sought to resolve the paradox by pointing to formal cause (does the design change?) and final cause (does the intended purpose change)? Deep politics testifies to continuity in design and purpose, the coexistence of stability and change, and shows how change can be grafted onto stable structures. It influences profoundly both how actors interpret and respond to dilemmas as well as influencing the conduct of every-day bureaucratic politics. Deep politics is an institution (North 1990, 3) composed of ideas, relationships, predispositions, and organisations that stimulate responses to dilemmas; it is more than an ideational construct but a powerful (sub-) structure basic to an understanding of the state, reflecting material interests. Both have an affinity with Evans’ (1995) idea of embedded autonomy: of states, embedded in society, but possessing sufficient autonomy to act independently.

Researching the inner-workings of a political process is difficult. There is, obviously, a shortage of hard evidence. Take, for example, the police, an obviously central arm of the state. In 2003 an Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) survey found that only around one-third of police forces had archiving policies and for a majority any contact with a public record office was rare. The provision of publicly accessible archives is voluntary and so there is huge variation in provision; only the Metropolitan Police is subject to statutory public record provisions (www.acpo.police.uk/ProfessionalPractice/InformationManagement.aspx) and, in any event, all official records are subject to weeding. Task another example: discussing the existence or otherwise of a ‘chilling effect’ (that discussions, hitherto confidential would become public acting as a disincentive to frankness and honesty) in policy formulation the Justice select committee noted ‘it would, by its nature, be very difficult to find, hard objective evidence of it. That is why, on this subject, it is necessary at least to consider anecdotes and impressions, albeit they might lack the academic rigour on which we would ideally like to base conclusions’ (HoC 2012a, para 170) with actors using informal meetings, face-to-face meetings and mobile phone calls to preserve confidentiality and autonomy. Evidential and methodological inadequacies means research can degenerate into conspiracy theory but there is ample evidence that deep politics exists and that it influences ‘surface’ politics, as such it draws our attention away from interpretivism’s actor-centredness to issues of structural power. Deep politics is not a system, rather it is an
attitude of mind, a predisposition to see the world in a particular way and behave accordingly.

Interviews are problematic because of the possibility of deception, memory lapse, personal interest, and the effect of organisational culture. Furthermore, no certain connection can be made between observable behaviour and verbal statements, with ‘real’ preferences (Dowding 2004, 138). Interpretivism’s agency focus poses serious questions about how to analyse preferences, particularly the relationship between revealed preferences (behaviour), stated preferences (verbal statements) and actual (unknowable) preferences. The world would, however, be inexplicable if we assumed no relationship existed, thereby denying any rational basis to behaviour. Networks are structures containing actions, in which behaviour and what is conceived of as feasible and desirable, is a product of the interaction of path-dependency and preferences. Actors advance and defend preferences by word and action but, operating in complex environments composed of other rational actors with different preferences but doing the same, they must behave strategically. Accounts of behaviour, practices and institutions are always open to challenge but that does mean these accounts are not true, rather they are incomplete. B&R assume correctly that words and actions mean something and have purposive rationality but deep politics assumes a structured inequality of access and influence and so adds a further analytical layer. It is possible, I think, to discern the contours of deep politics because over the past 15 years a massive amount of relevant raw material has been put in the public domain. Since 1996 there have been some 24 inquiries (under the 1921 and 2005 inquiries acts) such as the ‘Bloody Sunday’ inquiry, Chilcot, Hutton, Leveson and Finucane, as well as others such as the HIP. No definitive account of any event is possible and the job of a political scientist is to provide plausible accounts of events by identifying and explaining patterns, which rests primarily on observing and interpreting behaviour (Dowding 2004, 140-41). The next section examines interpretivism in the context of the Hillsborough disaster.

**Interpreting Hillsborough**

On 15 April 1989 a crush at Sheffield’s Hillsborough stadium during the FA Cup semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forest resulted in 96 deaths and 776 injuries. Putting aside the awful human tragedy Hillsborough had and, as a result of the report of the
Hillsborough Independent Panel (HIP), has major implications for public policy and politics. Hillsborough poses a challenge to interpretivism and network governance because of their focus on the ‘surface’ which ignores the nature of ‘deep’ politics that, like underlying geological strata, influence surface morphology.

What occurred on the day of the Hillsborough disaster was a concerted effort by South Yorkshire Police (SYP) to determine the narrative. Police spokesmen enjoyed privileged and immediate access to the media, SYP (in effect) therefore articulated an ‘official’ account of events reinforced via altering statements on an industrial scale (something noted by the Mr Justice Taylor’s report into Hillsborough) and further reinforcement of the official account came with the coroner’s inquiry and the media. The Taylor report and the victims’ families (http://hfsg.co.uk) rejected this ‘official’ version but their articulation was unable to challenge either the official version’s hegemony or wider institutional inertia. Systemic and systematic bias is well documented and understood by political scientists (Bachrach and Baratz 1970 and Gaventa 1980, for example).

The narrative constructed (Figure 1) to explain Hillsborough reveals how the unequal dynamics of contested histories works, of how one interpretation, articulated by what Stuart Hall et al termed ‘primary definers’ (1978, 183-84), was privileged despite a vocal challenge from the victims’ families (Scraton 2004 for example). The key elements of the police version being were articulated as early as 3.15 pm; that Liverpool fans (many drunk and ticketless) broke into the stadium, rushed down the tunnel into already congested pens, so producing the fatal crush. This interpretation was broadcast widely, framed by the official view of football crowds as an issue of public order, viewed through the ‘lens of hooliganism’. This interpretation solidified (Jemphrey and Berrington 2000) despite the alternative narrative of overcrowding, poor policing and stewarding, and an inadequate response by the emergency services. Allegations about the Liverpool fans from official (and therefore presumed reliable) sources such as the Police Federation, senior police officers, MPs, and others became the dominant interpretation. What is remarkable, and which testifies to the power of institutional inertial bias, is the immunity of this version to challenge (HIP 2012a, 2.12.9).
Hillsborough: Unanimous Verdict

It wasn’t our fault

It wasn’t our fault

Oh well, it must be our fault again

It wasn’t our fault
A revealing insight into the evolution of SYP’s response, and also its cultural and organisational biases, are the minutes of the special meeting of the local Police Federation (27 April 1989), attended by the Chief Constable (HIP 2012b, TFP00000010001). These record a meeting whose deliberations were not expected to become public so it is reasonable to see them as an accurate representation of the police’s web of meaning. They reveal, first, the official narrative’s coherence; and second, a determination to control the agenda. The police found it inconceivable that Taylor would find anyone other than the fans responsible, but Taylor’s interim report (August) emphasised police organisational and operational failures, and criticised senior officers for being less than candid, triggering a counter-attack. On 6 September 1989 Peter Shersby MP (the Police Federation’s parliamentary spokesman) met Douglas Hurd (the Home Secretary) and stressed Taylor’s adverse effect on police morale (the ‘not in the public interest’ argument). A meeting at SYP headquarters on 3 October 1989 (which Shersby attended) developed the full rebuttal. This reiterated the original narrative and challenged Taylor’s legitimacy (and therefore the alternative narrative), a process described as ‘putting the record straight’ and ‘putting our side of the story’; that the disaster was caused by drunken, ticketless Liverpool fans. A meeting, which divided on party lines, at the House of Commons (8 November 1989) arranged by Shersby, listened to Superintendent Bettison present SYP’s case (HIP 2012a, 2.12.92). A Cabinet briefing note of 2 August 1989 (heavily underlined) for the Prime Minister gives a different history:

-- that the main reason for the disaster was the failure of police control;

-- the Sheffield City Council were dilatory and inefficient in exercising their responsibility for safety at the ground;

-- that Sheffield Wednesday were to blame for not acting to ensure that fans could be evenly distributed between the pens on the terraces and at the Leppings Lane end.

Little or no blame is attached to the Liverpool fans (HIP 2012b, 000011301).

It took 23 years for this to become the official version.
Having passed the Football Spectators Act (1989) in response to the Heysel disaster, a piece of legislation on a par with the Dangerous Dogs Act, the government was moving ahead with a contentious membership scheme. Hillsborough initially reinforced the government’s determination to press-on, but the scheme was abandoned after the final Taylor report.

More serious was Hillsborough’s consequences for the police. The government was pulled in two directions: events seemed to confirm the low quality of many senior officers but there was an obvious reluctance to weaken police morale. The Chief Whip, for example, felt that once the ‘emotion had subsided and the facts about the behaviour of the crowd would have been appreciated, the incident will be seem to stem more from rowdyism than from the police’s response’ (HIP2012b. A. Turnbull to Prime Minister, 18 April 1989 COO00000008201). A memorandum on the Merseyside Police’s reaction found ‘a good deal of sympathy’ with SYP, and ‘the fact that large numbers of Liverpool fans turned up without tickets … was getting lost sight of in attempts to blame the police.’ Hillsborough was part of a repeated pattern of ‘drunken Liverpool fans [causing] disaster’ (HIP2012b. Carolyn Sinclair to Prime Minister, 20 April 1989. COO000000097001). Judging by the ferocity of her underlining the Prime Minister was deeply worried about criticism of the police. Douglas Hurd, the Home Secretary, proposed government ‘welcome’ the report. The briefing noted Taylor stressed police failings and their responsibility for the disaster, arguing the SY Chief Constable would have to resign; it conceded police morale and confidence would suffer and football hooligans would feel vindicated. Mrs Thatcher wrote, ‘What do we mean by “welcoming the broad thrust of the report”? The broad thrust is devastating criticism of the police. Is that for us to welcome?’ (HIP2012b. Caroline Slocock to Prime Minister, 2 August 1989. COO000000114001. Original emphasis).

That Mrs Thatcher (or any Prime Minister) would be concerned about Taylor’s impact on police morale is in the ‘dog bites man’ category. The government’s response was to ignore criticism of the police, focussing instead on Taylor’s recommendations on crowd safety. HIP reveals the unresponsiveness (or inertia) to external pressure. Take, for example, David Cameron’s apology: ‘the families have long believed that some of the authorities attempted to create a completely unjust account of events that sought to blame the fans for what happened’ (Hansard, 12 October 2012: cols.283-84). Ample data was available from Taylor onwards to support a persuasive alternative account, an alternative that was handled not by
refutation or rejection but by ignoring it and relying on the obstacles created by procedures that concentrated on explanation, not establishing responsibility and accountability. This produced the paradox that ‘everybody knew’ SYP were primarily responsible but no-one was to blame, as was demonstrated by the failed private prosecutions. A comparable case are the trials after ‘The Battle of Orgreave’ (June 1985) involving NUM pickets and police at a coke works near Sheffield. When police evidence (on oath) against arrested mineworkers was disproved, cases were dropped, the accused acquitted and no action (‘not in the public interest’) was taken against police officers (Taylor 2005, 224-226). All that was required to maintain the status quo was inaction that sustained the ‘double injustice’ of ‘the failure of the state … and the denigration of the deceased’ for 23 years (Hansard, 12 October 2012: cols.285-86).

Incorrect statements became ‘facts’ and official decisions (the 3.15pm cut-off for time of death, for example, was reinforced by the professional legitimacy and legal authority of the coroner) neutralised arguments and alternative interpretations, this was despite an alternative narrative that was sufficiently coherent to lead Jack Straw, as Home Secretary, to ask Lord Justice Stuart-Smith to explore whether or not there should be a new inquiry. Stuart-Smith concluded (Cm.3878), however, there was insufficient evidence to do so and one would only confirm Taylor’s findings. Stuart-Smith was presented with new evidence (doctored police statements) but recommended against a new inquiry arguing the new evidence did not materially alter what was already known. However, the opening of the SYP police records (including the altered police statements) enabled Andy Burnham (then culture secretary) to press for a full disclosure of all relevant public papers. This unprecedented disclosure brought out the truth in a way that legal and political institutions and processes did not, shedding light on the operation of deep politics. The comprehensive failure documented by the HIP exposes (and questions fundamentally) the ethos, as well as operation, of state institutions. B&R’s use of tradition has been criticised for being insufficiently robust to carry the explanatory load required; my sense is that tradition (or something very like it, such as organisational culture) can actually carry a great deal of explanatory weight.

HIP (created in January 2010) operated on the principle of maximum disclosure and, using its research and analysis of 400,000 documents, produce a comprehensive and authoritative
analytical narrative. HIP addressed a different constituency (the victims’ families and the wider public) in a different way compared to previous inquiries. HIP operated outside the established rules of the game and challenged a basic component of deep politics, namely determining what information would be released. The official narrative reinforced the perception of football fans as violent thugs that permeated the network (the clubs, Football Association, local authorities, police, government and emergency services) and this perception drove the official response to the dilemma posed by Hillsborough. We can see clearly the dilemma raised by Hillsborough: undermining confidence in the police was not in the public interest but it was also in the public interest to establish what had happened in order to restore confidence in the police. The dead fans’ supporters articulated an alternative (and truthful) narrative that was largely inaudible to a range of institutions; there was little institutional architecture to support this alternative narrative, which demonstrates the existence of in-built, systematic inertial bias. Only after 23 years of external pressure was the ‘official’ truth debunked with the release of massive amounts of information from public and private institutions that provide an instance of deep politics in action.

This casts light on the state’s historical identity (identity being hard to change), an identity protected by secrecy, expressed in interests, ideas and language creating autonomous institutions resistant to change (Vincent 1998, 13). Bevir and Rhodes’ thesis (2003, 6) is that a diverse range of actors indicates a permeable state; diversity and permeability have implications for the distribution of power as well as accountability and responsiveness. Hillsborough shows a failure to deliver accountability, how a narrative can be constructed by those who benefit from the status quo, and how that narrative is developed within, and promulgated by, actors in response to the values and beliefs that condition the surface of politics. We now move on to consider metagovernance.

**Metagovernance**

Defined as the ‘governing of governing’, the ‘governance of governance’, or the ‘regulation of self-regulation’, meta-governance is concerned with the norms shaping and steering governing (Jessop 2002, 240-243). Metagovernance means hierarchy, markets and networks co-exist with, and rest on, a common base that shapes governance in each policy sector
(Marsh 2011, 43-45). The state, present in all levels and modes of governance, shapes hierarchy, markets and networks and so no institution other than the state can determine metagovernance. We cannot therefore accord primacy to networks and must conclude that network governance underestimates the state’s role and overestimates the autonomy of social actors. To repeat, the state is not as hollow as we think.

Metagovernance coordinates (or ‘collibrates’) modes of governance and can, therefore, promote the marginalisation of the state (hollowing-out) in favour of multiple modes of governance. However, I argue that hierarchy remains fundamental. The decisions influencing the relationship between modes of governance are taken by the state, decisions that according to network governance weaken government and the state’s influence. Sørensen argues elected politicians engage with institutional design, construct narratives and promote participation as a counter-weight to their perceived loss of control (2006, 98-114). Politicians, however, seldom attempt to alter deep politics because deep and surface polities operate on different time-scales (for example, the electoral cycle) and because the ethos and practice of deep politics are congenial and valuable to politicians when in office.

I look at two examples of meta-governance: secrecy and public order, both are relevant to Hillsborough (the perception of football crowds as a public order issue and the instinct to cover-up) and central to the operation of the polity. Secrecy is both an objective to be achieved and a cultural artefact influencing how actors (individuals and organisations) behave; public order is foundational, being concerned with what is permissible in the public sphere and both are intimately connected with the distribution of power. Secrecy and public order combine in the idea of the public interest, which is concerned with state autonomy and the management of the public sphere.

**Secrecy**

Central to understanding Hillsborough is secrecy; not just the denial of information but the processes of deciding what information ought to be released. Hennessy describes secrecy as ‘the bonding material which holds the rambling structure of central government together. Secrecy is built into the calcium of a British policy-maker’s bones ... It is the very essence of the Establishment view of good government ... The rule is that the fewer the people who know, the better, including insiders’ (1989, 346). Hennessy’s analysis goes wider than the
bureaucratic-organisational culture, portraying secrecy as national-political cultural trait; however Vincent argues ‘It was not so much that British political culture was inherently secretive, but rather that in the British version of a liberal state, secrecy was inherently a cultural form’ (1993, 314 added emphasis). For Weber secrecy was fundamental to bureaucratic power ‘and nothing is so fanatically defended by the bureaucracy…’ (Weber 1970, 233). Secrecy determines the bureaucracy’s relationship with the ‘outside’ and one of Marsh’s case studies (2008, 265-66) is freedom of information. This ‘culture of secrecy’ is more nuanced than merely hiding information and must cope with change as well as stability, both of which are deeply embedded in a dense web of values and meanings founded on the possession secret knowledge, which enhances trust and defines probity amongst those privy to information. The key is not the concealment of information ‘but the right to determine its release … to judge what was good for the nation at large’ (Vincent 1998, 16). The state becomes synonymous with the public. The basis of solidarity and control is the possession of information, which is essential if elites are to defend their autonomy. This culture was challenged by demands for freedom of information, a demand justified by declining trust in institutions accused of inefficiency and protected by their control of information from criticism and modernisation.

In 2000 the Labour government passed the Freedom of Information Act (FoIA). Although much watered down from its original proposals, the FoIA was sold as a major modification of the governing tradition, a major augmentation of democracy that would improve the quality of public debate and policy. Describing the FoIA as his biggest regret the ex-Prime Minister indulges in uncharacteristic self-flagellation: “You idiot. You naïve, foolish, irresponsible nincompoop. There is really no description of stupidity, no matter how vivid, that is adequate. I quake at the imbecility of it” (Blair 2010, 516-17). Tony Blair concluded that ‘It’s not practical … If you are trying to take a difficult decision and you’re weighing up the pros and cons, you have frank conversations … And if those conversations are … liable to be highlighted in particular ways, you are going to be very cautious. That’s why it’s not a sensible thing’ (The Guardian, 1 September 2010).

Historically, this culture has remained inviolate, irrespective of the party in government (Brooke 2010, Naylor 2009, Rogers 1997, Wilkinson 2009, for example). Secrecy was vital for governing and ‘However impatient [politicians] might be with the culture of Whitehall, they
had no intention of compromising its right to determine when and on what terms it shared its confidential knowledge with the people. The secrecy of keeping secrets remained in place’ (Vincent 1998, 310). This can be seen clearly in the memoirs of New Labour ministers (Diamond and Richards 2008, 189-191) and, despite Maude’s criticisms, applies to the Coalition (BBC 2012). Secrecy is a code, justified by the over-riding need to sustain the autonomy and therefore integrity of decision-making and the prior discussions and advice on which decisions were based. To avoid any ‘chilling-effect’ on these discussions a ‘safe space’ is required ‘within which policy can be formulated and recorded with a degree of confidentiality’ (HoC 2012a, 54). Arguments supporting the safe space are those of good government and preserving the Westminster model, particularly ministerial and collective responsibility and the civil service’s ability to give frank advice. The default setting of this culture is risk-averse and if challenged its response, as described in the Butler report, is evasion and retreat (HoC 2004, paras 610-11). The reflexive response at the heart of the policy-making process remains an expectation of privacy as fundamental to good and effective government that defended autonomy from external pressure.

The FoIA does delineate a ‘safe space’ composed of exemptions (subject to a public interest test); the most important being s.35 (formulation and development of public policy) and s.36 (prejudicial to the effective conduct of public policy) and the Information Commissioner has upheld the sanctity of the ‘safe space’. Nonetheless, the Justice select committee conceded that the act and the possibility of disclosure could change behaviour because it was now unclear what constituted safe or un-safe space (HoC 2012a, para 166). Hazel et al’s (2010, 2011) relatively sanguine analysis of the FoIA’s impact on policy formulation was disputed by civil servants and politicians. Lord (Gus) O’Donnell and Jack Straw’s evidence eloquently and forcefully demonstrated the strength of the culture of secrecy (defined as the power to determine what information should be made public) and that those who best know government should define what remains secret (HoC 2012b, Ev 47 and Ev64).

Reflecting on this, the Justice committee concluded, ‘We see no reason why former senior ministers and officials in particular would flag this up as a concern if they did not genuinely believe it to be so …’ (HoC 2012a, para 200).

The tradition of secrecy at the heart of policy formation is a story of a powerful culture (albeit not unchallenged) reinforcing inertia and there is little evidence of a substantial
erosion of this culture (HoC 2012a, para 187). The implications of this for interpretivism are complex. At one level this is exactly what one would expect. Some aspects of policy-formulation and decision-making must remain secret, what matters is who decides what remains secret, and secrecy’s centrality to, and utility for, governance is readily admitted by practitioners and academics. Secrecy reinforces the power asymmetry at the core of policy formation something that is then nested in network governance. Governance is multi-levelled and variable (some networks are more open than others), other arenas are dominated by hierarchy or markets, interpretivism has tended to focus on open networks but one of the strengths of B&R’s approach is its interest in the micro-level with individuals (O’Donnell, Straw, for example) as the bearers of tradition that influences their beliefs and actions, but beliefs can change. Blair’s position is in this respect interesting: supporting and acting within one tradition in one institutional context (Labour in opposition), developing appropriate preferences (FoI) and legislating; then, as a result of exposure to different traditions, events, organisational cultures and context (governing) Blair changed his revealed preferences.

Order

From the late-18th/early-19th century public order, the highest of high politics, was a central concern of the British state. The interaction of liberalism, common law and statute law rendered defining ‘order’ difficult (for example the Public Order Acts 1936 and 1986, responded to specific problems) and this suited governments who shifted responsibility to local police forces, albeit subject to central direction when required. Reinforcing this was the narrative of police and people in harmony; police power was reciprocal and part of a wider negotiation between state and society. The police were given considerable freedom to determine what order was and how it should be secured when controlling public spaces, a response not determined by, confined to, any ideological tradition or party. The result was the growing political significance of chief constables and the professionalization of policing that were encapsulated in the police’s operational independence and autonomy from central and local government, reinforced by uncertain (or even absent) ‘constitutional definitions and constraints’ (Townsend 1993, 138). The Police Act (1964) s5(1) expressed the tradition ‘operational’ freedom and an absence of ‘political’ control which, in part, explains the police’s hostile reaction to the elected police and crime commissioners.
The concept of order remained deliberately vague and enforcement raised profound difficulties for the police. Closely defining order clashed with both the tradition of the police as the civilian in uniform, and with professionalization that promoted the police’s social isolation as well as their operational autonomy. The response to these dilemmas combined myth-making (police and strikers playing football during the General Strike, the ritualised and, by implication, implicit behaviour of police and pickets in the 1970s) coupled with regular moral panics over a decline in civilised values. When events challenged the image of policing by consent this was blamed on, for example, the unforeseen scale of events, a lack of resources, or a ‘bad apple’, rather than a response in line with fundamental organisational values. Animating this was the notion of the police striking a ‘balance’ between, for example, the public right to protest and a private right to tranquillity. The balance invariably favoured order, reflecting a view that despite the isolation of policing from scrutiny or public engagement, except at arm’s-length via police authorities, the police enjoyed a unique insight into the public interest and the public interest was served best by their autonomy. The result, Townsend concludes, that by the mid-1980s an ‘organizational culture’ had developed in policing ‘that was radically out of line with the consensual assumptions on which the English police system was founded’ (1993, 154).

After the publication of the Scarman report (1986) on public order an explosion of community-policing initiatives sought to revivify and reinforce ‘traditional’ notions of policing and flexibility in negotiating public order(s). Events showed ‘balance’ remained at the heart of the dilemma between different types of public order policing (community policing versus ‘going in hard’), a dilemma that reoccurred in the 1980s (the miners’ strike), 1990s (poll tax protests) and the 2000s (the occupy protests and 2011 riots). Responses to this recurring policing dilemma are open to interpretivist analysis (Bevir and Rhodes 2006, chapter 9) but public order, the foundational police task, is much more difficult a proposition to explore but thanks to ‘data-mines’, like the HIP report and archive, it is open to analysis.

Neither organisationally nor culturally are the police opposed to community policing, which in some ways articulates a classic view of ‘good’ policing, nor are police hostile to participation in networks. What they fear is that openness and integration into networks means a loss of autonomy and control. We can see secrecy in operation in two arenas –
government and the police – which helps to explain why the official version of Hillsborough was so different to what actually happened. B&R consider these questions in chapter 9 of *Governance Stories* (2006). They note the police have been under external pressure to reform to promote effectiveness, efficiency and accountability but, despite their evidence (and that of others) they reject the conservatism of police culture (Waddington 1999, Barton 2003, Loftus 2010 for example) as an explanation. The choice between command and control/bureaucracy or networks is not either/or but is refracted through the beliefs of officers at all levels and the immediate policing task. Simply put, command and control is more appropriate for some tasks (public order), networks for others (crime prevention) but the police’s fundamental concern remains maintaining operational autonomy in the control of public spaces and this means the command and control model remains the basic definer.

For political and operational reasons, as well to external political pressure, the police will participate in networks but the evidence (including B&R’s) shows a deep suspicion and dislike of openness which can open operational activity to those with an inadequate understanding of how policing works. Nonetheless, adaptation occurs. The SYP, for example, responding to the dilemmas created by Orgreave and Hillsborough revised its approach, adopting a more facilitative approach and a more open attitude towards the media in an effort to restore public confidence and police morale (Waddington 2011). B&R note (2006, 163) interviewees were confident in their ability to navigate and operate in the ‘network’ world but on closer inspection the responses suggest strategic adaptation in response to deep politics. The organisational culture of the police was critical for the response to Hillsborough that sought to avoid blame and reputational damage and expressed incredulity that any explanation other than the police’s would be legitimate. This is shown in Taylor’s acerbic comments that ‘the quality of [police] evidence was in inverse proportion to their rank … with some notable exceptions, the senior officers in command were defensive and evasive witnesses’ (Cm765 1989, paras 279-280). Although untruthful the police’s interpretation of events was speedily disseminated and SYP (literally) closed ranks, refusing ‘to concede they were in any respect at fault … the police case was to blame the fans … and blame the Club’ (Cm765 1989, para 285).

Innovations in policing analysed using an interpretivist and governance analysis do not touch the basic dilemma of policing. Effectiveness requires loyalty, discipline and *esprit de*...
corps, but these also create an insider mentality, and an interest in protecting the organisation from reputational damage that could undermine police morale and public confidence. The key defences are secrecy and autonomy, hierarchical traits prior to network governance. A powerful organisational culture and socialisation permeates policing; its effect is to merge self-interest and public duty. The ‘canteen culture’ characteristic of lower ranks is composed of myths, narratives, rituals, and attitudes that bind (negatively and positively) a group and an equivalent exists for senior officer culture. Riener’s classic, *Chief Constables* (1991), stressed their determination to protect operational autonomy, even while conceding that the public order crises of the 1980s had put the police under increased scrutiny and changes in policing style would be required. Openness and accountability was unappealing because no viable mechanism for securing openness and accountability existed, openness and accountability implied a loss of control and autonomy and, as the Metropolitan Police’s *Public Order Review* (1986) put it, “there will come a time when they [the police] must decide that some voices count for more than others” (quoted in Townsend 1993, 199). Caless (2011) emphasises the importance of personal patronage by senior officers, as well as networking, political savvy and technical competence as central to recruiting successive generations of senior officers. *Policing at the Top* emphasises the depth of suspicion of ‘external’ bodies (police authorities, HMIC, PCC, the Home Office, and crime and police commissioners) ‘interfering’ in policing, whilst recognising that such interference was a fact of life. These are seen as the locus of politically motivated amateurism that undermines the effectiveness of professional policing and, therefore, damages the public interest. Policing is, then, a prime example of the path-dependency at the heart of deep politics.

**Conclusions**

Offe argues governance has ‘a tendentious blindness for questions of power, distribution, and conflict’ (2009, 55). Valuable though the interpretivist and networks approaches are, there are aspects of politics that resist B&R’s approach. Networks do capture multi-level and multi-actor interactions but networks do not necessarily supplant hierarchy or signal a diffusion of power. Politics and policy-making remain suffused by inequalities and power asymmetries that privilege some actors, interests and narratives over others.
Empirically there is much to be gained from asking actors to explain what they are (or what they think they are) doing. The pitfalls of oral testimony are well-known and analysing these narratives cannot provide a complete account or explanation of events. Couple oral (and other) evidence with SNA, however, and there is a greater possibility of exploring systematically relationships and, therefore, the distribution of power and reward. The archives of material produced by inquiries offer a mine of information. Using the HIP report as an illustration, I argue for an explicit recognition of meanings deeper than declared preferences, of strategic cultures that influence organisations and their members who comprise networks, strategic cultures that are highly resistant to change. The country may be governed through networks but is it governed by networks? The state cannot be reduced to just another actor; hierarchy remains dominant and too close a focus on networks obscures the degree of continuity (even inertia) in the conduct of politics.

Deep politics are not easy to study but it can be done and the effort is worth it because this takes us into the realm of metagovernance. Only the state is in a position to determine what constitutes metagovernance. Hierarchy and metagovernance are prior to, and constitutive of, networks and governance, as can be seen from the two cases – secrecy and public order. Metagovernance and the inequalities it expressed were crucial to the resilience of the original Hillsborough narrative. Metagovernance also helps to explain the power of path-dependence and the ‘Theseus paradox’ in politics: that continuity and change are not exclusive and change can be drafted onto stable structures.

Networks exist but are not a wholly new governing mode and there exist underlying structural influences, robust patterns of beliefs that socialise individuals and organisations into resilient webs of meaning and action. Hierarchy casts a very long shadow indeed and, as I noted earlier, the state is rarely as hollow as we think.

**Bibliography**


BBC (2012) ‘Civil servants blocking government policy ‘unacceptable’ – Maude’
www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-19797736


