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1

Introduction

The importance of British government departments both constitutionally and politically is unquestionable. Daintith and Page emphasise the constitutional centrality of departments (1999: 6):

Our executive (while still conceived of as a unitary crown) is made up of departments, and it is normally to the heads of these departments (who are usually but not invariably ministers) not the government as a whole, that powers, and resources, are allocated by law.

Departments are a concentration of political and bureaucratic resources. They are the source of most policy and they hold overall responsibility for delivering policies. As such, the activities of the core executive occur within the departmental framework. The majority of ministers operate within, and draw most of their resources from, departments. Officials are based in, and loyal to, departments. In fact, most of the key concerns of those analysing British government – for example the relationship between ministers and civil servants or between civil servants and interest groups and the power of the prime minister – are only meaningful in the context of departments.

Despite their importance, there is an absence of research into government departments. Only the Treasury has received much attention (Hecló and Wildavsky 1981; Thain and Wright 1996; Chapman 1988; Deakin and Parry 2000), while there have been few studies of the operation of other departments. In addition, the studies undertaken have been largely descriptive and atheoretical (for a review of the existing literature see Smith, Marsh and Richards 1995). This paucity of work results, in large part, from an over-concentration on the role of the

prime minister (see Baker 1993; Madgwick 1991; James 1992; Kavanagh and Seldon 1999), an emphasis which was exacerbated by a fascination with Margaret Thatcher and her policy style (King 1985; Minogue and Biddiss, 1988).

Departments are an important and under-researched area. In addition, a study of departments is long overdue given the extent of change in central government over the last two and a half decades. This change has been described in great detail by a number of authors (Hennessy 1989; Pollitt 1990; Fry 1995). Here, the key point is that during the Conservatives' period of office from 1979 to 1997, there were three major reports into British central government: the Financial Management Initiative in 1982; the Next Steps Report in 1988; and the Senior Management Review (1995), with the linked fundamental Expenditure Review (for details see Smith 1999a; Richards 1997 and Chapter 3 below). These reports aimed fundamentally to change the culture, structure and management procedures of central government departments. Of course, we shall assess the extent to which those aims were achieved, but there is no doubt that the period upon which we focus saw greater change than any equivalent period, certainly in this century. As such, it deserves close attention.

Our aim will be to examine the operation of four departments between 1974 and 1997 in order to establish the extent of, and reasons for, the changes that have occurred. Three of our research decisions need brief justification here, although we return to the last two in a methodological appendix (see below pp. 251–5).

First, we concentrated upon the period between 1974 and 1997 for two reasons. As we have already emphasised, it was a period of significant change in central government; and, also, we used 1974 as a starting point to give us some limited perspective on the Conservative years. This last point raises another issue. It would have been interesting to compare the new Labour government with the Conservative. However, the vast majority of our interviews dealt only with the Conservatives' period in office, as most of them were conducted between late 1995 and early 1998, either before Labour were in power or before our interviewees had any perspective on Labour's time in office. We do have some interviews with civil servants and interest group officials undertaken in 1998 and early 1999 and, as such, a number of chapters include some consideration of the period since 1997. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that we use this material mainly to throw more light on the Conservative years.

Second, our study is of four departments: the Home Office; the Department of Trade and Industry; the Department of Social Security; and the now dismantled Department of Energy. Time and resources prevented a study of all departments and no set of departments would be 'representative'. However, our choice gave us a good spread of departments in terms of size, resources, functions and the extent of change that occurred in the period. We explain our choice in more detail in the methodological appendix.

Third, our data are drawn from 183 semi-structured interviews conducted with ministers, civil servants and interest group representatives who, between 1974 and 1997, were associated with our four departments. All the interviews reported were conducted by one or more of the authors, and, where the interviewee agreed, the interview was taped and subsequently transcribed.

Clearly then, we have not undertaken a behavioural study. There are two reasons for our approach. Most prosaically, it is not possible to observe or shadow civil servants and ministers. As such, we must depend on reports and interpretations of events by participants, and of course, on our interpretations of what we are told. As far as possible, we tried to ask a variety of respondents, politicians, civil servants and interest groups representatives for their 'version' of events and interpretation of motivations; this ensures a degree of triangulation so that the researcher can compare accounts and explanations. However, the researcher must always be aware of the perils of this type of research (see Devine 1995; Richards 1996).

More fundamentally, we are not positivists. We do not believe that there is a 'real' world out there that we can discover merely by using the 'correct', to most positivists scientific, methods. This is not the place for a long exposition of our epistemological position (for a brief outline of the position we adopt see Marsh et al. 1999). Suffice it to say here that we are critical realists. In our view, there is a real world 'out there' that is independent of our construction of it; this much we have in common with positivists and it distinguishes us from relativists (for an outline of these different positions see Furlong and Marsh 2001). However, to us, while social phenomena exist independently of our interpretation, or discursive construction of them, nevertheless that discursive construction affects outcomes. The importance of this distinction will become clearer below when we discuss the structure/agency question.

In fact, there are two related issues here: the status of the respondents' views; and the status of the researcher's interpretations. An

agent's interpretation of the world, which itself may be structured by a dominant discourse, has a crucial effect on outcomes. So, if we are trying to explain why there have been changes in British central government we need to know how agents, whether civil servant or ministers, understand their world and the projected changes to it. In effect, we present a view of the British political elite's interpretation of their world and the role of departments within it and we attempt to establish both how that view/interpretation is affected by structural change and how, in turn, it changes structures. As such, interviewing those involved within, and with, departments is crucial.

Nevertheless, we have to recognise that the interviewees' views are partial in both senses of the word. S/he will be narrating a particular story; probably one in which her/his role is exaggerated. One way forward, which we adopt, is to triangulate as much as possible, getting as many different views on, or interpretations of, an event or a relationship as practical. However, there are problems and we encountered a particular one in our study. Our interview material with ministers, and particularly civil servants, indicated that both tend to have a strong view of how policy is made. In our view, civil servants and ministers have a very agency-centred view of changes within departments and the policy-making process. They think of politics and policy-making in terms of the role of individuals and the interactions between them. Obviously, individuals are important in structural, cultural and policy change, but, in our view, it is important not to neglect the manner in which structures constrain or facilitate the actions of agents.

A second key issue is the status of the researcher. Data is of no use until it has been interpreted and it is the researcher who does the interpreting. Of course, in large part, one's interpretation is shaped by the theoretical framework one uses and, for this reason, we outline our position and concerns at some length below. However, we also quote extensively from our interviews to allow the reader to assess our interpretations of what was said. We have used a fairly standard procedure in quoting from our interviews: civil servants are never named, while ministers and interest group officials are named, unless we were specifically asked not to do so.

Developing a theoretical framework

One of the weaknesses of most existing studies of British central government, and this reflects a weakness with the study of British politics

more generally, is that they are atheoretical. We are usually presented with an analysis of an institution, for example Parliament or a department, that examines how it operates, but the study is not located within the context of broader questions about the nature of governance in Britain and fails to utilise meta-theoretical discussions, for example on structure and agency or the role of institutions and ideas, to help provide a more systematic explanation of outcomes. As such, we endorse the arguments of the editors of the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (The editors 1999: 3):

Knowledge is not theory neutral. It is the explicit, or perhaps more usually implicit, theoretical assumptions that we make which influence what we study, how we study it and how we interpret the results which are generated. In other words, theory is not an optional extra; it underpins all the empirical studies that we undertake.

Our broader view on British governance is based upon a sympathetic critique of Rhodes's differentiated polity model. In this section, we shall begin with an exposition of Rhodes's position; our critique of it will emerge throughout the book and we develop it more systematically in the conclusion (for an overview of our view see Marsh, Richards and Smith, 2001). However, in the final part of this section, we also outline our position on three seminal issues given our concerns in this volume: the power structure in Britain and how it should be conceptualised; the structure/agency problem; and the relationship between institutions and ideas.

Departments and governance in Britain

In recent years there has been a growing literature on changing forms or patterns of governance in Britain (see Rhodes, 1997, 2000; Bevir and Rhodes 2001). This is an important development for us, given that it implies that there have been significant changes in the operation of the core executive, and of course departments, which is a key focus of this book. Rhodes argues that the dominant view of conceptualising British politics has been the Westminster model, the key characteristics of which are:

- parliamentary sovereignty
- accountability through free and fair elections

- majority party control over the executive
- strong cabinet government
- central government dominance
- doctrine of ministerial responsibility
- non-political civil servants

As such, the Westminster model suggests that, while the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty underpins the institutions and processes of British politics, the way the system operates is based upon two linked characteristics of the British political system: a first-past-the-post electoral system, which, while it holds the executive accountable at periodic free and fair elections, almost inevitably gives one party an overall majority; and fairly tight party discipline which, together with the electoral system, produces majority government, strong cabinet government and executive dominance of the legislature.

Rhodes takes strong issue with the Westminster model and offers an alternative that he calls the differentiated polity model. Its main features are:

- governance
- power dependence
- policy networks
- a segmented executive
- intergovernmental relations
- a hollowed-out state

The very use of the term 'governance', rather than government, is revealing; governance is a broader term implying the involvement of actors well beyond the core executive. At the same time, the view is that the core executive itself is not a simple unified whole; there will be divisions within Cabinet, between departments and among civil servants and ministers. More broadly, Rhodes suggests that the Westminster model is also wrong to see politics as a zero-sum game with the prime minister dominating ministers, ministers dominating civil servants or central government dominating local government. Rather, there are a series of exchange relationships; each actor possesses resources that the other needs.

So, for example, the two models differ considerably in their view of the Civil Service. In the Westminster model, civil servants are non-political, unlike in the US or France, but they are also 'good and

faithful servants'. In this view, civil servants give policy advice to ministers and then carry out the minister's decisions. Of course, this is only one model of the nature of minister/civil servant relations. In the 1970s politicians (see Benn 1981) and academics (Kellner and Crowther Hunt 1980) increasingly argued that civil servants were the dominant partners, with ministers becoming the creatures of their department. This model became common currency, and perhaps the 'accepted wisdom', when it was enshrined in the popular TV programme, *Yes Minister*.

In contrast, Rhodes argues that there is a problem with both these formulations because they treat the relationship as though it were a zero-sum power game. In Rhodes's view, it is better understood as an exchange relationship. Ministers need civil servants to provide advice and help in the implementation of policy. Civil servants need ministers to win resources for the department from the prime minister/Treasury/ cabinet and promote and defend the department's interests in Cabinet, Parliament and, increasingly, Europe. As such, on most occasions, and in most ways, relationships are better understood as a positive-sum game.

In focusing upon the broader context of governance, Rhodes also pays particular attention to the role of policy networks. The German and Dutch literature on policy networks suggests that networks have replaced hierarchy and markets as the central mode of governance (see Marsh: 1998, ch. 1) and, to an extent, Rhodes draws on this literature. However, the British literature on networks is more circumspect (see Marsh and Rhodes (eds) 1992a; Smith 1993; Marsh (ed.) 1998; and for a critique see Dowding 1995). Actually, the chief proponents of this British view do not see tight policy networks as omnipresent or omnipotent; rather they view the presence and influence of networks as empirical questions. Of course, to the extent that tight policy networks do exist and are not dominated by government actors, then the role of departments as the key government actors in the policy-making process is more limited than the Westminster model implies.

Despite all this, perhaps the most radical aspect of the Rhodes model is his emphasis upon the hollowing-out of the British state (see Rhodes 1997; also Weller, Bakvis and Rhodes 1997). Rhodes argues that its authority, autonomy and power have been reduced. Authority and power have dispersed: upwards, to Europe and other international political and economic institutions; downwards, through agencies, quangos and, more recently, the introduction of devolution; and out-

wards, through privatisation, marketisation and policy networks. Of course, to the extent that there has been hollowing out, then a, if not the, key feature of the Westminster model is undermined; the strong central executive.

One of our aims, then, is to assess the utility of Rhodes's differentiated polity model. More specifically, we shall address the following questions:

- How important a role do interest groups play in the policy-making process?
- Does the government dominate most policy networks?
- What is the nature of relationship between the prime minister and departments? Does the prime minister dominate departments?
- How segmented is the core executive?
- To what extent has the state been hollowed out?

In addition, the apparent threats to the traditional Westminster model raise questions concerning the nature of the relationship between civil servants and ministers and, as such, we are concerned with the issue of whether the nature of the dependency relationships between officials and politicians has changed to the extent that both the traditional constitutional rules, and the more informal 'rules of the game', no longer apply.

The theoretical issues

As we argued above, in explaining the changes in the structure and culture of our departments we shall take a position on three key theoretical issues: the question of power; the structure/agency question; and the relationship between institutions and ideas. As we shall see, the three sets of issues crosscut one another.

(i) Power

Although this is the most crucial question, it needs less exposition because it has been well aired. However, three points are important here. First, the dominant perspective in studies of British politics is pluralism (see Marsh et al. 1999; Marsh 2001). Second, Rhodes's differentiated polity model is based upon a sophisticated pluralist conception of the distribution of power in Britain. Third, in our view, power is much more concentrated than pluralism implies. Each of these points deserves brief consideration.

Rhodes's differentiated polity model is essentially a pluralist model; although it is a sophisticated elite or reformed pluralist variant (on modern pluralism see Smith 1995; for the most sophisticated statement of modern pluralism see McFarland 1987). To Rhodes, as we saw, power is dispersed throughout the polity, at least among various elite groups. So, power is not exercised by a strong central government, rather it is present throughout the polity and expressed in and through a complicated series of exchange relations. As such, we need to understand the exchanges within the segmented executive (between the prime minister and the Cabinet, the departments and the Treasury, ministers and civil servants etc.), between central and local government (both disaggregated) and between government and interest groups (again disaggregated and occurring within policy networks). Rhodes's analysis is an elite pluralists one because it acknowledges the existence of competing elites and plays down the role of the electorate and Parliament. In addition, unlike many pluralists he does acknowledge the importance of structures as constraints on the actions of agents. Nevertheless, Rhodes retains the key core proposition of pluralism: that power is diffused.

To a large extent of course, the question of the utility of Rhodes's differentiated polity model is an empirical one. However, no empirical investigation is theory-neutral; one's theoretical position affects one's definition, methods and empirical focus. So, it is as well to admit at the outset that we are not pluralists. In our view, power is concentrated. Actually, there are two aspects of this position, one of which is more important here. First, in our view, we expect to find that central government in Britain is more powerful than the differentiated polity suggests. Indeed, our view is that Britain, as the Westminster model suggests, retains a powerful executive. So, although Rhodes is right to emphasise that power is not a zero-sum game and that British government is based upon a series of exchange relationships, the balance of that exchange rests heavily in favour of the powerful executive. Second, although that strong executive has significant autonomy, it operates within a broader social, political and economic system that is characterised by structured inequality. This structured inequality is reflected in the privileged access which some interests have to government and, thus, it shapes, although by no means determines, political outcomes. This is not the place to develop this argument (see Marsh 2001), but we shall return to this issue both in Chapter 8 and in the conclusion to this book.

(ii) Structure and agency: a dialectical approach

The structure/agency debate is one of the most important within social science. However, most social science authors tend to privilege either structural or intentional explanation and the position they adopt is strongly influenced by the power theory with which they are implicitly or explicitly working. So, for example, Dunleavy's bureau-shaping approach to bureaucratic change focuses upon the interests of civil servants and explains the introduction of Next Steps Agencies in terms of his exposition of their preferences (see below pp. 156–68). In contrast, other pluralist authors have emphasised the role of Margaret Thatcher in shaping the changes in British central government in the 1980s. For example, some see her as politicising the Civil Service, while others argue that the reason Civil Service reform was successful in the 1980s, in contrast to previous attempts, was because of Thatcher's active support. However, all these authors use intentional explanations and, as we suggested earlier, this is a view that is shared by most politicians and civil servants. There are fewer structural explanations of central government change, although Kingdon (1999) offers a Marxist explanation while some of the new institutionalist literature (for a review see Peters 1999), particularly historical institutionalism, with its emphasis upon path-dependency, has structuralist, and non-pluralist, roots.

We shall return to some of these issues in subsequent chapters. However, our key point here is that both intentional and structural explanations take too simplistic an approach to the relationship between structure and agency (for reviews of the structure/agency literature see Hay 1995 and McAnulla 2001). Our own view follows inevitably from our epistemological position. We see the relationship between structure and agency as dialectical. Agents operate within structured contexts that constrain or facilitate their actions. As such, these structured contexts tend to make it more likely that agents will take certain actions; in the term used by historical institutionalists there is 'path dependency'. At the same time, structures are not unchanging; in fact they change in large part because of the strategic decisions of agents co-operating within the structured contexts. The crucial thing is that agents do not control that structured context. However, they do interpret it and it is as mediated through that interpretation that the structural context affects the strategic calculations of actors.

If this is our general position it still needs to be unpacked. In particular, we need a clearer idea of the nature of the key structural and

intentional factors and in particular the role that ideas play in this relationship. There is little discussion in the literature on what is meant by structure or agency. In essence, most authors appear to be concerned with two types of structure: the particular institutional structures within which the relevant agent acts and the broader social structure within which the organisation and the agent are located. So, if we are concerned to analyse the behaviour of a minister, we need to examine it in the context of both his/her position within government – in relation to the department, the prime minister, the Treasury, the Cabinet etc. – and the broader social, economic and political situation – the state of the economy, the popularity of the government, the proximity of an election etc. This is important because many studies of central government focus only on the constraints within government itself, neglecting the way in which the broader social, economic and political context constrains or enables the actions of the core executive. We need to recognise that there are interactive effects between these two aspects of structure, the organisational and the social/economic/political, and between each of these and the actions of agents.

Equally, there is little discussion of what is meant by agency. Here again two approaches are common in the literature. Authors either focus on the role of individual or group agents, for example, Thatcher's influence on the Civil Service, or they are concerned with how the attitudes or preferences of agents shape outcomes, e.g. the Dunleavy (1991) and Dowding (1995) approach. What most, if not all, analyses fail to examine are, first, the role that ideas or culture have in relation to the structure/agency problem and, second, the way in which ideas affect both institutions and outcomes. This brings us to our third meta-theoretical issue.

(ii) The relationship between institutions and ideas

As we have suggested, the literature on structure/agency generally avoids the role of ideas or discourse; of the ideational realm. Yet, this is misguided because ideas clearly affect outcomes. More importantly for the discussion here, ideas can be important elements in either a structural or an intentional explanation. So, ideas, or discourse, can clearly constrain or facilitate agents. In this way, as we shall see below, civil servants in departments are clearly constrained by the prevailing culture within a department; here culture, that is a set of interconnected ideas, roles and rules of the game, clearly acts as a structural constraint or enabler. In contrast, certain ideas may be a crucial part of,

or may underpin, an individual agent's interests and preferences. Here, ideas are a crucial element of an intentional explanation.

It is equally clear that ideas shape institutions and institutions reproduce, mediate and change ideas. So, the dominant ideas of the Industry section of the DTI stressed intervention and government aid to struggling manufacturing industry, but, as we shall see in Chapter 4, these dominant ideas were undermined by a combination of the increased structural importance of Trade, as distinct from Industry, in the DTI, together with the broader New Right ideas of the Conservatives and the efforts of key DTI ministers. In a different manner, the Home Office, a powerful institution of the state, was able to resist the increased role of New Right ideas during more than a decade of Conservative government.

These relationships between structure and agency and institutions and ideas are interrelated and complex and cannot be resolved here. However, this book is informed by these debates and the questions they generate. We focus throughout on the role of structure, institutions, ideas, culture and agency and, even more importantly, upon the relationship between them. So, in our view, structure/institution and ideas/culture constrain or facilitate agents, but agents interpret and can change both structure and culture. As such, the relationship between structure/institutions, including culture recognised as a structural constraint, and agency is dialectical. At the same time, the relationship between structure/institutions and ideas/culture is also dialectical. This means that in this book, which focuses upon structural and cultural change, we examine how structure/institutions change ideas/culture and vice versa and also how both interact with agency. This inevitably means that we must operate with a historical perspective. Any dialectical relationship, by definition, involves constant iterations; an interactive process which works out over time cannot be studied using a short period.

The structure of the book

We have so much material that it is impossible to report all our findings in a single monograph. For this reason, the book focuses on structural and cultural change in British central government chiefly in the period between 1974 and 1997. As such, it only deals with policy change indirectly. At the same time, we also pay less attention to those issues that have been extensively covered by other authors. So, for example, while there has been a great deal written on structural change

in British central government over the 1980s and 1990s, much less attention has been paid to cultural change. For that reason, we have two chapters on cultural change and only one on structural change. Similarly, because Thain and Wright have dealt at length with relations between the Treasury and departments, we examine that issue more briefly, merely using our material to comment upon their conclusions and highlight any putative changes in the Treasury's role since their study was published.

This book has eight substantive chapters. The first three deal with structural and cultural change within British central government broadly and more specifically upon change within our four departments. Chapter 2 looks at cultural change across Whitehall before Chapter 3 considers structural change in Whitehall and our departments. Chapter 4 examines the impact of structural and cultural change on our departments. Chapter 5 examines the role of departments within the broader core executive. The next two chapters focus upon the role of the two most important sets of actors in departments. Chapter 6 highlights the change in the role of ministers over the last 25 years before Chapter 7 concentrates upon the role of civil servants, although also paying some attention to the relations between the departments and Next Steps Agencies and the position of special advisers. The final two substantive chapters highlight the departments' relations outside Whitehall. Chapter 8 deals with relations with interest groups, the media and the public, with the greatest focus on the first of these relationships. Chapter 9 then considers the changing pattern of the departments' links with Europe. The conclusion will return to the question of the differentiated polity and the impact changes may have had on the Westminster model.

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