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# 1

## Introduction

*In the last thirty years, I think direct power of British Government has reduced substantially, but the ability to continue to use the mechanisms of government, and the influences in new ways, has both hidden the extent of that reduction in power and in some areas compensated for it...Because of the plurality of our decision-making, because of the growth of private provision for ourselves, the role of the state has both changed and in many instances diminished. But is still very powerful in terms of being able to influence what happens within that plurality of decision-making elsewhere. However, we haven't yet fully got to grips with it, or explained it, or trained ourselves to be effective at it.*

(David Blunkett – interview with the author – January 2007)

*I think there is this legitimate view, although I've never taken it, that the Civil Service is a separate estate of the realm which has a constitutional role as a guardian of continuity which is separate from the government of the day. I've never seen the difference between the elected government and the Civil Service government. I regard the Civil Service as being there to serve the government of the day. There are still problems of ethics and conscience and so on so if an official is asked to do something that they regard as illegitimate by the government of the day they must advise that it is illegitimate and there must be some kind of protection for them. But there are various types of protection... With that protection I believe that the Civil Service will do what the government asks of them.*

(Very senior Cabinet Office official interview with the author – March 1999)

## **Explaining change in Whitehall: four contrasting perspectives**

The period from the election of the last Labour Administration in 1974 up to the resignation of Tony Blair as Labour Prime Minister in 2007 has witnessed a transformation in Whitehall. Any list of change is long. But in terms of prominence, one would identify the managerialist reforms introduced under the auspices of New Public Management (NPM), the 'de-privileging' of the Civil Service in the early 1980s, the introduction of Next Steps agencies in the late 1980s, the increasing impact of Europeanisation on individual departments from the early 1990s, the de-layering of Whitehall in the mid-1990s and, since 1997, the effect of devolution and the wide-ranging programme of 'Modernising Government' aimed at improving public service delivery.

One uncontroversial view is that Whitehall today is a different entity to the one that served the Wilson/Callaghan Governments in the 1970s. Yet, there is a paradox here: on one level, the past thirty years has witnessed, if not a revolution, then at least a transformation in the Civil Service that has seen substantial changes in both the formal and informal rules of the game which shape the way officials operate; at the same time, both ministers and senior civil servants have continued to defend the Westminster model.<sup>1</sup> The view the core executive offers is that despite, for example, the radical impact that devolution has had on Britain's political landscape, substantial change can be grafted onto the British political system without any need to rethink the fundamental elements of the Westminster model.<sup>2</sup> For example, to take the views of Tony Blair at both the beginning and near the end of his time in office:

I hope very much that when civil servants look back on the early days of this Government they will judge that this was a good and exciting period for the Civil Service. It should be. You have a Government which understands and values the role of civil servants, which welcomes and invites your support and contribution on an impartial, professional basis; which has confidence in your ability to do your job...I don't believe that any other government is better served than we are by the British Civil Service. (Blair 1998)

The fundamental values of Northcote and Trevelyan, lampooned at the time as an alien Chinese import, have survived remarkably intact through successive waves of reform. (Blair 2004)

And in similar fashion, we can see the opinion offered by Richard Wilson, the first Cabinet Secretary to be appointed by Blair:

Because the government of the day commands a majority in Parliament, the Civil Service works under the direction of that government, executes the programme of that government and owes loyalty to that government...How shall I define its [the Civil Service] character? First integrity..., second political impartiality..., third merit..., fourth, the ability to work for successive governments..., and finally, public service. (Wilson 2002)

And the view of Gus O'Donnell, who served as Blair's last Cabinet Secretary:

Our traditional values of integrity, objectivity, impartiality and honesty are our bedrock. They are just as important today as when they were first developed and are essential to everything we do, whether it's policy, delivery or corporate services. They need to be expressed clearly in a way which is relevant to all our staff. (Gus O'Donnell, Speech at the Launch of the new Civil Service Code, 6 June 2006)

Why is it, despite all the extensive empirical evidence offered by the numerous studies exploring the changing nature of British governance over the past thirty years, that Britain's political elites continue to argue that the key features of the Westminster model are relevant? The need to answer this question and at the same time explain this paradox forms the centrepiece of this account of the Blair Administration's relationship with Whitehall.

An obvious starting point is to reflect on the existing literature that has attempted to explain the nature of change and its impact on the Westminster model. Many of the transformations that have taken place in both Whitehall and the broader British political system have been explored by what is labelled the 'Anglo-governance school'.<sup>3</sup> This approach questions the traditional view of British politics presented by the Westminster model of government that power is hermetically sealed in the domain of Westminster and Whitehall. It highlights the need to recognise and account for the range of institutions, locations of power, networks of relations and multiplicity of actors involved in the process of governing. There are four perspectives in particular that offer interesting, but contrasting, explanations of how change has affected the

nature of Whitehall and, more particularly, the impact it has had on the Westminster model.

First, the 'End of Whitehall' approach argues that the reforms over the past three decades have destroyed the traditional role of civil servants (see Campbell and Wilson 1995, Foster and Plowden 1996, Foster 2005). It suggests that both the role and power of officials have been eroded to the point at which the view presented by the Westminster model that ministers and civil servants are engaged in a co-dependent, symbiotic relationship is no longer sustainable. Reform has undermined the model to a point at which:

Civil servants are increasingly defining their role as policy implementors rather than policy analysts, people who gave ministers what they said they wanted, rather than functioning as what they disparagingly call 'quasi-academics' who tried to show politicians the full consequences, adverse as well as positive, of their policy proposals. (Campbell and Wilson 1995: 60)

The conclusion it offers is that the Westminster model has been eclipsed by a post-Whitehall, minister-dominated paradigm.

Second, Rhodes' (1997) 'hollowing out of the state' thesis examines the wider changes in the policy-making arena. It argues that the power of the core executive has been eroded, as a hollowing-out effect has led to the capacity at the centre being dispersed upwards, outwards and downwards. It concludes that the analytical capabilities of the Westminster model have been 'found lacking' and an alternative, the 'differentiated polity model' is offered which: '... challenges the classical model of a unitary state characterised by a strong executive and parliamentary sovereignty...' and presents a neo-pluralist view of power (Rhodes et al 2003:166). Change, in particular in the form of devolution, demands that we move beyond a view of Whitehall as a monolithic or unified entity and, instead, empirical inquiry should be shaped by a decentralised view that accounts for the 'Civil Services of the UK' (Rhodes et al 2003: 6).

If the 'hollowing out' view is conceived as an empirical challenge to the Westminster model, then elsewhere, the 'decentred perspective' is concerned with presenting a more explicitly theoretical challenge (Bevir and Rhodes 2003a, 2006, 2007). This interpretive approach criticises the 'pervasive' effect the Westminster model has had on existing institutional studies of British politics. It argues for the need to explore the 'competing beliefs and traditions by

which governance is made and remade, not only by politicians but also by civil servants'. This requires a decentred approach which moves beyond the limitations of the Westminster model and identifies, understands and interprets a wider range of contingent traditions and beliefs which shapes the actions of Britain's political elites. In so doing, this has the potential to offer a richer or thicker description of the 'British story of governance'.

All three perspectives challenge the orthodoxy of the Westminster model, which has dominated accounts of how British politics works (see Gamble 1990). However, there is a fourth perspective – the 'reconstituted Westminster model' – which places a different emphasis on the influence of the Westminster model in shaping British politics (see Richards and Smith 2000a, 2004a). It criticises the limitations of the descriptive capacity of the Westminster model, in terms of an organising perspective of the British system of government. Nevertheless, it recognises the importance of the normative view of power it presents. It argues that the model acts as a 'legitimising mythology' of a particular elitist conception of core executive power, which is in the strategic interest of both ministers and civil servants to sustain. Its account of change in an era of governance is one in which ministers and civil servants continue to draw on the Westminster model to defend their structured, asymmetric position of power in the broader policy-making arena (see Marsh et al 2001, 2003, Richards and Smith 2002). So, unlike Bevir and Rhodes, who argue that change in Whitehall should be understood in terms of a decentred, interpretive approach, what this perspective advocates is to understand the actions of ministers and civil servants as defending or 'reconstituting' the Westminster model in a changing political world. I argue that this perspective can be used to address the paradox identified above and explain the Blair Administration's relations with, and approach to, Whitehall.

## **The theoretical and methodological framework**

Rhodes (2001: 111) observes that there is a literature on Whitehall which assumes that: '...one can read off the beliefs of top civil servants from their institutional position and their socio-economic background'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as we see in Chapter 2, the approach adopted in these accounts shares common ground with the elitist or materialist critiques of Whitehall offered by intellectuals from the Left, including Laski (1942), Miliband (1969), Anderson (1964) and Nairn (1977). Their accounts portray senior bureaucrats as representing particular class interests which

have left a lasting imprint on the nature of the various institutions of British state. Yet, Rhodes (2001:111) challenges this approach arguing that: 'beliefs cannot be so determined. Rather, we must study the texts (writings, lectures, interviews transcripts) of civil servants to identify their beliefs.'<sup>5</sup>

Underpinning this view is a broader critique offered by Bevir and Rhodes which challenges 'modernist empiricism'<sup>6</sup> and advocates the adoption of an interpretivist approach to understand modern British government and governance (see Rhodes 1997, 2007, Bevir and Rhodes 2003a, 2006, 2007).<sup>7</sup> This approach rejects a relativist epistemology and argues that actors interpret the world they inhabit in different ways, so: 'no practice or norm can fix the ways in which people act' (Bevir and Rhodes 2006: 3). It calls for an approach which identifies and understands the various traditions (or webs of belief) which agents draw upon and from which they: 'construct varied practices' (Rhodes and Bevir 2006: 166). This involves moving back and forth between aggregate concepts and the beliefs of individuals. It suggests that actions are related to interpretations of beliefs that develop in relation to sets of traditions and dilemmas. According to Bevir and Rhodes (2003a: 11), in order to: 'understand actions, practices and institutions, we need to grasp the relevant meanings, the beliefs and the preferences of the people involved'. From these beliefs and traditions, actors form particular narratives to explain events and decisions:

Individuals are not autonomous: they necessarily come to hold the beliefs they do within a social context that influences them. To explain the beliefs of a particular individual, we have to appeal to an aggregate concept, such as tradition, that evokes this social context. However, such traditions have no existence apart from in the contingent beliefs of particular individuals. To appeal to a tradition is always, therefore, explicitly or implicitly to make claims about the beliefs of particular individuals. (Bevir and Rhodes 2003b: 42)

This version of interpretivism is used to offer an account of British governance. The core of the argument is that the Westminster model has had a 'distorted influence', a 'bewitching effect' and acted as 'a smokescreen' on the study of British politics (see Bevir and Rhodes 2007). The answer is to embrace an anti-foundationalist epistemology and a decentred account which identifies four traditions as crucial to understanding how the British story of governance should be told – Tory, Whig, Liberal and Socialist (see Bevir and Rhodes 2003a, 2006,

2007).<sup>8</sup> Reform should be understood as a: ‘contingent product of a contest of meanings in action’ which stem from agents drawing from these four particular traditions.

The Bevir and Rhodes approach is a useful corrective to some of the more descriptive and atheoretical accounts of the world of Westminster and Whitehall.<sup>9</sup> The view here is at odds with the way in which a decentred account downplays the influence of the Westminster model and also its anti-foundationalist epistemology. It questions the view that the Westminster model is only one, if rightly important, tradition which needs to be set alongside others, in order to tell the British governance story (see Bevir and Rhodes 2007). Instead, I argue that the Westminster model remains the most important, indeed, overarching, tradition which has shaped Labour’s approach to Whitehall.

This account advocates the need to posit the Westminster model at the heart of any analysis of Labour’s reform programme. 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. Chapter 2 argues that 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 own political goals (see Marquand 1997). From this perspective, it can be argued that the model’s influence on the first Labour Government of Ramsey MacDonald can be compared to the impact it had some seventy years later on New Labour.<sup>10</sup> So, in this account, 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). That is not to say that other influences have not conditioned New Labour’s approach to Whitehall (see Evans 2003, Richards and Smith 2004b), but they can only be understood within the broader setting defined by the Westminster model. Indeed, while the sub-title of this book is *Reconstituting the Westminster Model*, as it builds on the perspective identified above about understanding change and the nature of core executive conceptions of political power (see Richards and Smith 2000, 2002, 2004a, 2006b, Marsh et al 2001, 2003), it could equally have been labelled *Recentering the Westminster Model*. To adapt a phrase used elsewhere, by ‘bringing the Westminster model back in’, we can account for the paradox of why change has not altered, in the view of Britain’s political elites, the constitutional status quo.<sup>11</sup>

In methodological terms, interpretation in this account is not based on an anti-foundationalist epistemology but on an ontological view of

agents as interpretative beings who develop a range of interpretations concerning particular material and institutional relations. This is not a behavioural study and it has not involved any form of participant observation or the shadowing of civil servants and ministers. Instead, it relies largely on elite interviews, alongside other qualitative material in the form of speeches, memoirs, diaries, Select Committee reports and so forth. It is a study that is concerned with the interpretations of events by key actors, and of course, the author's subsequent interpretation of their accounts. This methodology clearly draws from the new institutionalist tradition, in particular historical institutionalism, aimed at understanding and interpreting the formal and informal rules of the game that shape the behaviour of agents, rather than an anti-foundationalist approach concerned with interpreting their 'web of beliefs'.<sup>12</sup>

This is not the place for a detailed appraisal of my epistemological position (but for a more detailed outline, see Richards and Smith 2004a). What is provided here is a critical realist account which, while not offering any predictive models of political and bureaucratic behaviour, does try and explain the nature of Labour's relations with Whitehall over the past decade, identify what has happened and, where possible, provide some insight into why. It recognises that while social phenomena exists independently of any interpretation, or discursive construction of it, the way in which actors discursively construct their interpretations subsequently affects outcomes. If this study is concerned with understanding New Labour and Whitehall, this involves finding out how agents, be they Labour ministers or civil servants, understand their world and the projected changes to it.<sup>13</sup> A key issue, of course, is the status of the researcher, since there is no meaning to data until it has been interpreted. I do quote extensively from the interviews throughout the book, which at least allows the reader to draw their own conclusions on the interpretations I have placed on the interview data.

The majority of the data used throughout the course of this book is of a qualitative nature. It is drawn from four *ESRC* Research projects I have been involved in over the past decade, all of which have been concerned with exploring various aspects of British central government.<sup>14</sup> This has involved an extensive number of interviews with Labour and Conservative ministers and shadow ministers, senior civil servants, special advisers and non-governmental organisation representatives. As is usual with elite interviewing, in most, but not all cases, ministers, special advisers and non-governmental organisations are willing to be directly cited,<sup>15</sup> while all the interviews with civil servants have been conducted under Chatham House rules (see Richards 1996a). There is

clearly a potential problem with such interview data. Interviewees may exaggerate their own role or competence. So, for example, a civil servant may be more positive or place a different emphasis on a particular event or issue than that of the view offered by minister, and, of course, vice-versa. However, a substantial number of ministers and civil servants from across Whitehall were interviewed to obtain as broad a picture as possible and enable the checking of the views of one individual, or set of actors, against others. In terms of the interviews, I have tried to ask a variety of respondents for their 'version' of events and interpretation of motivations. When this is placed against other sources of qualitative data, memoirs, biography, Hansard reports and so forth – it has allowed for some degree of triangulation (see Richards 1996a). Although, here it is worth restating the view of Jack Hayward (1999: 34): 'Political scientists have the capacity to offer some hindsight, a little insight and almost no foresight'. I hope the following account of the Labour Administration and Whitehall offers something, in terms of hindsight and insight, as to what has happened over the past ten years, even if it does not attempt to foresee what the next decade might hold.

### **The structure and themes of the book**

Owing to the substantial material generated from the various research projects identified above, it is an almost impossible task to address, in a single monograph, all the issues concerning Labour and Whitehall that they raise. However, an earlier publication in this *Transforming Government* series (Marsh, Richards and Smith 2001) examined the structural and cultural change Whitehall has undergone in the past thirty years, including the whole of Blair's first term. As such, while I return to some of the themes raised in that book, there is little point in rehearsing the same arguments again. The account offered here does consider a number of topical Whitehall debates that continue to bubble away, concerning, for example, issues of accountability, devolution, agencification, Europeanisation, Freedom of Information and challenges to the public service ethos; the pressure of space again only permits a cursory discussion of each.

I have chosen three substantive themes to address the core question of the book concerning the relationship between change in Whitehall and the Westminster model.

The first theme, explored in Chapter 4, is an in-depth examination of the 1997 process of transition in Whitehall from the Major to the Blair Government. Eighteen unbroken years of Conservative Administration

meant that the 1997 transition was a key test in whether the Civil Service and the new Labour Government would be capable of sustaining the Westminster model. To what extent and how quickly would Blair's first ministerial team be able to internalise the formal and informal rules of the games presented by the Westminster model? Would the convention of a 'seamless web in government' be maintained or would the process expose serious deficiencies in the constitutional conventions defining the British system of government?

The second theme concerns an analysis of Labour's approach to reforming the broader policy-making arena and the effect this has had on Whitehall. It argues that recent governments have all faced a dilemma in trying to resolve a tension between the desire for [central] political control and the need for [devolved] administrative autonomy. Over the past decade, Labour has developed a distinct response to this dilemma, and Chapter 5 offers an analysis of how this has affected Whitehall and its external relations with other actors in the policy arena.

The third theme explored in Chapter 6 concerns an analysis of the internal effect Labour has had on Whitehall. It focuses on the governing strategy that it brought with it into government and how this has changed core executive relations. The chapter considers whether or not the Civil Service has been politicised under Blair and the impact which key changes, such as the much greater use of special advisers, has made on the core executive.

Underpinning the analysis offered in these three substantive chapters is the need to explain why the Westminster model is the aggregate concept explaining New Labour's relations with and approach to Whitehall since 1997. This involves recognising the extent to which, over time, the Westminster model has shaped the strategic choices made by the Party's leaders. It draws on an historical intuitionist approach presented in Chapter 2 and argues that, throughout much of the past century, the Westminster model has been the dominant force in shaping the leadership's approach to government. Chapter 3 then explores the extent to which, despite the radicalism often associated with Thatcherism and its prescription for a new state settlement, the reforms pursued by the last Conservative Administration continued to draw from within the framework presented by the Westminster model, rather than directly challenge it. The chapter also explores the response by the Labour Party to the Conservative legacy, most notably in the ideas of the Third Way and its revisionist programme, and the subsequent emergence of New Labour. It argues that the transformation of

the Labour Party has been played out within the contours prescribed by the Westminster model. The view here is that a path dependency can be identified from the first Ramsey MacDonald Administration up to the Blair Administration highlighting the central importance of the Westminster model in shaping the strategic choices of the Party's approach to government. In each of the three substantive chapters (4, 5 and 6), I have tried to place the particular themes to be examined within a broader historical context, in order to develop this notion of dependency. Finally, in Chapter 7, I return to the original paradox of the relationship between change and the maintenance of the Westminster model, to consider why, despite the substantial reforms to Whitehall since 1997, Blair, his ministers and senior civil servants continue to defend the model.

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