

**IS WESTMINSTER DEAD IN WESTMINSTER**  
**(and why should we care)?<sup>1</sup>**

R. A. W. Rhodes  
Professor of Political Science  
Research School of Social Sciences  
Australian National University  
Canberra  
ACT 0200  
Australia

E-mail: [Rhodes@coombs.anu.edu.au](mailto:Rhodes@coombs.anu.edu.au)

Inaugural lecture in the ANZSOG-ANU Public Lecture series, The Shine Dome, Academy of Science, Canberra, 23 February 2005.

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<sup>1</sup> I must thank Mark Bevir, Jenny Fleming, Andrew Gamble, Susan Hanson, and John Wanna for providing information, advice and comments on the first draft. To those colleagues familiar with my earlier work on Britain as a differentiated polity (Rhodes 1988, 1997a and 2003), I point out this paper updates my analysis for, and is restricted to, New Labour's two terms of office. © R. A. W. Rhodes. Please do not cite without permission.

## **Abstract**

Westminster's characteristics include a unitary state, but Australia is federal. They include parliamentary sovereignty, but Britain has ceded sovereignty to the European Union. So is there anything left of the Westminster model that is both distinct from other parliamentary democracies and relevant to the present-day practices of Australia and Britain?

The answer is the family of ideas about executive government.

- 1) Parliamentary sovereignty with its unity of the executive and the legislature.
- 2) The concentration of political power in a collective and responsible cabinet.
- 3) The accountability of ministers to parliament.
- 4) A constitutional bureaucracy with a non-partisan and expert civil service.

But in Britain all these ideas have been and continue to be challenged. Key constitutional changes include devolved government to Scotland and Wales, reform of the House of Lords, the Human Rights Act, and freedom of information. Key changes in political practice include the rise of the British presidency.

These changes represent a shift from government by a unitary state to governance by and through networks. I examine these changes under five headings: hollowing out the state, the shift from prime minister to core executive, the accountability gap, learning skills we haven't learnt before, and the sour laws of unintended consequences. I argue Australia confronts similar problem of governance; for example it too must work through packages of governments and organizations. Examining how Westminster has changed may highlight these problems. It does nothing to help solve them. It belongs to a simpler era. Now we must learn manage domestic and international networks over which we have at best hands-off controls.

'Of the Queen's title "Head of the Commonwealth", a French-speaking newspaper in Quebec in 1953 declared, "The solution of the problem is in the good British tradition; it is both efficient and devoid of logic". The same can be said perhaps of the constitution' (adapted from Bogdanor 1991: 37).

## **Introduction**

I begin with the obvious - a definition. Andrew Gamble (1990: 407) adumbrates the characteristics of a Westminster system as: a unitary state characterised by: parliamentary sovereignty; strong cabinet government; accountability through elections; majority party control of the executive (that is, prime minister, cabinet and the civil service); elaborate conventions for the conduct of parliamentary business; institutionalised opposition, and the rules of debate. But if the characteristics include a unitary state, then Australia is federal. If they include parliamentary sovereignty, then Britain has ceded some sovereignty to the European Union. So, neither is an example of the Westminster model, not even the home of the Westminster system! So what if anything is left of the Westminster model that is both distinct from other parliamentary democracies and relevant to the present-day practices of Australia and Britain?<sup>2</sup>

The answer could be said to lie in Westminster's family of ideas about executive government.

- 1) Parliamentary sovereignty with its unity of the executive and the legislature.
- 2) The concentration of political power in a collective and responsible cabinet.
- 3) The accountability of ministers to parliament.

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<sup>2</sup> For a review of the literature on Australia as a Westminster system see Rhodes and Weller 2005.

4) A non-partisan and expert civil service (see Rhodes and Weller 2005).

But in Britain all these ideas have been and continue to be challenged. The two most important constitutional changes are devolved government to Scotland and Wales, and the Human Rights Act. Among the several changes in political practice, the rise of the British presidency stands out.

In this talk, I take at face value ANZSOG's aspiration to foster blue skies or curiosity-driven research. I make no pretence to be an ersatz departmental secretary willing and able to tell the public service how to do its job. I am no management consultant who 'has solution will travel'. Rather I have my eyes firmly fixed on a bigger picture and I argue that, in Britain, there has been a shift from government to governance; from Westminster to the differentiated polity.<sup>3</sup>

In this talk I examine each of the four characteristics of the Westminster model, describing: the hollowing-out of the state, the shift from prime ministerial power to core executive, the accountability gap, and learning new skills we haven't learnt before. I conclude that the shift to a differentiated polity accounts for many of the sour laws of unintended consequences that dog government policy. I then review the lessons that can be learnt from this analysis, the continuing uses of the Westminster model, and the reasons why it matters to Australia. Robert Parker is one of the founding fathers of Australian public administration and a former head of ANU's Political Science Program. Is it true, as he argues, that the developments affecting Australian and British government

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<sup>3</sup> For an account of recent changes to the Westminster constitution changes see Hazel (1999) and King (2001). King (2001: 99) interprets the changes as a shift from a power-hoarding to power-fractionated system where 'to fractionate' is to break into fragments. The label differentiated polity is sufficiently well-established for another label to be unwarranted.

have reduced the differences between the two Westminster systems to relative insignificance (Parker 1980: 130)?

When trying to repair a gap in the map of British government, there is always the danger of appearing one-sided. I seek to counter a view of British government that stresses Britain as a unitary state with a strong executive. I do not dispute the British executive can act decisively. Obviously, the centre co-ordinates and implements policies as intended at least some of the time. But the Westminster model attaches too little importance to the sour laws of unintended consequences. Governments fail because they are locked into power-dependent relations and because they must work with and through complex networks of actors and organizations. To adopt a command operating code builds failure into the design of the policy. Such centralization will be confounded by fragmentation and interdependence which will, in turn, prompt further bouts of centralization. It is time to break free of the shackles of the Westminster model.

## **Mapping change**

### 1. The hollowing-out of the state.

Many of the trends constraining parliamentary sovereignty and executive power in Britain can be summarised using the aphorism ‘the hollowing-out of the state’. It refers to dependencies from above (for example, international institutions) and from below (for example, devolved government) (see Rhodes 1994: 138-9). Here, I briefly comment on

four such trends: fragmenting services, devolved government, Europeanization and internationalization.

### *Fragmenting services*

This heading draws attention to the shift from line bureaucracies to fragmented service delivery. I make no party political point. Both the Conservatives (under Margaret Thatcher and John Major) and New Labour (under Tony Blair) experimented with new ways of delivering services.<sup>4</sup> After 1979, function-based policy networks based on central departments (or sections of them) changed in two ways. First, the membership of networks became broader, incorporating both the private and voluntary sectors. Second, the government swapped direct for indirect controls. British government privatised the utilities. It contracted-out services to the private sector and this policy of marketizing public services speeded up differentiation and multiplied networks. It introduced quasi-markets through purchaser-provider splits when services could not be privatised. It bypassed local authorities for special-purpose bodies. It removed operational management from central departments and vested it in separate agencies (see Rhodes 1997a: chapters 5-7). So, fragmenting services not only created new networks but it also increased the membership of existing networks. It increased the centre's dependence on multifarious networks, making steering more difficult, and creating the impetus to multiply the mechanisms for integration. Thus, as the government substituted regulation for ownership, it also multiplied the watchdogs of, for example, the new private sector

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<sup>4</sup> As one brief illustration of the common ground between the parties, New Labour promised to abolish the purchaser-provider split in the National Health Service and did so, to its great chagrin, because now it looks for ways to reintroduce it!

monopolies. The 'audit explosion' refers to all forms of management and financial audit and evaluation with related quality assurance mechanisms and 'a distinct mentality of administrative control' which displaces trust and focuses on quantified, external, ex-post, expert forms of control (Power 1994: 8-9). The past twenty years have seen an explosion of indirect control over less.

New Labour's response to fragmenting services has been to look for ways of joining-up the several agencies involved in service delivery (see Cm 4310 1999, Cabinet Office 2000). There are three dimensions to joining-up. First, there is horizontal coordination between government departments (for example, Social Exclusion Unit at No. 10). Second there is vertical coordination between departments and service delivery agents (for example, action zones for health, education and employment, which seek to bring together local actors to deal with inequalities in health provision). Finally, there is internal departmental coordination, which covers such innovations as management boards, comprising not only senior departmental managers but also key external stakeholders. This search for coordination lies at the heart of New Labour's reforms. It has several problems (see Mulgan 2001).

First, horizontal coordination runs foul of the departmental interests of the baronies and the short-term-ism of ministers, who are in post for on average some 18-24 months and want quick results. Second, there is also tension between the two main central coordinators - the Cabinet Office and the Treasury. Third, vertical coordination assumes agreement between central government and local actors. Local actors protect their autonomy and feel they do not 'own' the joined-up initiatives. Fourth, the budgets for joined-up programmes are small. Finally, the initiatives create their own problems. Thus,

there is an epidemic of zones, to the point where the solution to fragmenting services seems to have become a part of the problem since the zones add significantly to the many bodies to be coordinated. John Denham (1999), then a junior minister in the Department of Health, conceded that ‘zones can sometimes make government look more, rather than less complicated to the citizen’ and there is the danger of ‘initiative overload’ because the zones do not join-up.

Awareness of these problems permeates the language of officials. For example, civil servants in the Department of Health confronted with the challenge of instilling financial discipline in doctors liken their task to ‘herding cats’. They compare their management tools to ‘rubber levers’, which when pushed bend in the middle but effect little change on the ground. The new style of management has a colourful language!

The reforms have a centralization thrust. They seek to coordinate departments and local authorities by imposing a new style of management on other agencies. So, although the government does ‘not want to run local services from the centre’, it ‘is not afraid to take action where standards slip’ – an obvious instance of a command operating code (Cm 4310 1999: 35, 37, 45, 53, 55). The centre owns zones and local agendas are recognised only if they promote the agenda of the centre. Such a code, no matter how well disguised, runs the ever-present risk of recalcitrance from key actors and a loss of flexibility in dealing with localised problems. Gentle pressure relentlessly applied is still a command operating code in a velvet glove. When you are sitting at the top of a pyramid and you cannot see the bottom, control deficits are an ever-present unintended consequence. The pursuit of coordination looks more like the pursuit of the Holy Grail.

### *Devolved government*

Devolved government to Scotland Wales and Northern Ireland is probably New Labour's most important single constitutional change,<sup>5</sup> and the ESRC (2004) 'Devolution and Constitutional Change' research programme, comprising 35 research projects, is the most comprehensive assessment of the outcomes so far. I paraphrase their findings on Scotland and Wales. ESRC (2004) describes devolved government as a process not an event that it is characterised by asymmetries. The new institutions work well and command majority support in Scotland and Wales. There have been few inter-jurisdictional disputes over, for example, finance. There are marked and growing differences in service delivery between the constituent territories of the UK. Examples of the differences include: free long term personal care for the elderly, abolition of tuition fees for students in higher education, and the pay and conditions of work settlement for teachers. Yet there is a 'missing centre' in two senses. First, there will be no devolved government to the English regions following the 'no-vote' in the North-east referendum. Second, there is no UK policy on the extent of such policy variation. Also, there is no policy on, or formal mechanisms for managing, intergovernmental coordination of both service delivery and economic disparities.

So, initially, devolved government reduced the tension between territorial and functional politics within the constituent territories of the UK because the devolved governments were able to 'match' policy to expectations more closely. The new consultative machinery, allied to the tradition of keeping in step with the Whitehall departments,

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<sup>5</sup> The other changes include a Human Rights Act, reforming the House of Lords, and introducing freedom of information. Independence for the Bank of England is the other major devolution of power but it is not normally seen as a constitutional change. For a useful survey see Hazell (1999), for commentary see King (2001) and for regular updates visit the Constitution unit web site at <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit>.

minimized conflict between the constituent territories and the centre. However, Rhodes et al (2003) argue that this equitable climate cannot be sustained because the rationale for devolved government lies in difference, not homogeneity. For example, the pressures on a unified civil service will intensify and civil servants may become more politicised because they will be keen to please their local masters, not Whitehall. Also, at some stage, there will be different parties in power in London, Edinburgh and Cardiff. In future, the pattern of intergovernmental relations in the UK may well increasingly resemble those of other states like Australia and Canada with Westminster systems. In the new dispensation, the institutions of central state public administration, most notably, the civil service are pivotal. Even in devolved systems, the pull of the centre remains strong. So, the oscillating tensions between territories and the centre will be one of the central characteristics of the evolving process of devolved government.

### *Europeanization*

The European Union shows how transnational policy networks emerge when, for example, there is a high dependence in the policy sector; policy making is depoliticised and routinized; supra-national agencies are dependent on other agencies to deliver a service; and there is a need to aggregate interests. The term multi-level governance is used to describe the need to work with and through packages of governments. In the EU, multilevel governance links the Commission, national ministries and local and regional authorities. It is a specific example of the impact of international interdependencies on the state. Anand Menon and Vincent Wright (1998) provide a succinct summary of the impacts on Britain. They argue 'there is no doubt' the UK 'has 'forged an efficient policy making and co-ordinating machine' because the government speaks and acts with one

voice. It has also been successful in its 'basic strategy of opening up and liberalizing the EU's economy'. However, its 'unjustified reputation' for being at the margins of Europe is justified for EU constitution building and 'an effective and coherent policy making machine becomes ineffective when it is bypassed' for the history making decisions.

New Labour's attitude to the EU was a 'real sea change'. However, the EU is a 'sticky' institution, change is difficult, 'it is only during the second term that results may begin to emerge' and in 2001 'the jury is still out' (Deighton 2001: 324-5). The invasion of Iraq may not have improved Britain's standing in Europe but domestic politics dealt an equally devastating blow. Gordon Brown, Chancellor of the Exchequer, frustrated Blair's wish to join the Euro (Peston 2005: chapter 6, Keegan 2003: chapter 12, Seldon 2004: 682-3). He persuaded Blair that the decision to join 'should be based purely on an economic assessment' (Peston 2005: 179, 220-21). It was a Treasury decision, not a political one. As there is no over-riding, unanswerable economic case for joining, Britain remains outside the Euro and, consequently, at the margins of the EU's history-making decisions.

### *Internationalization*

I use this term to refer to the rest of the world, out there in all its buzzing blooming confusion. Events such as 9/11, Northern Ireland, Kosovo, the Afghan war, and Iraq divert prime ministerial attention from domestic policy. Over Iraq, for example, not only did Blair have to persuade international leaders on the case for war, which he conspicuously failed to do, he also had to maintain support at home. He did, but at the price of eroding his authority in the party and with the electorate. The war presented Blair

with the embarrassing resignations of two of his Cabinet colleagues, Robin Cook (formerly Foreign Secretary, at the time Leader of the House of Commons) and, eventually, Clare Short (Minister for International Development). The resignation of Cook and the ensuing fallout increased Blair's dependence on his Cabinet colleagues. John Kampfner (2003: 161-2, 225-6, 272, 277 and 315) describes the extent of the opposition to the invasion of Iraq in the Parliamentary Labour Party (with up to 139 Labour MPs voting against the government), and by the public. Even the Cabinet was uncertain, verging on divided. In the understated phrases that are employed at times of stress and conflict, Cabinet support moved from 'rock solid' to 'broad' and 'fears were being expressed with uncharacteristic candour' (Kampfner 2003: 294, 255). Although a prominent critic of government policy, Robin Cook's (2003: 271-2) assessment is judicious:

Part of the political cost of Iraq was that it created in the public mind an image of their prime minister as preoccupied with fixing the world rather than running Britain. The irony is that this political damage to the Labour government was a self-inflicted wound. It could have been avoided by listening to the majority who were opposed to the war.

In sum, parliamentary sovereignty is being eroded by several internal and external trends. British government now confronts multiplying veto points with an inappropriate central operating code that sees listening and negotiating as signs of weakness. As one former prime minister confessed 'It often feels like a very hostile world out there ... and the fact was I could do very little about it' (quoted in Kavanagh and Seldon 1999: 310). So what did the Blair government do about it?

## 2. From prime ministerial power to core executive.<sup>6</sup>

When Hugh Heclo and Aaron Wildavsky (1974: 341-3) described the debate about British prime ministerial power as one of the ‘chestnuts of the constitution’, they probably did not expect to see it thriving thirty-five years later as the presidentialization thesis.<sup>7</sup> Although a few prime ministers have attracted the appellation of president, most notably Harold Wilson and Margaret Thatcher, journalists, academics and insiders have repeatedly described Blair as the archetypal case. He was presidential from the moment of his election as prime minister. Many claim that Blair has manipulated his personal resources and expanded his institutional power to achieve a degree of predominance unmatched in British history.<sup>8</sup>

### *The would-be President*

On New Labour’s election victory, Jonathan Powell (No. 10 chief of staff) had famously warned senior civil servants to expect ‘a change from a feudal system of barons to a more Napoleonic system’ (*Daily Telegraph* 8 December 2001 cited in Seldon 2004: 437).

Blair’s No. 10 aides claim:

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<sup>6</sup> The core executive refers to ‘all those organizations and procedures which co-ordinate central government policies and act as arbiters of conflict between different parts of the government machine, not just prime minister and cabinet’ (Rhodes and Dunleavy 1995: 12).

<sup>7</sup> Heaven forbid I should cover this ground again. For a review see Rhodes (1995) and Smith (1999). For useful collections of articles see King (1969, 1985) and Rhodes and Dunleavy (1995). For a comparative analysis of trends see Foley (2000) and Savoie (1999).

<sup>8</sup> The main contributors are: Allen (2002), Foley (1993, 2000), Heffernan (2003), Hennessy (1998, 2000a, 2000b and 2002), Kavanagh and Seldon (1999), Mughan, (2000), Pryce (1997), and Rose (2001). The most coruscating critic of all things presidential is George Jones. See for example Jones (1985) and (1995).

Cabinet died years ago. It hardly works anywhere else in the world today. It is now a matter of strong leadership at the centre and creating structures and having people do it. I suppose we want to replace the Department barons with a Bonapartist system' (quoted in Kavanagh and Seldon 1999: 286).<sup>9</sup>

Blair's ministerial critics do not demur. Mo Mowlam (2002: xx), former Secretary of state for Northern Ireland, criticised 'the centralization tendency and arrogance of No. 10' – 'I think there is a lack of inclusiveness of the cabinet, MPs, party members and the unions leads to bad decisions. Try as I might, I got no indication that their views or behaviour would change.' Briefly, I assess the three main claims made to support the contention that Blair has transformed his role as prime minister into that of a president; namely, that there has been a centralization of coordination, a pluralization of advice, and the personalization of elections.<sup>10</sup>

#### Centralization of coordination

Structural changes at No. 10 and the Cabinet Office are the way in which Blair has strengthened the centre of government. The Policy Unit mutated into the Policy Directorate when it merged with the Prime Minister's Private Office. From day one Blair surrounded himself with a network of special advisers. Their numbers rose from just eight under John Major to twenty seven under Blair (Blick 2004: Appendix, and on the

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<sup>9</sup> The reference is to the centralization of power under Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), Emperor of France (1804-15).

<sup>10</sup> Definitions of the presidentialization thesis vary: cf. Allen (2002: 16), Foley (1993: chapter 1), Pryce (1967: 37 and 67) and Mughan 2000: 9-10). I synthesize their argument into the three trends of: greater centralization of coordination, pluralization of advice, and personalization of elections. The Blair presidency is seen as a defining case supporting the presidentialization thesis. If the evidence for the Blair case is weak, then the evidence for the thesis is weakened. On the insurmountable difficulties of the American analogy see Rose (2001: 236-244).

growth of advisers see next section). Total staff employed at No. 10 rose from 71 in 1970 under Edward Heath, to a 107 under Major to over 200 under Blair (Kavanagh and Seldon 1999: 300), creating ‘the department that-will-not-speak-its-name’ (Hennessy 2002: 20). However, it is important to put this increase in perspective. The total number of political and policy advisers remains small compared with the 3,429 members of the Senior Civil Service.

Initially, the focus was on improving communications with Alistair Campbell heading the Strategic Communications Unit (SCU). Latterly the emphasis fell on policy advice. The Cabinet Office was reformed to improve central coordination. Several new units were created: for example, initially, the Social Exclusion Unit and the Performance and Innovation Unit, latterly the Strategy Unit, the Office of Public Services Reform, and, most important, the Delivery Unit. As Peter Hennessy (1998: 15) observes, Number 10 seeks to be ‘omnipresent’. The Cabinet Office has always been a ragbag of functions bequeathed by former prime ministers. Now it groans under its own proliferating units posing the question of, ‘who will coordinate the would-be coordinator?’ Blair seeks to control government functions without bothering himself with too many operational details.

In presidential tales, the prime minister’s department in all but name allows Blair to remain on top of several projects if not in detailed touch. It checks the problem of prime ministerial overload. As Anthony Seldon (2004: 630) observes ‘however distracted Blair might be by other events, domestic and international, the work of monitoring ... went on regardless (“The [Delivery] Unit never sleeps”, Blair was told).’

## Pluralization of advice

In the Westminster model, the civil service has a monopoly of advice and this advice is collated and coordinated by the Cabinet through its ministerial and official committees and the Cabinet Office. This neat and tidy picture has given way to one of competing centres of advice and coordination for which, allegedly, Blair is the only nodal point (see also pp. xx-xx below). The Cabinet Office has been 'gradually brought into the orbit of Downing Street ... serving as a part of a prime ministerial centre', rather than the cabinet collectively. Blair cut back on collegial decision making, 'reducing most meetings of the Cabinet to just forty minutes of approving decisions already taken elsewhere, parish notices and short speeches either delivered by the Prime Minister or vetted by him in advance' (Rentoul 2001: 540. See also Hennessy 1998: 11; Kavanagh and Seldon 1999: 273-4; Rawnsley 2001: 33, Seldon 2004: 437). Blair rarely chairs cabinet committees. There are fewer committees, meeting less often and not always reporting to full Cabinet. Most decisions take place in 'bilaterals' – agreements struck in ad hoc meetings between Blair and ministers directly - a style favoured by both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor (Rawnsley 2001: 53). In his first three years of office, Blair held 783 meetings with individual ministers compared with John Major's 272 for the same period (Kavanagh and Seldon 1999: 281). As Blair said, 'I think most Prime Ministers who have got a strong programme end up expecting their Secretaries of State to put it through; and you've always got a pretty direct personal relationship'. Also, he would not expect ministers to raise matters in Cabinet: 'look I would be pretty shocked if the first time I knew a Cabinet Minister felt strongly about something was if they raised it at the cabinet

table' – 'I would expect them to come and knock on my door' (cited in Hennessy 2000b: 12).

The list of decisions taken by Blair and Brown and never even reported to Cabinet includes: Independence for the Bank of England, postponement of joining the Euro, cuts in lone-parent benefit, and introducing Scottish and Welsh devolved government. Robin Butler, former Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Home Civil Service, has reported that 'during the late 1940s, cabinet met for an average of 87 times a year, with 340 papers being circulated; in the 1970s, 60 times a year, with 140 papers; and by the late 1990s, no more than 40 times a year, with only 20 papers' (cited in Hennessy 2000a: 5). The frequency and content of Cabinet meetings are said to have diminished significantly under Blair, 'although a lot of the business of government continued to be done in cabinet committees' (Rentoul 2001: xx) Bilateral agreements have replaced collective government, and Blair is the coordinating nodal point.

Blair is supported in this role by the new machinery of the centre and by sources of advice other than the civil service. Colin Campbell and Graham Wilson (1995: 294) concluded from the Thatcher years that 'in crucial areas the monopoly of the civil service on advising ministers has been broken' - 'British ministers have become used to the idea that, although civil servants can produce good ideas, there is no reason to listen only to civil servants'. Blair developed the practice. He knows the general direction in which he would like government to move, but not how to get there.

They say, in effect, "Tell me what you want and we'll do it. But he keeps saying different things. Richard Wilson [Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Home Civil

Service] finds it very difficult the way the Prime Minister jumps around. It's a succession of knee jerks (cited in Hennessy 2000b: 9).

The result is a frustrated civil service and frustrated special advisers. Derek Scott was Blair's economics adviser at No. 10 and he was clearly frustrated by what he saw as Blair's limited grasp of economics (Scott 2004: 14, 17, 206) and inability to stand up to Brown. He argues that Blair paid less attention to his policy advisers and civil servants than to 'the occasional outsider or those members of his inner circle who had little grasp or real interest in policy'. Moreover, Blair's circle was not the only, or even the most important, source of advice on social and economic policy. Gordon Brown had his own coterie, and his pre-eminent *consigliere* was Ed Balls, Chief Economic Adviser to the Treasury and a key Brown supporter. So, pluralizing advice also meant competing centres of advice and the competition between Blair and Brown's teams was intense and is one more example of how central coordination is thwarted.

#### Personalization of elections

Yet another theme in tales of a Blair presidency is the 'professionalization of New Labour's relationships with the media through the use of spin doctors and public relations consultants' (Foley 2000: 4; see also Mughan 2000, and Seymour-Ure 2003). This professionalization is harnessed to two bigger purposes - continuous electioneering and personalizing the campaign, and indeed the government, by an almost exclusive focus on Blair.

Andrew Rawnsley (2001: 488) amusingly illustrates the point:

‘when Blair was asked why the manifesto contained seven pictures of himself and not one of the Cabinet mates sat behind him, Brown’s features were a study in granite ...the Deputy Prime Minister [John Prescott], wearing what his mother called his “ugly face”, looked like a man one provocation away from a detonation’.

Blair did not invent media management as a way of sustaining the pre-eminence of the prime minister. However, his ‘public communications, from the designer leisure wear to the designer accent and the designer press conferences probably attracted more public interest than those of any previous British government’ (Seymour-Ure 2003: 7). Managing the media, or ‘spin’, is a game of chance and Blair’s gambler-in-chief, his ‘spin doctor’ managing the media, was Alastair Campbell, Director of Communications and Strategy. The key organization was the Strategic Communications Unit, created in 1997 to ‘provide a media monitoring and rapid reaction facility ... it would record, analyse and, where necessary, rebut items of news relating to government policy’ (Foley 2000: 190). Campbell subsequently was given the specific mission of presenting the prime minister’s voice as that of the government. Campbell fulfilled this role as a media spin-doctor through a series of daily lobby briefings. He extended his role to commanding the press relations of all ministers. Early in 1997 he even ‘informed all departmental press chiefs that media bids for interviews with their ministers must be cleared first with him’ (*The Independent*, 6 May 1997). In this way, Blair allegedly got an advanced news management service akin to that of an American president (see also Scott 2004: 15-18; Seldon 2004: chapter 22). Managing the media was also a central element in policy formulation. The strategy is called ‘triangulation’. It involves packaging policies

so they conflict with the left-wing of the Labour Party, thus winning support from the right wing press.

Blair's premiership is also said to have been marked by a significant increase in the personalization of power. Contemporary media create an environment in which a politician's ability to attract publicity is crucial to electoral success. Indeed, Blair's office contributed to creating this environment by including 'personal convictions and experiences of the premier ... in the launch of policy initiatives and reviews' (Foley 2000: 256). For example, when Blair spoke of a rise in the rates of cancer, he publicly mentioned the death of both his own mother to throat cancer and his wife's aunt to breast cancer. In this way, Blair personalized politics both by adding his own sincere concern to issues and by making those matters public information. As Seldon (2004: 432-6) documents, whenever Blair thought he was not getting the results he wanted, he took personal charge. He identified himself personally with policy initiatives in, for example, crime, education, health, immigration and transport. In the pungent phrase of the leader of the opposition, Michael Howard, when he takes charge he has 'more summits than the Himalayas'.

#### *The contingency of court politics*

This tale of the Blair government has numerous flaws and contradictions. Even as journalists, political scientists, and practitioners tell tales of a Blair presidency, so they continue to recognize many limitations to Blair's ability to get his own way. Andrew Rawnsley (2001: 292-4) initially subscribed to 'the command and control' view of Blair. But by June 2003 he wrote of 'a prime minister who is not looking in the least bit

presidential' at the head of 'a government displaying signs of drift' (*The Observer* 15 June 2003). In similar vein, Peter Riddell (2001: 40) commented 'If Mr. Blair has been a Napoleonic figure, he has been a frustrated rather than a commanding one'. So, there is a second story that focuses on the problems of governance and sees Blair as perpetually involved in negotiations and diplomacy with a host of other politicians, officials, and citizens. He is cast as just one actor among many interdependent ones in the networks that criss-cross Whitehall, Westminster, and beyond. And of all the rocks around which he has to navigate his ship of state, there is none more formidable than his Chancellor of the Exchequer. The brute fact is that Brown runs economic policy and, through his control of public expenditure, much social policy. How this came about is a diverting story in itself.

Recognition of Brown's authority requires us to shift from tales of a Blair presidency to stories which Rawnsley (2001: 20) describes 'as a dual monarchy, each with its own court'. This notion has its roots in the 'infamous' Granita restaurant story - a meeting between Blair and Brown in Islington on 31 May 1994 (but see Peston 2005: 57, 58, and 60). In return for standing down in the contest for the Labour leadership, 'Brown believed that he had his wish granted to be the central figure over economic and social policy in the future Labour government'. There is much disagreement about, and little documentary evidence on, the degree of control ceded to Brown. 'But there is no doubt that substantial if imprecise control was granted' (Seldon 2004: 193-4). James Naughtie (2002: 71) believes command over economic policy and 'significant chunks' of social policy were conceded by Blair (as do Keegan 2003: 124, Peston 2005: 58, and Rawnsley 2001: 20, 111). While there is no documentary evidence to support a deal on handing

over the prime ministership to Brown, there is some evidence on the policy deal (Guardian 6 June 2003 and see Peston 2005: 63). Michael White, Political Editor of the Guardian, concludes that ‘Blair had effectively ceded sovereignty to Brown in the economics sphere’ (cited in Seldon 2004: 669, see also Peston 2005: 67). Rawnsley (2001: 143) describes Blair as ‘the chairman and Brown the chief executive’ (see also Wheatcroft 2004: 68).

There have been several occasions on which Blair has found his authority checked by Brown. Such checks have occurred most often and dramatically over Blair’s European ambitions (see above p. xx) and the budget. So, Brown controlled the budget by withholding information. As Scott (2004: 24) comments ‘getting information about the contents of Gordon Brown’s budget was like drawing teeth’ (see also Peston 2005: 99 and 226-7, Seldon 2004: 674). And it mattered because ‘Brown always put his “poverty” agenda above Blair’s “choice” agenda’ (Seldon 2004: 688). Thus, Brown ‘viewed the big increases he achieved in NHS spending as a huge moral victory against Blair’ while he thought Blair’s policy on hospitals was a ‘distraction from his achievement in increasing expenditure’. Blair’s policy on tuition fees for universities was also deemed a distraction from the real achievement of Brown increasing education expenditure (Seldon 2004: 682-3).

It may be accurate that in the second term ‘while Blair aimed ... to limit Brown’s authority over domestic policy, Brown fought to increase it (Seldon 2004: 627). But the result was two men presiding over territory ever more jealously guarded. Brown was ‘immovable’, ‘dominating his own territory’ with ‘jagged defences designed to repel any invader, including the Prime Minister’. Not only was Downing Street left ‘wondering on

the latest thinking about the Euro' but 'unthrifty ministers' found him 'unrelenting in his pursuit of his own strategy'. Brown's role was that of 'social engineer who was redistributing wealth'. So, 'they were not interested in submerging their differences in outlook, but in making an exhibition of them' (Naughtie 2002: 352).

Seldon (2004: 689) speculates on 'how much more Blair would have accomplished since 1997 had not so much time, emotional energy and goodwill been consumed' by their deteriorating relationship. He opines, 'Brown's achievements were almost undimmed by the shadow the relationship cast, while Blair felt hemmed in and often unable to realise his ambitions'; 'Brown felt himself to be the loser but in the end, it was Blair who lost out far more' (Seldon 2004: 689). By 2005, their relationship had deteriorated to an all-time low. Their 'TeeBee-GeeBees' are a long-running soap opera in the media.<sup>11</sup> But Brown now believes that Blair has torn up their deal with the announcement that he will stand for a third term (see Peston 2005: chapter 10). Brown was reported as saying to Blair that 'There is nothing you could ever say to me now that I could ever believe' (Peston 2005: 349). Brown was now 'the official opposition to Blair within the very heart of the Cabinet' (Peston 2005: 13 also 353). A key characteristic of the past eight years is this shifting of fortunes in the court politics of the duumvirate, signalling the limits of a presidential analogy.

Court politics are not confined to Blair and Brown. Norton (2000: 116-7) describes the core executive as baronial:

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<sup>11</sup> If 'heebie-jeebie' refers to a state of nervous apprehension, then 'TeeBee-GeeBees', formed from the respective initials of the two protagonists, refers to their state of apprehensive antagonism and their regular spats.

Ministers are like medieval barons in that they preside over their own, sometimes vast, policy territory. Within that territory they are largely supreme. .. The ministers have their own policy space, their own castles - even some of the architecture of departments ... reinforces the perception - and their own courtiers. The ministers fight - or form alliances - with other barons in order to get what they want. They resent interference in their territory by other barons and will fight to defend it.

Hennessy (2000a: 493-500) has conscientiously mapped Blair's court and its changing membership. Many commentators note its influence (see for example Rawnsley 2001: 292; Seldon 2004: 407).<sup>12</sup> The rivalry between Brown and Mandelson is a constant : 'one of the great laws of British politics ... is that any action by Mandelson causes an equal and opposite reaction by Brown (Peston 2005: 223, see also Rawnsley 2001: 20; Seldon 2004: 162). There have been other major, running conflicts; for example, between Brown and Alan Milburn, Secretary of State for Health, over Foundation Hospitals. Other ministers struggle to become heavy hitters. David Blunkett's frank if injudicious comments on the abilities and progress of his cabinet colleagues are a public example of a conversation that Westminster and Whitehall conducts all the time in private.<sup>13</sup> Such

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<sup>12</sup> Over the years, it included the likes of Alistair Campbell (Head, SCU), Jonathan Powell (No. 10 Chief of Staff), Jeremy Heywood (PM's principal private secretary), Anji Hunter (Special Adviser), David Miliband (Head of the Policy Unit) and Philip Gould (PM's pollster). Among ministers it included Charlie Falconer (Minister, Cabinet Office) and Peter Mandelson (various).

<sup>13</sup> For example, Blunkett said Alan Milburn (Health) had 'grown in competence and ability', Margaret Beckett (Environment and Agriculture) is 'just holding the ring'; Charles Clarke (Education) 'has not developed as expected', Patricia Hewitt (Trade and Industry) does not think strategically, and Gordon Brown throws his weight around (Pollard 2005: 27-8). Of course his colleagues reciprocate. John Prescott (deputy prime minister) is said to hold Blunkett in a mixture of contempt and suspicion while others grit their teeth at his 'idiotic indiscretion' (*Observer* 12 December 2004).

gossip is the currency of court politics and the judgements are markers in the endless ministerial jockeying for position and recognition.

Amid this jostling, cabinet and its infrastructure of committees continues. For example, David Blunkett played the traditional ministerial role in cabinet, rationing his contributions to key issues and not interfering in the affairs of other departments. Also highly political issues such as introducing identity cards were fully ventilated in cabinet and run through cabinet and interdepartmental committees (Pollard 2005: 26 and 305-6). Desuetude is not yet cabinet's fate.

The phrase 'the core executive seeks to broaden the notion of the executive beyond a narrow focus on prime minister and cabinet. It stresses the interdependence of the *several* actors at the heart of government. The story of Blair and Brown, and their ubiquitous court politics, shows how misleading it is to focus only on the prime minister and cabinet. While the core executive thesis can encompass the duumvirate, the prime ministerial power or presidentialization thesis can not. I can think of no clearer example of how the language of Westminster obscures our understanding of trends in British governance. Political power is not concentrated in either prime minister or cabinet, but more widely dispersed. It is contested, so the standing of any individual, prime minister or chancellor, is contingent.

### 3. The accountability gap

I do not document the several dimensions to accountability in British government. Here, I focus on ministerial, civil service and network accountability. Few would dispute there

are problems. It is not contentious to claim that public respect for and trust in politicians generally and the government in particular is not high. When the Labour Lord Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, commented that ‘The problem is that many MPs never see the London that exists beyond the wine bars and brothels of Westminster’ (*The Times* 19 February 1987), he may have erred on the side of exaggeration but he caught the mood of the day. More prosaically, 79 per cent of voters think Britain needs a written constitution with clear rules imposed on ministers (*The Independent*, 30 May 1995). There is a clear perception of an accountability gap.

### *Ministerial responsibility*<sup>14</sup>

Along with the prime minister as first among equals, ministerial responsibility is one the hoariest chestnuts of the constitution. Defining the term resembles ‘the procreation of eels’ (Marshall 1986: 54). I can deal with the topic briefly only because Geoffrey Marshall and Diana Woodhouse provide authoritative restatements of these evolving conventions. On individual ministerial responsibility Marshall (1986: 223) writes:

‘It is a rule that can be suspended or breached except in circumstances when the Prime Minister, having considered the immediate and long-term political implications, feels it to be more honoured in the observance.’

On collective responsibility he writes:

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<sup>14</sup> For an encyclopaedic survey of the many faces of accountability, see Mulgan (2003). For a statistical analysis and classification of resignations see: Dowding (1995: chapter 8). For surveys see Marshall (1986: chapters IV and XIV), and Woodhouse (1994, 2003 and 2004). Woodhouse (2003: 329-32) has a useful bibliography and a list of resignations and, just as important, non-resignations (Woodhouse 2003: 298). On ministerial accountability in Australia see Thompson and Tillotson (1999).

Cabinet may have a policy, if it wishes, of permitting public disagreements between Ministers even on matters of major policy without endangering constitutional principles (Marshall 1986: 225).

In short, ministers do not resign and cabinets disagree in public. Whether ministerial responsibility and collective responsibility apply depends on the political standing of the minister and the judgement of the prime minister. The trouble with lawyers, however, is they err on the side of dry and take the fun out of it all. So, it is worth noting in passing that 43% of all resignations between 1945 and 1991 were for sexual or financial scandals, not personal or departmental error (Dowding 1994: 165).

Legal and statistical summaries lose some the drama. I was present in the weeks leading up to a resignation and can attest to the emotional highs and lows of Minister, advisers and civil servants. It is hard to comprehend the maelstrom the media can unleash on the unwary. It places them in the media eye to a frightening extent. I saw the Minister, who to the best of my knowledge had made no mistake, hounded by the press. They were not interested in the facts of the case. They did not know, and did not want to know, the accurate story. They wanted a headline. They wanted blood in the guise of a resignation. I saw a Minister taut with worry trying to fend off the pack. The voice gave facts. The body spoke tension. The Minister's hands were clasped together on the tabletop, as taught in the media classes they all take. But the legs were twined and twisted under the table and the breathing was shallow and rapid. The journalists did not listen. They talked among themselves. The press treated the Minister as an object, not a person. Indeed, the special correspondents took a back seat to the political correspondents, who knew

nothing about the policy area and cared even less. The story, the scoop, the by-line were all that mattered.

There is a serious point to this story. It suggests that ministerial responsibility is alive and well, but not in its conventional formulation. It is no longer the prime minister and the political standing of the minister that decides a resignation – but the media maelstrom (see also Woodhouse 2004: 17). David Blunkett, Home Secretary, had high personal political standing in the party and the full support of the prime minister but the pack brought him down over his affair and subsequent row over access to the children (see Pollard 2005: chapters 12 and 13). It would seem that only fox hunting among blood sports is to be banned.

#### *Civil service accountability*

Speaking in May 1999, on ‘The Civil Service in the New Millennium’, Sir Richard Wilson, then head of the home civil service, commented:

I mentioned earlier the pride which the Civil Service has traditionally taken at its more senior levels in its ability to advise Ministers on policy. But we are now beginning to question among ourselves quite how good we were in fact at this skill. Were we talking about devising policies which could be managed effectively to deliver the outcomes which the Government of the day wanted? Or were we more concerned with devising policies which the Minister could get through his Cabinet colleagues and Parliament and present successfully to the press? And how often have we in practice gone back later and evaluated the success with which policies have delivered what was claimed for them at the time

when they were launched, rather than simply move on to devising the next policy which helps the Minister through a difficult moment?

In short, there is no formal system for holding the civil service to account for its policy advice.

It is scarcely any better for their management work. Responsibility (for management) can be delegated to agency chief executives. Accountability (for policy) remains with the minister. But this distinction hinges on clear definitions of both policy and management and of the respective roles and responsibilities of ministers, senior civil servants and chief executives. They do not exist:

accountability arrangements are not obvious because it is not always possible to clearly separate policy and management issues and some Chief Executives, especially the ones from the private sector, are very conscious of being in what they consider to be a fairly precarious position. (Cabinet Office 1994: 24)

Given the Blair government's manifesto promise to improve service delivery, especially in education and health, it is virtually impossible to separate policy and management issues; the government decrees they are one and the same. In effect, ministers decide who is responsible for what, and ministers can change their mind in the light of prevailing political winds.

### *Holding networks to account*

To the ambiguity of management reforms, we can also add the sheer institutional complexity of networks, which obscures who is accountable to whom for what. Forgive

my stating the obvious, but outside of police, defence and social security, there are almost no policy areas where the centre has hands-on control and where a command operating code might work. Government now manages networks, commonly referred to nowadays as partnerships. As Richard Mulgan (2003: 211-14) argues, buck-passing is much more likely in networks because responsibility is divided and the reach of political leaders is much reduced. Brian Hogwood and his colleagues (2000) show that agencies and special purpose bodies have multiple constituencies, each seeking to hold them to account and there is no system, just disparate, overlapping demands. As Guy Peters (1998: 302) argues 'strong vertical linkages between social groups and public organizations makes effective coordination and horizontal linkages within government more difficult'. Once agreement is reached in the network, 'the latitude for negotiation by public organizations at the top of the network is limited'. The brute fact is that multiple accountabilities weaken central control (Mulgan 2003: 225).

So, if we adopt the Westminster model's focus on ministerial responsibility, we have a seriously lop-sided view of accountability on British government. Rather, we need to think in terms of webs of accountabilities. In other words, accountability is about sets of organizations, not the individual minister, and about legal, professional and managerial accountability as well as political.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Davis (1995: 103) provides a convenient summary of this take on responsible government in Australia when he argues, 'The idea of responsible government is fundamental to our society, but to give a realistic idea of responsible government in Australia, it must be eased from its monogamous uni-centric Westminster roots, and brought closer to the polycentric circumstances of Australian politics.' On the need to rethink accountability in the nation-state see Behn (2001).

#### 4. Learn skills that we haven't learned before

The role of the bureaucracy has also changed over the past two decades. In the words of the then head of the home civil service, Sir Richard Wilson (1998), the civil service is 'going to have to learn skills that we haven't learned before'. What has changed? What are these skills? In this section, I discuss bureaucracy, contracts, and networks as these changes affect the civil service.

Marketization and contracts are characterised by prices and competition. Bureaucracies are characterized by authority and rules. Networks are characterised by trust and diplomacy. The British government has undergone a shift from hierarchy to markets to networks and now uses all three to deliver services, often for the same service.<sup>16</sup> Each has problems. Bureaucracy and red tape is an old litany. We are aware of the advantages of and limits to contracting out and marketization in their several guises. We are less familiar with networks.

Of course, networks have advantages. First, networks often work in conditions where markets and hierarchies do not. For example, they work when: professional discretion and expertise are core values; flexibility to meet localised, varied service demands is needed; and cross-sector, multi-agency co-operation and production is required. Second, networks bring together policy makers and the implementing agencies, and by so doing increase the available expertise and information. Third, networks bring together many actors to negotiate about a policy, increasing the acceptability of that policy and improving the likelihood of compliance. Fourth, networks increase the resources

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<sup>16</sup> On the equivalent trends in Australia see Davis and Rhodes 2000.

available for policy making by drawing together the public, private and voluntary sectors. However, they have limits. They also have costs. For example, they can be: inefficient because cooperation causes delay; and unaccountable for their actions. Also, network negotiation and coordination can be confounded by their political context when, for example party political interests undermine negotiations and the search for an agreed course of action. They can be a form of political oligopoly, closed to public scrutiny and protecting vested interests. The main problem, however, is not the limits of any one mechanism but their interaction with one another.

One clear effect of marketization is that it undermines the effectiveness of networks. By promoting both competition and contracting-out, the result is to 'corrode common values and commitments' and 'to create an atmosphere of mistrust'. Market relations had 'corrosive effects' on 'professional networks, which depend on co-operation reciprocity and interdependence'. In short, contracts undermine trust, reciprocity, informality and co-operation. It's the mix of governing structures that matters but that mix can be of oil and water (Flynn et al 1996: 115 and 136-7). So the challenge is to identify the conditions each which each mechanism works for a specific service. As my contribution to this discussion, I want to advance three less than popular propositions: bureaucracy works, personalization rules OK, and head kicking (or management by fear and sanctions) is counter-productive. Or, to put it more formally, bureaucracy has its virtues, civil service appointments have been personalized, not politicized, and we should choose management styles that 'fit'.

### *The virtues of bureaucracy*

Unfashionable though it may be to say so, bureaucracy has its uses. Even when governments live in a world of contractors, they still need a bureaucracy - an active public sector that is stable, long-term, specialised, merit based, ethically sensitive and free from political patronage so advice and contract decisions are not tainted. We use bureaucracy to manage contracts (Davis and Rhodes 2000).

But the virtues of bureaucracy are not so limited. First, bureaucracy is not just red tape or domination by officials, although it can be both. It is a tool of government and the trick is to know what you are using and why you are using it. From Weber on, we have known that this machine has 'technical superiority' over other forms of organization. It has: 'precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs' (Gerth and Mills 1946: 214).

Second, the arguments against bureaucracy were never well founded. Indeed, to put no finer point on it, the critics were factually wrong in many of their assertions. Goodsell (1994) shows that: most people are satisfied with the services they receive from bureaucracy; public sector productivity has risen continuously over the past two decades; the public sector has a better record than the private sector as an equal opportunity employer; bureaucrats are motivated; and they do exercise initiative and discretion. The cavalier neglect of evidence by many critics is no where better illustrated than by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler (1992: xviii) whose objective is 'to bash bureaucracies'. They

want to promote the entrepreneurial spirit, to which end they tell many stories about the entrepreneurial spirit in government bureaucracies. And here lies the central paradox. The very bureaucracies they seek to bash are also the sources of innovation!

Third, there is a case for bureaucracy based on political theory. For example, Gary Wamsley and his colleagues (1985) argue the 'Public Administrator' has an important role to play in identifying the 'public interest'. They define the 'public interest' as an ideal and a process, meaning it is the product of a continuing dialogue which addresses long-range views, competing demands and all affected individuals and groups. The 'Public Administrator' is a trustee of the public good. It is their responsibility to look beyond the short-term, to stimulate reasoned debate, to involve citizens in that debate, and to expand the opportunities for that involvement. These Platonic guardians of the public interest may pose acute problems of political accountability, but the official has always existed as a counterweight to the politician. They are the repository of 'specialised knowledge, historical experience, time-tested wisdom and ... some degree of consensus of the public interest' which acts as counterweight to short-term political expediency and opportunism. The civil service is the locus of institutional memory and the bearer of 'institutional scepticism' (Hugo Young cited in Plowden 1994: 104). They stand for integrity and probity against partisan interest and corruption.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, bureaucracies are probably a political necessity. Indeed, life in the public service would not be worth living if it were not beset by such contradictions. While governments think they want less bureaucracy, their actions betray them. Bureaucracies provide direct,

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<sup>17</sup> On institutional skepticism, also referred to as 'the frank and fearless', in the Australian public service see Weller (2001).

hands-on control of policy and services through their hierarchical, rule-based structure. These characteristics favour intervention, and governments want to intervene. In any crisis, and the political complexion of the government will be irrelevant, bureaucracy may be the obvious ship on which to sail to safety (see Marr and Wilkinson 2003). Needs must where the devil drives, and failures of policy and in service delivery carry a high electoral penalty. Similarly, ministers may want responsiveness and better services. They also want the older arts. The good departmental secretaries spot holes before ministers fall in, pull ministers out when they have fallen in, and then pretend they never fell in at all. The small 'p' political arts have not fallen into decrepitude, we just don't talk about them - they are out of fashion.

*Personalization, not politicization*

Marketization impacts on civil servants in several obvious ways; their departments lose functions to the private sector, they have to manage contracts. My main concern here is the use of employment contracts as part of the search for greater political control. The emotive phrase for these changes is politicization. It has been a recurrent theme in British public sector reform under both Conservative and Labour governments. It is more productive to move beyond the idea of politicisation to a different idea - personalisation. Permanent secretaries are selected and kept in part because of their style and approach, in part because of their policy preferences, and in part because ministers are comfortable with them. Mutual toleration becomes less significant if they can be readily moved. Personal compatibility is necessary; the permanent secretaries must adjust to meet the demands of the ministers. Every system has examples of top civil servants 'retiring' or leaving abruptly unable to find the right rapport with their minister. So, political control

of the bureaucracy was and remains the order of the day. Permanence gave way to contracts, a degree of personalisation and greater responsiveness to the elected government. The statesmen in disguise of the golden years had to learn to be servants of power, and willingly so because they initiated many changes. So, nowadays, it is commonplace to note the personalisation of appointments and the preference for can-do civil servants who are policy managers not policy makers.<sup>18</sup>

That said, I want to enter three qualifications. First, not all departmental secretaries display the fashionable managerial traits. For all their commonality of background, they remain a mixed breed. My experience of civil servants is of individuals who are by turn eccentric, laudable, unconventional, overbearing, charismatic, even ones who evoke an empathetic sorrow for their fate. There are outsiders as well as members of the old boy network. There are men who oil the machine of state and men with grand ideas who made a difference.

Second, civil servants believe in the Westminster model. It is integral to their anonymity and political impartiality, in a public service ethos, and in loyalty to the minister. For example, they stick fast to the Westminster model's constitutional conventions.

Ministerial responsibility may be a fiction in that ministers do not resign when their departments are at fault. But civil servants act as if ministerial responsibility is a brute fact of life. In classic Weberian fashion, the doctrine of ministerial responsibility means that the role of civil servants is to follow orders and that of politician, to give them. It

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<sup>18</sup> Australia and New Zealand have moved further and more quickly down the managerialism and contracting route than the UK. As Rhodes and Weller (2001: 253) conclude from their six country survey, public sector reform is an example of 'Antipodean exceptionalism'. It joins the kangaroo, the duck-billed platypus, the Tasmanian Tiger and the Kiwi as another example of uniqueness in the southern hemisphere.

legitimizes the role of the civil servant, their anonymity and political impartiality. The corollary of this stance is that they see it as their duty to serve the minister. They expect to give the minister what he or she wants. They expect to establish the necessary rapport, which may be purely professional or something much closer. It is their job to establish a good working relationship. Obviously some ministers are obnoxious, some hapless, and there is no guarantee of success, but there is a clear set of expectations.

Third, most are adept at adapting. Their response to the pluralisation of advice and the increase in political and policy advisers was to incorporate both to their normal methods of working. So, they no longer see themselves as the main let alone only source of advice but they do see themselves as collating coordinating packages of advice. They do not fear competing advice, only being left out of the loop. Similarly, advisers provide few problems. One permanent secretary pointed out that his minister's advisers were located next to his private office, No nonsense about burying them away in obscure rooms. He wanted them where he could see them. The two offices mingled. Relations were amicable. Everyone was kept in the loop. Indeed, they were seen as an asset on relations with the media and the party and their help was actively sought.

#### *Diplomacy and hands-off management*

Recent reforms reinforce the existing pattern of functional differentiation with decentralised political authority. Increasingly the centre has to manage packages of services, packages of organizations, and packages of governments. Managing intergovernmental relations is a new skill and distinctions between types of organizations and levels of government become blurred as the centre seeks to manage a seamless web.

I use 'diplomacy' to refer to management by negotiation in contrast to management by fear and sanction. As Sir Douglas Wass said 'finesse and diplomacy are an essential ingredient in public service' (cited in Hennessy, 1989: 150). Such skills lie at the heart of steering networks. The idea is not new, although it can seem novel; it has just been temporarily misplaced. We relearn old lessons. As François de Callières 1663 [1716] comments:

Now, if I were in the place of this Prince, wielding his power, subject to his passions and prejudices, what effect would my mission and my arguments have on me? The more often he puts himself in the position of others, the more subtle and effective will his arguments be.

Why is this relevant? Because diplomatic styles of management work for networks, command styles do not. As Ewan Ferlie and Andrew Pettigrew (1996: 88-89) found for chief executives of the national Health Service, the web of interagency alliances prompt a shift to matrix management styles with chief executive officers increasingly concerned to build and uphold links and institutionalise strategic alliances. Respondents identified the following key networking skills:

strong interpersonal, communication and listening skills; an ability to persuade; a readiness to trade and to engage in reciprocal rather than manipulative behaviour; an ability to construct long-term relationships (Ferlie and Pettigrew 1996: 96)

Similarly, Gerry Stoker (2004: 139) argues that in local government that networked community governance needs facilitative leadership that can reconcile differences, develop shared visions, build coalitions, and help people to find their own solutions. With

due temerity, I suggest, this diplomatic style of management is conspicuous for its rarity in the public services in of Britain.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, the British civil service, while continuing to use its classical bureaucratic skills, also has to learn the new political arts of responsiveness, managing the media and advisers, and coping with the exigencies of a networked society.

##### 5. The sour laws of unintended consequences.

Here, I focus not on the horizontal networks of Westminster and Whitehall or on the networks beyond Westminster and Whitehall but on the ways in which government policymaking is all too often confounded by both. Central fragmentation and the Blair reforms of the centre seek to impose the desired degree of coordination with limited success. Add the simple fact that service delivery is disaggregated to a multiplicity of networks and the explanation of the gap between rhetoric and reality is obvious (Rhodes 1988: 409). The implementation gap is ubiquitous and unintended consequences are inevitable (Pressman and Wildavsky 1974).

This argument is illustrated by the several studies of policy under Blair (Toynbee and Walker 2001; Seldon 2001; and Savage and Atkinson 2001). Of course, there are policy successes. For example, Polly Toynbee and David Walker (2001: 40) confess that a 'deep-dyed cynic' would be impressed by New Labour's commitment to a fairer society

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<sup>19</sup> Diplomacy may be rare today in the Australian public service also, but it is not unknown.. For example, Caiden (1990: 30) identifies putting oneself in the other person's shoes as a long-standing value and belief of Commonwealth officials. These skills are also present in the federal-provincial diplomacy of Australian intergovernmental relations (see Keating and Wanna 2000).

and conclude they have improved the lot of the poor. In other policy areas there has been little change or the results are unclear.

During the first term, changes in social security were incremental and they often recalled Conservative policy. It is the same story in housing policy. Health is a more complex tale, and it differs across the four nations of the British Isles (Bevir and Rhodes 2005: chapter 8). In England, there has been a clear shift to mixed public-private provision but it is too early to assess the effects of these changes. Clearly, there has been a massive injection of public spending, although by international standards the UK is still well down the league table of spending on health. The age-old contest between ‘professional monopolists’ and the ‘corporate rationalisers’ is still unresolved. There has been a similar injection of cash in education but again the long-term outcome is uncertain (and for a preliminary balance sheet see: Seldon 2001: 593-600). There is a major emphasis on improving service delivery with ever more demanding performance measurement and evaluation. However, Tony Wright, Labour Chair of the Select Committee on Public Administration, commented perceptively: ‘it is just not technically feasible, never mind desirable, to have that much centralization. If everything is a target, nothing is a target’ (cited in Rawnsley 2001: 292).

Then there are the known domestic problem areas - higher education, immigration and transport – that still wait for their ‘solutions’. There are the cock-ups – for example, privatizing air traffic control, the railways, tax credit payments, reform of the House of Lords, passports. There are the disasters that discredit governments. The examples include: the millennium dome, the Hutton Inquiry into Iraq and weapons of mass

destruction, the Jo Moore affair over her claim that 9/11 was a ‘good day to bury bad news’,<sup>20</sup> and the proposed referendum on the Euro.

All governments fail some of the time. All governments are constrained by world events. All prime ministers intervene. Few control and then only for some policies, some of the time. The test of success in politics is elusive and shifting. Maybe, as Enoch Powell said, all political careers end in failure. Maybe, as George Orwell said, every life is a defeat seen from the inside. But Blair’s failures stand in stark relief to the early promise, making the disappointment of his supporters more acute. The sour laws of unintended consequences haunt all governments, none more so than those that ignore the governance narrative.

## **Conclusion**

Parliamentary sovereignty is hollowed out by fragmenting services, devolved government, Europeanization, and internationalization. Prime minister and cabinet are no longer the loci of decision-making and there is no trend to presidentialization. In their place we have the court politics of the core executive. Ministerial responsibility is a myth of the constitution, obscuring both the complex webs of accountabilities that now characterise British government and the impact of the media. The civil service has to add political responsiveness and network management to its existing bureaucratic skills. By way of conclusion, I want to reflect on what lessons can be learnt from my account of the transformation of Westminster into a differentiated polity, on the uses of Westminster, and on why anyone in Australia should care.

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<sup>20</sup> Jo Moore was a political adviser to Stephen Byers, Secretary of State at the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions. For the full story see Blick (2004: 13-15) and Woodhouse (2004: 2-4).

## 1. Lessons

The maxim ‘for every complex problem there is a simple solution and it is always wrong’ may not be literally correct but it should instil a modicum of caution in the breast of the would-be reformer. So, with due trepidation, I suggest we can draw three lessons from my stories.

First, a differentiated polity is not a problem to be resolved by further centralization. The republican view of democracy stresses freedom from non-domination. So, John Braithwaite (1997: 312) argues for:

the ideal of many semi-autonomous powers recursively checking one another rather than a few autonomous branches of governance. The more richly plural the separation into semi-autonomous powers, the more the dependence of each power on many other guardians of power will secure their independence from domination by one power.

So, ‘it is better to have many unclear separations of public and private powers than a few clear ones’. Multi-level governance with its many policy networks approximates to ‘many unclear separations of public and private powers’. The issue becomes, therefore, one of ensuring equity of access to not only the several governments of the UK but also the networks through which it works. The aim is to sustain differentiation through participation, not eliminate it.

Indeed, one of the unintended benefits of New Labour’s reform programme is that it has increased the number of veto points British governments have to negotiate. Devolved

government, the High Court enforcing human rights legislation, and the Bank of England are the major examples. But other possible examples are: the reform of the House of Lords, introducing freedom of information, and the elected mayor for London. Against that has to be set the continued distrust and by-passing of local government and vituperative attacks on the BBC. It was not the aim, but the outcome of more veto points is consistent with the trend to a differentiated polity and the republican theory of democracy.

Second, differentiation is messy and offends those with an administratively tidy cast of mind. Mess has its merits. As Martin Landau (1969: 350) argues, ‘the probability of failure in a system decreases exponentially as redundancy factors are increased’. Or, in sharp contra-distinction to the traditional maxims of public administration, duplication and overlap is good because it ‘provides safety factors, permits flexible responses to anomalous situations and provides a creative potential’. An organization with no duplication, no overlap and no ambiguity will be unreliable and inflexible. Redundancy ‘allows rules to be broken and units to operate defectively’ in the interests of effectiveness (Landau 1969: 356).

The prime example of the virtues of redundancy is federalism. As Landau (1969: 352 and n. 37) points out the authors of *The Federalists* ‘were ever mindful of the grave possibility of failure’. They contrived ‘the internal structure of government so that its several constituent parts, may by their mutual relations, be the means of keeping each other in their proper places’. In other words, the principle of checks and balances is also ‘the principle of interwoven and competing redundancies’. Charlie Jeffery (2004) calls for ‘limits on ... economic disparities’, ‘reducing differences between territories’,

‘minimum standards’, and averting the drift ‘into a centrifugal dynamic’. His emphasis on limiting variation recalls traditional public administration’s criticism of duplication and overlap as inefficient. This concern with administrative tidiness would seem to be a misplaced, harking back to the old days of a unitary state rather than recognizing the desirability of redundancy in a devolved state.<sup>21</sup>

Advocates of greater rationality in government may well consider a system characterised by checks and balances and redundancy as their worst nightmare. Not so. My third point is that we need to revisit Charles Lindblom’s work on partisan mutual adjustment and policy analysis. Most discussions of coordination assume hierarchy, seeing it as the most important or appropriate mechanism for effective coordination. However, Lindblom (1965) persuasively argues that indirect coordination or partisan mutual adjustment was messy but effective. For example, the San Francisco Bay Area public transit system is a multi-organizational system (or network) in which only some coordination takes place by central direction, so ‘personal trust developed through informal relationships acts as a lubricant for mutual adjustment’ (Chisholm 1989: 195). Moreover, each partisan in this process will bring analysis to the negotiating table.

Lindblom (1988: 239) distinguishes between simple incremental analysis, disjointed incrementalism and strategic analysis. Simple incremental analysis is limited to considering policies that are only incrementally different. Disjointed incrementalism restricts analysis to a few familiar policies, focuses on the ills to be remedied, employs

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<sup>21</sup> Galligan (1995: 244) recognizes this facet of Australian federalism when he comments that: federalism is not a hierarchy but a complex ‘mixing and blending of agencies from both levels of government. It is ‘essentially untidy’, with ‘governments and parts of governments competing for a share of the action’. It is best understood as ‘a policy matrix in which no government has a monopoly or complete authority’; as ‘a communications network rather than a chain of command’.

trial and error, ignores some not all consequences and fragments analysis between the several participants on the process. Strategic analysis involves problem simplification, and accepts that any analysis will be incomplete, but the simplification and incompleteness are deliberate and skilful, and we can aspire to bounded rationality. So, although no analysis of any problem is synoptic, there are several strategies for simplifying problems and analysing them.

A version of such strategic analysis is offered in Hennessy (2000a: 540-41), though it is not so described. Many of the specialized units in No. 10 are enmeshed in the hurly-burly of everyday life at the top. Hennessy suggests that No. 10 should distancing itself from this frenetic activity and develop both a plurality of analytical capacities and a greater capacity to provide risk and strategic assessments. He wants a risk assessment unit with a wide remit: 'all those areas and activities where setbacks, catastrophes or unforeseen developments can (rightly or wrongly) be laid at a PM's door'. But, crucially, to ensure that risk assessment does not become risk obsession, prime ministers must make sure the doomwatchers have a sense of proportion by treating their assessments with a healthy dose of scepticism. In other words, multiplying veto points and redundancy are the context in which analysis takes place, not the antithesis of it.

## 2. The uses of Westminster

If my story of Britain as a differentiated polity is accurate, why do the trappings if not the substance of Westminster persist? The short answer is because it is a useful myth.

A myth does not take hold without expressing many truths - misleading truths, usually, but important ones: truth for one thing, to the needs of those who elaborate

and accept the myth; truth to the demand for some control over complex realities; truth to the recognition of shared values (however shakily grounded those values may be in themselves). Even the myths that simplify are not, in themselves, simple. (Wood 1997)

Although, the ostensible subject matter is John Wayne, this account of the status and function of a myth applies just as well to the Westminster narrative, even down to its 'heroic' quality!

The long answer is that the chatter about a Blair presidency, ministerial responsibility, the demise of cabinet government and other Westminster baggage is a counter both in the court politics of the duumvirate and in wider party politics. So, for example, it matters not that the presidential analogy is misleading because the game is not about empirical accuracy but about expressing personal hostility to Blair in particular and the Labour government in general. The critics have several specific targets. For example, Michael Foley (2004) argues that the presidential epithet can refer to Blair's personal characteristics, to claims that he is too powerful, to the consequences of Blair's command and control style of government, to his international adventures and attendant disregard of domestic politics, to his flouting of constitutional conventions, and to the influence of the USA on British politics. So the term is a smoke screen behind which lurk several criticisms of Blair and the Labour government.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> In Australia, ministerial responsibility is used as a stick by the opposition to beat the government. See, for example, Kevin Rudd, House of Representatives, 15 February 2005: 9.

It also serves useful purposes for the government because it cloaks executive power with legitimacy. Thus, 'President Blair' asserts

To my certain knowledge that has been said about virtually every administration in history that had a sense of direction. I remember that people said that back in the Eighties about Thatcher. Of course you have to have Cabinet Government.

(*The Observer*, 23 November 1997. See also the citations in Hennessy 2000c: 11 and n.70).

It is the government's equivalent of a cloak of invisibility. Myths have serious functions. The Westminster story continues to be told. I tell the story of the differentiated polity so we can see things differently; so I can point to new connections in governance and new aspects of governance. Terms like ministerial responsibility and parliamentary sovereignty are best seen, therefore, as political counters in a bargaining game. This game is ever-evolving and characterised by intermingling and overlapping of policy networks over which Westminster and Whitehall seek to exert both hands-off and hands-on controls with unpredictable degrees of success.

### 3. Why should we care?

Whether Westminster is alive, dead or merely terminally ill, why should an Australian audience care? Parker argues (1980: 130) that Australia incorporated the 'essential elements of "the Westminster model"' and, more controversially he adds three contentions:

that most of the political institutions of Westminster were successfully and lastingly transplanted to Australia; ... that Australian political culture was only one of the influences tending to modify the operation of Westminster institutions in this continent – geography, historical accident, institutional interactions and short-term political expediencies were at least as important, ... Whatever the differences Australian factors have made to the working of the Westminster system, they are probably less important in their impact on the system than developments that have affected Australian and British government alike and reduced the alleged differences between them to relative insignificance. ... It is indeed arguable that Australia has moved a smaller distance from the original than has Britain.

He was wrong - then. But he was prescient – today, he is right. The impending demise of Westminster in Westminster signals to Australia that it could happen here. Australian government also confronts similar problem of governance. It confronts packages of governments and organizations, shared responsibility among webs of organizations, mixed management systems, the erosion of institutional scepticism, and declining strategic capability.<sup>23</sup> Examining how Westminster has changed may highlight these problems. It does nothing to help solve them. It may not be true that, ‘Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone’ (John Donne [1611], ‘The First Anniversary. An Anatomy of the World’, 1985 edition, 335 line 213). But British government can do a passable imitation

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<sup>23</sup> Republicanism is much more than the question of the monarch as head of state. It is also about freedom from domination or the separation of powers. Australia has always had many constitutional veto points at both state and Commonwealth levels of government. They include the High Court, the Senate and federalism. On the argument advanced here, such veto points are not to be despised as, for example, unrepresentative swill, but prized as bulwarks of liberty.

of incoherence and the nostrums of the Westminster model simply act as a smoke screen, obscuring both problems and unwelcome solutions. It was a simple model belonging to a simpler era. Now Westminster is more fairy tale than fact. We manage complex and uncertain domestic and international networks over which we have little control and at best hands-off influence.

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**Rod Rhodes** is Professor of Political Science and Head of Program in the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, and Emeritus Professor of Politics at the University of Newcastle, UK. He is the author or editor of 20 books including recently *Understanding Governance* (1997), *Transforming British Government Volume 1. Changing Institutions. Volume 2. Changing Roles and Relationships* (2000), and (with Mark Bevir), *Interpreting British Governance* (2003) and *Governance Stories* (2005, forthcoming). He has been editor of *Public Administration* since 1986. He is a Vice-President of the Political Studies Association of the United Kingdom and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in both Australian and Britain.