Searching for Civil Society: changing patterns of governance in Britain

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Introduction

British government has shifted, according to many political scientists, from the government of a unitary state to governance in and by networks (Rhodes, 1997; Rhodes 2000a; Stoker 1999 and 2000). Yet the difficulties surrounding the term governance are considerable. It can refer to a new process of governing, or a changed condition of ordered rule or the new method by which society is governed (cf. Finer 1970: 3-4). One colleague described it as a ‘weasel’ word - slippery and elusive, used to obscure, not to shed light. In this article we seek to understand the new epoch by providing an account of how elite political and administrative actors understand the term; that is, a decentred analysis focusing on the various British political traditions and their several interpretations (and on decentred analysis see Bevir and Rhodes 2002).

In our view, people can engage in a practice only because they hold certain beliefs or concepts. Consequently, political scientists can explore that practice by unpacking the relevant beliefs and explaining why they arose. For example, our electoral practices assume participants have a shared understanding of such notions as voting, candidate and polling. We can explore electoral practices by examining the content of these concepts and their historical roots. When political scientists so interpret practices, they lump beliefs together in discourses, ideologies, or traditions. They abstract from the beliefs of particular individuals to depict aggregates – the patterns of thought that inform a political practice. Alternatively, when individuals vote for the Labour Party, they may do so believing Labour will promote redistributive policies that are socially desirable and from which they will benefit. We can explore their voting behaviour by examining their webs of beliefs and how they came to hold them. When political scientists so interpret beliefs, they provide insights into the behaviour of particular individuals. They describe the particular sets of reasons that led the relevant
individual to act. The distinction between aggregate and individual analysis is, however, artificial. An interpretative approach moves back and forth between aggregate concepts and the beliefs of particular individuals. The coverage given to each in any given study depends on the topics that study seeks to illuminate. 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.

In this article, we concentrate on an aggregate analysis of British political traditions. One of the dangers of so working is that we can neglect the differences in the beliefs of the individuals lumped together in a tradition. A recognition of this danger prompts us to decentre aggregate concepts such as tradition; that is, to highlight the diversity of its constituent parts. So, within the British political tradition, we distinguish Tory, Whig, Liberal, and Socialist traditions. Within the Socialist tradition, we distinguish between Old and New Labour. We could have gone on to analyse the beliefs of particular individuals. We do not do so. Our aim is to trace the patterns of thought informing British governance, and to do so we concentrate on aggregate analysis. We do not unpack the beliefs behind particular actions or policies. Rather, we concentrate on the broader traditions informing general changes in the practices of British government, invoking individuals as exemplars, rather than as the individual agents who make up traditions.

Governance signals how the informal authority of networks supplements and supplants the formal authority of government. The governance literature explores the limits to the state and seeks to develop a more diverse view of state authority and its exercise. Broadly conceived,
governance explores the changing boundary between state and civil society. Still, we ground recent changes in the boundaries between state and civil society in an analysis of the mechanisms for authoritatively allocating resources and for exercising control and co-ordination. In other words, we focus on hierarchies, markets and networks. Bureaucracy remains the prime example of hierarchy or co-ordination by administrative order. Despite all the recent changes, it is still a major way of delivering services in British government; for example, the Benefits Agency remains a large bureaucracy. Privatisation, marketing testing and the purchaser-provider split are examples of government using market or quasi-market ways of delivering services. Price competition is believed to be the key to efficient and better quality services. Competition and markets are now a fixed part of the landscape of British government. It is less widely recognised that British government now works through networks characterised by trust and mutual adjustment to provide welfare services. The shifts from hierarchy to markets and then to networks involved changing the boundaries between state and civil society (and for a more detailed account see Rhodes 2000a). Indeed, the Conservative government explicitly defended its use of market mechanisms as a way of redefining the boundaries of the state, while New Labour is almost equally explicit about its use of networks.

This article argues there is no essentialist notion of governance but at least four conceptions each rooted in a distinctive tradition. Each tradition is a distinct mix of beliefs about the role of government. The first section of the paper describes the relevant traditions: Tory, Liberal, Whig and Socialist. The second section describes the different notions of governance associated with each tradition; intermediate institutions, marketising public services, reinventing the constitution, and trust and negotiation. It also explains these distinct
conceptions of governance as responses to the dilemmas of inflation and state overload. In the conclusion, we summarise how and why traditions change.

**Governmental Traditions.**

Our focus is on developments in the public sector since 1968 when the Fulton report (Cm 3638 1968) heralded the ‘modern’ era. We offer a decentred account; that is we seek to provide thick descriptions of governance using the accounts or texts of participants. We clump these thick descriptions together into various traditions.

A tradition is a set of beliefs someone inherits largely through the process of socialisation. A governmental tradition is a set of inherited beliefs about the institutions and history of government (cf. Davis 1998: 158; Perez-Dias 1993: 7). Because individuals can modify their heritage through their agency, traditions are contingent, constantly evolving, and necessarily embedded in a historical context.

Our choice of traditions for Britain is conventional (see for example: Barker 1994, Pearson and Williams 1984). We focus on the Tory, Liberal, Whig and Socialist traditions, providing a brief account of each, which we summarise in Table 1.

**Table 1: Traditions of government**

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<tr>
<th>TRADITIONS</th>
<th>TORY</th>
<th>LIBERAL</th>
<th>WHIG</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DEFINING STORY LINE.</strong></td>
<td>Preserving traditional authority.</td>
<td>Restoring markets and combating state overload.</td>
<td>Organic change.</td>
<td>The bureaucratic state.</td>
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The Tory Tradition

The Tory tradition is elusive and relentlessly inconsistent (Honderich, 1991). All too often its proponents define it more by what it isn't than by what it is. Gilmour (1978: 121-43) argues the Conservative party is not averse to change (ibid.: 121), not a pressure group (ibid. 130), and not ideological (ibid.: 132). More positively, 'the fundamental concern of Toryism is the preservation of the nation's unity, of the national institutions, of political and civil liberty' (ibid.: 143). Blake (1985: chapter 11 and postscript) argues Conservatives are against centralisation, equality and internal splits but, to leaven the mix, they are for the national interest. Gamble (1988: 170-71) describes the British state as the Tory state with the defining characteristics of racial and national superiority, a deferential attitude towards authority, a secrecy surrounding the practice of high politics, an anti-egalitarian ethos and a status hierarchy.

Some strands recur in the Tory tradition. For example, Michael Oakeshott (1962 and 1975) provides the philosophical underpinnings for several raconteurs of Tory narratives. Ian Gilmour (1978: 92-100; and 1992: 272-3) adopts Oakeshott's distinction between the state as a civil and an enterprise association. An enterprise association is 'human beings joined in pursuing some common substantive interest, in seeking the satisfaction of some common want or in promoting some common substantive interest'. Persons in a civil association 'are not joined in any undertaking to promote a common interest ... but in recognition of non-instrumental rules indifferent to any interest', that is, a set of common rules and a common government in pursuing their diverse purposes (Gilmour 1978: 98; see also Mount 1992: 74-5; Willetts 1992: 72-3). So a free society has 'no preconceived purpose, but finds its guide in a principle of continuity ... and in a principle of consensus' (Gilmour 1978: 97). The Tory tradition favours civil association and only accepts the state as an enterprise association 'when
individuals are able to contract out of it when it suits them' (Gilmour 1992: 272). Nonetheless
Gilmour (1978: 236) accepts that some state intervention will often be expedient, practical
politics, essential to preserving the legitimacy of the state. For all its hedging about the role of
the state, the Tory tradition upholds its authority. People are self-interested and hierarchy is
necessary to keep order. Scruton (1984: 111) makes the point forcefully: 'the state has the
authority, the responsibility, and the despotism of parenthood' (see also Gamble 1988: 170).
Strong leaders wield that authority to uphold national unity, to correct social and economic
ills and to build popular consent.

The Liberal Tradition

For Liberals such as Norman Tebbitt, former Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and
former chair of the Conservative Party, Gilmore’s belief that intermediate institutions such as
local government were a check and balance on Westminster is ‘an entirely new and quite
false constitutional theory’. No matter that Enoch Powell, former cabinet minister, former
Conservative and life-long parliamentary romantic, could say that ‘a “hatred of bureaucracy”
was a common and continuing feature of Conservatism’. Until Margaret Thatcher’s election,
there was, at least to the more ardent neoliberals, little difference between, say, Edward Heath
and the Fabian reforming agenda – both were technocratic and problem solving. Thus,
and the use of business methods in a way that is remarkably similar to the Fulton Committee
and the Fabians.

The Thatcher reforms had twin roots in the economic liberalism of the Institute of Economic
Affairs (see Niskanen et al. 1973) and a concern with bureaucratic inefficiency (see
resistance to decline rather than comfortable accommodation to it’ and the public sector
would not be insulated from her reforming zeal. Thus, began the era of corporate
management, agencification and most notably marketisation. The key question became ‘what
public services must we keep?’ The policies of privatisation and contracting-out redrew the
boundary between the public and private sectors. ‘Reformism gave way to revolution’ as the
government sought to create ‘the minimalist state’. Some claim the changes wrought were as
great as those of the Northcote-Trevelyan era.

‘New Conservatism' revived the Liberal tradition by stressing freedom, applying the
principles of freedom to the economy, and accepting the welfare state on sound Conservative
grounds. Thus, David Willetts (1992), Conservative MP and junior minister under both
Margaret Thatcher and John Major, finds the roots of the New Conservatism in the One
Nation Group’s (Powell and Maude 1954) arguments against government intervention and in
such philosophers as Friedrich Hayek and Michael Oakeshott. For Willetts (1992: Ch. 6)
Adam Smith's 'system of natural liberty' provides the intellectual justification of free markets.
Markets tap 'two fundamental human instincts'; the instinct to better oneself and the instinct
to exchange. These instincts, when 'protected by a legal order which ensures contracts are
kept and property is respected', are 'the source of the wealth of nations'. Big government
cannot deliver prosperity, undermines markets and erodes communities. But 'rampant
individualism without the ties of duty, loyalty and affiliation is only checked by powerful and
intrusive government'. So, Conservatism stands between collectivism and individualism and
'Conservative thought at its best conveys the mutual dependence between the community and
the free market. Each is enriched by the other' (Willetts 1992: 182). The Conservative Party's
achievement is to reconcile Toryism and individualism. State intervention stultifies.
Competition improves performance: 'free markets are ... the route to prosperity' (Willetts
1992: 136). Bureaucracy was the problem. Marketisation was the solution to bureaucratic inefficiency (Thatcher 1993: 45-9).

The Whig Tradition

The Whig tradition emphasises the objects that are the historic heart of political science - the study of institutions or the rules, procedures and formal organisations of government, constitutional law, and constitutional history (Rhodes 1997 chapter 4). It also has an idealist strand that focuses on the interaction between ideas and institutions. Its most famous expression is the Westminster model of British government.

The Westminster model refers to

- strong cabinet government based on majority rule;
- the importance attached to constitutional conventions;
- a two-party system based on single member constituencies;
- the assumption that minorities can find expression in one of the major parties;
- the concept of Her Majesty’s loyal opposition;
- and the doctrine of parliamentary supremacy, which takes precedence over popular sovereignty except during elections (Verney 1991 p. 637).

There are many similar definitions (see among others Gamble 1990: 407 Lijphart 1984; Parker 1979; Weller 1985: 16; and Wilson 1994: 190-93).

The Westminster model also contains a widely shared set of assumptions. For example, it sometimes embodies an idealist moment, seeing 'institutions as the expression of human purpose' and focusing, therefore, on the interaction between ideas and institutions. Thus, Johnson's (1975 pp. 276-7) rationale for the study of political institutions argues:
political institutions express particular choices about how political relationships ought to be shaped; they are in the nature of continuing injunctions to members of a society that they should try to conduct themselves in specific ways when engaged in the pursuit of political ends.

Here the Westminster model typically goes with a Whig historiography that comes perilously close to telling the story of a single, unilinear, progressive idea, reason or spirit underlying the evolution of British government. It emphasises gradualism and the capacity of British institutions to evolve and cope with crises. It provides 'capacity for independent action, leadership and decision' while ensuring that 'British political institutions would remain flexible and responsive'. This narrative with its implicit Whig historiography was esteemed by political scientists who 'were largely sympathetic' (Gamble 1990 p. 411), convinced that change needed to be evolutionary', and willing to celebrate 'the practical wisdom embodied in England's constitutional arrangements' (Gamble 1990 p. 409). There are many academics and practitioners who extol the virtues of the Westminster model and of the resilience of British political institutions. One example must suffice. Thus, Professor Philip Norton (1984: 351), now Conservative peer in the House of Lords, talks of a political culture 'moulded and reinforced by the experience of history', and about the ‘strength’ of that political culture, which ‘reinforced pride’ in the system and ‘encouraged a romanticised teaching of its attributes’.

The Socialist Tradition

The Socialist tradition, with its structural explanations focused on economic factors and class and with its critique of capitalism, mounted a prominent challenge to Whig historiography. The historical story of the socialist tradition is often ambivalent about, or even hostile to, that
of the Whigs. For example, David Marquand (1988: 198), former Labour MP and European Union official, comments:

> The old Whig historians were not wrong in thinking that Britain's peaceful passage to democracy owed much to the hazy compromises which unprobed ambiguities make possible. By the same token, however, once these compromises cease to be taken for granted ... arrangements of this sort are bound to run into trouble. ... Respect for the rules of the game will ebb away. ... In doing so, they have focused attention ... on the hidden presuppositions of club government itself ... And, as a result, these presuppositions have started to come apart at the seams.

The Whig tradition collapses because it confronts a heterogeneous, pluralistic society in which authority has been de-mystified, cultural values have changed, the political system has lost legitimacy, and territorial politics is in disarray (ibid.: 199-204).

From the earliest days, a central strand in the Socialist tradition is the role accorded to bureaucracy. For example, the leading Fabian, Sidney Webb, identified socialism with the efficient organisation of society conceived as co-operative and co-ordinated organisation with state activity (Bevir 2002). The Fabians, he implied, should act as positivist experts, providing information and policies to diverse politicians. Although Webb believed in liberal democracy, he suspected that it would bring a welcome move away from political conflict towards a rule by an administrative and managerial elite. He had a strong faith in experts as a source of neutral compelling advice, although he always restricted their role to providing advice and implementing policies. Deciding had to remain the provenance of elected representatives. Contemporaries such as Graham Wallas (Qualter 1980: 99 and 162) and
inter-war Fabians (Greaves 1947) shared Webb’s strong faith in a science of public administration, according bureaucracy a central role in achieving political ends.

Narratives of Governance

We offer a decentred account of governance using the accounts or texts of participants, not academic commentaries. Of course, there is often no clear-cut distinction between academic commentators and elite actors. So, for example, Lord Crowther Hunt was both a member of the Fulton Committee on Civil Service Reform and a Fellow of Exeter College, Oxford University. Subsequently, he became a political adviser to the Prime Minister Harold Wilson, whom he advised on implementing the recommendations of the Fulton Committee. Individuals can be academics, authors of official documents and political actors all at once or at different times in their lives. Also, there is a shared language about ‘the system’. Tivey (1988: 3) deploys the concept of 'the image' to denote 'a set of assumptions about “the system” ... and how it works'. Each image contains 'operative concepts' or 'operative ideals': 'the views of the authors are taken’, moreover, ‘to be of some influence; what they have said has to some extent become operative’. Indeed, his images ‘have gained currency among those who study politics, and diluted and distorted they have reached the practitioners' (Tivey, 1988: 1; see also Beer 1965: xiii and 404).

There are four main constructions of British governance each corresponding to one of the traditions just discussed: Tories characteristically understand governance as a bypassing of intermediate institutions; Liberals see it as marketising public services; for Whigs it is a matter of reinventing the constitution; and for Socialists it is the Holy Grail of joined-up government (see Table 2). For each construction we present, in turn, the beliefs as expressed by academics, practitioners (politicians and administrators) and official reports. We also draw
on other primary texts, such as lectures, interviews, memoirs, autobiographies and biographies.

Table 2. Narratives of Governance

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bypassing intermediate institutions.</td>
<td>Marketising public services.</td>
<td>Reinventing the organic constitution.</td>
<td>Trust and negotiation.</td>
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**EXAMPLES**

**Tory governance**

The story of the Tory tradition’s accommodation to collectivism has been told often (Beer 1965; Geenleaf 1983). Whether Toryism has yet reached an accommodation with Thatcherism’s attack on so many of the ideas it venerated, including local self-government, remains unclear. Just as Butskellism and tripartism relegated the liberal strand of the Conservative Party to the sidelines in the 1950s and 1960s, so today the High Tory view of British government has been submerged by the neoliberal one. Yet just as the liberal strand lived on through the 1950s and 1960s in the speeches of Enoch Powell (Shepherd 1996: 122-4) and the pamphlets of the One Nation Group (Powell and Maude 1954), so at the start of the twenty-first century the eloquent voices of Ian Gilmour and Roger Scruton (1984) continue to express High Tory protests albeit from the sidelines even of the Conservative Party. The Tory
notion of governance bemoans the demise of traditional institutions and looks for a return to
the constitutional ways of yore.

Chapman and O’Toole (1995: 4) praise ‘the traditions of a non-partisan bureaucracy, an
actuality which allowed the civil service to come close to practising the virtues of Plato’s
guardians and Weber’s ideal-type of bureaucracy’. They defend ‘the virtues of the traditional
British civil service, with its emphasis on accountability, and its almost vocational approach
to motivation’ against the ‘fashionable pursuit of apparently new approaches to management’.
The notions of accountability to parliament through the minister and of public duty lie at the
heart of their critique. They argue that civil servants must display integrity, never putting
private interests before public duty, objectivity and impartiality (Chapman and O’Toole 1995:
5-7). To be a civil servant was an ‘esteemed opportunity to serve the state in an honourable
capacity’ (Part 1990: 20). Edward Bridges represents the peak of this tradition. Recent
management reforms, many Tories argue, attack the generalist. They are leading to the
‘demise of public duty’. Agencies fragment the civil service. Civil servants are no longer
socialised into its shared traditions. The principles of the Citizen’s Charter replace the public
service ethos. The Civil Service Code stands as a testament to how far this process has gone;
it represents a warning that we will lose the traditional values unless we protect them.
Business-like methods are no substitute for old values.

The recurrent Tory belief in preserving established roles and relationships could not be
clearer. Chapman’s debt to the Tory tradition appears throughout his work (see Chapman
1970: chapter 7). For Fry (1995: 6), for example, the classical High Tory account of
nineteenth century British government is that of Sir Lewis Namier (1961 and 1974), and yet
Chapman never refers to his work. Yet the presence of a tradition does not depend on citing
shared authorities or even an explicit list of core beliefs or a specific lineage. Beliefs and their
antecedents can be taken for granted – they can be the unspoken assumptions on which authors build their narratives. So, in his biography of Edward Bridges, Chapman (1988) extols the virtues of the generalist civil servant. His general administrative history (Chapman and Greenaway 1980) is, as Gowan (1987) caustically comments, an ‘indispensable introduction to the facts and basic sources of late nineteenth and early twentieth century administrative history’ that ignores the way in which reform served to sustain aristocratic privilege. With the Tory admiration of the generalist goes a covert acceptance of elitism.

High Tories may well ask, with Lord Salisbury, ‘why do we need change, things are quite bad enough as they are’. Or they may say, with Samuel Johnson, ‘if the changes we fear be thus irresistible, what remains but to acquiesce with silence, as in the other insurmountable distresses of humanity? It remains that we retard what we cannot repel, that we palliate what we cannot cure’.

Inspired by this Tory tradition, Gilmour (1992: 198-224), a former Cabinet Minister (1979-81), portrays the public sector reforms of the 1980s as a ‘series of tactical battles’ that wrecked Britain’s intermediate institutions, such as the monarchy, the church, the civil service, the judiciary, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and local government. These ‘barriers between state and citizen’, he argues, were torn down in the drive to create an enterprise culture and a free market state. Gilmour values the pluralism of intermediate institutions and wants to return to moderation in the exercise of power. Similarly on civil service reform, Gilmour (92: 185) regrets that civil servants abandoned their principal function of drawing ‘attention from long experience to the flaws of instant panaceas’ and decided that ‘the way to live with ideology was to appear to share it’. They ‘executed ordained error without demur’. They neither retarded nor palliated. They did not resist
reforms with a vigour nourished by a proper confidence in the old values of the British constitution.

There was never a neat divide in the Conservative party between the paternal statism of the High Tories and economic liberalism but during the 1980s and 1990s, the former was a submerged tradition. Official reports did not articulate the High Tory reverence for the old values. So, the lineage of the Tory narrative fades.

**Liberal governance**

Thatcherism responded to the dilemmas of inflation and state overload. The overload thesis so popular in the 1970s (King 1975) drew attention to the limits to state authority. The Thatcher response from within the liberal tradition was to attack intermediate institutions such as the trade unions, local government and professional groups and to reassert central authority through the strong state (Gamble 1988; Hall 1983; Marquand 1988 and 1989). Inflation had become a major problem for the British economy by the end of the 1970s. Some proponents of all the dominant traditions came to accept four central tenets of monetarism: the key monetary levers should be interest rates rather than fiscal policy; the supply-side of the economy should be considered more significant than demand management; low inflation should be as important a goal of economic policy as low unemployment; and government should develop monetary policy in accord with rule, not discretion, to preserve credibility. This change is central to the Liberal account of Thatcherism. So, the government rejected intervention and corporatism. Instead, it was committed to marketisation and managerial rationality – planning became strategic policy-making, targets became clear objectives and performance measures. The Thatcher reforms challenged the Socialist belief in bureaucracy
while endorsing its belief in greater efficiency. Its notion of governance evoked a reduced role for the state, greater scope for markets and a return to micro-communities and self-help.

In what is probably the most comprehensive history of the British civil service, Geoffrey Fry (1969, 1981, 1985, 1993 and 1995) has mounted a sustained critique of the generalist administrative class taking his inspiration from the Liberal tradition. In his first book, he argued the all-rounder tradition was ‘more appropriate to the Service of a Regulatory State than that charged with administering the Welfare State and managing the economy’. He proposed the merger of the administrative and executive classes, better management, the more extensive use of specialists, and greater exchange of staff with both the rest of the public sector and crucially the private sector. He was an early and perceptive critic of the Fulton Committee (Cmnd 3638 1968), claiming that its proposals were unimaginative and unrealistic when all about him said the report was radical - and his judgement was the sounder. He is one of the few academic admirers of Margaret Thatcher’s administrative revolution and the economic liberalism that underpinned it (Fry 1995).

Fry’s Liberal intellectual lineage is spelt out in his own account of the growth of government (Fry 1979) as well as in his account of the career civil service since 1979 (Fry 1985 and 1995). He is a successor to Dicey in his arguments against collectivism. He draws on critics of the generalist, whether they are from the Left or the Right, and on a long line of liberal thinkers and business leaders who railed against bureaucratic inefficiency.

The dilemma of bureaucratic inefficiency was widely shared, most importantly by Margaret Thatcher (1993: 45-9). Sir John Hoskyns (1983) was one of several business leaders seconded to Whitehall. On leaving, he reflected in writing on his experiences. In doing so, he criticised the failure of government to agree and define objectives. He complained about the small
world of Westminster and Whitehall, and especially about a civil service closed to outsiders, lacking in confidence and energy, and serving political masters with whom it does not agree. He challenged the convention of political neutrality as leading to passionless detachment instead of radically minded officials, and to the low quality of much policy work. His main proposal for change is to break the civil service monopoly of top jobs and to appoint business outsiders on seven-year contracts. In a similar vein, Leslie Chapman (1978), a former regional director in the (then) Ministry of Public Building and Works, castigated the civil service for waste, inefficiency and inadequate management. His solutions included a new investigative audit department and better, accountable management. During the 1979 election campaign, he advised Margaret Thatcher on efficiency within the civil service (Metcalf and Richards 1987: 5-6). Although Chapman was widely tipped to become Thatcher’s adviser on efficiency in government, that mantle eventually fell on Sir Derek Rayner, joint managing director of Marks & Spencer.

Not all Liberals focus on reforming public management. Willetts (1992: 71) wants to claim community as a core principle in the Liberal tradition. He rejects the idea of community embodied in the nation state for the notion of an ‘overlapping network of communities’. He denies that free markets destroy community. On the contrary, liberalism reconciles markets and community with the idea of ‘micro-conservatism’ or ‘the particular network of communities which gives each individual life meaning’. The role of the state is to sustain ‘a political order in which this multiplicity of communities can survive’ (p. 105). Micro-communities populate the boundary between state and civil society, an image with a close affinity to nineteenth century notions of governance as private collectivism.

The recurrent liberal concerns with business-like efficiency, setting clear policy objectives and recruiting better managers, pervade various official reports of the last two decades. The
Efficiency Unit (1988: 3-5) argues, for example, that ‘senior management is dominated by people whose skills are in policy formation and who have relatively little experience of managing or working where services are actually delivered’. It strongly believes that ‘developments towards more clearly defined and budgeted management are positive and helpful’. It accepts that senior civil servants must respond to ministerial priorities but argues the civil service is ‘too big and too diverse to manage as a single entity’. So, it recommends setting up agencies ‘to carry out the executive functions of government within a policy and resources framework set by a department’. Senior management will have the freedom to manage. So, there will now be ‘a quite different way of conducting the business of government’; a central civil service consisting of core departments servicing ministers and agencies at arms length with clearly defined responsibilities for service delivery.

**Whig governance**

For Whigs, phrases such as continuity and change show that accommodation is all. Whether the wellspring of ideas is neo-liberalism or the Third Way, the civil service remains ‘a superb braking mechanism’, to use Shirley William’s phrase. So the drive for greater efficiency was complemented by calls to preserve the old values of permanence, neutrality and expertise. Similarly the clarion call of joined-up government has met with a variable response and claims that it is being done already.

When I was in defence we had long since discovered joined-up government. It’s presented as such a revolutionary idea but I had worked for my whole career in defence on the basis that we joined up everything we did with the Foreign Office and with the Cabinet Office and with 10 Downing Street. It was just deep in our culture that this was the way you worked and we got it off to a fine art (private information).
The key phrases in the Whig conception of governance are organic change, digestible change and defence of the status quo.

There is no finer sight in present-day British political science than Peter Hennessy in full flight, pricking the pretensions of the great and the good with his witty stories. His monumental study of *Whitehall* (1989) is full of such delightful vignettes. Hennessy’s core thesis is that, for all his admiration of the higher civil servants as individuals, as a class they have let Britain down. We have inherited a nineteenth century bureaucracy, which, for all its modifications and refinements, remains ill-suited to twentieth century government, and especially to the task of translating political wishes into practical reality (1989: 722). He is even prepared to criticise such eternal verities as the generalist and its apogee, Lord Bridges. Although Hennessy has a ‘sneaking admiration’ for Bridge’s talents, he accuses him of missing a great opportunity to reshape his profession (Hennessy, 1989: 140). Hennessy calls for the civil service to shake off its Northcote-Trevelyan heritage and to ‘unfreeze its labour market’ by subjecting all senior posts to open competition.

Hennessy can display an admirable ironic detachment about ‘the good chap theory of government’, that is, a good chap knows what a good chap is expected to do and will never push things too far. He believes the civil service played a part in Britain’s decline, and he is willing to produce a long list of reforms. Nonetheless, part of him is also seduced by a good chap’s decency and reasonableness. Hennessy wants to work with the Westminster model of representative democracy, not to transform it. He wants to use ‘wherever possible, traditional and familiar institutions for new purposes’. He wants reforms that ‘go with the grain of Westminster and Whitehall and their traditions’. Arguably he seeks only to ameliorate rather than to cure the ills he diagnoses. Hennessy thus exhibits a Whigish empathy with the
evolving British constitution: he dances a dance to the ghosts of time, typifying the Whig tradition’s celebration of gradual reform and evolution.

There was a time in the early 1980s when it seemed as if the Conservative maelstrom would sweep aside the traditional public service. Lord Bancroft (1983: 8), a former head of the home civil service, reflected on these changes in true Whig style:

I am reminded that Abbot Bower of Inchcolm, commenting on the legislative enthusiasm of James I of Scotland in the Parliament of 1426, applied what he thought an apt quotation: “to enact new laws with facility, and to change the old with facility, is marvellous damaging to good order”. He was quoting Aristotle. We are heirs to a long inheritance.

Lord Bancroft, again like a true Whig, contrasts his argument ‘for organic institutional change, planned at a digestible rate’ with a defence of the status quo. Indeed, he explicitly criticises ‘the overnight fever of a new department here and a new agency there, in order to accommodate a transient personal whim or political tantrum’ (see also Bancroft 1984; and the concluding remarks in Dale 1941: Appendix C; and Sisson 1959: 153). Like Hennessy and other Whigs, he wants gradual evolution through sympathetic reforms that work with, and so perpetuate, all that is salutary in Britain’s constitution and political practice.

The White Paper, The Civil Service: Continuity and Change (Cm 2627, 1994) reflects on a decade of change, and, in true Whig fashion, seeks to consolidate the changes in the broader heritage and pattern of historical development. The White Paper’s summary of the role and functions of the civil service claims the civil service has ‘a high reputation, nationally and internationally, for its standards of integrity, impartiality and loyal service to the Government of the day’. It suggests, ‘the particular standards that bind the civil service together are
integrity, impartiality, objectivity, selection and promotion on merit and accountability through Ministers to Parliament.’ Although recent reforms delegated management responsibility to agencies, the government acknowledges ‘the need to ensure that the defining principles and standards of the civil service are not relaxed’. The White Paper instances the new, unified Management Code (1993), which lays down the relevant standards, and promises a statutory code or a New Civil Service Act. The proposed reforms are meagre. The White Paper even phrases its proposals for open competition for top jobs cautiously:

Departments and agencies will always consider advertising openly at these (senior management) levels when a vacancy occurs, and then will use open competition wherever it is necessary and justifiable in the interests of providing a strong field or introducing new blood.

Such words hardly herald an open season on top posts in the civil service. Equally, the White Paper remains silent on measuring and improving the work of permanent secretaries. The White Paper’s title is an accurate reflection of its contents. The Whig tradition’s empathy with the British constitution leads to an organic reinvention of that constitution.

Socialist governance

The New Right has a vested interest in state failure. Distinctively, New Labour’s programme of reform assumes it is possible to make the state work. New Labour constructed the dilemma of state-overload differently from the New Right. It rejected not only Old Labour’s top-down, command-style bureaucracy based on centralised rules but also the New Right’s commitment to rolling back the state by using markets. New Labour’s notion of governance seeks to transform the state into an enabling partner by promoting the idea of networks of institutions and individuals acting in partnership and held together by relations of trust.
A summary of the contents page of Kellner and Crowther-Hunt (1980) suffices to illustrate the recurring themes of the Old Labour analysis of bureaucracy. They start with an attack on the cult of the generalist and then blame the power of the civil service for frustrating the reforms of the Fulton Committee. Next they turn their attention to recruiting and training the civil service, denouncing its Oxbridge bias, before, finally criticising the power of officials in their dealings with ministers, parliament’s ineffective scrutiny of the executive, and the cult of secrecy. They see the civil service as ‘the biggest pressure group’. And they call for ‘the kind of professionalism demanded by the Fulton Committee, that is, a bureaucracy of trained managers and experts.

The socialist or Fabian reform lineage is so obvious it hardly needs documenting. It emerges in the Webbs’ preference for expertise and efficiency in the bureaucracy (Bevir 2002). It runs through Robson (1937), Greaves (1947), Balogh (1962), ‘The Administrators’ (1964), Fulton (Cmnd 3638, 1968), and Garrett (1972) as well as Kellner and Crowther Hunt (1980). All of these examples of the Fabian tradition develop a consistent set of themes, notably, the need to end Oxbridge elitism by open recruitment, promoting greater professionalism by wider use of experts, a stress on better planning for economic policy making, and a call for greater democratic control of the bureaucracy.

Thus, the Fulton Committee in its infamous, but hugely enjoyable, first chapter weighs into the civil service because ‘the structures and practices of the Service have not kept up with changing tasks.’ They add, ‘we have found no instance where reform has run ahead too rapidly’. The Fulton Committee considers the effects of the ‘philosophy of the amateur’ as ‘most damaging’. It argues that dividing the service into classes ‘prevents the best use of individual talent’ since specialist classes ‘get neither the full responsibilities and corresponding authority, nor the opportunities, they ought to have. It suggests that ‘too few
civil servants are skilled managers’ ‘there is not enough contact between the Service and the rest of the community’, and personnel management is inadequate (Cmd 3838 1968: 11-13). Yet for some the report did not go far enough!

There may have been disagreement about the best way forward, but academics and practitioners had a shared belief that reform was overdue. As Sir Philip Allen (Permanent Secretary, Home Office, and a member of the Fulton Committee) observed;

An opportunity had been missed of reforming the Civil Service after the war. We simply went back to then old order of things. The Norman Brooks and co were weighed down with work. The Civil Service was not in a very happy position in the post-war period until the 1962 changes at the Treasury, which meant for the first time people had spare capacity to think about these things. Norman Brook had an impossible task as Head of the Home Civil Service and Secretary of the Cabinet. (Interview, cited in Fry 1993: 2)

Now, because our concern is governance and recent reforms, we focus on the New Labour strand in the Socialist tradition and the way in which New Labour reinterpreted the concerns highlighted by the New Right (Bevir and O’Brien, 2001). The emergence of New Labour shows how socialists confronted the dilemma posed by monetarist ideas for their commitment to full employment and the welfare state. The Labour Party began to emphasise that economic recovery would bring unacceptable inflation unless it took place with a commitment to macroeconomic stability and supply-side policies to boost industry. Increasingly it opted for a more positive view of markets. Quasi-market mechanisms as well as privatisation are entrenched on the party's agenda. Similarly, Old Labour’s faith in experts and top-down, command-style bureaucracy based on centralised rules was eroded. The New Right rejected
hierarchic patterns of organisation in which co-ordination is secured by administrative orders, arguing it was inefficient and it eroded individual freedom. The Thatcher governments tried to make public services more efficient through privatisation, marketization, and the new public management. Citizens became consumers able to choose between arrays of public services. Although command bureaucracy remains a major way of delivering public services, privatisation, the purchaser-provider split, and management techniques from the private sector have become an integral part of British governance.

An emphasis on the supply side of the economy has led the Labour Party to modify its stance towards privatisation and marketisation. Mandelson and Liddle tell us New Labour renounced the statist policies once associated with the Party for a concern with efficiency and good management (Mandelson and Liddle, 1996, 27 and 151). In doing so, they tie efficiency and good management to marketisation rather than the traditional bureaucratic model of public service provision. Thus, although the Labour Party remains critical of a blanket assumption of the superiority of the private sector and markets, it has accepted large parts of the supply-side revolution. Even privatisation now has a place in government thinking.

New Labour does not defend the command bureaucracy associated with Old Labour. There has been a shift in the socialist tradition inspired in part by the New Right’s concerns with market efficiency and choice. For example, Peter Mandelson, former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and Roger Liddle explicitly reject the ‘municipal socialism’ and ‘centralised nationalisation’ of the past (Mandelson and Liddle 1996: 27). New Labour ‘does not seek to provide centralised ‘statist’ solutions to every social and economic problem.’ Instead New Labour promotes the idea of networks of institutions and individuals acting in partnerships held together by relations of trust. New Labour’s concern with networks based on relations of trust does not exclude either command bureaucracy or quasi-market competition. Rather,
New Labour proposes a mix of hierarchies, markets, and networks, with choices depending on the particular nature of the service under consideration. Government policy is that ‘services should be provided through the sector best placed to provide those services most effectively’, where ‘this can be the public, private or voluntary sector, or partnerships between these sectors’ (Cm 4011 1998). Even a simple service is liable to display a mix of structures, strategies, and relationships.

Equally, New Labour embodies a critique of the New Right’s model of public service delivery. It suggests the New Right has an exaggerated faith in markets. New Labour believes individuals are not just competitive and self-interested but also co-operative and concerned for the welfare of others. So, public services should encourage co-operation while continuing to use market mechanisms when suitable. For example, David Clark (1997), then the Minister for Public Services, explained that policies such as market testing ‘will not be pursued blindly as an article of faith’ but they ‘will continue where they offer best value for money’. New Labour insists markets are not always the best way to deliver public services. They can go against the public interest, reinforce inequalities, and entrench privilege. Besides, much of the public sector simply is not amenable to market competition. Indeed, trust and partnership are essential. With out the conditions for effective markets, one has to rely on either honest co-operation or specify standards in absurd detail. Far from promoting efficiency, therefore, marketization can undermine standards of service quality.

New Labour’s emphasis on individual choice and involvement overlaps with themes found in the New Right. In promoting customer-focused services, New Labour adopts features of the new public management when it considers them suitable. However, New Labour’s model of service delivery does not follow the New Right’s vision of the new public management. On the contrary, New Labour argues that many features of this new public management, such as
quasi-markets and contracting-out, maintained an unhealthy dichotomy between the public and private sectors: public bodies did not work with private companies but merely contracted services out to them. This argument is used, for example, to justify abolishing the internal market within the National Health Service. The Third Way, in contrast to the vision of the New Right, is supposed to develop networks that enable public and private organisations to collaborate. Examples of such collaboration appear in the partnerships between the public and private sector that are so important to the delivery of the New Deal for the unemployed.

New Labour’s networks for public service delivery are supposed to be based on trust. Prime Minister Tony Blair describes such trust as ‘the recognition of a mutual purpose for which we work together and in which we all benefit’ (Blair 1996: 292). Trust matters because we are interdependent social beings who achieve more by working together than by competing. As Blair argues:

People are not separate economic actors competing in the market place of life. They are citizens of a community. We are social beings. We develop the moral power of personal responsibility for ourselves and each other . . . People are not just competitive; they are co-operative too. They are not just interested in the welfare of themselves; they are interested in the well being of others (Blair, 1996: 299-300).

Quality public services are best achieved through stable, co-operative relationships. Blair talks of building relationships of trust between all actors in society. Trust is promoted between organisations through the Quality Networks programme: organisations should exchange information about their practices to facilitate co-operation. Trust is promoted inside organisations through forms of management that allow individual responsibility and discretion increasingly to replace rigid hierarchies: individuals should be trusted to make
decisions and implement policies without the constraint of strict procedures. Trust is promoted between organisations and individuals through the Service First programme: citizens should trust organisations to provide appropriate services, and organisations should trust citizens to use services appropriately.

So, the Labour government uses networks based on trust to institutionalise its ideals of partnership and an enabling state. Blair (1998) stated the aims succinctly: ‘joined-up problems need joined-up solutions.’ This theme runs through the Modernising Government White Paper with its frequent references to ‘joined-up’ government and ‘holistic governance’ (Cm 4310 1999; see also Cabinet Office 1999 and 2000; and Rhodes, 2000b). The term covers both horizontal joining-up between central departments and vertical joining-up between all the agencies involved in delivering services. So services must be effective and co-ordinated and the principles of joined-up government apply across the public sector and to voluntary and private sector organisations. The state is an enabling partner that joins and steers flexible networks and the civil service must adapt. The task is to build bridges between the various organisations involved in designing policies and delivering services. In future civil servants will manage packages of services, packages of organisations and packages of governments.

**Conclusions: explaining the varieties of governance**

To understand governance, we have to ask whose story in which tradition. We have identified four competing but overlapping traditions. We have described the notions of governance associated with each tradition. We have also shown that academics, practitioners and official reports share a set of themes about governance that occur across diverse traditions. For example, the era from 1964 to 1976 was one of managerial rationalism permeated with
Fabian ideas whereas neoliberal ideas characterised the 1980s. Finally, we explained how traditions changed in response to the dilemmas of inflation and state overload. By analysing such changes, we can explain the several, present-day notions of governance. We have peppered our account with quotes from practitioners and official reports, to show that these interpretations are not just academic constructions of British governance but shared images.

Traditions persist, but they also change in response to dilemmas. In particular, we argue the Thatcher reforms were a response to the dilemmas of state overload and inflation. The government rejected government intervention and corporatism for marketisation and managerial rationality. It reduced the role of the state and expanded the scope for markets. New Labour’s pragmatic approach to public sector reform reflects its response not only to inflation and state overload but also the New Right’s ideas.

We recognise that British government confronted other dilemmas in the 1980s and 1990s but inflation and state overload are most relevant for understanding the shift from hierarchy to markets to networks. The political and administrative elites focused on them when discussing the role of the state, whether that phrase is narrowly understood to refer to public sector reform or more broadly as redrawing the boundary between state and civil society. Also, because we focus on central government, the relevant elite is the English political and administrative elite. Obviously, if we were talking about Scottish devolution or British membership of the EU, then our analysis would draw on different traditions and involve different actors.

In an important sense, there is no such thing as governance, but only the differing constructions of the several traditions. There is no necessary logical or structural process determining the form governance takes, neither a process based on the intrinsic rationality of
markets nor one on the path dependency of institutions. In an equally important sense, however, governance is the diverse actions and practices inspired by the varied beliefs and traditions we have discussed. Patterns of governance arise as the contingent products of diverse actions and political struggles informed by the beliefs of agents as they arise in traditions. There may be some agreement that the boundary between state and civil society is being redrawn, and that the form and extent of state intervention is changing, but there is little agreement on how, why or whether it is desirable. The reinvention of the minimal state by the New Right and the discovery of networks by New Labour are attempts to find a substitute for the voluntaristic bonds diminished by state intervention and the erosion of intermediate institutions such as local government. We are witnessing the search for an extended role for civil society as a counterweight to the centralisation of the 1960s and 1970s.

Our account of British governance provides a valuable corrective to both the traditional Westminster model of British government and more positivist accounts of governance itself. It offers the hope of finding 'new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking about' British government; it is an exercise in 'edification' (Rorty 1980: 360). We had no expectation that we could provide a true account of an objective process unaffected by the mentalities of particular individuals. Rather, we have begun to relate governance to the actions of many individuals inspired by diverse sets of belief. We have described the conflicting but overlapping stories that inform the actions of different individuals; and we have used the concept of tradition to explain why these actors construct their worlds as they do.

In sum, we provide a language for redescribing the world. We open the door to an understanding of how several actors have constructed the meaning, and so nature, of recent government changes. Simple solutions such as joining-up or holistic governance may have an
appealing elegance. Governments will always seek simplicity - but they should distrust it. Our approach to the analysis of governance makes no apology for describing a complex world in at least some of its complexity. There are no simple solutions based on hierarchies, markets or networks. We hope that our analysis is edifying. We are convinced it is provisional.
References


