

## **Chapter 1**

### **OBSERVING GOVERNMENT ELITES**

It is one of those grey London days where the colour of the sky matches the buildings. I am sat in a ministerial car in Parliament Square. By London traffic standards we make good time, although we don't have far to travel. I wonder if London itself contributes to the air of rush and stress that surrounds the Minister. It is such a big, noisy, dirty, congested place. There must be corners of peace and quiet but I see none of them in the square mile of Westminster and Whitehall. I just see people and traffic rushing in every direction. London is a metaphor for the Minister's lifestyle. I miss the peace and quiet of my Canberra suburb with its gum trees and views over the Brindabellas where the noisiest thing is the Kookaburras arguing over territory, mates and food. There is no stillness here, only the privilege of a chauffeured limousine and the demands of the unrelenting diary.

Why study government elites? As citizens, why do we care about the everyday life of ministers and civil servants? We care because the decisions of the great and the good affect all our lives for good or ill. For all their personal, political, and policy failings and foibles, they make a difference. Forget about grand acts of parliament. Relatively minor decisions can change people's lives. For example, the literacy and numeracy rates among 5–11-year-old pupils were low. So, the Secretary of State for Education decided that improving these rates was a priority. He set targets and this ostensibly boring act triggered a massive improvement; the policy was an 'unadulterated success' (Barber 2007: 38). The government made a difference to children's achievements.

So, we want to know what ministers and bureaucrats do, why, and how. In other words, we are interested in their beliefs and practices. This book ploughs virgin

territory in the analysis of British central government because it is an exercise in political anthropology. I apply the observational methods of the anthropologist to explore the reasons and actions of the ministers and permanent secretaries of three British government departments. I describe the government elites' world through their eyes, focusing on beliefs and everyday practices. I explore how their beliefs and practices create meaning in politics, policy making and public service delivery. I analyse how such beliefs and practices are embedded in traditions; in webs of routines, rituals, and languages. I provide case studies of specific 'events' to show ministers and civil servants 'in action'. I challenge conventional views of British government and governance with their focus on constitutional norms, institutions, and managerialism. Instead, I paint the portrait of a storytelling political-administrative elite with beliefs and practices rooted in the Westminster model that uses protocols and rituals to domesticate rude surprises and recurrent dilemmas. This chapter outlines the organizing ideas used to present my empirical observations, describes how I observed everyday life in a government department, and provides a summary of the rest of the book.

### **Organizing ideas**

As John Stuart Mill (1969 [1840]: 119–20) remarked:

By Bentham ... men have been led to ask themselves, in regard to any ancient or received opinion, Is it true? And by Coleridge, What is the meaning of it? The one took his stand outside the received opinion, and surveyed it as an entire stranger to it: the other looked at it from within, and endeavoured to see it with the eyes of a believer in it ... Bentham judged a proposition true or false as it

accorded or not with the result of his own inquiries ... With Coleridge ... the very fact that any doctrine had been believed by thoughtful men, and received by whole nations or generations of mankind, was part of the problem to be solved, was one of the phenomena to be accounted for.

In this book I ask, after Coleridge, ‘what is the meaning of it’ where ‘it’ refers to the working life of political and other governmental elites. I concentrate on meanings, beliefs and practices, not laws and formal rules, correlations between social categories, or deductive models. I look at the ways in which practices are produced, reproduced and changed through the particular and contingent beliefs, preferences and actions of individuals.

With Mark Bevir, I have already written a detailed account of both an interpretive approach in political science and its key concepts of beliefs, practices, traditions, dilemmas, and narratives.<sup>1</sup> This book serves a different purpose. I focus squarely on empirical observations and their implications for how we think about British government, not on theory and method. The aim is to show how much work can be done with a small conceptual and methodological toolkit. However, I must describe each concept, if only briefly, because they provide the organizing framework for the empirical observations.

### ***Beliefs***

An interpretive approach argues that it is not possible to identify people’s beliefs by appealing to the allegedly objective social facts about them. Instead, we must explore the beliefs and meanings through which they construct their world. These beliefs and desires are inextricably enmeshed with theories. When we say that a civil servant in

charge of a department has a vested interest in increasing that department's budget and employing more staff, we use a particular theory to identify their interests from their position. Someone with a different set of theories might believe that someone in that position has different interests; for example, loyalty to their politician and implementing his or her policies as efficiently and speedily as possible. The important point here is that how the people we study see their position and their interests inevitably depends on their theories, which might differ significantly from our theories. Officials might possess theories that lead them to see their position as administrators serving the public interest, rather than as chief executives employing the best managerial practice of the private sector. They might see their interests as sustaining best professional practice, not maximizing the turnover of clients. I stress decentred analysis; that is, focusing on the social construction of a practice through the ability of individuals to create, and act on, meanings. It is to unpack a practice as the disparate and contingent beliefs and actions of individuals. Political scientists cannot read-off beliefs and desires from objective social facts about people. Instead they have to interpret beliefs by relating them to other beliefs, traditions, and dilemmas.

I can illustrate the difference by comparing the mainstream and an interpretive approach to the study of institutions. Institutions are said to take a concrete, fixed form; that is, they have operating rules or procedures that govern the actions of the individuals. This notion is unacceptable. It leads political scientists to ignore the effects of contingency, internal conflict, and the several constructions of actors in an institution. If we think of institutions in this way, we do not interpret what institutions mean to the people who work in them. Rather we assume the allegedly objective rules prescribe or cause behaviour. There are two problems with this assumption. First,

people not only wilfully choose to disobey a rule, but they also subvert, ignore, avoid and redefine them. Second, we cannot read-off peoples' beliefs and desires from their social location. Rules are always open to interpretation. It is not just a question of literal meaning but also a question of to whom the rule applies, and applying the rule in any given situation.

On the other hand, if institutions are said to include cultural factors or beliefs, then rules do not fix such meanings or the actions of its members. Now we must ask how beliefs and actions are created, recreated, and changed in ways that constantly reproduce and modify institutions. Of course, an institution understood in this way poses the question of whether the approach remains, in any significant sense, institutional. Explanations are no longer cast as if behaviour was the result of rules but of the multiple, diverse ways in which people understand, and react to, conventions. The purpose of these reflections is not to undermine all appeals to institutions or rules. These reflections suggest only that we need to tailor appeals to institutions to recognize that political science is an interpretive discipline focused on the beliefs of the relevant actors.

### ***Practices***

When we leave the micro-level of individual beliefs and actions for the macro-level, I think of social objects such as the state as practices rather than institutions or structures. A practice is a set of actions, often a set of actions that display a pattern, perhaps even a pattern that remains relatively stable across time. Practices consist simply of what a group of people do, and the unintended consequences of these actions. So, the state or a government department is a set of embedded practices. Such notions as institution and structure can be used as a metaphor for the way activity

coalesces into practices. I avoid this metaphor because all too often it has a bewitching effect, leading people to treat institutions or structures as real, reified entities (see Marsh 2008a).

Practices often help to identify beliefs. I interpret people's actions by ascribing beliefs to them. Nonetheless, practices cannot explain actions because people act for their own reasons. I explain their actions by reference to the beliefs and desires of the relevant actors, not by reference to the practice itself. I unpack a practice as the disparate and contingent beliefs and actions of individuals. It is possible to explain people's beliefs (and the practices to which their actions give rise) only by locating them in a wider web of beliefs.

### *Traditions*

I need a concept such as tradition to explain why people come to believe what they do. People understand their experiences using theories which they have inherited. This social heritage is the necessary background to the beliefs people adopt and the actions they perform. I define a tradition as a set of understandings someone receives during socialization. So, a governmental tradition is a set of inherited beliefs and practices about the institutions and history of government (Perez-Diaz 1993: 7). Although tradition is unavoidable, it is only a starting point, not something that determines later actions. Traditions are an unavoidable presence in everything people do, but they are mainly a first influence on people.

Social contexts only ever influence, as distinct from determine, the actions of individuals. Traditions are products of individual agency. When people confront the unfamiliar, they have to extend or change their heritage to encompass it, so developing their heritage. Every time they try to apply a tradition, they have to reflect

on it, they have to try to understand it afresh in today's circumstances. By reflecting on it, they open it to innovation. Thus, human agency can produce change even when people think they are sticking fast to a tradition they regard as sacrosanct.

A particular relationship must exist between beliefs and practices if they are to make up a tradition. For a start, the relevant beliefs and practices must have passed from generation to generation. As well as suitable connections through time, traditions must embody suitable conceptual links. The beliefs and practices a teacher passes on to a pupil must display a minimal consistency. A tradition could not have provided someone with a starting point unless its parts formed a minimally coherent set.

Traditions cannot be made up of purely random beliefs and actions that successive individuals happen to have held in common.

I see tradition as a starting point, not a destination. Traditions do not determine the beliefs that people go on to adopt or the actions they go on to perform. They are diverse. In any society there is a multiplicity of traditions. I adopt a pragmatic notion of tradition. Investigators choose a particular tradition to explain whatever set of beliefs or practices happen to be of interest to them. Traditions are essentially artefacts. The justification for any choice of traditions lies in the claim that they best explain what is of interest, in my case the beliefs and practices of central political and administrative elites, not in the claim that such traditions are given or natural.

In conventional social science terms, I am recasting the problem of structure and agency. It is our ability for agency that makes tradition a more satisfactory concept than rival terms such as structure, paradigm, and episteme. These latter ideas suggest the presence of a social force that determines or limits the beliefs and actions of individuals. Tradition, in contrast, suggests that a social heritage comes to individuals who, through their agency, can adjust and transform this heritage even as they pass it

on to others. This idea of tradition also differs from political scientists who associate the term with customary, unquestioned ways of behaving (Oakeshott 1962: 123 and 128–9) or with the entrenched folk-lore of pre-modern societies. At the heart of this analysis of tradition is the notion of *situated agency*: of individuals using local reasoning consciously and subconsciously to reflect on and modify their contingent heritage.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Dilemmas***

A dilemma arises for an individual or institution when a new idea stands in opposition to existing beliefs or practices and forces a reconsideration of these existing beliefs and associated tradition (Bevir 1999: chapter 6). As MacIntyre (1996: 552) would have it: ‘traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict’. Political scientists can explain change within traditions by referring to relevant dilemmas. Dilemma provides a way of understanding the role of individual agency in developing traditions. Whenever someone adopts a new belief or action they have to adjust their existing beliefs and practices to make way for the newcomer. To accept a new belief is to pose a dilemma that asks questions of existing traditions.

It is important to recognize that we cannot straightforwardly identify dilemmas with allegedly objective pressures in the world. People vary their beliefs or actions in response to any new idea that they come to hold as true. They do so irrespective of whether the new idea reflects real pressures, or, to be precise, irrespective of whether it reflects pressures that political scientists as observers believe to be real. In explaining change, we cannot privilege our academic accounts of the world. What matters is the subjective, or more usually, intersubjective, understandings of political actors, not our scholarly accounts of real pressures in the world. The task of the

interpretive political scientist is to recover the shared, intersubjective dilemmas of the relevant actors. The task is not to privilege scholarly accounts, although, of course, the pressures political scientists believe to be real often overlap with the actors' perceptions of the relevant dilemmas.

Dilemmas do not have given, or correct, solutions. It might look as if a tradition can tell people how to respond to dilemmas. At most, however, it provides a guide or hints to what they might do. The only way to check if an individual's actions are consistent with the beliefs of a tradition is to ask whether other adherents of the tradition are happy with those actions. Even when people think they are merely continuing a settled tradition or practice, they could well be developing, adjusting, and changing it. Change can occur when people think they are sticking fast to a tradition. Traditions and practices could be fixed and static only if we never met and face novel circumstances; but, of course, we are always meeting new circumstances. People can integrate a new belief into their existing beliefs only by relating themes in it to themes already present in their beliefs. Change thus involves a pushing and pulling of a dilemma and a tradition to bring them together. Beliefs about the state and political institutions are in such perpetual flux.

### *Narratives*

I use the term 'narrative' to refer to the form of explanation that disentangles beliefs and actions to explain human life.<sup>3</sup> Narratives are the form theories take in the human sciences.<sup>4</sup> I explain actions by reference to the beliefs and desires of actors, and I explain these beliefs by reference to traditions and dilemmas.

It is often claimed that positivist political science provides causal explanations while interpretive approaches provide understanding of beliefs, motives, and actions. Not

so. Narratives explain actions. Scholars from all sorts of disciplines use the word ‘cause’ to signal that there is a significant relationship between people and events. Narrative is a form of explanation that works by relating actions to the beliefs and desires that produce them. Narratives depend on conditional connections. When individuals act on their beliefs and desires, there is a conditional connection. Conditional connections are neither necessary nor arbitrary. Because they are not necessary, political science differs from the natural sciences. Because they are not arbitrary, we can use them to explain actions and practices. So, narratives identify the conditional connections that link people, events and ideas to one another and explain actions and practices. Although these narrative structures also appear in works of fiction, we need not equate political science to fiction. Political scientists offer us narratives that strive, to the best of the narrator’s ability, to capture the way in which events did happen in the past or are happening today, whereas writers of fiction need not do so. Political scientists cannot ignore the facts, although we must accept that no fact, agreed or otherwise, is simply given to them.

## **Methods**

Anthropology or ethnography, the two terms are commonly interchangeable, reconstruct the meanings of social actors by recovering other people’s stories from practices, actions, texts, interviews, and speeches. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983: 2) claim that the method ‘captures the meaning of everyday human activities’, and encourages the researcher to get out there and see what actors are thinking and doing. It is exploratory – ‘unstructured soaking’ (Fenno 1990: 57) – and characterized by deep immersion in social worlds so we can understand day-to-day practices, and how these practices become meaningful.<sup>5</sup>

Political anthropology encompasses many ways of collecting qualitative data about beliefs and practices. For example, Cris Shore's (2000: 7–11) cultural analysis of how EU elites sought to build Europe defines ethnography to include participant observation, historical archives, textual analysis of official documents, biographies, oral histories, recorded interviews, and informal conversations as well as statistical and survey techniques. I am not a methodological missionary, but I do want to argue the case for *observation* as an important addition to the political science toolkit. As Fenno (1990: 128) observed, 'not enough political scientists are presently engaged in observation' and his remark is accurate whether we are talking of Australia, North America or the United Kingdom (Rhodes 2002). Observation is conspicuous for its absence in the political science armoury of research methods.<sup>6</sup>

For Geertz (1973: 9), ethnography is about 'thick descriptions', about explicating 'our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to'. So, we seek to understand the webs of significance that people spin for themselves. The everyday phrase is 'seeing things from the others' point of view'.<sup>7</sup> The key point is that the ethnographer provides his or her own interpretation of what the informants believe they are up to, so his or her accounts are second or even third order interpretations. It is a soft science that guesses at meanings, assesses the guesses and draws explanatory conclusions from the better guesses. Yet it is still possible for ethnographers to generalize. Theory provides a vocabulary with which to express what symbolic action has to say about itself. Although ethnography rarely aims at prediction, theory still has to 'generate cogent interpretations of realities past' and 'survive ... realities to come'. The task of the ethnographer is to set down the meanings that particular actions have for social actors and then say what these 'thick descriptions' tell us about the society in which they are found. The ethnographer will

never get to the bottom of anything. Ethnography is a science ‘marked less by a perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate’ – ‘what gets better is the precision with which we vex each other’.<sup>8</sup>

To write a story that vexes the reader, I draw on three sources of information: ‘the pattern of practice, talk, and considered writing – the first is the most reliable, the second is the most copious and revealing and the third is the most difficult to interpret’ (Oakeshott 1996: x).

Oakeshott would turn in his grave if I described this approach as triangulation, but my account is based on these three sources of information. On practice, I observed the office of two ministers and three permanent secretaries for two days each, totalling some 120 hours. I also shadowed two ministers and three permanent secretaries for five working days each, totalling some 300 hours. On talk, I had repeat interviews with: ten permanent secretaries (2 x 2-hour taped and transcribed), five secretaries of state and three ministers (1 x 2-hour taped and transcribed); and 20 other officials (1 x 1-hour taped and transcribed), totalling some 67 hours of interviews. On considered writing, I had copies of speeches and public lectures; committee and other papers relevant to the meetings I observed; and newspaper reports. I report such details as the number and length of interviews and the total hours of observation to increase confidence in the results just as, when reporting a survey, I would include various details such as the sample size and the response rate (Yanow 2006).

My interviews and fieldwork observations were for citation but not for attribution without the interviewee’s permission. I interviewed three female ministers and two female permanent secretaries. There were so few women that if I gave the person’s gender, in effect, I identified them. So, I use the male pronoun throughout. The Private Offices were more equally divided between male and female and with 20

interviews it does not compromise a person's identity if I use the correct gender. I anticipated that at least some parts of the story would have to be anonymous. I chose three departments similar in size and status, so I could talk about the composite minister, department, or permanent secretary and remain plausible.<sup>9</sup> Had I sought to draw a composite based on departments as unlike as the Treasury, the Foreign Office and the Department for Work and Pensions, the result would have been implausible. I conducted the interviews in 2002. The fieldwork was carried out in 2003. There were several repeat interviews and occasional visits in 2004.

There is a conventional stereotype of ethnography that sees the researcher moving to a single location for a long time. But As it spread beyond social and cultural anthropology, ethnography came to encompass more varied forms of field involvement. Following the established practice of latter-day ethnographers, for this book I undertook 'yo-yo fieldwork'; that is, I repeatedly went back and forth, in and out of the field (Wulff 2002: 117). I also went to more than one fieldwork site because I was 'studying through'; that is, following a policy process through the 'webs and relations between actors, institutions and discourses across time and space' (Shore and Wright 1997: 14; see also Marcus 1995). Most of the research reported in this book used a combination of elite interviews and fieldwork observation conducted during repeated visits to several locations.<sup>10</sup>

I told every participant I would not write up the research during the life of the 2001–5 Parliament. I calculated that everyone would have a different job when I told my story, thus minimizing, if not removing, any political sensitivities surrounding the events I describe. When I cannot attribute a quote, I use the phrase 'Transcribed Interview' (TI). It does not mean 'something someone's told me some time'. All such information is from a taped and transcribed interview. I give the position held by the

individual – minister, permanent secretary, and so on. For the quotes from ministers there are eight possible sources, and for permanent secretaries there are ten. In every other case, there will be at least three possible sources for the quote. When it is consistent with protecting the anonymity of the individual, I also give the individual's departmental affiliation.<sup>11</sup>

One of the advantages of not publishing straight away is that I also had several insider accounts of the period to draw on (see chapters 2 and 3 below). So, I supplemented the fieldwork and interviews with the primary sources listed in the bibliography and with the several insider accounts now available.<sup>12</sup> Throughout, whether drawing on my fieldwork or other primary sources, I stress the views of insiders because I am trying to describe their world through their eyes. Finally, nowadays, senior civil servants speak in public almost as often as ministers. Moreover, the speeches of both are easily available from the Internet. I also attended many lectures and seminars under the Chatham House rule,<sup>13</sup> which offered the opportunity to hear many senior public figures speaking, often frankly, off the record. I found this combination of talk and considered writing a valuable primary source, which I commend to colleagues. Perhaps the most intractable problems arise not from the fieldwork but in finding a way to provide an authoritative account of that work. Van Maanen's (1998: 8) observation that 'there is no way of seeing, hearing, or representing the world of others that is absolutely, universally valid or correct' is probably now the conventional wisdom of anthropology. There is no agreed way of representing the world of others. His aspiration is to find 'more, not fewer, ways to tell of culture'. He uses the term 'tale', 'quite self-consciously to highlight the presentational or, more properly, representational qualities of fieldwork writing' (Van Maanen, 1998: 2, 8 and

14) and he identifies several ways of telling: realist tales, confessional tales and impressionist tales.

*Realist* accounts are dispassionate, third-person documentary accounts of everyday life. The story is told from the native's standpoint but the author has the final word, both selecting the standpoints and pronouncing on the meaning of their culture. Van Maanen (1998: chapter 3 and p. 54 and 64–6) concedes that realist ethnography has 'a long and by-and-large worthy pedigree', although its writing conventions are now seen as 'embarrassing'.

The characteristics of a *confessional* account are that it is an autobiographical, personalized story, which tells the tale from the fieldworker's perspective; and aims for naturalness and getting it right in the end. Confessional tales are first person and anecdotal. All too often the storyline is that of 'a fieldworker and a culture finding each other and, despite some initial spats and misunderstandings, in the end, making a match' (paraphrased from Van Maanen, 1998: chapter 4 and p. 79).

*Impressionist* tales take the form of a dramatic storyline, with a fragmented treatment of theory and method, because they focus on characterization and drama (Van Maanen, 1998: 103–6). Impressionist tales 'highlight the episodic, complex and ambivalent realities that are frozen and perhaps made too pat by realist or confessional conventions'. Their accounts are 'as hesitant and open to contingency and interpretation as the concrete experiences on which they are based' (Van Maanen, 1998: 119).

This book presents mainly a confessional and impressionist narrative and I am present throughout. The worlds I present are complex, episodic, ambivalent and contingent. I had to decide the extent to which I should be present in the story. Normally, I seek refuge in the language of the social science and avoid talking in the first person. The

first challenge was to write an account with narrative drive in both everyday English and the language of those being watched. The second challenge was to incorporate the narrator as an observer. I am present throughout the text and the reader is continuously made aware of both the involvement and detachment of the researcher that lies at the heart of observation. That admitted, I insist that every scholarly attempt to make sense of politics in all its many shapes and forms involves a blend of personal involvement and scholarly detachment.

Finally, as White (1973: 7) argues, the meaning of my stories will depend on the way I tell my story: ‘Providing the “meaning” of a story by identifying the *kind of story* that has been told is called explanation by emplotment ... I identify at least four different modes of emplotment: Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, and Satire.’

So, the choice of language, whether romance, tragedy, comedy, or satire, emplots different explanations in the text. My story encompasses comedy and tragedy. It is a comedy in that the desire of ministers to make a difference holds out the prospect of ‘the temporary triumph of man over his world by the prospect of the occasional *reconciliations* of the forces at play’. So, ‘the condition of society is represented as being purer, saner and healthier’ because ‘seemingly inalterably opposing elements’ can be reconciled. In tragedy there are terrible, inalterable, eternal divisions.

Reconciliations are sombre; we are resigned to the conditions under which we labour, limiting what we can aspire to (White 1973: 9). Such is the story of the minister and permanent secretaries; oscillating between comedy and tragedy.

I adopt several storytelling devices: chronology, scenes, asides, and dialogue. In Chapters 4 and 5, I tell mainly chronological stories. In Chapters 6 to 8, I rely more on scenes, or story segments that I use as building blocks to develop specific themes.

Throughout, I use dialogue, or reciprocal conversations, sometimes in the form of

semi-structured, transcribed interviews (TIs) but also, during the observational fieldwork, they were part of everyday conversations at the office. The stories, scenes and dialogue took place mainly in the offices of the public servants. I wrote them mainly from the viewpoint of, and sometimes in the words of, their inhabitants. On occasions, I use long extracts from the transcribed interviews so that the reader can ‘hear’ the voice of the interviewee, not just my voice. Stories cover days and weeks. Scenes cover moments in time; there is no unfolding storyline or character development as in the chronological stories. I present dialogue from the interviews in italics. Observed practices from the fieldwork notebooks (FWNB) are in roman font. Quotes from the FWNB are in inverted commas. To show that my stories are plausible, and to guard against the criticism that I have picked only juicy quotes from interviews and fieldwork notebooks, I cite other insider accounts whenever possible. Most of these citations are in the endnotes and are illustrative, not comprehensive. Other quotations are attributed in the usual way. I follow my own advice and compare observed practice (from FWNB), talk (from interviews and conversations), and considered writing (from autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, speeches and lectures). Also, readers always know my sources.

I also triangulate my three sources of information – ‘the pattern of practice, talk, and considered writing – to increase confidence in my stories. As Sanjek (2000: 281) argues, observation is an essential complement to interviews. Finally, I provide multiple quotes to demonstrate a point. Such detail is endemic in observational fieldwork; it is a defining characteristic of ‘thick descriptions’.

I am well aware of the limits of ethnography. The most important limitation to the analysis in this project concerns my role as non-participant observer. I report the interviews as if I am neutral and as if the data is given to me in a pure or unmediated

form. I am not that naive. All observers construct their material drawing on their prior theories. I accept that the several stories are *my* construction of how my interviewees see their world and that it is crucial to locate people's beliefs and practices against a background of traditions.

Also, how do we keep our distance from the people who are under observation? You see a lot of each other and you get to like each other. I admit to warm admiration for all three permanent secretaries. But it is just as likely that you will come to dislike the people you observe. Some politicians made that all too easy. Either way, academic detachment can be compromised. It is a tricky balancing act to remain both distant and to keep their confidence; to keep critical detachment and empathize and not go native. That said, the ersatz native eventually withdraws from the field and a reflexive stance to one's work should enable the researcher to become a 'professional stranger' (Agar 1996).<sup>14</sup>

A third question is how to manage the control that government elites can exercise over the research. They can restrict, even deny, access at will. They can delay, even prevent, publication. They can refuse permission to attribute quotations from interviews. What will they allow? What will we settle for? The problems should not be overstated. Almost everyone was willing to speak on tape. At the end of most long interviews, the elite were relaxed, willing to chat about anything, historical or present-day. Many have a need to talk. As Rawnsley (2001: xi) observes 'they have to tell an outsider because they are so worried about whether it makes sense or, indeed, whether they make sense'. For most of the research, most of the time, there was no issue. I report the few issues that arose in Chapter 10 as part of the elites' reflections on my work. The brute fact is, of course, that when problems arise, they win.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, how do we know that our research is objective? How do we interpret our interpretations of elites? How do we know that our findings are reliable and valid? How do we know that the few days we spend observing and interviewing our subjects are typical days? How do we make sure the observed behaviours remain natural? Our presence as researchers influences the behaviour and reasoning of our subjects, consciously or unconsciously, and provides us with a potentially flawed picture of their actions and thinking. Subjects may engage in impression management for the researcher rather than going about their usual business. Such issues arise for many varieties of social science research. The differences are ones of degree, no more. Anthropologists have argued over these issues for decades, and developed intelligent and widely accepted ways of dealing with them.

I see no point in trying to pretend the ethnographic approach and its distinctive research methods is just a 'soft' version of the positivist approach with its penchant for 'hard' quantitative data. They are simply different in both the aims and knowledge criteria they employ. In his defence of case studies, Flyvbjerg (2006: 224) argues 'concrete, context-dependent knowledge is ... more valuable than the vain search for predictive theories and universals'. He argues for the primacy of 'thick descriptions'. So does this book. 'Thick descriptions' produce data that is as valid as that of any social survey. Neither method is any better than the research question it seeks to answer.

I also see little virtue in abstract arguments about method. Grounding in fieldwork, and not in abstract argument, is the best way to assess methods. As Wright Mills (1970: 136) suggested, we should pay 'serious attention ... to general discussions of methodology only when they are in direct reference to actual work'. I incline to Fox's (2004: 4) practical and pragmatic assessment: 'While participant observation has its

limitations, this rather uneasy combination of involvement and detachment is still the best method we have for exploring the complexities of human cultures, so it will have to do.’

In short, what works is best, so I became a *bricoleur* – less a handyman and more a Jack-of-all-trades – gathering material when, where and how I could (Levi-Strauss 1966: 16–17).

Finally, I adopt an intersubjective agreement approach to assessing research findings.<sup>16</sup> In other words, objective knowledge arises from the comparison of rival stories. The political science community’s continuing debates define and redefine the criteria by which we judge the knowledge claims of individual members of that community. It is not self-referential because the knowledge claims can be ‘reconfirmed’ by encounters with practitioners and users. So, I translate abstract concepts into conversations in fieldwork. These encounters and their conversations produce data which I interpret to produce narratives which are then judged by evolving knowledge criteria of the political science community. Reconfirmation occurs at three points:

- when I translate my concepts for fieldwork: that is, are they meaningful to practitioners and users and if not, why not?
- when I reconstruct narratives from the conversations: that is, is the story logical and consistent with the data?
- when I redefine and translate my concepts because of the academic community’s judgement on the narratives.

Reconfirmation is an iterative process. We translate our concepts into conversations in fieldwork, and these conversations produce data that we interpret to produce

narratives that are then judged by the evolving knowledge criteria of our academic community (see also Giddens 1993: 170).

Bevir (1999: chapter 3) identifies the criteria, for judging any narrative, referred to as the rules of intellectual honesty. They include a willingness to take criticism seriously; a preference for established standards of evidence and reason; and a preference for speculative theories that suggest exciting new predictions. So, because we respect established standards of evidence and reason, we prefer webs of interpretation that are accurate, comprehensive, and consistent. Objectivity is, therefore, a product of 'local reasoning' in that it arises from the critical comparison of narratives within an academic community, reconfirmed in debate between communities, where all debates are subject to the provisional rules of intellectual honesty.

I try to put this approach to objectivity into practice. The draft manuscript was sent to all the major figures in the study for comment, and I have cited their advice and criticisms both in the text and in Chapter 10. I also presented the findings at various workshops and conferences and I benefited from the advice and criticisms of my academic colleagues. Finally, in Chapter 10, I discuss what we know from being there and focusing on everyday practices. I identify my key findings and describe how my account differs from the conventional narratives of British government with their focus on constitutional norms, institutions, and managerialism. I seek to highlight how my observations alter our view of British government. This narrative can then be critically compared to others.

## **Summary**

Before I tell my stories, I must describe their setting. That is the task of Part 1.

Chapter 2 provides a short survey of the British government key domestic policies and politics between 2001 and 2005, the parliament during which I undertook the fieldwork. The Labour government's second term was a turbulent affair scarred, for example, by the Iraq war. I sketch the main events of the period as the backcloth against which my actors played their parts. My focus is domestic politics, and foreign affairs only intrude as they affect domestic politics. My aim is to contrast the excitement of high politics as presented in the newspapers and on television (see, for example, Rawnsley 2001 and 2010) with the low politics of everyday life in the government departments. I also introduce three narratives that will recur. The Westminster or constitutional story stresses that British government is hierarchical with a strong executive. The public management story focuses on the managerial, market and delivery reforms of the past two decades. The governance story looks at the horizontal and vertical networks in which the core executive and the departments are embedded.

Chapter 3 describes the ministers' setting. I studied three ministries: the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), and the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA). All three are middle-ranking ministries. I provide short portraits of each, describing where people work, who holds the key positions, and what they do. I provide a brief account of the buildings in which the events take place with an outline of the internal organization of each ministry. I describe the roles of ministers and permanent secretaries. I describe what departments do by describing their traditions (or departmental philosophies) and their present-day policy agendas. Finally, running through these portraits is an analysis of the dilemmas that confront the departments; between Westminster roles

and relationships and managerialism; between constitutional bureaucracy and political responsiveness; and the unintended consequences of neoliberal policy agendas and metagovernance.

In Part 2, I describe the everyday life of the main actors; the ministers and the permanent secretaries. Chapter 4 provides portraits of Secretaries of State and Ministers of State at work. My account is based on an analysis of their engagement diaries, repeat interviews with ministers, and a qualitative analysis of their work drawn from my fieldwork notebooks. In this chapter, as in all others, when I write ‘I will describe’ or an equivalent phrase, it means that I provide an account ‘in the words of the main actors’. I seek to present their world as they see it. I describe their everyday working life inside and outside the department.

Chapter 5 provides a portrait of the permanent secretaries and describes their working day. Again my account is based on an analysis of the diary, repeat interviews with permanent secretaries, and a qualitative analysis of their work drawn from my fieldwork notebooks.

Part 3 introduces the notion of the ‘departmental court’ and explores scenes of comedy and tragedy. The everyday practices of departments, their protocols, rituals, languages, and their links with the rest of Westminster and Whitehall are the stuff of jokes much loved by *Yes Minister*. It has its amusing side, but the purposes of their protocols and rituals were all too serious. They routinized, even domesticated, everyday life. When they could not cope with a crisis, a political tragedy took place and the minister resigned. The stories move from comedy to tragedy.

Chapter 6 looks at the central secretariat or the departmental core executive, which I describe as the ‘departmental court’. All ministers and permanent secretaries are supported by a court. For ministers, it comprises the Private Office, ministerial

advisers and the press office, and junior ministers. For permanent secretaries, it comprises the Private Office, senior management team, and director generals (or equivalent). I describe the roles, responsibilities and relationships of the court inside the department. I describe the work of the principal private secretary (PPS), the private secretaries (PS) and four aspects of the everyday life of the departmental court: recruitment and training, internal management, office tensions, and internal networking.

Chapter 7 focuses on the practices of the departmental court; its protocols, rituals, and languages that make up the willed ordinariness of everyday life. Administrative protocols are the sedimented or codified practices of civil servants because they are written down. I describe the protocols around: the diary; the red box; telephone; correspondence and filing; travel and hospitality (including drivers); meetings, committees and briefings; submissions and policy advice; and speeches. Rituals are habitual practices that are not written down. I describe the rituals of politeness, gossip and humour. Finally, I distinguish between, and discuss, the traditional or classical Whitehall language, and managerialism.

The traditional Westminster story about British government and the challenge from managerial, market and delivery reforms of the past two decades dominate the book to this point. In chapter 8, I turn to the governance story; to the horizontal and vertical networks that criss-cross Westminster, Whitehall and beyond. Every department is part of a web of links encompassing: the central agencies (Number 10, the Cabinet Office, and the Treasury); other functional departments; Parliament and the political parties; and broader links beyond Westminster and Whitehall. Moreover, the several actors know they are part of a web and deliberately build links, play games, and

otherwise manage their networks. This chapter also tells the departments' stories about 'outsiders', not the outsiders' stories of the minister and the department.

Chapter 9 turns to tragedy, in particular Estelle Morris's resignation at the Department for Education and Skills. I describe how the department strove to domesticate a rude surprise. I look at the incidence and effects of stress on ministers and permanent secretaries, and at their reasons for doing the job. Finally, I reflect on how storytelling, a siege mentality, performing, and the media shaped the ways in which the department coped with this 'rude surprise'.

Finally, in Chapter 10, I summarize the beliefs, practices, traditions and dilemmas that make up everyday life at the top using the Westminster, public management and governance stories. There was no shared story of how British government worked.

Yesterday's story remained an important guide to today's practice. So, the managerial story (in its various forms) and the governance stories have been grafted on to the Westminster narrative with all the attendant dilemmas. I argue that my account of how willed ordinariness and storytelling domesticate life in the goldfish bowl provides a distinct and distinctive account of British government. Second, I discuss the advantages of political anthropology, of 'being there', for studying British government. Third, I report the comments of the ministers and permanent secretaries on my research. Finally, I reflect on the ways in which inherited traditions as myths continue to shape British government, and on the world we are losing.

In sum, this book aims to understand the ways in which the political and administrative elites of central government departments make sense of their worlds; to provide 'thick descriptions', or my constructions of their constructions of what they are up to, through an analysis of their beliefs and everyday practices; and to show that

observation is not an optional but an essential part of any toolkit for studying British government.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I describe briefly the ideas I need to organize my stories, no more. I do not pretend to offer an account of the interpretive approach. I have done so elsewhere at length with my friend and colleague Mark Bevir. Those readers interested in theory should look at Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 2006 and 2010; and the debate with our critics in *British Journal of Politics and International Relation* 6 (2) 2004: 129–64; *Political Studies Review* 6 (2) 2008: 143–77; Bevir and Rhodes 2008 and Marsh 2008a and b; and the special issue of *Public Administration* 89(1) 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Local here means ‘local to a web of beliefs’, not necessarily ‘local to a geographical area’. See, Bevir and Rhodes 2010, chapter 4.

<sup>3</sup> I use stories and tales as synonyms for narratives both for stylistic reasons – the everyday phrase is story telling – and because members of the Whitehall village talk about ‘getting their story straight’. I am not trivializing the notion of narratives or the activity of story-telling, which I consider, along with game playing, integral to all human social behaviour (see Huizinga 1955).

<sup>4</sup> There is a massive literature on narratives. Alvermann 2000 provides a short introduction. I found the following helpful: Barthes 1993; Bevir 1999: 252–62 and 298–306; 2000 and 2006; Ricoeur 1981, chapter 11, and 1991, chapter 6; and White 1987.

<sup>5</sup> As with theory, I describe my methods so readers know how I collected the data for my stories. For a detailed discussion of observation and its limits see Rhodes 2002, 2005 and Rhodes, ‘t Hart and Noordegraaf 2007, chapters 1 and 9. For general

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surveys of qualitative methods, see: Denzin and Lincoln 2005; and Hammersley and Atkinson 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Even in the study of British government, there are honourable exceptions; see, for example, Burns 1977; Dargie 1998; Faucher-King 2005; Hall, Scott and Hood 2000; and Hecló and Wildavsky 1974. Also my comment applies to political science only.

Observation is an increasingly common tool in organization studies. For a brief overview see Czarniawska 1998; and for public sector examples, see: Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Mintzberg and Bourgault 2000; and Noordegraaf 2000.

<sup>7</sup> The parallel in fiction is with the story told from the vantage point of its several participants as in Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957–60), William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929); and Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta* (1986).

<sup>8</sup> This section is paraphrased from Geertz 1973: chapter 1. The quotes are from pages 9, 20, 26 and 28–9.

<sup>9</sup> When I refer to a specific Minister, Permanent Secretary or Department, I capitalize the first letter. When I am talking generally about ministers, permanent secretaries and departments, I use lower case. I also follow everyday language conventions and refer to the Secretary of State as Minister, unless clarity requires the full form of address.

<sup>10</sup> On observation see: Adler and Adler 1987; Fenno 1990; Geertz 1973 and 1983; Hammersley and Atkinson 1983; Punch 1986; Sanjek 1990; and Van Maanen 1988.

<sup>11</sup> In earlier articles reporting the fieldwork, I gave the date of the interview or of the fieldwork observation. I have not done so here simply because there were too many dates. They littered the text and made it more difficult to read.

<sup>12</sup> For the period 2001–5, Michael Barber 2007, Alastair Campbell 2007, and David Blunkett 2006 were especially useful, while Tony Blair 2010a; Cherie Blair 2008,

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Lord Michael Levy 2008, and John Prescott 2008 were less so. Some historians and journalists should also be included in this list because of their impeccable off-the-record sources. Anthony Seldon's (2004 and 2007) two-volume biography of Blair has a staggering array of insider interviews. Peter Hennessy (various), Andrew Rawnsley 2001 and 2010, and Robert Peston 2005 are not far behind; the latter had the best access to Brown and his court. Less consistently useful contributions were: Beckett and Hencke 2004, and Pollard 2005. Other memoirs, diaries, biographies and autobiographies were of episodic use and are listed in the bibliography.

<sup>13</sup> Although we usually say 'Chatham House Rules' (plural), in fact there is only one rule: 'When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed'. See: <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/about/chathamhouserule/>.

<sup>14</sup> I have much sympathy with Watson's (1986) prayer, 'make me reflexive – but not yet'. I sought to remain a 'professional stranger', so I had to strive for both detachment and critical self-awareness.

<sup>15</sup> These issues are a matter of longstanding debate; see Punch, 1986; and Mitchell, 1993.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed defense see: Bevir 1994; 1999: chapter 3; and Rhodes 1997a: chapter 9.