POLITICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND PUBLIC POLICY: PROSPECTS AND LIMITS

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Abstract

This lecture asks two questions. What lessons about public sector reform can be learnt from using political anthropology, especially observational methods, to study governance? What are the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach in the study and reform of public governance?

I contrast the everyday working experience reported in Rhodes (2011) with the core themes of civil service reform; namely evidence based policy making, managerialism, and choice. I tell a cautionary tale to draw out lessons for would-be reformers. I use five axioms for clarity of exposition: coping and the appearance of rule, not strategic planning; institutional memory, not internal structures; storytelling, not evidence based policy; contending traditions and stories, not just managerialism; the politics of implementation, not top-down innovation and control.

Biography

R. A. W. Rhodes is Professor of Government (Research) at the University of Southampton (UK); Professor of Government at Griffith University (Brisbane, Australia); and Emeritus Professor of Politics at the University of Newcastle (UK). Previously, he was the Director of the UK Economic and Social Research Council’s ‘Whitehall Programme’ (1994-1999); Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the Australian National University (2006-11); and Director of the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University (2007-8).

He is the author and editor of 30 books including recently: Everyday Life in British Government (Oxford University Press 2011); The State as Cultural Practice (with Mark Bevir, Oxford University Press 2010); Comparing Westminster (with Patrick Weller and John Wanna, Oxford University Press 2009); and Governance Stories (with Mark Bevir, Routledge 2006). He also edited or jointly edited: The Australian Study of Politics (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009); Observing Government Elites (Palgrave-Macmillan 2007); and The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions (Oxford University Press 2006).

He is life Vice-President of the Political Studies Association of the United Kingdom; a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia; and an Academician of the Academy of Social Sciences (UK). He has also been a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and he was editor of Public Administration from 1986 to 2011.
INTRODUCTION

This paper asks two questions. What lessons about reforming the British civil service can be learnt from using observational methods to study British government departments? What are the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach in the study and reform public administration? Both questions are unusual in political science. First, observation is not a common research tool; for example, the addiction to secrecy of British government is seen as a formidable barrier. Second, those relatives of observation such as action research and organizational learning (Arygris and Schon 1978 and 1996; Morgan 1993) are said to have limited applicability in civil service reform because these approaches are compromised by the political environment (Commons 2004, 36-38).

As Geertz (1983, 21) points out, ‘there has been an enormous amount of genre mixing in intellectual life’ as ‘social scientists have turned away from a laws and instances ideal of explanation towards a cases and interpretations one’ and towards ‘analogies drawn from the humanities’. Examples of such analogies include social life as game, as drama, and as text. This ‘refiguration of social theory represents … a sea change in our notion not so much of what knowledge is but of what it is that we want to know’ (Geertz 1983, 34). There is a problem for public administration. As we blur genres, ‘the social technologist notion of what a social scientist is is brought into question’ (Geertz 1983, 35). Rather, the task becomes to recover the meaning of games, dramas and texts and to tease out their consequences. So, this paper blurs genres, combining political science and cultural anthropology to explore civil service reform. Then, confronting the ‘social technologist’ issue, I ask, ‘what lessons can public administration drawn from this research’? Can recovering stories provide lessons for the would-be reformer?
The paper has three sections. The first section describes the dominant approach to public sector reform over the past decade: evidence-based policy making, managerialism, and choice. The second section compares the reform proposals with the fieldwork reported in Rhodes (2011) and draws lessons for would-be reformers. I use five axioms for ease of exposition: coping and the appearance of rule, not strategic planning; institutional memory, not internal structures; storytelling, not evidence based policy; contending traditions and stories, not managerialism; the politics of implementation, not top-down innovation and control. The final section discusses the strengths and weaknesses of my approach both in the study of public administration and for public sector reform.

THE REFORMS

This section reviews recent proposals to reform the civil service by both think-tanks and the government. I suggest these reports are pervaded by beliefs in the instrumental rationality of evidence-based policymaking, managerialism, and economic choice. I give examples that span the 2000s to show that these ideas persist. They are the shared, almost tacit, knowledge of contributors to the continuing debate about public sector reform. These remarks can be justified briefly as they verge on the obvious.

Evidence-based policymaking

The Strategic Policy Making Team in the Cabinet Office (1999) started with a model of the core policy process that had four stages: problem definition, developing solutions, implementation, and evaluation. However, they found that ‘policy making rarely proceeds as neatly as this model suggests’ and developed their own ‘descriptive’ model of a ‘modernized’ policy process. It includes the following characteristics
Clearly defines outcomes and takes a long term view, taking into account the likely effect and impact of the policy in the future five to ten years and beyond;

- Uses the best available evidence from a wide range of sources;

- Constantly reviews existing policy to ensure it is really dealing with problems it was designed to solve without having unintended detrimental effects elsewhere;

- Learns from experience of what works and what doesn’t through systematic evaluation.

At the heart of this professional policy making model is a belief in evidence based policy making or advice/decisions … based upon the best available evidence from a wide range of sources; all key stakeholders are involved at an early stage and throughout the policy’s development. All relevant evidence, including that from specialists, is available in an accessible and meaningful form to policy makers. (Paraphrased from Cabinet Office 1999, paras 2.6, 2.10, 2.11 and Annexe A).

It is hard to think of a better example of the consensual approach to evidence based policy making; that is, to ‘in-house’ work where there is agreement on the issues to be addressed. The aim is commonly to improve service delivery. It comes in two main forms: information on performance and evaluation of policy outcomes, with the occasional policy experiment (or pilot project) thrown in. The shared intellectual core is the rational means-ends, decision-making model and the instrumental use of research to achieve given ends (Sanderson 2002, 5-6; Bullock, Mountford and Stanley 2001).
This view of the policymaking process is widely shared inside and outside government. The Institute of Government’s (2010) favourite incantation is strategic:

‘We define ‘strategic leadership’ as the process of setting clear priorities, linking those priorities to funding, collaborating with departments to draw up work plans, and performance managing the most important goals’ (Institute of Government 2010, 8).

The faith in evidence is touching:

Often being strategic rubs up against the pressure of events and personalities. But governments’ usual optical distortion is that they overestimate the impact of short-term measures and underestimate how much can be changed over the longer term, with well-judged policies informed by hard evidence (Institute of Government 2010, 16; see also Better Government Institute 2010, 11, 13-14 and 32).

The report cites Mulgan (2009) in support. In this book, the former head of Tony Blair’s Strategy Unit assembles every fashionable management nostrum of the past decade to tell governments how to achieve their goals. At the heart of the book once again we find evidence-based policy.

In July 2011, the Coalition government launched its Open Public Services White Paper (Cm 8145. 2011). Despite claims that ‘something very big and different is happening with this White Paper’ (Cameron 2011), most observers saw only more of the same. The emphasis fell on ‘building on evidence of what work’. Phrases like ‘sound evidence base’ ‘what works’ and ‘robust evidence’ abound. Departments would need a ‘clearer understanding of what their priorities are’ and need ‘to ensure administrative resources match Government policy priorities’ so the Government can get ‘value for taxpayers’ money in delivering its objectives.
Managerialism

Managerialism is a set of inherited beliefs about how private sector management techniques would increase the economy, efficiency and effectiveness – the 3Es – of the public sector. Initially the beliefs focused on managerialism or hands-on, professional management; explicit standards and measures of performance; managing by results; and value for money. Subsequently, it also embraced marketization or neo-liberal beliefs about competition and markets. It introduced ideas about restructuring the incentive structures of public service provision through contracting-out, quasi-markets; and consumer choice. Margaret Thatcher introduced both managerial and neo-liberal ideas and both were adopted by New Labour, with a twist. It introduced a third strand to managerialism with its service delivery agenda. Despite the brouhaha about its novelty, the Coalition government also focused on service delivery and customer choice. In this section, I give examples of managerialism. In the next section, I look at delivery and choice.

Managerialism has a long history which cannot be retold here (see: Pollitt 1993; and Ferlie, Lynn and Pollitt 2005). For my purpose, I need to show only that such reform persists (and for a review of the 2000s see Public Administration Select Committee (PASC 2009). The core concern for decades has been better performance management whether called accountable management or management-by-objectives (see Fulton 1968). Only the labelling has changed:

Effective performance assessment within government helps to identify how well public organizations are meeting their objectives, as well as highlighting where improvements could be made, so that government is better able to work towards its desired outcome (PASC 2009, 3; see also PASC 2003; Better Government Institute (BGI) 2010, 33)
Over the last 15 years, several innovations came and went, including total quality management, skills of the civil service, joined-up government, capability reviews, and the ubiquitous ‘leadership’. Of late, the Coalition’s reform proposals has emphasised better operational management for more effective implementation. The common thread running through these fads and fashions is performance management and it remains a key part of the government’s latest batch of proposed reforms (Cabinet Office 2012, 28-29).

Delivery and choice

The general principles informing the delivery agenda were outlined by Michael Barber, the Prime Minister’s former Chief Adviser on Delivery in his comments about education:

> Between 2001 and 2005 what Blair increasingly hankered after was a way of improving the education system that didn’t need to be constantly driven by government. He wanted to develop self-sustaining, self-improving systems, and that led him to look into how to change not just the standards and the quality of teaching, but the structures and incentives. Essentially it’s about creating different forms of a quasi-market in public services, exploiting the power of choice, competition, transparency and incentives. (Interview with Michael Barber 13 January 2006; see also Barber 2007, chapter 3; and PASC 2005).

In February 2004, the Prime Minister outlined what delivery meant for him:

> The principal challenge is to shift focus from policy advice to delivery. Delivery means outcomes. It means project management. It means adapting to new situations and altering rules and practice accordingly. (Blair 2004)

Cameron agrees. Although evidence-based policy making and managerialism remain prominent strands in the Coalition’s reform proposals, choice is the first principle of the reforms; ‘wherever possible we are increasing choice by giving people direct control over the services they use’
(Cameron 2011). The White Paper claims that ‘the old centralised approach to public service delivery is broken’, so ‘wherever possible we will increase choice’ and ‘power will be decentralised to the lowest appropriate level’. Such choice will only happen if service delivery is ‘opened up to a range of providers of different sizes and different sectors’ (Cm 8145, 2011, 8-9).

Choice, decentralization and diversity of providers are three core tenets of the proposed reforms.

All the ideas about evidence-based policymaking, managerialism and choice are part of the vocabulary of senior civil servants. For example, O’Donnell (2012) includes clear objectives, objective evaluation and honouring the evidence among his ten commandments of good policymaking. As the Regulatory Policy Institute (2009, para 31) observes, ‘every suggestion’ in the ‘numberless’ reports on civil service reform are ‘a version of the same, how better to manage an ever more centralized state’. In sum, instrumental rationality, managerialism and choice rule, and it is not OK.

This focus on how to better manage the centralized state is a key part of the problem. For, as Hood and Lodge (2007, 59) point out, the ‘Civil Service reform syndrome’ is familiar to all.

We have seen this movie before – albeit with a slightly different plot-line – with earlier attempts to fix up the bureaucracy, accompanied by the characteristic hype from the centre, selective filtering at the extremities and political attention deficit disorder that works against follow-through and continuity. We have seen the pattern with ideas like total quality management, red tape bonfires, better consultation, risk management, competency, evidence-based policy, joined-up government, delivery leadership, and now better policymaking. Such initiatives come and go, overlap and ignore each other, leaving behind residues of varying size and style (Hood and Lodge 2007, 59).
The syndrome persists not because civil servants are venal or incompetent but because the assumptions behind reforms are not fit for public sector purpose.

LESSONS

Rhodes (2011) seeks to understand the ways in which the political and administrative elites of British central government departments made sense of their worlds. It provides ‘thick descriptions’, or my constructions of their constructions of what they are up to (Geertz 1973), through an analysis of their beliefs and everyday practices. As Law (1994, 263) observes, outsiders studying an organization ‘are no more able to offer a single and coherent account of the way in which it orders itself’ than its managers. So, just as civil servants seek to domesticate the everyday life of their minister, I seek to domesticate the many competing beliefs and practices of the departments.

Methods

I draw on three sources of information: ‘the pattern of practice, talk, and considered writing’ (Oakeshott 1996, x). 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 twenty other officials (1 x 1-hour taped and transcribed), totalling some 67 hours of interviews. On considered writing, I had and newspaper reports, copies of speeches and public lectures; committee and other papers relevant to the meetings I observed.
My interviews and fieldwork observations were for citation but not for attribution without the interviewee’s permission. 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). I chose them because they are similar in size and status. So, I could talk about the composite Minister, Department, or Permanent Secretary and remain plausible. 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. Following the established practice of latter-day ethnographers, I undertook ‘yo-yo fieldwork’. 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 events through the ‘webs and relations between actors, institutions and discourses across time and space’ (Shore and Wright 1997, 14; see also Marcus 1995). So, the research reported in *Everyday Life in British government* used a combination of elite interviews and fieldwork observation conducted during repeated visits to several locations. This mix of research tools is distinct, distinctive, and rare in political science.

In sum, the book tells a story of willed ordinariness sustained by elaborate protocols and rituals. I suggest the distinctions between policy and management, politician and civil servant, are meaningless when confronted by the imperative to cope and survive. I describe the world of ‘political-administrators’ dependent on one another to carry out their respective roles, each role one side of the same coin. Every rude surprise demonstrates their mutual dependence. Of course, the obvious retort to these comments is that we knew it already. That is an ever-present danger for all who are doing political research. But this 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 is not the conventional portrait.

Axioms

This section draws out the lessons from the fieldwork and asks whether the various reform proposals blend with the everyday beliefs and practices of civil servants and their ministers. I use five axioms for clarity of exposition: coping and the appearance of rule, not strategic planning; institutional memory, not internal structures; storytelling, not evidence based policy; contending traditions and stories, not just managerialism; the politics of implementation, not top down innovation and control. I accept that these axioms oversimplify but I want to dramatize the costs of reforms.

Coping and the appearance of rule, not strategic planning

At the top of government departments we find a class of political-administrators, not politicians or administrators. They live in a shared world. Their priority and their skills are about surviving in a world of rude surprises. The goal is willed ordinariness. They do not need more risk. They are adrift in an ocean of storms. Only reformers have the luxury of choosing which challenge they will respond to. Ministers and permanent secretaries have to juggle the contradictory demands posed by recurring dilemmas. They must appear to be in control. I incline to Weiss’s (1980) notions of decision accretion and knowledge creep. Thus, policy emerges from routine and builds like a coral reef. Similarly, rational policy analysis creeps into the decision process almost by osmosis, by becoming part of the zeitgeist, rather than overt deliberation. Civil service reform is not, therefore, a matter of solving specific problems but of managing unfolding dilemmas and their inevitable unintended consequences. There is no solution but a succession of solutions to problems which are contested and redefined as
they are ‘solved’. This analysis is an anathema to the would-be reformers of the previous section, but it is the fate of their rational schemes.

Strategic planning is a clumsy add-on to this world. Its time scale is too long. Its concerns too far removed from the everyday life concerns of its short–stay incumbents. The demands of political accountability and the media spotlight do not pay attention to strategic priorities. Relatively trivial problems of implementation can threaten a minister’s career. Finally, the call for clear roles and responsibilities, for objectives and targets, is an idealized rational model of policymaking largely removed from the messy reality of public policy making.

The limits to the rational model of policy making have been spelt out so often, they need but brief recappping here. Crucially, as practiced, rational analysis is retrospective not prospective. It is used to justify decisions already taken by other means and for other reasons. And the other reasons are usually political ones. There is no obvious reason to prioritize economic rationality over political rationality, rather the converse. I agree with Wildavsky, writing back in 1968 about the then fashionable management reform of PPBS (Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System), when he vigorously argued that ‘political rationality is the fundamental kind of reason’ it determines ‘the decision structures [that] are the source of all decisions (Wildavsky 1968, 393).

Much government is about the appearance of rule: ‘about stability. Keeping things going, preventing anarchy, stopping society falling to bits. Still being here tomorrow’ (Lynn and Jay 1984, 454). I do not seek, as did the authors of the quote, to make people laugh. In this witticism is much wisdom, not cynicism.

Institutional memory, not internal structures

Reform all too frequently involves splitting up existing units, creating new units, redeploying staff, bringing in outsiders, revamping IT systems and, as a consequence, eroding institutional memory.
Pollitt (2007: 173) gives his recipe for losing institutional memory: rotate staff rapidly, change the IT system frequently, restructure every two years, reward management over other skills, and adopt each new management fad. All three departments met most of these criteria. There was a tacit policy of depleting a proven asset for unproven gains. Institutional memory is the source of stories; the department’s folk psychology, providing the everyday theory and shared languages for storytelling. These stories involve a retelling of yesterday to make sense of today. They explain past practice and events and justify recommendations for the future. It is crucial if the civil service is to tell accurate and reliable stories. Quite simply, the next bout of reforms should explore ways to preserve and enhance institutional memory.

Of course, there is some awareness of the importance of some everyday routines. The BGI (2010) report, written by senior officials, considers that Ministers and civil servants can move too frequently between jobs and subject areas. As a result, ‘records of previous decisions or past events may no longer exist or be easily available … [and there] … has been a serious weakening of corporate memory with the risk of failure in strategy, policy and delivery’. It calls for ‘special attention … to the maintenance, preservation and accessibility of departmental records (BGI 2010, 35, 36 and 41; see also PASC 2011c, 13-14). But such suggestions are the exception not the rule. I am not aware of any official actions to affect an improvement in institutional memory.

Storytelling, not evidence based policy

Storytelling substitutes informed conjecture for prediction. It does not preclude rational policy analysis. It treats it simply as another way of telling a story alongside all the other stories in a department. So, stories are modest in their claims. Each story is one set of spectacles for looking at the world. But how can you tell which story makes the most sense? The short answer is that the civil service has been doing it for years. So, when they identify
and construct the storyline by asking ‘what happened?’, and ‘why?’, they also ask whether a story is defensible (to both internal and external audiences); accurate (in that it is consistent with known and agreed ‘facts’), believable (in that it is consistent with the departmental philosophy). Lying is seen as a worse sin than error, accident, even incompetence. So, they test ‘facts’ in committee meetings and rehearse story lines or explanations to see what they sound like and whether there is agreement. They judge how a story will play publicly by the reactions of their colleagues. In this way, they can anticipate the reaction of an external audience. They compare stories in the same way.

For the would-be reformer, one challenge would be to get the departmental court to wear night vision spectacles to identify and collect the many, relevant and sometimes unheard stories. So, at the heart of a storytelling approach would be collecting the several voices in the department stories and increasing the voices heard. The second step would be to develop transparent criteria for writing, evaluating and comparing stories. Currently, such criteria are embedded in words like ‘sound’, ‘judgement’, ‘experience’ and ‘safe pair of hands’. They communicate understood, shared but tacit meanings.  

Contending traditions and stories, not just managerialism

Even today, ministers and civil servants act as if the nineteenth century liberal constitution sets the rules of the political game. The British constitution reminds me of geological strata, a metaphor which captures the longevity of the beliefs and practices. I do not want to suggest that nothing has changed. Obviously much has changed, but much remains. Managerialism and network governance have not replaced earlier beliefs and practices; rather, they coexist with the inherited Westminster tradition. Ministers and civil servants are fluent in all these languages, yet they continue to act as if earlier constitutional beliefs and practices are reliable guides for present-day behaviour. So, my big surprise was that British government was riven with incommensurable
traditions and their stories. There was no agreed standard for comparing the stories. Even within a government department, let alone across central government, 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 not replaced the Westminster central operating code. Rather they have been grafted on and the Westminster, managerial and governance traditions co-exist side by side with all the attendant dilemmas.

Elite actors displayed variable interest or concern in resolving such dilemmas. For example, ministers and civil servants have overlapping roles and responsibilities. Typically, would-be reformers want to clarify the constitutional relationship between ministers and civil servants. They want to spell out roles and relationships. For example, the PASC (2011c, 29) argued:

> The convention of ministerial responsibility ... derived from the Haldane Report at the beginning of the last century have, on the whole, stood the test of time. However ... it is timely to consider the development of a new Haldane model to codify the changing accountabilities and organization of government.

But, typically, ministers and their civil servants have a vested interest in the current arrangements. Its ambiguity protects them from effective scrutiny. Thus, the Government’s response to the PASC recommendations was dismissive, brusquely referring the Committee to ‘the statutory position of civil servants whose accountability is to Ministers who in turn are accountable to Parliament’ (PASC 2012, 12). Haldane prevails because it serves the interests of both Ministers and their civil servants. And yet the Government proclaims, ‘the old idea of a Civil Service “generalist” is dead’. Instead, they say they want ‘the right combination of professionalism, expert skills and subject matter expertise’ (Cabinet Office 2012, 23). Where are the political antennae that point out the hole to the minister before he or she falls in, to pull him or her out of the hole afterwards, and then to argue that he or she never fell in? Have would-be reformers persuaded ministerial colleagues to
forsake the cocoon of willed ordinariness at the top of departments that exists to protect the minister? Private offices exist to domesticate trouble, to defuse problems, and to take the emotion out of a crisis. Protocols are the key to managing this pressurised existence. Everyday routines are unquestioned and unrecognised. The reformers know not what they seek to reform. ¹⁰

Similarly, managerial reform is all too often a secondary concern for Ministers and their civil servants. I agree that effective performance measurement needs more clarity if performance management is what matters. My problem is that, when I imagine myself in a minister’s or permanent secretary’s shoes, performance management does not seem to matter that much. Useful, but not where the real action is. Ministers are not managers. It is not why they went into politics. A minority of Secretaries of State take an interest, even fewer Ministers of State. These brute facts undermine reform. The civil service exists to give ministers what they want and most do not want anything to do with management reform. At best, it is not a priority. At worst, it is not even on the radar. Critics of the civil service for the slow pace of change should look instead to ministers as the main wellspring of change in British government to explain the slow pace of change. So, we need to ask whether different sections of the elite draw on different traditions to construct different narratives about the world, their place within it, and their interests and values. The diversity needs to be explored, not ignored, otherwise reform will be dogged with misfortune from the moment it starts.

**The politics of implementation, not top down innovation and control**

Politics and policies do not arise exclusively from the strategies and interactions of elites. Other actors can resist, transform, and thwart the agendas of elites. An anthropological approach draws attention to the diverse traditions and narratives that inform actions at lower levels of the hierarchy, and the actions of citizens. For example, we know street-level bureaucrats shape service delivery in crucial ways. They use local knowledge and local
reasoning to decide what policy will be for clients (see Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). In a similar vein, Lindblom (1990) compares professional with lay knowledge to the discomfort of the former. Understandings of how things work around here are embedded not only in the taken for granted routines and rituals of the departmental court but also the beliefs and practices of actors at lower levels of the hierarchy. Not only is such knowledge rarely part of the policy process, it is not valued. Yet it is often crucial to the success of policies especially in their implementation. Although one strand in the British political tradition asserts that ‘leaders know best’, the track record of much top-down innovation and control does not inspire confidence.

Moreover, when implementation comes to the fore of government thinking, it is strangely divorced from everyday knowledge. Thus, the Civil Service Reform Plan (Cabinet Office 2012, chapter 3) adopts the top-down, rational model of implementation with its imperatives for clear objectives, robust management information, and project management. If social science research ever teaches us anything, it tells us that the top-down model is plagued with implementation deficits. Curiouser and curiouser, the report states that ‘much of this failure has been because policy gets announced before implementation has been fully thought through’ (2012, 18). From this statement, do we conclude that ministers delay their history-making policy announcements while their civil servants spot snags? Ministers have short tenure. They will not sit around waiting on what they see as mere detail. In all probability, they will not be there when the implementation problems arrive. Snag spotting irritates them (Rhodes 2011, 185). Civil servants are wary of speaking too much truth to power. Even more of a problem, the statement also assumes that civil servants are responsible for implementation when many departments rely on third parties. They have a hands-off, not hands on, link to policy implementation. As Bovens (1998, 46) puts it, they confront the “the
problem of many hands” where responsibility for policy is shared. Everyday lay knowledge would tell policy makers about the limits to implementation, but no one would be listening.

CONCLUSIONS: strengths and weaknesses

Indubitably, the lessons of my fieldwork are not the basis of the reform proposals, which are pervaded by beliefs in the instrumental rationality of evidence-based policymaking, managerialism, and choice. Rather, the key task in civil service reform is to steer other actors using storytelling. Storytelling organizes dialogues, foster meanings, beliefs, and identities among the relevant actor. It seeks to influence what actors think and do, and foster a shared narrative of change. It is about continuities and preserving the departmental philosophy, and its everyday theory and shared languages that enables a retelling of yesterday to make sense of today.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach in the study of public administration? What do we know from my story that we don't know from Yes Minister and the existing public administration and political science literature? My account of life at the top differs in seven ways from other accounts.

First, there is much agreement in the academic literature that the constitution is in disarray (see, for example, Bogdanor 2003 and 2009; Johnson 2004; and King 2007). There is much to agree with in these several critiques of the constitution and constitutional reform but ministers and civil servants act as if the old verities are constant; for example, they believe they are accountable to Parliament and act accordingly. Such behaviour is a fine example of the Thomas theorem (1928, 572) that, ‘if men define situations as real, they are real in their
consequences’. I take the constitutional beliefs of elite actors ‘as real’ and explore the consequences.

Second, I do not privilege any one tradition but treat them all as living traditions. No one account is comprehensive. Each web of inherited beliefs and practices shapes some ministerial and civil servant actions. Each explains some actions by some people some of the time.

Third, I explore how these broad traditions are translated into specific protocols and routines and embedded in everyday life. In other words, I do not see protocols and routines as boring red tape but as the means by which constitutional ideas and reform are brought to life. I explore how these several protocols and rituals are re-enacted in everyday life, and change as divergent ideas bump into one another.

Fourth, I explore the dilemmas posed by the diverse traditions to show how new ideas produce not only reform but also resistance. To twist a familiar saying, ‘you can change if you want but this practice is not for changing’. Indeed, it is the embedding of yesterday’s beliefs in today’s protocols and rituals that makes change such a hazardous enterprise.

Fifth, the ethnographic approach admits of surprises, of moments of epiphany, which can open new research agendas. It accepts serendipity and happenstance. In this paper, the surprises included the persistence of the nineteenth century liberal constitution and the commonplace use of storytelling.

Sixth, the approach helps to analyse the symbolic dimensions of political action. Most political behaviour has a strong symbolic dimension. Symbols do not simply ‘represent’ or reflect political ‘reality’, they actively constitute that reality. By drawing out the negotiated, symbolic and ritual elements of political life, ethnographic analysis draws attention to deeper
principles of organisation that are not visible to empiricist or positivist approaches. Thus, ministers are heirs to a royal tradition and it shows in the present-day practices, especially in the appearance of rule. The Minister was absent much of the time but everybody talked about the Minister’s wishes, weaknesses and prestige all the time. When the minister was ill, ‘everybody’ knew about it within 30 minutes! There was an ever-present fear of damage to the minister’s standing in the government and with the electorate at large. The department’s routines and practices remained the same, but whenever the minister was around there was a marked change of atmosphere, in the pace of work, with a quantum leap in the sense of urgency and stress. This reaction was not to the person. Indeed, officials made negative, critical comments about the individual. It is a reaction to the office; to a symbol of authority in, and a cornerstone of, British government.

Finally, I look at ministers, permanent secretaries and departmental courts from an unusual angle. I do not adopt the usual focus on institutions, events, personalities and policies. It was never my intention to criticize any specific policy. I have not sought to evaluate the impact of any policy. My focus is on understanding how civil servants and ministers understand and practice policy making. I look at the everyday processes which individuals use to cope with events, other people and policies. This angle of vision influences what I see. I focus on the social construction of practices through the ability of individuals to create, and act on, meanings. I unpack practices as the disparate and contingent beliefs and actions of individuals.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach for the reform of public administration? Its strength is that it does not privilege managerial rationality or the preferences of managers. Rather, it focuses on facets of reform ignored in the conventional literature. It suggests that the reform of the British civil service should focus on coping, not
strategic planning, institutional memory, not internal structures; storytelling, not evidence based policy making; contending traditions and stories, not just the beliefs and practices of the departmental court, ministers and top civil servants; and the politics of implementation, not top down innovation and control.

Playing the role of ‘social technologists’ and using observational fieldwork to produce proposals for civil service reform poses several problems and I consider them under the headings of: roles, relevance, time, evidence, and working with elites.¹²

There is no agreement on the role of the anthropologist let alone on whether anthropology should be ‘relevant’ and how that could be achieved. Van Maanen (1978, 345–6) describes his relationship with the police he was observing as ‘a cop buff, a writer of books, an intruder, a student, a survey researcher, a management specialist, a friend, an ally, an asshole, a historian, a recruit and so on’. He was ‘part spy, part voyeur, part fan and part member’. Similarly, Kedia and Van Willigen (2005, 11) distinguish between ‘policy researcher or research analyst; evaluator; impact assessor, or needs assessor; cultural broker; public participation specialist; and administrator or manager’. Applied anthropology can serve many masters.

For Van Willigen applied anthropology is about providing information for decision makers so they can make rational decisions. Or, more formally, applied anthropology is a ‘complex of related, research-based, instrumental methods which produce change or stability in specific cultural systems through the provision of data, initiation of direct action, and/or the formulation of policy’ (Van Willigen (2002, 150 and chapter 10). Not everyone would agree that the task is to help decision makers. For Agar (1996, 27), ‘no understanding of a world is valid without representation of those members’ voices’. For him, ‘ethnography is populist to the core’ and the task is to be ‘sceptical of the distant institutions that control local people’s lives’. He would endorse the annual Lucy Mair Medal of Applied Anthropology awarded by
the Royal Anthropological Institute (1998), which ‘is intended to honour excellence in the application of anthropology to the relief of poverty and distress, and to the active recognition of human dignity’.

Managers are scarcely sympathetic to such aims. They see anthropologists as ‘coming forward with awkward observations’ and ‘as wishing to preserve “traditional” ways’ (Sillitoe 2006, 10). Managers criticise anthropologists because their findings often failed to conform to expectations held by employers about the causes of problems and their solutions’. They were dismissed as ‘irrelevant or disruptive’ (Sillitoe 2006, 14). As Kedia and Van Willigen (2005, 16-20) observe, applied anthropology confronts an acute and recurring moral dilemma ‘since the practitioner must negotiate an intricate balance between the interests of the clients who commission the work, and those of the community being studied’. Inevitably, there are issues about whose aims are served by the research, who owns the research results, and individual privacy. Given that observational fieldwork is about decentring an established organization to identify its several voices, its contending beliefs and practices, and its traditions and stories (Bevir and Rhodes 2006), then the research is never about privileging any one voice. From the viewpoint of the managers, therefore, there is always the potential for disruption and irrelevance.

Given managerial concerns about such anthropological decentring and disruption, it is ironic that my political science colleagues express concern about its conservative outlook. In effect, they claim that by describing life at the top, I justify it. I am too sympathetic to ministers ‘bleating about their world as one of high risk and shock’ and I seek to ‘make the life of the political administrative class more comfortable’. I agree description can spill over into justification and, therefore, seem conservative but that is not my intention. My aim is to understand, not sympathize. I want would-be reformers to be aware of the likely pitfalls; that
is, to know what they are seeking to reform. After all, the reformers have had the field to themselves for decades with, at best, modest success. I am explaining why that success is modest. Reformers who advocate evidence-based policy making need to draw on observational evidence in designing change. It is conspicuous for its absence. Ministers bleat for reforms which they then do little to support. A key part of the inertia is not the civil service but the politicians, and reformers will continue to see their reforms fail because they continue to target the civil service; it is the wrong target.

The claim to relevance is further compounded by the problem of time. Observation in the field is time consuming and fits uncomfortably if at all with the demands of politicians and administrators alike. The brutal fact is that if you want to understand everyday life you have to stick around, go where you are led, and take what you are given. The Minister and the department will not wait on the results from such unstructured soaking. Of course fieldwork does not have to be the decade long immersion of the lone researcher. There are short cuts; for example, by using teams of fieldworkers, collaborative working with the client, snapshots across locations and time, and storytelling circles (Czarniawska, 2004, chapter 3; Snowden 2000a) But getting below and behind the surface of official accounts to provide texture, depth and nuance and opening the consciousness of one group of people to another (Geertz 1988) cannot be done overnight. I was lucky - the civil service agreed to my doing ‘curiosity research’.

In political science, the dominant tradition is modernist-empiricism with its roots in the natural science model. The argument about blurred genres takes as its starting point the turning away from that model and the idea of law-like generalizations. As Inglis (2000, 112) argues, there has been a lethal attack on modernist-empiricism, and the work of philosophers such as Charles Taylor, Peter Winch and Alasdair McIntyre means that using the methods of
the natural sciences in the human sciences is ‘comically improper’. Richard Bernstein, Clifford Geertz, and Richard Rorty could be added to a long and growing list of such critics, before mentioning the long-standing hermeneutics tradition of Continental Europe. This ‘interpretive turn’ raises the problem of what counts as evidence. It might seem obvious that ‘not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts’ (sign hanging in Albert Einstein’s office at Princeton), but not when it comes to civil service reform and policy analysis. It is a world of given facts, positive theory and hypothesis testing. Qualitative data simply does not meet these expectations because it does not count as generalizable evidence.

Finally, there is the delicate issue of managing relationships with the elite. I have considered this at length elsewhere (Rhodes et al 2007, chapter 9) but two points bear repetition. I was not studying the powerless. Rather, the research ‘subjects’ were more powerful than me. They can, and a minority did, refuse interviews, deny access to the organization, declare documents secret, and insist on anonymity for both themselves and their organization. All the interviews and periods of observation took place with informed consent but as the work unfolded I had to negotiate constantly to keep that cooperation. Also, it is all too easy to affect the relationship between yourself and the observed, causing them to behave differently. The aim of the so-called ‘non-participant’ observer is to remain the outsider; ‘the professional stranger’ (Agar 1996). However, for lengthy on-site visits and extensive repeat interviews, you have to have a conversation and relate to the people around you. You have to establish rapport. You are sucked into events, even if it is only casual badinage to ease tension. For example, one permanent secretary gave me a copy of his diaries. The analysis of his engagements and committee work showed he was spending about one-third of his time on corporate civil service business outside the department. He was surprised. He had no clear picture of the distribution of his workload. Immediately, he began to reduce his corporate commitments. He
could exercise much control over his working life, and he knew it. My example makes it clear that the powerful are different. They can shape your research and change everyday life even as you look at it.

Whatever the problems of this storytelling approach, one point seems clear. The attempts to impose private sector management beliefs and techniques to increase the economy, efficiency and effectiveness have had at best variable success. If private sector techniques offer such obvious and available ways to manage, then why is so little implemented across government? It is not because public managers are ill-trained, stupid or venal, but because private sector techniques do not fit the context, can be neutered by both bureaucratic and political games, and are not subjected to the same accountability as public management. Public sector officials also do not share the same risks and rewards. Similarly, rational means-ends analysis is largely removed from the reality of public policy making. Politics, value clashes, interests, cultures, symbolic imperatives, processes and accountability requirements all make the rational actor model untenable in public policy decision-making. Internal reorganisation has marginal effects on beliefs, practices and traditions. Chanting the mantras of organizational change and leadership leaves most of the organization untouched. The choice agenda ignores the political context confronting ministers and senior civil servants. ‘Hands off’ advice is an anathema to the British governing elite that has always known best. We do not need more of the same. We need a different approach to reform. The storytelling approach is a contender.
REFERENCES


Hood, Christopher and Lodge, Martin 2007. ‘Endpiece: Civil Service Reform Syndrome – Are We Heading for a Cure?’ *Transformation*, Spring, 58-59.


NOTES

1 For example, Fine et al 2009 cite no studies by political scientists in their overview of organizational ethnography. See also Fenno, 1990. Of course, there are exceptions; see Rhodes 2012 for citations and discussion. On the UK public sector see: Burns 1977; Crewe 2005; Dargie 1998; Faucher-King 2005; Gabriel 2000; Hall, Scott and Hood 2000; Heclo and Wildavsky 1974; Rhodes 2011; Rhodes et al 2007; Richards and Smith, 2004; and Wilkinson 2011.


3 See Cm 8145, 2011; and Cabinet Office 2012; and compare with Blunkett 2000.

4 For a listing and brief summaries of the several reports see Public Administration Select Committee 2009; Horton and Gay 2011; and Martin Stanley’s excellent web site http://www.civilservant.org.uk/.

5 In a relatively short article, I do not have the space to report the data supporting my account of everyday life. I provide only the briefest summary so I can get on with my main task of describing the limits on would-be reformers. The fieldwork is reported in full in Rhodes 2011.

For proof that the rational model is alive and well, see: Blunkett 2000; Bullock, Mountford, and Stanley 2001; Cabinet Office 1999; and National Audit Office, 2001. For critiques see: Braybrooke and Lindblom 1963; Lindblom 1965; and Wildavsky 1979.

Evidence based policy making has been widely discussed and criticised elsewhere. See: Davies, Nutley and Smith 2000; Hood, Margetts and Perri 6 2010; Learmont and Harding 2006; Parsons 2002; Sanderson, 2002; Solesbury 2001; and Young, Ashby and Grayson 2002.


A final example courtesy of Professor Andrew Kakabadse, specialist advisor for PASC 2011a, who highlights three core civil service capabilities; policy design, service delivery and agency relationship. He also suggests a fourth, emergent capability; stakeholder community support. This fourfold analysis has many weaknesses; for example external relations are not confined to agencies and must encompass, for example, pressure groups and their peak associations. More significant, however, the political tasks of the higher civil service are simply ignored (see PASC 2011b, 80).

On implementation see: Hill and Hupe 2009; O’Toole 2000; Pressman and Wildavsky 1984; and Sabatier 1986.