Chapter 14
FROM PRIME MINISTERIAL LEADERSHIP TO COURT POLITICS
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Introduction

Myopia is a common condition for academic specializations. Prime ministerial studies are no exception. Debates about prime ministerial versus cabinet government and the presidentialization of the prime minister qualify as hoary old chestnuts of the constitution (cf. the contributions in King 1969 and 1985 with Poguntke and Webb 2005). This book seeks to break the mould by linking the study of prime ministers much more closely with the comparative study of political leadership. So, Part I looks again at the theoretical foundations of the topic, focusing on the complex and contingent nature of power, political time, the interplay of institutional and personal resources; and the importance of endogenous, gendered expectations. Part II looks at the rules of the game about the relationship between prime ministers and their parties suggesting that leaders have grown stronger at the expense of parties. Nevertheless they ignore their party constituencies at their peril. Part III is novel. It uses surveys of the opinions of historians, political scientists and other experts to rank prime ministerial performance. Little work of this kind has been done before and I must confess to finding it great fun to disagree with several rankings – in the style of John McEnroe, cries of ‘You cannot be serious’ rent the domestic air.

As well as making its own contribution to the field, the volume also undertakes the equally important task of providing a conspectus of where we are now. So, the editors tell the reader not only what is missing but what is needed. The list of ‘missing’ topics is long, including: personality theory and social psychology; rhetorical, dramaturgical and media analysis; behavioural analysis of prime ministerial leadership styles and their effect on outcomes and
performance; prime ministerial beliefs and motives; and managing central capability. That is a research agenda for a generation.

The editors also have high expectations. They want the next generation of scholars to develop ‘an integrated approach’ in which prime-ministerial power and performance depend: ‘on colleagues, on followers, on favours won, trust gained, enmity contained, needs fulfilled and always conditional (on the historical moment, on political culture and political climate, on institutional conditions and institutional change)’ (Walter, forthcoming, this volume: xx).

My task is neither to criticize the individual contributions nor to go over the same ground as the editors. Rather, I seek to build on the analysis of several chapters (not all) to suggest theories and methods that should help to realize the editors’ ambitions.

Specifically, I explore two avenues not touched on elsewhere in the volume; the interpretive analysis of traditions, and the political anthropology of court politics. More generally, my ambition is to broaden horizons by blurring genres; that is, by drawing on the theories and methods of the humanities (Geertz 1983). First, I seek to move ‘the agenda for prime ministerial analysis beyond the confines of its traditional preoccupation with the institutional analysis of…the core executive’ (Strangio et al. forthcoming, this volume: xx) to the analysis of court politics. Second, I argue for an interpretive theoretical approach focusing on ‘the interplay between political circumstances, institutional possibilities, individual characteristics and social relations at the apex of executive government’ (ibid.: XX, emphasis in original). Finally, I argue against too narrow a focus on institutional analysis and make the case for a broader toolkit. I use examples drawn from anthropology and history to show that we can explore the beliefs and practices of the governing elite and explain the shifting patterns of court politics.

On reading a draft of this chapter, a colleague commented, ‘where does that leave “the political scientist” (not the historian, etc.) analytically and methodologically?’ The answer is that it leaves him or her where he or she has always been, as a *bricoleur* (Levi-Strauss 1966: 16–17) or jack-
of-all-trades drawing on the theories or tools that best answer the question posed. Political science does not have, nor to the best of my knowledge has it ever had, its own distinct and distinctive toolkit. We should make a virtue out of this question because genre blurring is unavoidable. I argue for a more varied toolkit for the political scientist. That is a modest aim. I demur from Cowling’s (1963: 209), overly vigorous claim that political science as hypothesis and experiments is ‘an impossibility’; ‘political explanation exists … as philosophy and history, and nothing else’; and the social sciences ‘when looked at critically, dissolve into these two disciplines: and if they do not, they have not been looked at critically enough’. However, we do need to take a critical look at our toolkit and explore what we can learn from genre blurring.

The core executive

In an earlier attempt to escape the conventional wisdom about the prime minister and the British constitution, I developed the core executive approach for the analysis of British government (Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990; Rhodes 1995). We defined the executive in functional terms. So, instead of asking which position is important, we asked which functions define the innermost part or heart of government. For example, the core functions of the British executive are to pull together and integrate central government policies and to act as final arbiters of conflicts between different elements of the government machine. These functions can be carried out by institutions other than prime minister and cabinet; for example, the Treasury and the Cabinet Office. By defining the core executive in functional terms, the key question becomes, ‘who does what?’

Leadership, however, as acts of power and influence, is contingent and relational; that is, it depends on the relative power of other actors and events. Ministers depend on the prime minister for support in getting funds from the Treasury. In turn, the prime minister depends on her or his ministers to deliver the party’s electoral promises. Ministers and prime ministers depend on a
healthy economy to deliver the needed financial resources. This power-dependence approach focuses on relative resources in the core executive and explores the shifting patterns of dependence between the several actors. So, the unit of analysis in core executive studies cannot be the prime minister. Similarly, those who study prime ministerial leadership would be well-advised to look beyond the individual characteristics and behaviours of prime ministers.

After two decades of core executive studies, Elgie (2011: 71–2 and citations) concludes that the ‘the language of the study of British central government has been transformed’ by the approach; and ‘the concept has travelled’ well to the study of other countries. However, core executive studies are ‘less innovative than they might at first appear’ because they can appear as an ‘updated version of the old prime ministerial vs. cabinet government argument’. More significant, Elgie claims ‘the resource-dependency approach is almost completely dominant’ and he suggests that the only challenge to this orthodoxy comes from an interpretive and ethnographic approach.

An interpretive approach

With Mark Bevir, I continue to explore the ways in which an interpretive approach would improve our understanding of British government and politics. Interpretive theory is not included among the ‘theoretical as well as explorative treatments of hitherto neglected or underdeveloped ways of conceptualizing the nature of prime-ministerial power to perform public leadership’ (Strangio et al. forthcoming, this volume: xx). I can repair this deficiency.

An interpretive approach begins from the insight that to understand actions, practices and institutions, we need to grasp the relevant meanings, the beliefs and preferences of the people involved (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 2006 and 2010). The idea of meaning lies at the heart of the interpretive approach:
We need to go beyond the bounds of a science based on verification to one which would study the inter-subjective and common meanings embedded in social reality … this science would be hermeneutical in the sense that … its most primitive data would be a reading of meanings (Taylor 1971: 45).

An interpretive approach seeks to understand the webs of significance that people spin for themselves. It provides ‘thick description’ in which the researcher writes his or her construction of the subject’s constructions of what the subject is up to (adapted from Geertz 1993: 9). So, the task is to unpack the disparate and contingent beliefs and practices of individuals through which they construct their world; to identify the recurrent patterns of actions and related beliefs. Of course, beliefs may not be accurate. Nonetheless, an interpretive approach takes seriously the Thomas theorem (1928: 572) that ‘if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’. The resulting narrative is not just a chronological story. Rather, I use narrative to refer to the form of explanation that disentangles beliefs and actions to explain human life. Narratives are the form theories take in the human sciences, and they explain actions by reference to the beliefs and desires of actors.

People act for reasons, conscious and unconscious (Bevir 1999: chapters 4 and 7).

From core executive to court politics

The interpretive approach gives a distinctive tweak to the study of the core executive. It moves analysis from functions and tasks to beliefs and practices. It highlights the games played by interdependent actors:

Power dependence characterizes the links between the several barons, and between the barons and the prime minister. It forms the fault-line at the heart of the machine. All prime ministers intervene. Few control and then only for some policies, some of the time … A decentred approach does not
seek a general model of power in the core executive or the power of the prime minister. It offers narratives of the contingent relationships in the core executive (Bevir and Rhodes, 2008: 732–3).

This interpretive approach rejects the conception of power that refers to social relations based on interests that people allegedly have outside the particular traditions by which they make sense of the world (cf. Strangio et al. forthcoming, this volume: xx). It does so because people always construct their understanding of their interests against the background of a tradition. It leads to other ways of conceiving of prime ministerial power.

For a start, power can refer to the way in which traditions have an impact on individuals’ beliefs helping to define them, their actions, and the world. Power refers here to the constitutive role played by tradition in giving us our beliefs and actions, and in making our world. An interpretive approach is all about power so conceived, since it explains actions and practices by reference to contingent beliefs formed against the background of traditions.

In addition, power can refer to the restrictive consequences of the actions of others in defining what we can and cannot do. Restrictive power works across intricate webs. Actors such as elected politicians and senior civil servants find their possibilities for action restricted by what others do. In these terms, an interpretive approach shows how various actors restrict what others can do in ways that thwart the intentions of policy actors.

This conception of power gives a distinctive twist to the resource-dependency model of the core executive. Resources cease to be given by (say) institutional position. Rather, they are inter-subjective, constructed by actors against a backcloth of traditions (see, for example, Crozier and Erhard 1980). Dependence is not determined by control over resources, although the perceptions about the control of resources can be restrictive, but also by inherited beliefs and individual’s webs of significance. So far, so general. How does this help us analyse the core executive and its court politics?
The first and obvious point is that an interpretive approach focuses on the beliefs and practices of core executive actors, the traditions in which they are located, and the games people play to resolve dilemmas. It represents a shift of *topos* from institution to individual; from institutions and positions to the court politics of the core executive. This shift captures the intense rivalry between, for example, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown or Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. It also rejects any notion of dominance by any one actor or set of actors. The emphasis falls on fluidity and shifting allegiances. By way of example, Elgie (1997) identifies six patterns of core executive practices in prime ministerial and semi-presidential systems.

- *Monocratic government* – personal leadership by prime minister or president.
- *Collective government* – small, face-to-face groups decide with no single member controlling.
- *Ministerial government* – the political heads of major departments decide policy.
- *Bureaucratic government* – non-elected officials in government departments and agencies decide policy.
- *Shared government* – two or three individuals have joint and equal responsibility for policymaking.
- *Segmented government* – a sectoral division of labour among executive actors with little or no cross-sectoral coordination.

The advantage of this formulation is that it gets away from bald assertions about the fixed nature of executive politics. While only one pattern may operate at any one time, there can still be a fluid pattern as one set of practices succeeds another. It also concentrates the mind on the questions of which pattern of executive politics prevails, when, how, and why did it
change? Focusing on the power of prime minister and cabinet is limiting whereas these questions open the possibility of explaining similarities and differences in the court politics of the core executive (Elgie 1997: 23, and citations).

Moreover, court politics are not confined to the core executive. If ministerial government or bureaucratic government or sectoral government is the prevailing pattern of governance practices, then the effective executive becomes the minister in his or her department and the task becomes to explore the work of the departmental court. Every department has a central secretariat made up of several private offices and shared support units. However, this label is misleading; the central secretariat is better described as a ‘departmental court’. This phrase draws attention to the beliefs and practices of the court; to the court politics surrounding ministers and senior civil servants, to the competition between ministers, and to the tensions between the court and the rest of the department and between civil servants and special advisers. In effect, and once again, there is a shift of focus from positions and offices to relationships both inside and outside the department. We know that ministers, permanent secretaries and their departments have to manage their relations across Whitehall, especially with central agencies such as No. 10 and the Treasury. The departmental court is central to that exercise; but existing accounts pay much less attention to the role of the court in managing relationships within the department. Most departments are complex organizations. They have two or more Ministers of State and several Director-Generals heading major units. The departmental court is a key part of the organizational glue holding the department together. It socializes high-flying civil servants as part of their career development. It coordinates the departmental policy process by filtering and packaging proposals from the department. It contains and manages conflicts between the different sections of the department. It acts as the keeper of administrative protocols and language. And it acts as the gatekeeper and broker for the department’s internal and external networks. Departmental
courts not only have these activities, they also have characteristic ways of behaving. I have described their distinct and distinctive beliefs and practices, protocols and rituals at length elsewhere (Rhodes 2011). Here, I provide a brief illustration of some court practices. A senior serving civil servant sketched these three ‘syndromes’.

- **Courtier Syndrome**, which is some people tiptoeing round (and sucking up to) the Minister, rather than serving him/her professionally. Apart from being unutterably sick-making, this distorts the true purpose of the relationship and damages advice and decision-making.

- **Spotlight Syndrome**. Today the Minister is very concerned about A so everyone grabs A and starts desperately trying to improve it. Tomorrow the Minister (who has limited time and attention) is very concerned about B so everyone forgets about A and makes a grab for B…. The next day it’ll be C. Thus nothing ever gets properly finished as all the clever people move on to the next priority!

- **Sat Nav Syndrome**. This is where civil servants sit looking awkward about them, having worked hard but ending up in entirely the wrong place – but feel somehow that everything’s going to be all right because they pushed all the right buttons/followed the correct procedures. Morally they clearly feel they should be in the right place even though they patently aren’t! (Edited from a personal communication, 8 August 2009.)

I have chosen these three brief examples because I suspect they are instantly recognizable in every country discussed in this volume. Beliefs and practices will vary, however, as actors
draw on differing governmental traditions and respond to even common dilemmas in distinctive ways.

**Court politics and traditions**

In Britain, the practices, protocols and rituals of departmental courts have their roots in not only the long-standing traditions of British government but also the specific traditions, or departmental philosophies, found in the individual departments. Perhaps the most obvious tradition in many bureaucracies is that of hierarchy and its deference to authority. It is reinforced in Britain by the monarchical tradition. The Minister is the Queen’s Minister and accorded due homage. The office has a long history of grandeur. The Minister is called ‘Minister’ or ‘Secretary of State’ and rarely addressed by his or her first name by officials. Outsiders display equivalent verbal and physical deference. The Minister is the centre of attention and this simple fact is displayed in language, beliefs and practices. The monarchical tradition lives on as a central characteristic of the Westminster model and ministerial practice. The point is that the Minister is a celebrity, if not royalty. As one Departmental induction video put it, there ‘is a bit of mystique around Ministers and they make you feel inferior’.

Most dress to reinforce the appearance of rule. As a celebrity, the Minister is escorted everywhere in a chauffeur-driven car, greeted at doorways on red carpets by respectful hosts, recipient of homage from expectant interests.

This brief discussion of the monarchical tradition and its associated syndromes is an example of the pragmatic analysis of traditions. Commonly, governmental traditions are seen as a set of inherited beliefs about the institutions and history of government. For Western Europe it is conventional to distinguish between the Anglo-Saxon (no state) tradition; the Germanic *Rechtsstaat* tradition; the French (Napoleonic) tradition; and the Scandinavian tradition which mixes the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic. Painter and Peters (2010) add several families, groups
and hybrids, including: Latin America, Postcolonial South Asia and Africa, East Asia, Soviet, and Islamic.

We should be wary of reifying traditions. We must not claim an existence for them independent of the beliefs and actions of individuals. Traditions are not fixed entities. They are not given, sat in a philological zoo, waiting for people to discover them. They are contingent, produced by the actions of individuals. The carriers of a tradition bring it to life. They settle its content and variations by developing their beliefs and practices, adapting it to new circumstances, while passing it on to the next generation. So, we should define them pragmatically depending on the events and actions we want to explain. Political scientists construct traditions in ways appropriate to explaining the particular sets of beliefs and actions in which they are interested. They move back from particular beliefs and actions to traditions made up of linked beliefs and actions handed down from generation to generation. What the political scientist should not do, and many problems with the idea of tradition arise because they do so, is to make this move by comparing the beliefs and actions of the individual with a reified tradition. Traditions are not fixed entities, so we cannot situate people in one by comparing their beliefs and actions with its allegedly key features. Rather, we must recognize that traditions are contingent products of the ways in which people develop specific beliefs, preferences and actions.

Traditions and practices could be fixed and static only if we never met and faced novel circumstances; but, of course, we are always meeting new circumstances. A dilemma arises for an individual 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). People can integrate a new belief into their existing beliefs only by relating its themes to themes already present in their beliefs. Change thus involves a pushing and pulling of a dilemma and a tradition to bring them together. Political scientists can explain change in traditions by referring to relevant
dilemmas. The idea of ‘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. The task of the interpretive political scientist is to recover the shared, intersubjective dilemmas of the relevant actors.

Observing the court

To identify practices, we need to observe prime ministers, ministers and cabinets ‘in action’.

Here, genre blurring is a productive avenue of exploration because, for example, anthropology and history provide examples of detailed studies of elites. The obvious objection is that the secrecy surrounding executive politics limits the opportunities for such work. The point has force, and may explain the absence of ethnographic fieldwork in this book. We must, however, take care to avoid saying ‘no’ for powerful people. We can learn from biography and journalism. Biographers probe the reasons. Journalists with their exposé tradition probe actions to show ‘all is not as it seems’. Both observe people in action. Both are important sources of data on beliefs and practices. If we want to know this political world, then we must tell stories that enable listeners to see executive governance afresh. A political anthropology of executive politics may be a daunting prospect but it behoves us to try and get inside the black box. It can be done. There are several examples of studies inside the sensitive black box.

Non-participant observation may be the defining method of anthropology but it is not the only method. Any way of ‘being there’ counts and I would include intensive repeat interviews as one such way. The common format for an elite interview is a one-hour conversation around a semi-structured questionnaire. Of course, it can be revealing in the hands of a skilled interviewer (see, for example, Richards 1997; Weller 2001), but it courts the danger of becoming a confining ritual. Our conception of an elite interview can be too narrow. All elite interviewers know the permanent secretary and minister who can negotiate such an encounter with ease and ‘talk for an
hour without saying anything too interesting’ (Rawnsley 2001: xvii–xviii citing Robin Cooke, former British Foreign Secretary). There is another choice besides this format – intensive repeat interviews.

Robert Lane (1962) conducted interviews with 15 American blue-collar workers four to seven times for up to three hours on each occasion. The interview guide was 50 double-spaced pages long and every interview was taped. This approach could be used to interview, for example, former ministers and senior officials. We just need to adjust our expectations and become the Oliver Twist of interviews – ask for more.

Tom Burns’ (1977) analysis of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is a little-known book among political scientists. It is based on 15 weeks of ethnographic fieldwork in four sections of the BBC and two rounds of interviews conducted ten years apart. Some 200 interviews were conducted in 1963. They are described as ‘conversations’ lasting one to three hours and there was no interview schedule. Some 50 or 60 interviews were recorded. He spent a further ‘six or seven weeks’ at the BBC in 1973, and conducted 60 more interviews. All were recorded. The BBC refused permission to publish the working report based on the 1963 round of interviews and observation, arguing it would be used against the Corporation by hostile newspapers. Like secrecy in British government departments, such defensive behaviour is adduced as evidence that observational fieldwork on elites is not feasible. It is important to record, therefore, that Burns describes his experiences as ‘rather slight frustrations and difficulties’ (p. xvii); that he was granted a second round of interviews in 1973; and that the book was published in 1977.

Heclo and Wildavsky’s (1981 [1974]) study of budgeting in British government demonstrates the value and feasibility of intensive interviews at the top of British government. Unfortunately, they are less than informative about their methods. They conducted two rounds of interviews totalling ‘two hundred or so’. They were ‘intensive’ interviews with ministers and civil servants
but they do not say anything about their structured or semi-structured interview schedule. There is no breakdown of interviews by rank. They refer to their interviewees as co-authors, to ‘seeing the world through their eyes’, and describe themselves as ‘observers’ … ‘watching how people work together’ (Heclo and Wildavsky 1981: lvii, lxvii–iii, lxxi). Hugh Heclo recollects ‘we did nothing but observational fieldwork’ (personal correspondence 9 May 2012). No matter they fail to report their methods in detail. Their work exemplifies the value of intensive interviews (as does Heclo 1977).

A fine example of what can be achieved through a mixture of interviews and observational fieldwork is Shore’s (2000: 7–11) cultural analysis of how European Union elites sought to build Europe. He used participant observation, historical archives, textual analysis of official documents, biographies, oral histories, recorded interviews, and informal conversations as well as statistical and survey techniques. The research was based mainly on over 100 interviews lasting from one to four hours supplemented with observation of, for example, committee meetings. He did not have ‘carte blanche access to meetings, officials or unofficial documents’. Nonetheless his intensive interviewing produces a revealing portrait of patronage and nepotism in the Commission.

Finally, I (Rhodes 2011) observed the office of two British 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. I conducted 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. I also had copies of speeches and public lectures; committee and other papers relevant to the meetings observed; newspaper reports; and published memoirs and diaries.
In short, intensive interviewing and fieldwork observation are feasible research methods for studying political elites including prime ministers and their courts, and I could give more examples (for citations, see Rhodes et al. 2007; and Rhodes 2011). As many journalists and biographers have demonstrated, we can get access to court politics; to the beliefs and practices of elites (for citations see Rhodes 2011 and 2012). The task of the academic is to weigh such evidence in the balance against the rules of intellectual honesty (Bevir 1999: chapter 3). Elgie (2011: 74), a sympathetic commentator, fears the interpretive approach will ‘lead to “mere” storytelling and while each story, by its very nature, will be new, any fresh insights into the core executive will soon be subject to the law of diminishing returns’. Maybe, but that outcome is less likely if we construct our narratives to explain actions by reference to the beliefs and desires of actors located in an analysis of traditions.

If anthropology offers us one approach to studying court politics, history offers another. Obviously the toolkit of the historian is indispensable for the analysis of traditions, but it also offers much for the analysis of court politics. This literature analyses ‘high politics’ and ‘statesmanship’. The main sources are somewhat fragmentary (for a useful conspectus and bibliography see Craig 2010). The founding father of this so-called Peterhouse school of history, Maurice Cowling, describes the character of high politics in Cowling (1971, 1-12); discusses the sources for identifying the beliefs and practices (or in his terms, intentions and political actions) of the political elite in Cowling (1967, 311-40); and provides a general justification for a focus on political action and statesmanship in Cowling (1963, 178-202). His approach is assessed sympathetically in Craig 2010 and Williamson 2010 and much more critically in Ghosh 1993. These ideas have crept into political science most notably in the work of Bulpitt 1983 and 1987. For Bulpitt (1983: 68, n.23), political elites have an ‘operating code’, which is ‘less than a philosophy of government and yet more than a specific collection of policies. It refers to the accepted rules of “statecraft” as
employed over time by political elites’. According to the OED (1993: 3036, col. 3) statesmanship is a synonym for statecraft.

For Cowling, the high politics approach meant studying the intentions and actions of a political leadership network which consisted of ‘fifty or sixty politicians in conscious tension with one another whose accepted authority constituted political leadership’. High politics was ‘a matter of rhetoric and manoeuvre’ by statesmen (Cowling 1971: 3–4). He explores the tension between ‘situational necessity and the intentions of politicians’ using the letters, diaries and public speeches of this network of elite leaders. His people behave ‘situationally’ but Cowling never deploys such reified notions as institution or class. Rather he asks, ‘What influences played upon, what intentions were maintained, what prevision was possible and what success was achieved by the leading actors on the political stage’ (Cowling 1967: 322).

He analyses the realpolitik of the governing elite. His approach is characterized by ‘relativistic individualism’ (Gosh 1993: 276, n.76) and an emphasis on historical contingency:

Between the closed world in which decisions were taken and the external pressures it reflected, the connections were so devious and diverse that no necessity can be predicated of the one in relation to the other. Between the inner political world and society at large on the one hand and between personal and policy objectives on the other, no general connection can be established except whatever can be discovered in each instance about the proportions in which each reacted on the other (Cowling 1967: 340).

Cowling has a dull penchant for indirect argument and paragraph-long sentences. Williamson (1999: 12–18) is more succinct. He sees the study of high politics:

in the interpretative, not simple descriptive, sense, where the narrative is not of one politician nor even of one party, but rather of the whole system of political leadership. Here individuals are placed within the full multi-party
and multi-policy contexts which properly explain the details of their careers.

Context exists not as political parties, institutions, or public opinion but as the narrative that the elite both tells itself and seeks to persuade others to accept. This approach explores, ‘the remorseless situational and tactical pressures, the chronic uncertainties, and the short horizons which afflict all political leadership’; and it looks for ‘the qualities that really distinguish and explain a politician’s effectiveness…in the longer term consistencies or patterns’. In other words, the study of high politics necessarily involves the study of statesmanship (Williamson 1999: 12–18). The overlap between the ideas of high politics, court politics and the interpretive turn is as substantial as it is obvious (on which see Craig 2010). Of particular importance, the proponents of the high politics approach do not just argue abstractly for the approach, but demonstrate in substantial case studies and biographies that we can explore the beliefs and practices of the governing elite not only though observation and intensive interviews but also through the study of their letters, diaries and speeches.

Conclusions

The court politics approach has implications for each of the themes developed in this volume. The aim of this book is to move beyond the traditional preoccupations in the study of prime ministers. I share this ambition with the editors and the analysis of court politics is my addition to the menu of approaches to understanding and evaluating prime ministerial leadership. I have sought to build on, indeed complement, the suggestions in Chapters 1 and 2, while suggesting a different conception of power to that in Chapter 3. I pose several challenges. In particular, the court politics approach poses the question of why the prime minister is the unit of analysis. Prime ministers are locked into webs of dependence, spinning webs of significance. They seek to make sense of events as they seek to create the dominant narrative about them. Their actions can only be understood as
part of the political leadership network that constitutes high politics or, my preference, the court politics of the several executives?

I have also sketched an interpretive approach, which unpacks the descriptive metaphor of court politics into its constituent beliefs, practices, traditions, and dilemmas. These ideas lead to an exploration of the situated agency of prime ministers; to explorations of the beliefs, actions, and practices of agents against the backcloth of traditions as they confront the dilemmas posed by conflicting beliefs and contending traditions. The approach also leads to the conclusion that there is no generic theory of prime ministerial leadership. Rather it is historically contingent and socially constructed. So, we need to ask how the webs of significance of court politics shape the court’s perceptions of events, the attendant dilemmas, and the opportunities for action. The political and historical context is not given but variously understood, even created.

The chapters on political parties suggest that prime ministerial leadership has become more dominant. The court politics approach suggests a different emphasis. I incline to Cowling’s (1971: 3) view that: ‘Backbenchers and party opinion will appear off stage as malignant or beneficent forces with unknown natures and unpredictable wills’ (Cowling 1971: 3). Cowling would see the party elders, the inner circle of the party, as part of the political leadership network of high politics. The court politics view is the same. It treats the party elite as part of the court and it is the court, not the prime minister alone, which manages the malignant or beneficent forces of backbenchers and the party outside parliament. The party-at-large might fight back and seek to exert control by, for example, democratic reforms to help deselect leaders. Whether such reforms will broaden the relationship between party and court is a moot point. How will the pendulum swing next? In a political world shaped by ‘events, dear boy, events’, even luck, only the foolhardy predict, but I suspect the more revealing metaphor is a pendulum. I doubt that democratization is a trend line. If history has any lessons to teach, then the court will strike back.
The attempt to rank prime ministerial performance, belying the scientific trappings of a survey and quantitative analysis, is consistent with an interpretive court politics approach because, in essence, the method is inter-subjective. It sums up experts’ judgement, allowing much latitude on the criteria for those judgements. In effect, it fuels debate not only about relative standing but also the criteria for judging. Such reputational techniques have been widely criticized and the rankings make some big assumptions: that leaders are ‘in charge, ‘in control’ and, therefore, ‘responsible’ for their records. That said, leaders play this game among one another all the time; it is known as gossip. In a secret and closed world, it is an essential currency of court politics and a way of communicating sensitive information that can be disowned.

The key point about the performance of a prime minister is that it is socially constructed – usually by other members of the elite – and historically contingent. No matter how good or bad a prime minister’s standing when he or she leaves office, the revisionist biographer is just around the historical corner. Even popular songwriters have their ‘two-penneth’ with their clarion call to ‘tramp the dirt down’ on the grave of a despised prime minister (Costello 1989). That said, I find it hard to disagree with Enoch Powell’s (1977: 151) assessment of political life – and he was a politician whose own reputation underwent much revision: ‘All political lives, unless they are cut off in midstream at a happy juncture, end in failure, because that is the nature of politics and of human affairs.’

While they live, reputations remain fragile. All compete for standing in parliament, in the party, and in the country. Gossip is a key, but unreliable, currency for all. The media are fickle. Standing and performance are contingent as is the dominance of the prime minister, or the power of any of his or her colleagues. Command and control is always a possibility. As Walter (2010) correctly observes, ‘rival barons may fail in their attempts to control the king’, but, equally, regicide happens.
Blurring genres by turning to, for example, anthropology to study executive politics expands the toolkit of political scientists. By adding not only observation but also the notion of intensive qualitative fieldwork in place of the questionnaire-based interviews, political scientists can strive to ‘be there’. Similarly, the historian’s interpretive analysis of the letters, diaries and speeches of the political leadership network – high politics – is not a commonplace in the study of executive government. All these methods expand the repertoire and warrant further use.

The analysis of court politics is in its infancy. We know that court politics are not restricted to the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Many ministers have courts, and the ‘bigger the beast’, the greater the probability there will be courtiers dancing attendance. We know that competition between courts is an ever-present constraint on both prime ministers and ministers; but there can be no presumption that the consequences of court politics are ‘good’, for example, restraining a domineering prime minister, or ‘bad’, for example, fostering group think. We need to demonstrate that court politics matter by relating differences in court politics to the intended and unintended consequences of executive action.

‘Court politics’ is all too often shorthand for the machinations of political and bureaucratic elites. We need to establish the extent of court politics – are they the rule rather than the exception? I have also argued we can move beyond description to analyse the beliefs, practices, traditions and dilemmas of the court (Rhodes 2011). There are other ways forward. Walter (2010) suggests that we need to pay attention ‘to the psychology of court politics – its propensity to elevate private above public interest; to emphasize internal loyalties; perhaps to play out the psychological needs of its “king”’. He also observes that ‘court politics are not easily amenable to being tested and replicated and will be criticized on those grounds’. If, however, as the editors of this volume claim, we need to study ‘the interplay between political circumstances, institutional possibilities, individual characteristics and social relations at the apex of executive government’ (Strangio et al., forthcoming, this volume: xx), then court politics is a prime *topos* for such an exploration.
Elucidating court politics through historical accounts of previous eras of court politics and systematic observation, intensive interviewing and other forms of qualitative research – ethnography if you will – promises an exciting future for executive studies.
References


Notes

The author acknowledges funding support provided by the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG). I would like to thank the editors, Mark Bevir, Jenny Fleming, Gerry Stoker, Anne Tiernan and Pat Weller for their helpful comments on earlier drafts.