Towards an Interpretive Parliamentary Studies

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Introduction

The Palace of Westminster remains a central and visible pillar of representative politics in the United Kingdom. The green benches of the House of Commons have served as a backdrop for historic debates and decisions, past and present. That is not to say the legislature is revered. According to the most recent Audit of Political Engagement by the Hansard Society (2017), only 30% of the public are satisfied with how Parliament works. This statistic goes to the heart of a wider crisis of legitimacy that many political institutions are facing across developed countries. Such dissatisfaction is relevant to debates about the efficiency and effectiveness of representative institutions, and pivotal to almost every study in UK parliamentary studies (e.g. Russell and Cowley 2016). It is familiar to legislative scholars elsewhere, too, especially given the contributions by comparative scholars (e.g. Strøm et al. 2003). While this focus contributes to our understanding of Parliament, debates within parliamentary studies have also arguably not advanced significantly beyond this paradigm. Indeed, legislative studies has been curiously immune to theoretical or empirical innovations found elsewhere in political science (Hay 2002; Peters 2011). There are only a few exceptions (Cole and McAllister 2015; Judge 2003; Patterson 1989; and below, pp. XX-XX).

British legislative studies have remained wedded to institutionalist lenses, especially traditional formal-legal analysis and the new institutionalism. We call for a more theoretically explicit, interpretive turn in studying parliaments. Our argument unfolds in four parts. First, we discuss the key debates, issues and methods of traditional-formal

institutionalism. Second, we turn to new institutionalist approaches and the long legacy of the institutionalist lens on British legislative studies. Third, we outline briefly an interpretive approach. We show we are not alone and illustrate the approach 'in action'. Fourth and finally, we assess the challenges and opportunities of using an interpretive framework to understand the UK Parliament and beyond.

Traditional institutionalism in British parliamentary studies

Parliamentary studies in the UK has remained persistently within the paradigm of old institutionalism; that is, an explicit focus on describing the internal dynamics of the institution without any theory. As Peters (2011, p. 60) has pointed out:

> The study of Parliament has produced primarily … descriptive studies of institutional dynamics … These studies describe one or more aspects of parliaments extremely well, and fit them into broader patterns of governance in the United Kingdom, but they do not move the theoretical literature forward, nor locate the British parliament in a comparative context.

The roots for this focus lie in the legitimising myth of the Westminster constitutional model (WM). Among other things, the WM is commonly associated with: an appeal to the sovereignty and primacy of Parliament; the centrality of individual ministerial responsibility to the House of Commons; and, the selection of the executive through a competitive, adversarial electoral system. This formal-legal approach and its assumptions are frequently used to provide the standard account of the British state. It places Parliament in a broader constitutional context and focuses analysis on institutions, rules, procedures, and formal organisations of government and state. Consequently, debates revolve around the extent to which parliamentary government in the UK still follows the central tenets of the Westminster model. Thus, there is a debate over the extent to which parliamentary sovereignty in the UK remains intact after devolution, membership of the European Union, and incorporation of the Human Rights Act 1998. Others focus on the extent of ministerial responsibility to Parliament, given significant restructuring of the British state since 1979 (Flinders, 2002, 2004). These debates continue, in part, because there is no single agreed definition of the model (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, pp. 24-31; Rhodes et al. 2009, pp. 1-9). The lack of agreement indicates that the Westminster model is under challenge both as an idealised version of the British constitution and as an

empirical-descriptive model. Yet it remains a resilient reference point in British political science, in general, and parliamentary studies, in particular.

Both the narratives of the Westminster model and the focus of analysis on institutions, rules and formal organisations of government indicate a traditional approach to the study of Parliament with shared methodological assumptions. Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes (2003, p. 27) summarise these assumptions as: 'the tools of the lawyer and the historian to explain the constraints on both political behaviour and democratic effectiveness'. As a result, much research focuses on the interpretation of documents, texts and parliamentary procedure to locate the formal and informal decision-making powers of the two Houses of Parliament (for example, Blackburn and Kennon 2003; Norton 2013; Rush 2005). These ways of approaching legislative studies are the legacy of formal-legal analysis and have dominated parliamentary studies for a long time.

The traditional institutionalist approach has a distinctive set of debates and a restricted research agenda. An assumption shared by most members of the public, reinforced by the media, and unchallenged by many academics is that the legislature is either misunderstood or unimportant to British politics. Matthew Flinders and Alexandra Kelso (2011) list several examples where commentators have lamented the decline of Parliament. They include Bruce Lenman's *The Eclipse of Parliament* (1992) and Ian Ward's description of Parliament as 'puerile, pathetic and utterly useless' (2004, p. 42). Such judgements are not new. Richardson and Jordan (1979) argued the UK's political system has become 'post-parliamentary'. The judgement persists. King and Crewe (2013, pp. 361-2) argue that Parliament is 'peripheral', 'totally irrelevant' and 'passive'. Yet, as Flinders and Kelso argue, these caricatures are misleading and based on a misunderstanding of Parliament's role. This question about the importance of Parliament has underpinned many debates within parliamentary studies, especially about the causes, consequences and nature of parliamentary reform, and the influence of Parliament on policy-making.

A significant focus of research has been on parliamentary reform, rooted in a reformist literature that emerged in British legislative studies in the mid-1960s. It sought to challenge an unnecessarily compliant legislature towards the executive. This work includes Walkland (1960), Ryle (1965) and Wiseman (1966). Arguably the most influential book at the time, however, was Bernard Crick's *The Reform of Parliament* (1964). He set

the tone for parliamentary debates about reforming the House of Commons, especially with his call for a structured committee system that would enable specialisation and scrutiny in Parliament. It was in this spirit that the academic-practitioner network called the Study of Parliament Group came into being in 1964. The SPG had two aims from the beginning: 'to strengthen the study of Parliament for the purposes of research and teaching and to provide a forum for advocating parliamentary reform' (Ryle 2005, p. 4). The Group has been active since then and continues to meet to this day. It continues to make recommendations to committees in the House of Commons as well as sponsoring research and publications (for example, Ryle and Richards 1988; Walkland and Ryle 1977). It comprises both parliamentary officials as well as scholars, something that has ensured collaboration between academia and practitioners in this field.

This reformist literature remained a significant focus for UK parliamentary studies. Many scholars employ institutionalist lenses and formal-legal approaches to concentrate on the effect of reforms on Parliament, especially on its ability to hold government to account. This work includes Flinders (2002, 2004, 2007) and Kelso (2003, 2009), as well as parliamentarians (Power 2007; Wright 2004). These authors are supported by many other reports, investigations and commissions into parliamentary reform by, among others, the Conservative Party (Commission to Strengthen Parliament 2000) and the Hansard Society (2001). What all these studies share is a focus on the relationships between the executive and the House of Commons. All aim to evaluate the nature of those reforms on the efficiency (that is, streamlining parliamentary processes) and effectiveness (that is, scrutiny and policy-making capacity) of Parliament (for example, Judge 1983). In sum, they focus on the institution as a whole and on its relationships with other organs of government.

Besides the reformist literature on the House of Commons, a second and closely related strand focuses on the effect of reforms on the broader role of the legislature in policy-making. There has been a growing consensus among UK legislative scholars that Parliament is not, as Polsby identified in 1975, an 'arena' legislature or talking shop at the mercy of an all-powerful executive. On Parliament's law-making capacity and influence, Thompson's (2015a, 2015b) meticulously studies the role of bill committees and shows that the legislature plays a more important role in the legislation than is usually assumed. Elsewhere, Cowley (2002, 2005; see also Cowley and Stuart 1997, 2014) show both the importance of intra-party relationships in shaping parliamentary behaviour, and the

increasingly independent-minded behaviour of MPs. This behaviour affects the control of government over its legislative and policy programme. Others have shown that select committees can play an influential role in changing government policy (Benton and Russell 2013; Hindmoor et al. 2009). Finally, the House of Lords continues to be an understudied yet important revising chamber (Russell 2013). Once again, what underpins these studies is a shared interest in the efficacy of parliamentary processes, and the relationship between the executive and the legislature, the place of committees, and the role of political parties.

What does all of this tell us? It tells us that parliamentary studies in the UK have remained descriptive and focused on institutional relationships and constitutional frameworks. The chief focus of discussion, debate and scholarly interest has been on the effectiveness of the legislature in holding the executive to account. More recently, attention has switched to how the public relate to Parliament given the decline of trust in political institutions for the last forty years (Flinders and Kelso 2011; Kalitowski 2009; Leston-Bandeira 2016).

So, there is a large reformist streak in the study of Parliament. Further, most studies have a shared and limited theoretical and methodological approach to the study of Parliament. The research agenda and methods toolkit are restricted. The overarching narrative is the Westminster model seen through a traditional institutionalist lens. As British political science shifted its focus from formal political institutions to new approaches, methods and topics from the 1960s onwards, legislative studies increasingly spoke only to its specialist community. Arguably, the subfield declined in importance. However, this trend was stemmed in recent years. In the next section, we discuss the changing nature of parliamentary studies.

New institutionalism in parliamentary studies

There has been little room for unconventional methods, theoretical innovation or adaption of sociological approaches because the scholarship remained focused on explaining how the UK Parliament operates, often within the broader context of the UK's uncodified constitution. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify some theoretical innovations in more recent times that have begun to enhance the focus and diversity of analysis in UK parliamentary studies. This shift follows broader changes in political

science to new institutionalism. Historical institutionalism (HI) has arguably made the most important inroad into the sub-discipline.

This shift is unsurprising given the roots of the subfield in traditional institutionalism. Most scholars emphasise the historical, incremental changes to the UK constitution (e.g. Bogdanor 2003). HI is underpinned by a belief that political actors are rule-following satisfiers, interpreting dominant value systems and fitting their actions to institutional rules of the game. So, actors' preferences are socially and politically structured by their surroundings; that is, the institutional setting in which they work. This assumption implies that institutions and political agents act in the future as they have done in the past ('path dependency'). This dependency creates a sense of stability (especially through 'sunk costs' that constrain future behaviour through past actions), which can only be broken through 'critical junctures' or 'windows of opportunity'.

For British legislative studies, this approach has affected the debate about the nature of parliamentary reform. Some have argued that reform depends on the inclination of Members of Parliament and the satisfaction of three conditions – disequilibrium, a coherent reform agenda, and leadership (Norton 1983, 2013). However, this 'attitudinal' perspective is challenged by the 'contextual' perspective proposed by historical institutionalists. They suggest that 'the structured institutional context of parliament has a highly significant degree of influence' and that path dependency substantially constrains 'the range of reform options that might be realistically contemplated' (Kelso 2009, p. 25). Proponents of this view (Flinders 2002) argue that reform originates, and is sustained by, the executive. Importantly, the historical institutionalist approach has kept the focus on institutional relationships. It may have introduced a more sophisticated analytical terminology to understand legislative behaviour, especially parliamentary reform (and see Kelso (2009) for the most rigorous application so far). But the focus is still institutions. In so privileging history, two consequences follow. First, it limits the potential for agency and for parliamentarians' interpretations of the context in which they find themselves. It attributes a strong causal role to historical context. Second, the framework predisposes research to focus on long-term changing relationships between institutions and less about the ideas, beliefs, practices or dilemmas that individuals within the institution face.

Alternative variants of new institutionalisms include feminist institutionalism (Krook and Mackay 2010) and sociological institutionalism (Powell and DiMaggio 1991). On the

former, we have seen important contributions from scholars such as Sarah Childs (2008, 2014, 2016). She looks at the extent to which a gendered lens can help explain institutional behaviour in Parliament (see also: Campbell and Childs, 2014; Kenny, 2013). On the latter, there have only been few attempts to draw insights from sociology. One prominent example is Donald Searing's (1994) exploration of politicians at the Palace of Westminster. He brought together elements of rational choice theory (what he called *homo economicus*) with motivational role theory and situational analysis (or *homo sociologicus*). He argues that rule-following is a powerful force in an institutional setting, but politicians can and do still act purposefully in their own right. He does not reject self-interest as a motivation for action. Rather, he argues that it is only one of many reasons for political agents to pursue a course of action. His approach relied on 521 interview with MPs during 1970-71 with the aim of exploring how MPs understand their role. This piece of research has become a significant reference point for scholars trying to understand legislative roles (Blomgren and Rozenberg, 2012), yet few have taken this approach further.

The trend from traditional to new institutionalism has been far from universal. For example, Michael Rush and Philip Giddings (2011) look at how MPs are socialised into the House of Commons, and identify various forms of socialisation. Their approach clearly echoes sociological institutionalism. Yet, Rush and Giddings do not identify with new institutionalism and are sceptical of what they perceive as a too rigid typology in Searing's work. Instead, they adopt a largely atheoretical approach to the socialisation of MPs. Their work is, arguably, still typical of parliamentary studies in the UK, despite recent attempts to break away from the institutionalist lens.

What does this reveal about parliamentary studies in the UK? It shows that the legacies of formal-legal analysis and the new institutionalism perpetuate an institutional lens. We acknowledge that the vast majority of these studies have added new insights to our understanding of Parliament. But the dominance of both traditional and new institutionalisms have limited the analytical possibilities for parliamentary studies. The former is descriptive, reformist and pursues a narrow research agenda. The latter overplays the determinism of path dependency, downplays the role of actors, and marginalises beliefs and practices. We suggest an explicit interpretive approach will open new possibilities in studying the UK Parliament (and other institutions beyond legislatures). We want to focus directly on the ideas, beliefs, practices and traditions that play out in parliamentary settings.

An interpretive agenda for parliamentary studies

The roots of our approach lie in the literature on governance and the state (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 2006, 2010; Hajer 2009); anthropological approaches to parliaments (Crewe and Müller 2006); and the analyses of ceremonies and rituals (Rai 2015; Rai and Johnson 2014). All of these inform our attempt to build an interpretive approach to parliamentary studies. We begin by setting out the theoretical principles of such an approach before applying those principles to a parliamentary research focus.

Theoretical principles and concepts

Our approach is rooted in an anti-foundationalist philosophy, which 'asserts that none of our knowledge is certain' (Bevir and Rhodes 2010, p. 42). Anti-foundationalism suggests there is, as the name implies, no foundation or essence to reality. In contrast to positivists, who assert that objective meanings are 'out there' in the world waiting for us to find them, anti-foundationalists take as their starting point the principle that social (and political) realities are constructed through our experiences of and engagement with what we perceive of the world. This philosophical assumption has clear implications for our understanding of objectivity, facts and truth. Facts are not 'given' to us, but 'intersubjectively constructed' (see Bevir 1999, pp. 78-126, and, Bevir and Rhodes 2006, pp. 26-30). This approach is important because it stresses the significance of individuals' interpretations to make sense of their everyday lives.

The philosophical principles that underpin the interpretive approach have significant repercussions for political science. They can lead in several different directions, such as discourse analysis, post-structuralist approaches, hermeneutic analysis, or frame analysis (Wagenaar, 2011). They are unified by the idea that we must take seriously the way in which political actors interpret the world around them. It attributes a causal role to ideas and beliefs in political analysis. In this way, ideas (or beliefs) become the basic block of analysis. To carry out such an analysis, Bevir and Rhodes (2010, p. 73) argue that we need to 'decentre' the interpretations and concepts used by political actors. Decentring means privileging an analytical focus on 'the social construction of a practice through the ability of individuals to create and act on meanings'. As scholars, we must 'unpack a practice as

the disparate and contingent beliefs and actions of individuals'. In doing so, we challenge the idea that 'inexorable or impersonal forces, norms, or laws define patterns and regularities in politics'. Though many approaches can be adopted, we take Bevir and Rhodes (2003, pp. 17-44; 2010, pp. 63-80) as a starting point. The concepts that guide our interpretive approach are summarised in Table 3.1.

[Table 3.1. about here]

Following our anti-foundationalist principles, we reject the notion that individuals can form and act on beliefs in a vacuum. We reject the idea of an autonomous subject or self. However, this position does not mean that individuals lack the capacity for agency. People have the capacity to adopt beliefs and actions, even novel ones, for reasons of their own, and in doing so they can transform their social background. So, agency is possible, but it is always situated in a particular context (so we use the phrase *situated agency*). By context, we refer to *traditions*. Traditions are the settings in which agents find themselves; the 'situation' in 'situated agency'. They are webs of belief that act as organising perspectives for individuals, groups and other political actors. There are echoes of such notions as episteme, social structure or paradigms. However, we do not argue that traditions fix behaviour. Rather, traditions offer starting points to political actors, who are under no obligation to follow a tradition. That said, traditions can be sticky in that they suggest what is acceptable, legitimate or even imaginable in a particular web of beliefs.

Traditions are not static but change in response to *dilemmas* (Bevir 1999, pp. 221-64). Dilemmas come about when a belief puts into question an existing belief or webs of belief. Dilemmas only happen once a situated agent has interpreted something as a dilemma or problem. Dilemmas can come from anywhere: reading a book, personal moral reflection, contrasting experiences of the world, empirical evidence, unintended consequences, shock events, a tactless act, natural or artificial disasters, and many more (Bevir and Rhodes 2006, pp. 9-11). Conflicts between beliefs play out in different ways. New beliefs could: be discarded as unconvincing; be accommodated in the existing web of beliefs; or replace an older belief. Such changes could lead to ripple effects because it could now conflict with other beliefs in a tradition. In this way, incrementally, slowly and painfully, traditions and practices change over time. Alternatively, introducing a single new belief could have such substantive effects that the coherence of whole traditions are ripped apart. Dilemmas

matter because they help us to understand the contingent nature of British politics and the central mechanism to explain political change.

We argue that beliefs and traditions play out through *everyday practices*, where competing ideas meet, enmesh and clash. We believe that practices can be conceived of as actions that exhibit a pattern, which may remain stable across time. Practices are the way we can understand the underlying beliefs of political actors precisely because beliefs manifest themselves in everyday life. They do so through routine (perhaps even mundane) actions: for example, from the way that we organise our personal and working spaces to the way we communicate with others both verbally and non-verbally. Thus, everyday practices are a crucial nodal point through which we can analyse parliamentary behaviour. They are intimately linked to the beliefs and traditions surrounding actors both in parliamentary settings and beyond (for a discussion, see Geddes 2016, pp. 48-56).

Analytical possibilities

Our preferred theory offers only one of many conceptually rich ways by which we can analyse parliamentary behaviour in legislatures. Our approach focuses on the beliefs, practices, traditions and dilemmas of parliamentary actors. Each concept offers a new hook to studying parliaments. To explore *situated agency* and *traditions*, we would focus analysis on the context in which parliamentary actors are placed in interpreting and enacting their roles. We already know that MPs, clerks, researchers, journalists and visitors to the Palace of Westminster are situated into what may be termed the Westminster 'bubble' or 'village'. We also know that most official accounts of Parliament formally assert the importance of the Westminster model as a tradition that guides institutional relationships in Parliament. However, it is possible to offer much more nuance and depth about particular situations and competing traditions. Thus a focus on competing traditions, will illuminate many unknown aspects of parliamentary life. To do so, we must focus directly on the ways in which the Westminster model is interpreted in Parliament by parliamentarians rather than looking to legal texts or institutional relationships alone.

Turning from traditions to individual *beliefs*, we cannot assume that parliamentary actors act out of rational self-interest. Rather, they pursue a wide range of practices depending on interpretations of their role. We do not deny self-interest or utility maximisation. We

do insist that politicians may also act because of a belief in party policies, propriety standards or other reasons not grounded in self-interest. As a result, it becomes crucial to study their interpretations of – among other things – scrutiny, constituency representation and legislative roles. Only then can we make better sense of MPs' beliefs , whichwill have consequences for the *everyday practices* of parliamentary actors. Here, we can focus on how actors act on their beliefs to create meaning-in-action. Among other things, we can examine: social manners and appearances; attempts to follow social cues (or attempts to subvert them); the organisation of space; the role of ceremonials and rituals in an institution steeped in symbols; ways of performing on the floor of the House and in committees; and the content of particular speech acts, questioning styles, and rhetorical flourishes. Finally, we can look at how beliefs, practices and traditions change over time by exploring specific *dilemmas* that legislative actors face.

In sum, the aim is to decentre parliaments and legislatures by looking at topics such as: committee behaviour and the effectiveness of scrutiny; the role of different actors in shaping parliamentary actions; the way in which elected representatives seek to enact their representative or constituency functions; the role of the public and interest groups in participating in parliamentary processes, and so on. In each case, we focus on the meaning of an action for the actors. This focus would help to add further texture and nuance to current debates in legislative studies; it offers complex specificity in context. None of the examples cited above are intended as a prescriptive future for parliamentary studies. Rather, they illustrate some of the ways that our conceptual framework can act both as hooks for analysis and open new avenues of exploration.

We are not alone

A decentred approach offers new directions for research. In this section, we show we are not alone in our ambition to reorient parliamentary studies. Briefly, we review the growing diversity of studies and research methods studies consistent with our preferred approach. Then, we provide a more detailed case study of an interpretive approach in action.

Growing diversity

Over the past 10 years, studies of the UK Parliament have become more diverse, usually from scholars outside political science. One important reference point is the research conducted by Emma Crewe (2005, 2015). She is not a political scientist but an anthropologist with a long background of research in international development. Crewe's research looks at the rituals, manners, rhythms and everyday behaviour of peers and MPs. She shows that politicians do not act according to self-interest or historical context, though both may be important. She asserts that politicians' behaviours are crucially affected by the political cultures that emerge in Westminster to create distinct tribes. Her approach has been refreshingly different from previous studies of the UK Parliament, and has developed alongside other studies that have taken rituals, ceremonies and symbols as foci for analysis (see also: Rai and Johnson 2014; Rai and Reinelt 2015). Elsewhere, we have seen scholars drawing on psychology to study MPs' behaviour (Weinberg 2012), which has allowed us to better understand politicians' mental health, candidate selection processes, and politicians' cognitive skills. This growing diversity has begun to make itself felt in parliamentary studies. For example, Rai (2015) develops a 'political performance framework' to analyse parliaments; and Leston-Bandeira (2016) uses constructivism to study public engagement in legislative settings. These approaches draw on an interpretive approach to political science and illustrate what we want to call an 'interpretive parliamentary studies'.

Interpreting select committee scrutiny in the House of Commons

We illustrate our claims for an interpretive approach with a brief case study of the everyday practices of parliamentarians (see also Rhodes 2011 on ministers and public servants). As with other research on the UK Parliament, our understanding of select committees has often focused on the effectiveness of their outputs; i.e. reports and recommendations on affecting government policy (e.g. Benton and Russell 2013; Hindmoor et al. 2009). These committees are crucial to understanding accountability and control of the UK legislature over the government. However, we know little about the ways that committee chairs, members and staff interpret and enact their everyday roles. Applying our interpretive lens to this topic opens new avenues for research and allows us a more nuanced understanding of accountability in parliamentary settings. We use the concepts described in the previous section.

In looking at the way in which MPs and staff interpret parliamentary scrutiny, the first and most important conclusion is that there is no single agreed definition of the term, nor an agreement on what 'good' or 'effective' scrutiny means in practice. Each MP adopts a unique perspective on their select committee role, which is shaped by broader webs of belief or traditions that those MPs have nurtured in Parliament. This approach has important, wider implications for accountability in Parliament because those interpretations affect MPs' priorities and consequent behaviour.

Turning from MPs' beliefs to practices, we can identify a diverse range of performance styles for committee MPs. Some MPs remain committed specialists and advocates for particular policy areas to structure their parliamentary work in the face of an unpredictable everyday life. Others develop hobby horses that they attempt to push onto their committee and pursue at all costs, even at the detriment of other scrutiny commitments. Further, some MPs are firmly rooted in a localist tradition and see their role as a constituency champion. As a result, they do not value committee work unless it can further their constituency's interests. Others take a party route and see committee work as a way to push their party's agenda, although the non-partisan nature of select committee scrutiny has made this difficult. There are also those MPs for whom committee work is a chance to build expertise and learn about a policy area. For them, scrutiny is not necessarily about interrogating witnesses in the name of accountability or transparency but to learn about policy. One clerk memorably contrasted the ideal of committee scrutiny as 'court room' with the reality of many sessions, which are closer to 'school room' atmospheres. Finally, there are those MPs for whom committee scrutiny is only a 'marginal pastime', so they do not spend much time on it. It becomes clear that MPs behave in diverse ways on committees, far more so than traditional interpretations (e.g. Wahlke et al. 1962) would suggest.

What we learn goes far beyond traditional studies of committees, providing much more depth and nuance about committees. We can question how theories of accountability work in practice. We find thatdiverse performances of scrutiny are as crucial for explaining the focus of reports and the questioning styles of committee hearings. It also draws attention to those parliamentary actors who are placed in more strategically important positions, such as committee chairs. They will have to unite the committee's strategy, agenda and focus for scrutiny by reconciling the diversity of approaches, interests and perspectives that committee members adopt in interpreting scrutiny. Finally, studying everyday

practices sheds light on our understanding of the evidence-gathering process and the way in which witnesses are questioned, whether academics or secretaries of state. These insights would not be `possible through an institutionalist lens alone.

Such perspectives on committees, their members and their work practices do not exist in UK parliamentary studies because the predominant theoretical approaches have inhibited scholars from focusing on the interpretations and practices of parliamentary actors. By taking the beliefs and practices of individual MPs as the basic units of analysis – by decentring – we can add much greater nuance and depth to accounts of parliamentary scrutiny. We inscribe, complex specificity in context (and for more detail see Geddes (2016)).

Challenges and opportunities in interpreting the UK Parliament

The core of our approach involves telling stories about other people's stories, to recover them, and to explain them (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, p. 5). Many methods can be employed to do this. An interpretive approach does not favour any particular methods. It does not prescribe a particular toolkit for producing data but prescribes a particular way of treating data of any type. It should treat data as evidence of the meanings or beliefs embedded in actions. So, it is a mistake to equate an interpretive approach with only certain techniques of data generation such as reading texts and participant observation. It is wrong to exclude survey research and quantitative studies from the reach of interpretive analysis. In the space available, we cannot do more than the list the many options. However, because of its emphasis on recovering meaning, an interpretive approach does have implications for how we collect data. It leads to a much greater emphasis on qualitative methods than is common among naturalist political scientists. In particular, an interpretive approach lends itself to deep immersion and the research toolkit known as ethnography.

The presumption that ethnography is limited to deep immersion in the field for a long time is unhelpful. Shore's (2000, pp. 7-11) cultural analysis of how EU elites sought to build Europe defines ethnography to include participant observation, historical archives, textual analysis of official documents, biographies, oral histories, recorded interviews, and informal conversations as well as statistical and survey techniques. So, even if there are problem in gaining access for observation, there are many alternative ways of 'being there',

the defining characteristic of ethnographic approaches (see Table 3.2). In our own research, we draw on three sources of information:

> the pattern of practice, talk, and considered writing – the first is the most reliable, the second is the most copious and revealing and the third is the most difficult to interpret (Oakeshott 1996, p. x).

We discuss each in turn.

[Table 3.2. about here]

First, and most obvious, there are several opportunities to study documents from the House of Commons and House of Lords. Parliament produces hundreds of pages of documents every single day, both internal and external, and they play a role throughout the everyday lives of all political actors involved. Documents keep Parliament running through routine tasks of recording, filing, archiving and retrieving information. The UK Parliament website is a treasure trove. It includes not only agendas, minutes and order papers, but also committee reports, *Hansard* (that is, records of speeches given in Parliament), briefing papers, research notes and many more beyond. So, many opportunities exist here for scholars to conduct an interpretive analysis, perhaps similarly to ones conducted in this volume on the Bundestag (see chapters XX and YY).

Second, we believe that semi-structured interviews, preferably repeat interviews, are crucial tools. Interviews allow us to speak with parliamentary actors in a way which gives them a direct opportunity to narrate their experiences, tell us about their beliefs, and explain how they negotiated dilemmas in Parliament. We accept that interviews do not give us pure access to respondents' accounts and lives, but this does not mean that interviews are futile. Our interpretive agenda is not only about what happens to someone, but how they reacted and felt about events, ideas and dilemmas. Of course, interviews are also invaluable to help us identify which documents deserve analysis, which affected actors. This corroboration between different data sources helps us to ensure accuracy of claims made by either. Given that much of what happens in Parliament is offstage, in the margins of other events or following conversations in corridors, interviews can be important. Parliamentary staff can offer real insights – though they depend on anonymity and must be able to trust that interviewers will treat them with respect and discretion. We appreciate MPs and peers are harder to access, but it is surprising how many will be willing

to talk. And once the access and trust has been gained, the possibilities are immense (this volume, chapters XX and YY).

There are further, and more innovative (for legislative scholars in the UK, at least), ways to study Parliament. This brings us to our third method: observation. We do not want to repeat debates about the method that have been conducted elsewhere (see Rhodes et al. 2007; Rhodes 2015; and, above). However, there are clear benefits: it enables researchers to observe behaviour directly; to see everyday practices as they happen; to open what is ordinarily hidden in official documents and accounts; and provide a deep immersion that no other method can. There are, of course, drawbacks: it is resource-intensive, unpredictable and precludes statistical if not theory-based generalisations. It is perhaps for those reasons that observation has not been employed widely to study the UK Parliament.

With all methods – including several not mentioned here (see Rhodes 2015 and Table 3.2 above) – the key problem is almost always about gaining access. This problem can be difficult to overcome, in club-like political institutions such as Parliament. However, there are signs that the legislature is taking some steps to become more open and inviting to academics. For example, there are increasing opportunities to observe Parliament at work through the televised recordings of committee meetings and plenary sessions, as well as the opportunities provided by internships and fellowships in Parliament.

Conclusion

Academic research on parliaments and legislatures has often overlooked actors' individual beliefs, everyday practices and wider traditions because they are often perceived to be inconsequential to the institutional dynamics at play. This legacy comes from the old institutionalist approaches we described earlier. Surprisingly , it remains the main organising perspective for parliamentary studies in the UK. Many such studies have made important contributions to our understanding of the UK Parliament. However, there is a collective weakness. The subfield does not offer the diversity of theory, methods and debate found in other areas of the social sciences. As we noted earlier, traditional institutionalism has been challenged by the new institutionalist lens. But a more dramatic challenge, and one less congruent with the focus on institutions, has emerged in

interpretivist guise and deploying different methods drawn from, for example, anthropology.

In this chapter, we have sought to highlight the advantages of a broader theoretical pallet. We have outlined one specific approach but there are others. Our interpretive approach has proven its worth in studies of governance in the UK and of political and bureaucratic elites. Our approach also offers a broader methods toolkit. We focused on textual analysis, interviews and observation. However, as Table 3.2 and the other contributions to this volume attest, there are many other possibilities. Obviously we hope the interpretive approach will continue to thrive and bring vibrancy, purpose and confidence to parliamentary studies. It would allow parliamentary studies to join the theoretical and methodological debates at the heart of the political science discipline. However, there is no need for grand claims. There is a simple claim to be made for our preferred approach and methods: 'no understanding of a world is valid without representation of those members' voices' (Agar 1996, p. 27), and that claim is as true of Parliament as it is of a factory or a village.

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Table 3.1. The interpretive approach: concepts

Concept	Definition
To decentre	To decentre is to unpack practices as the contingent beliefs and actions of individuals, challenging the idea that inexorable or impersonal forces drive politics.
Narratives	Narratives are a form of explanation that works by relating actions to individual beliefs and desires that produce them. This allows us to capture how events happened in the past or are happening today.
Situated agency	Individuals are situated in wider webs of beliefs (traditions), which largely shape their beliefs. Yet they keep a capacity for agency in that they respond to traditions, beliefs and dilemmas in novel ways.
Beliefs	Beliefs are the basic unit of analysis, in that they are the interpretations of individuals of their world and their surroundings.
Traditions	Traditions are 'webs of belief', and form the background of ideas in which agents find themselves. Agents will adopt beliefs from traditions as a starting point, but may amend them.
Dilemmas	A dilemma is an idea that stands in contradiction to other beliefs, posing a problem. Dilemmas are resolved by accommodating the new belief in the present web of beliefs or replacing old beliefs with new beliefs.
Practices	A set of actions that often exhibits a stable pattern across time. Practices are the ways in which beliefs and traditions manifest themselves in everyday life.

Table 3.2. The ethnographic toolkit

Ethnographic Tool	Definition	Potential data sources	Examples
Hit-and-run fieldwork	Repeated, short bursts of intensive observation as researchers yo-yo in-and-out of the field (see Wulff 2002)	Legislatures, constituency offices, campaign events	Rhodes (2011) *Everyday Life in British Government*
Ethnographic interviewing	Repeated, semi-structured and unstructured interviews with the same participant (see Wagenaar 2011)	Recently retired politicians and public officials	Reeher (2006) *First Person Political*
Memoirs	First-person reflections on governing	Auto-biographies and authorised biographies; radio and television interviews	Corbett (2015) *Being Political*
Elite focus groups	Group reflections that encourage elites to flesh out and challenge each other's claims (see Rhodes and Tiernan 2015)	Recently retired politicians and public officials	Rhodes and Tiernan (2014) *Lessons of Governing*
Para-ethnography	An ethnographic interview focused around explaining a particular document or artefact (see Holmes and Markus 2005)	Focused on particular bills, legislative rules, important media content	Never used in political science
Visual ethnography	Using video recordings as a form of remote observation (see Pink 2013)	C-SPAN (and similar footage elsewhere); press conferences	Novel in political science