

## **THINKING ON: A CAREER IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

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### **Abstract**

This article provides a brief intellectual history of my journey from traditional public administration through modernist-empiricism to an interpretive approach and its associated research themes; a story of how I got to where I am. I do so to provide the context for a statement of where I stand now on key themes in my research; a story of where I go from here. I have a vaulting ambition: to establish an interpretive approach and narrative explanations in political science, so redefining public policy analysis.

### **I was so much older then**

It is intimidating to look back over a 40-year career as a political scientist. Has it been that long? Can I remember ‘the gangling youth of the prominent Adam’s apple variety’ – as one of my referees expressed it back then? It is tempting to claim that I had a rationale to cover an unfolding research agenda. It would be a patina. Much was happenstance. Looking back imposes a logic that was not clear at the time. As Bob Dylan’s evocative line from his song ‘My Back Pages’ suggests, I did seem older then but the certainties of a young academic did not last; old beliefs gave way to new ideas. Life myths are rewritten.

This article is not about my term as the editor of *Public Administration* (on which, see Rhodes 2011a). Rather, I write two brief stories about how I got to where I am, and where I go from here. In Part I, I provide an intellectual chronology covering my initial floundering, my eventual transition to a professional political scientist, the ‘government to governance’ years, and the shift from the social to the human sciences. In Part II, I sketch a research

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agenda for the next decade that seeks to develop an interpretive policy analysis. I argue for narratives as a tool of policy analysis and illustrate the argument with stories of implementation. I conclude with some reflections on what is novel about my approach and what political anthropology and storytelling add to the study of public administration.

### ***In the beginning, 1970–76***

The study of public administration in the 1970s was shaking off the old order. Its grand old men were William Robson (1895–1980), Norman Chester (1907–86) and W. J. M. (Bill) Mackenzie (1909–96). All were on the cusp of retirement. For me, they represented traditional public administration, which was essentially institutional and concerned to analyse the history, structure, functions, powers and relationships of government organizations (see: Mackenzie 1975; Rhodes 1979a: chapter 5; Robson 1975). Robson represented that blend of institutional description and Westminster reformism so typical of the British school. ‘His great ability was to assemble a huge mass of data, to analyse order out of the complexity, and to argue a coherent case for change’. He was ‘one of the Olympian Fabians, worthy company to the Webbs’ (Jones 1986: 12). Norman Chester’s best books were the official history of the nationalized industries (1975) and a history of the English administrative system between 1780 and 1870 (1981). Bill Mackenzie (1975) was admired for his lucid, nuanced essays on both British government and the study of public administration. All were prominent in my undergraduate education. Robson’s *Nationalised Industries and Public Ownership* (1962) was a birthday present – yes, I was delighted, and still have it.

Like many a young scholar, my horizons were confined by my academic training and employment opportunities. I had an undergraduate degree in business and administration from Bradford Business School and a yet to be completed research degree from Oxford. I applied for jobs at Trinity College, Dublin, under Basil Chubb, and Aberdeen, under Frank

Bealey, but both in their wisdom decided they could survive without my talents. John Stewart and Richard Chapman at the Institute of Local Government Studies (INLOGOV), University of Birmingham, were more discerning! So, I had ten years of teaching and research on British local government. To put no finer point on it, I floundered. I never intended to 'I never intended to be a consultant for local government or train local government officers. I don't think I knew what I wanted to do. I had no individual voice, just boundless, ill-directed enthusiasm. So I wrote on the reform of English local government, Anthony Trollope and the nineteenth-century civil service, developments in the study of public administration, and the impact of membership of the (then) European Economic Community (EEC) on local government. From the vantage point of 2010, I can think of no reason to be interested in competition for public works contracts, but I read and wrote about these EEC regulations. Of course, INLOGOV expected applied work relevant to its local government audience, and micro-specialization was ever the lot of the novitiate academic, more so today than then. Still, I had to prove myself. Some of my scribbling might have had passing value, but are best classed as juvenilia. I made no lasting contribution until I was commissioned by the Committee of Inquiry into Local Government Finance (Layfield) to review the academic literature on the relationship between central departments and local authorities (Rhodes 1976). This work led me to submit evidence to the (then) Social Science Research Council (SSRC) Panel on Research into Local Government (Rhodes 1977) and my appointment to the SSRC Panel on Central-Local Government Relationships. For the first time, I had an intellectual agenda.

### ***A professional political scientist at last, 1976–88***

During the 1970s, change was also afoot in the wider world. The young lions were at public administration's door. I experienced the change first-hand at the Public Administration

Committee's (PAC) Conference on the 13–15 September 1971, at the University of York. It was my first academic conference and I was excited because it had such luminaries as Ron Brown (1971) extolling the virtues of organization theory, John Stewart (1971) on public policy making, Lewis Gunn (1971) on public management, and Peter Self (1971), who exorcised the evil spirits of economic efficiency. The conference explored new ways of studying public administration. I was a spectator of the new generation; the successors to Robson, Chester, and Mackenzie. I also saw the future in the guise of the theory and methods of American social science. In John Stewart, I had a mentor whose commitment to ideas, to INLOGOV, and to local government was as admirable as it was infectious, even if I did not share his enthusiasm for corporate management (Rhodes 1992b).

As a postgraduate, I read American social science avidly. I was an admirer on the theoretically informed case studies of, for example, Michel Crozier (1964) and Philip Selznick (1966). I saw this work as *the* intellectual challenge to traditional public administration. Policy studies and organization theory were the way forward (see also Hood 1990). The temper of the times encouraged me to apply the theory and methods of American social science in case studies of British local government in its dealing with central government. Of the distinguished speakers at the PAC conference, all are now retired and several are dead. The generations pass. For a time, however, I was heir to their ideas and enthusiasms; a modernist-empiricist in all but name. In other words, I treated institutions such as central departments, local governments and policy networks as discrete, atomized objects to be compared, measured and classified. I sought to explain these institutions by appealing to ahistorical mechanisms such as functional differentiation (see Bevir 2001; Bevir and Rhodes 2010).

The work I did for the SSRC gives the game away; the subtitle of one report was 'the search for positive theory' (Rhodes 1978a). The theory was 'interorganizational analysis' and my

main influences were Kenneth Benson (1975), Michel Crozier and Jean-Claude Thoenig (1976) and James Thompson (1967). To this day, exchange theory lies at the heart of policy network theory. Thus, ‘an organization has power, relative to an element of its task environment, to the extent that the organization has the capacity to satisfy needs of that element and to the extent that the organization monopolises that capacity’ (Thompson 1967: 30–1). I elaborated this idea arguing that any organization is dependent on other organizations for resources. To achieve their goals, the organizations have to exchange resources. The organization’s dominant coalition employs strategies within known rules of the game to regulate this exchange relationship (paraphrased from Rhodes 1979b; 1981: 98–9).

So, I argued, local authorities were embedded in sets of relationships and we should analyse the patterns of interdependence, not just the links with central departments. Following the lead of Hecló and Wildavsky, I suggested that these networks were structured by policy area or function (Rhodes 1978b and Rhodes 1981: chapter 5). So, the interorganizational links between central departments and local authorities took the form of ‘policy communities’ of: ‘personal relationships between major political and administrative actors – sometimes in conflict, often in agreement, but always in touch and operating within a shared framework. Community is the cohesive and orienting bond underlying any particular issue (Hecló and Wildavsky 1974: xv).’ I did not know it at the time but here were the roots of my subsequent work on policy networks (and for a review, see Rhodes 2006).

As I began to explore policy networks, Margaret Thatcher was intent on transforming the public sector about which I was writing. The age of managerialism in its twin guises of performance measurement and marketization was upon us. Mainstream public administration embraced the new public management. There were a sceptical few. Christopher Hood (1990) argued the rise of managerialism meant the field had lost coherence. It had fragmented into

sub-disciplines, still including, but not limited to, organizational studies and policy analysis. The challenge was to find a framework and a language to compare and contrast these several paradigms. I argued for an explicit multi-theoretic approach, methodological pluralism and, above all, the need to set our own research agendas (Rhodes 1991). No matter how individuals responded to the changes in the public sector, few would deny managerialism was pre-eminent (see also Hood 1991; Pollitt 1993).

I spent the 1980s in the Department of Government at the University of Essex. It set out to emulate American political science. It became, and remained, among the best political science departments in the UK. Initially, I did not prosper. The Department of Government rigorously pursued the highest standards of professional excellence in which research was the clear priority. Running an undergraduate degree may be necessary, but it was a chore. The thrill lay in your next grant, article or book and building an international reputation. It was a lesson to learn quickly if you wanted promotion. I learnt, but perhaps not as quickly as I should. My pet project was a new undergraduate degree in public administration which grew from zero to 30 admissions a year. Pet projects can slow you down. I did not publish enough. I was not promoted. So, I 'retired' as degree director and inflicted two large books, each of over 400 pages, on a world which had done nothing to deserve such punishment.

My fieldwork on the local government peak associations and their linked specialist, advisory bodies was part of the (now) Economic and Social Research Council's Research (ESRC) Programme on Central and Local Government Relationships. It was published in 1986 as: *The National World of Local Government*. Subsequently, I won an ESRC personal research grant to draw together the findings of the 16 major research projects that formed the Research Programme. It resulted in *Beyond Westminster and Whitehall* (1988). This book provided a full-length treatment of policy networks, and argued that Britain should be seen as a

differentiated polity. So, Essex in the 1980s was a department to admire, and it turned me into a professional political scientist.

### ***From government to governance, 1988–98***

After a decade of Thatcherism, the 1990s were an inauspicious time for the theory and practice of public administration. Managerialism was rife. The civil service had been the butt of criticism and reform for over a decade. I had just been appointed to my first chair at the University of York, and I did not think I had inherited a healthy discipline. I wrote a couple of pessimistic pieces on its decline (Rhodes 1997a: chapter 8). I was not the first (Ridley 1975) nor was I alone among my contemporaries. Dunsire (1995: 34) noted that implementation theory and contingency theory had died. Subsequently, Christopher Hood (1999: 288) noted that I was a pessimist who thought that ‘an optimist would describe the future as bleak. A pessimist would be living and working in America’. I did not emigrate until 2003. Instead, I set about doing something to revive my field, and that something was the ‘Local governance’ and the ‘Whitehall’ research programmes.

A senior Danish colleague once told me he had reached the summit of his career when he became a full professor. I was surprised. I found becoming a professor was the start. Now, I could do things that had been closed to a mere lecturer. For example, I sat on ESRC’s committee responsible for research programmes. I argued for both a local government and a central government programme. With Gerry Stoker, I set up the local governance programme (Rhodes 1999). I then stepped down from the committee so I could be director of the central government programme that became known as the Whitehall Programme.

I had always been told by my elders that researchers could not get access to central government. Hecló and Wildavsky (1974) showed that claim to be inaccurate. Of course, came the retort, it was because they were foreigners. British academics could not penetrate

the veil of secrecy. I had my doubts. I suspected we said ‘no’ for the ministers and senior civil servants instead of asking and letting them say ‘no’ for themselves. I drew a simple lesson. I would ask. The (then) Head of the Home Civil Service, Sir Robin Butler, gave the Frank Stacey Memorial Lecture at the University of York and signalled his willingness to encourage research on central government (Butler 1992). Subsequently, the Cabinet Office and the ESRC signed a formal accord with the former participating in a joint steering and commissioning panel to develop the research programme. So, we had access. Even more striking, the accord was to conduct ‘curiosity research’. It was agreed by the ESRC and the Cabinet Office that the Research Programme’s primary objective was not to provide policy relevant advice. Rather, it would provide an ‘anthology of change’ in British government. To continue with the language of the civil servants with whom I worked, the Programme was ‘holding up a mirror to government’ and ‘learning each other’s language’. The task was ‘to help one another understand the changes’.

The Programme’s main aims were: to describe, to explain and to create a better understanding of both recent and long-term changes in the nature of British government; to develop new theoretical perspectives; and to encourage the use of new research methods in the study of central government. The Programme comprised 23 projects costing £2.1 million. The first project began in March 1995. The last project finished in December 1998. At its peak the Programme employed 49 people (and for a short history see: Rhodes 2000).

My rationale for the Programme lay in two ideas; the core executive and network governance. Instead of asking which positions are important in British government, prime minister or cabinet, the core executive idea asks which functions define the heart of the machine. 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 several institutions including but not limited



to prime minister and cabinet; for example, the Treasury and the Cabinet Office. Also, power no longer resides with any position. Rather, it is contingent and relational; that is, it depends on the relative power of other actors and, as Harold Macmillan succinctly put it, ‘events, dear boy, events’. This power-dependence approach focuses on the distribution of such resources as money and authority in the core executive and explores the shifting patterns of dependence between the several actors (see Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990; Rhodes 1995). So, the core executive is segmented into overlapping games in which all players have some resources with which to play the game and no one actor is pre-eminent in all games. In sum, the term ‘core executive’ directs our attention to two key questions: ‘Who does what?’ and ‘Who has what resources?’

In his review of administrative theory in Britain, Dunsire (1995: 34) speculated that just as public administration had become public management in the 1980s, it could become governance in the 1990s. I first used the term ‘governance’ for the launch of the local governance initiative when I wrote a short piece entitled ‘Beyond Whitehall: researching local governance’ in the journal, *Social Sciences* (Rhodes 1992a). This work on governance was a logical extension of my previous work on policy networks. It came out of my reappraisal of *Beyond Westminster and Whitehall* (1988), which was necessary after Thatcher’s reforms. That reappraisal was *Understanding Governance* (1997), which became over the next few years into ‘the Anglo-governance School’ (Marinetti 2003). The Whitehall research programme helped to bring this about.

The ideas of the core executive and network governance may have been distinctive elements of the Whitehall Programme but, as with any ideas worth their salt, increasingly they spurred critical debate (and for a survey of the critics and a reply see Rhodes 2007b). For example, Marinetti (2003: 605) concluded that the Anglo-Governance School had ‘to undergo an intellectual crisis wrought by the growing weight of criticism’ and he expected to see

‘alternative ways of conceptualising the institutions, actors and processes of change in government’. I agree, and my alternative is an interpretive, decentred approach.

Apart from studying British government, a central aim of the Whitehall Programme was to compare the changes in British government with those in other member states of the European Union (EU) and other states with a ‘Westminster’ system of government. Until now, with Vincent Wright as my patron, my comparative interests had been limited to writing the chapter on Britain in edited collections of country studies (Rhodes 1979c; Rhodes and Wright 1987). The Whitehall Programme gave me the opportunity to do genuine comparative work and fostered my collaboration with Patrick Weller (Griffith University, Brisbane).

The initial product of our partnership was a collaborative project structured around the ideas of the hollowing-out of the state and the changing role of the core executive. We covered Australia, Britain, Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands, but we did not write country studies. Instead, everyone wrote on every country and we focused on the functions of the core executive: winning and keeping support for government, collective government, policy advice, resource allocation, coordination, and reform. If there is a single conclusion it was that, like Richard II, we told ‘sad stories of the death of Kings’ as we identified the manifold shackles on leadership.

We then turned to the changing role of the public service (Rhodes and Weller 2001). It was a collaborative project again, although this time the research was based around country studies. We covered Australia, Britain, Denmark, France, Germany, The Netherlands, and New Zealand. However, there was a shared framework and a set of agreed methods. We created a data set on the characteristics of the administrative elite, covering such topics as age, sex, education, recruitment, training, career paths, and departure. We explored a common set of topics on what they did and how their roles were changing. Finally, and most distinctive, we wrote short biographical portraits constructed from lengthy interviews with the public

servants. We tried to let them speak for themselves. This work demonstrated that the social science ideas of hollowing-out, the core executive and network governance have purchase; they travel and illuminate governance practices in other countries.

*From the social sciences to the human sciences, 1999–2009*

The next chapter in my story is the shift from the social to the human sciences. The 2000s were a good decade. Christopher Hood (2011) inclines cautiously to a ‘never had it so good’ view of the state of the discipline. Indeed, I would date the good times from the mid-1990s when I wrote my prophecy of doom! Since then, the ESRC has funded four major research programmes – local governance, Whitehall, devolution, and public services – and the Centre for Market and Public Organization at the University of Bristol. My normal cast of mind is positive. I am of the ‘can-do’ persuasion. Yet I remain all too keenly aware of the precarious state of my discipline.

Writing in 1951, Mackenzie (1975: 4) thought that public administration was in ‘rather a queer state’. In the 2000s, public administration was still in a queer state. In fact, looking back, it has not been a dodo, a phoenix or a chameleon. Rather, it continues to rehearse its recurrent dilemmas without resolving them. Mackenzie (1970: chapter 2) defines disciplines not by their subject matter, methods or agreed paradigm, but as social entities with shared traditions and supported by organizational forms such as departments or faculties in universities. In this sense, public administration was, and remains, a discipline. However, its ‘classical’ subject matter of the history, structure, functions, powers and relationships of government organizations is also the happy hunting ground of many other disciplines. So, and first, public administration competes for attention with economics departments and business schools, among others. It is also a practical subject, perhaps even a profession, which seeks to provide timely advice and train practitioners. Yet, and second, academic fame

lies in developing theory, in publication in international refereed journals, and standing with one's colleagues. Third, British public administration is a small discipline, reliant on government, especially research council support, with only a small postgraduate recruitment with which to replace its grand old men and women. It is vulnerable to changing government agendas and the state of the public finances. Finally, local traditions have crumbled beneath not only the onslaught of the mighty American presence in the field, but also from closer links with our Continental counterparts. If a multi-theoretic approach and methodological pluralism were the prescription for the 1990s, they were a brute fact of life in the 2000s. There can be no pretence to a disciplinary core. So, I remain concerned about the precarious nature of the enterprise. Public administration remains a small discipline with no agreed theoretical core, reliant on government supports, and dominated by American and European traditions of study (and for a more detailed account of the state of British public administration today and possible developments see Rhodes 2011b).

The discipline has survived, and even thrived, because some of its leading players mastered the 'trick' of linking policy and academic relevance. We may specialize in central–local relationships, public service delivery or other topics of the day, but we must locate such topics to broader agendas in the social and human sciences. Otherwise we become either mere technicians or loyal servants of power or, of course, both.

I have been fortunate. My field has benefited from the work of many outstanding scholars throughout Europe over the past 25 years, including, to name but a few, Mark Bovens, Christopher Hood, Christopher Pollitt, Johan P. Olsen, Renate Mayntz, Fritz Scharpf and Jean-Claude Theonig. Indeed, a significant trend over the past 25 years is this shift to a European community of scholars known to one another and engaging with one another's work.

During the 1990s, a new generation of scholars emerged, and Patrick Dunleavy, Christopher Hood, Helen Margetts, Christopher Pollitt, and Gerry Stoker all had this ability to encompass diverse theories and changing practice (see also Lekhi 1995: 92). My own theoretical interests also became more diverse, posing their own, new challenges for working with practitioners.

At this time, my own theoretical interests became more diverse and my break with modernist-empiricism puzzled colleagues. I agreed with Inglis (2000, p. 112) that there has been a lethal attack on positivism, and the work of philosophers such as Charles Taylor, Peter Winch and Alasdair MacIntyre, means that using the methods of the natural sciences in the human sciences is, to quote Inglis, 'comically improper'. I sought to work out the implications of this philosophical shift for the study of politics, especially British government and public administration. This shift coincided with my move to the University of Newcastle. Contrary I suspect to most people's expectations, my move to the 'Neanderthal North' led to a dramatic broadening of my intellectual horizons. I still read and wrote about governance, but my reading now extended to political philosophy (Bevir 1999; Bernstein 1976 and 1991), historiography (Collingwood 1939 and 1993; White 1973), cultural anthropology (Geertz 1973; Van Maanen 1988), governmentality (Foucault 1991a and 1991b), and the just plain unclassifiable (Berman 1982). I had discovered the human sciences, and, with Mark Bevir, I started to work on what became a ten-year project developing an interpretive approach to the study of British government.

Our interpretive approach starts with the insight that to understand actions, practices and institutions, we need to grasp the relevant meanings, beliefs and preferences of the people involved. Bevir and Rhodes (2003, 2006 and 2010) argue that individuals are situated in webs of beliefs handed down as traditions and these beliefs and associated practices are changed by the dilemmas people confront. To explain individual actions, we must identify the set of

reasons that led to the particular action. To understand an institution and its processes, we must understand the beliefs and practices of its members and the traditions that inform those beliefs and practices. We summarize this approach as ‘situated agency’. *Interpreting British Governance* (2003) developed the theory of ‘situated agency’ and used it to explore British governance. We emphasized the importance of interpreting governance by examining practices from the bottom-up, and noted the lack of such studies. In *Governance Stories* (2006), we sought to fill that gap with ethnographic fieldwork of the civil service, the police, and doctors in the National Health Service. We located these studies in a broader account of governmental traditions. In *The State as Cultural Practice* (2010), we developed a theory of the state as a diverse set of practices rooted in varied beliefs about the public sphere, about authority and power, which are constructed differently in contending traditions. Our stories show how ministers, civil servants and citizens construct and reconstruct the state in their everyday lives.

This interpretive turn also informed my comparative work. We took the human science ideas of traditions, practices, beliefs and dilemmas and wrote *Comparing Westminster* (Rhodes *et al.* 2009), probably an over-ambitious, certainly a comparative, analysis of why the Westminster systems of the old dominion countries had changed since their inception. We explored five recurring debates: the growth of prime ministerial power, the decline in individual and collective responsibility, the politicization of the public service, executive dominance of the legislature, and the effectiveness of Westminster systems. The book is a clear demonstration of the Thomas Theorem that ‘if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’ (Thomas and Thomas 1928: 572). The beliefs of Westminster systems may seem an antiquated, inaccurate description of everyday practices but these beliefs, myths, if you will, continue to shape political practice. If my initial focus had been on changing patterns of British governance, with Pat Weller and other colleagues, we were able

to show that these ideas have purchase beyond the tiny country across the Channel (see also Bevir, Rhodes and Weller 2003).

### **I'm younger than that now**

Where do I stand now? What are my key research themes for the next ten years? The interpretive turn in my work is the starting point for the next decade. My ambition is as simple: to use the interpretive turn in the human sciences to redefine public policy analysis as storytelling.

### ***Developing interpretive policy analysis, 2010 and beyond***

The rational model of policy making, or 'policy cycle', continues to hold sway in the study of policy making. It has many proponents and minor variations, including an 'Australian version' that enjoins policy makers to identify issues, analyse the various alternatives, choose the appropriate policy instrument, test the ideas through consultation, coordinate with other affected government agencies, make the decision, implement it, and evaluate the results (see Althaus *et al.* 2007: 37–40). No matter which country or which version of the model, all have at their core the instrumental rationality of means-ends analysis before making, implementing and evaluating a decision. Its popularity endures and the textbooks go through numerous editions (see for example Althaus *et al.* 2007; Bardach 2009; Dunn 2004). The current fashion for 'evidence based policy' has also led to more publications rooted in the rational model (see, for example, Banks 2009; Bullock *et al.* 2001; Sanderson 2002). We know that policy making in real life is messy and confused, rarely following any neat, logical cycle. There have also been many swingeing critiques (see, for example, Lindblom 1988: Part 2); but the model persists. It does so because it is seen as a useful heuristic by policy makers. It

provides them with a retrospective rationale for decisions taken by other means, which can be used to defend policy in public and to legitimate decisions.

There is a growing, mainly European, literature challenging rationalist approaches to policy analysis (see, for example, Dryzek 2006; Fischer 2003; Fisher and Forester 1993; Hajer 2009; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003). In policy analysis, as Dryzek (1993: 222) points out, there are many social science frames of reference and this multiplicity of ‘incommensurable analytical frames’ dealt a ‘devastating’ blow to the ‘authoritative ambitions’ of policy analysis. It also led to a dead end. The interpretive turn was seen as unable to make a ‘positive contribution’ to policy analysis (Bobrow and Dryzek 1987: 171). It could put nothing in the place of policy analysis. It seemed content to remain a cult literature. I seek to bring it out of its closet, using policy narratives, or stories by participants that recover their beliefs and practices about ‘how things work around here’, as the main vehicle for policy analysis. I want to provide an alternative rationale for policy analysis and policy making based on the ways in which decisions are made in everyday life by policy makers harried at every turn.

### *Narratives of policy making*

There is an extensive literature on narratives in the human sciences (see Alvermann 2000; Bevir 1999 and 2000; Czarniawska 1998 and 2004; and Ricoeur 1981 and 1991). It has had limited impact on political science. 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. 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). Policy narratives present a chronology or sequence of linked events, using a few major characters, and each step in the story ‘causes’ the next step. The central element in the story is the



metaphor, or making the unfamiliar analogous to familiar situations; ‘the simplest stories are proverbs and parables, used to justify policy relevant stories’ (Rein 1976: 266).

Narratives use the toolkit of political anthropology, especially observation, to recover meaning through other people’s stories. Mainstream political science does not use field observation and rarely draws on political anthropology. It is not a part of the standard toolkit (Fenno 1990: 128) whether we are talking of Australia, North America or the United Kingdom (Rhodes 2002). Yet observation is an especially valuable tool in the political science armoury of research methods. For example, I used it to provide a ‘thick description’ of life at the top of British government departments. It enabled me to get beneath the surface of official accounts and let interviewees explain the meaning of their actions, providing an authenticity that can only come from the main characters involved in the story (see Rhodes 2011c; also Rhodes 2002, 2005, 2007a, 2009; Rhodes *et al.* 2007). I draw on this fieldwork for the examples used below.

The aim of political anthropology is to reconstruct the meanings of social actors by recovering other people’s stories from practices, actions, texts, interviews, and speeches. For Geertz (1973: 9), thick descriptions ‘are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to’. They lie at the heart of political anthropology and I am a *bricoleur* – less a handyman and more a Jack-of-all-trades – gathering material when, where and how I can to provide ‘thick descriptions’ of everyday life (Levi-Strauss 1966: 16–17). I draw on three main sources of information: ‘the pattern of practice, talk, and considered writing’ (Oakeshott’s 1996: x). I accept Fox’s (2004: 4) practical and pragmatic assessment that ‘while participant observation has its limitations’, nonetheless, ‘this rather uneasy combination of involvement and detachment is still the best method we have for exploring the complexities of human cultures’ (see also: Agar 1996; Rhodes *et al.* 2007; Sanjek 1990; and Van Maanen 1988).

I write stories. In my study of three British government departments (Rhodes 2011c), the departmental philosophy was the source of many stories. It was a form of folk psychology. It provided the everyday theory and shared languages for storytelling. It was the collective memory of the department; a retelling of yesterday to make sense of today. Institutional memory resided in the stories people tell one another. For policy makers, narratives were like ‘precedent cases ... to the judicial system’. They were used to ‘formulate recognizable, cogent, defensible and seemingly rational collective accounts that will serve as precedents for individual assumption, decision and action’ (Boje 1991: 106). Permanent secretaries in British government departments preserved institutional memory, integrity, impartiality, and the risk-averse tradition that seeks to protect the minister. Management reforms were filtered through inherited traditions and their practices and adapted to local circumstances.

Storytelling provides not only chronological accounts of events but also analytical tools for dissecting people’s beliefs and practices. For my three government departments, a story had three characteristics: a language game, a performing game and a management game. The language game identified and constructed the storyline, answering the questions of what happened and why. The resulting story had to be reliable, defensible, accurate and consistent with the department’s traditions. Lying was seen as a worse sin than error, accident, even incompetence. The performing game told the story to a wider audience, inside and outside the department. Officials tested the facts and rehearsed the storyline in official meetings to see how their colleagues responded. They had to adapt the story to suit the minister, and both ministers and officials had to judge how the story would play publicly. They then performed that agreed story on a public stage to the media, parliament and the general public. Finally, there was the management game, which both implemented any policy changes and perhaps even more important let them get on with ‘business as usual’ as quickly as possible.

In sum, the interpretive approach has a technique for policy analysis – storytelling – which is both recognized by managers and provides guides for managerial action. In both public and private organizations, managers use stories not only to gain and pass on information and to inspire involvement, but also as the repository of the organization’s institutional memory. The crucial tasks of the policy analyst are, therefore, to invent stories, to design programmes of intervention based on the stories, and to criticize the stories others commend (Rein 1976: 268).

### *Stories of implementation*

Guba and Lincoln (1989) drew on interpretive theory and qualitative research methods to provide a fourth generation theory of evaluation theory and practice. My point of entry for narrative policy analysis is the theory and practice of implementation. Implementation remains a stubborn problem for governments of all persuasions. Government policies still fail, both nationally and internationally. The outcomes of policies do not live up to their supporters’ expectations. Clients are disappointed by the services they receive. Why? How do we explain these policy implementation deficits? Many government policies are implemented successfully, so we also need to study such successes.

Implementation was a cutting-edge topic in the 1970s and 1980s. Nowadays, many see it as one of ‘yesterday’s issues’ (Dunsire 1995; Hill 1997). Everyone agrees that it has fragmented into myriad topics; for example, partnerships, coordination, inter-organizational analysis, collaboration, even the all-embracing ‘delivery’ (O’Toole 2000). There is no longer a defining debate between top-down and bottom-up models (Sabatier 1986) or any agreed theoretical core. The study of implementation is an ‘intellectual dead end’ with ‘lots of leads, little results’ and where 47 variables completely explain five case studies (deLeon and deLeon 2002). An interpretive approach is the way out of this dead end, and I illustrate this

contention with brief descriptions of elite narratives of implementation, and the discretion of street level bureaucrats.

Political scientists should pay more attention to the traditions against the background of which governing elites construct their worldviews. The central elite need not be a uniform group. A decentred interpretive approach suggests that political scientists should ask whether different sections of the elite draw on different traditions to construct different narratives about how things work around here. For example, central agencies like the Treasury and the Cabinet Office tell different stories to the spending departments. Their response to the dilemmas posed by fragmentation both within and beyond Whitehall was to shift from rowing, or hands-on commands, to the more diverse tool kit of indirect informal modes of steering through other agencies and non-departmental public bodies (see Jessop 2000; Rhodes 1997b; and Bevir and Rhodes 2010: chapter 5). So, officials in central agencies foreswear line management and talk of strategically managing the landscape with indirect controls (see Fawcett 2009: chapter 4). Civil servants are aware that there are limits to such hands-off strategies. One Permanent Secretary observed that the shift to hands-off controls needed a major cultural change and he opined that no one had attempted cultural change on this scale before. His remarks were not streaked with much optimism. Others are blunter about such steering: ‘they see another piece of paper from the centre and say stuff that’ (Rhodes 2011c: chapter 5). Steering is the response of the central agencies, not the department. The elites have different narratives.

The politics of policy implementation are not confined to the strategies and interactions of central and local elites. Other actors can resist, transform, and thwart the agendas of elites. For example, we know the role of street-level bureaucrats in delivering services is crucial; in effect, they decide what policy will be for clients: ‘The decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work

pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out' (Lipsky 1980: xii). Social workers, police, teachers and other street-level bureaucrats fix client identities by, for example, stereotyping, thus setting the premises for judgements about the client and their need for resources. They also use everyday routines for managing time, client demands, and the pressure on resources. For example, they rubber stamp decisions taken elsewhere or refer people to other agencies instead of taking them on as clients (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003: chapter 12). They are not heroes. They have to manage the 'irreconcilable' dilemmas posed by clients' needs, bureaucratic supervision (of rules and resources), and the exercise of state power. To understand their working lives and how it affects policy implementation, we need to explore, again, how things work around here by looking at departmental and professional traditions, storytelling practices, routines, coping mechanisms, gossip and humour.

By 'studying through' the hierarchy and across organizations – that is by following a policy process through the 'webs and relations between actors, institutions and discourses across time and space' (Shore and Wright 1997: 14) – it is possible to compare and contrast the divergent narratives of (say) managers and street level bureaucrats, so accounting for implementation deficits. Policy arenas are sites of struggles not just between strategic elites, but between all kinds of actors with different views and ideals reached against the background of different traditions. Subordinate actors can resist the intentions and policies of elites by reconstructing them in ways that draw on their local traditions and their local reasoning. For example, street-level police officers are often influenced by organizational traditions that encourage them to set priorities different to those of both their superior officers and elite policy makers. They see combating crime as the core of police work, not the 'touchy-feely' areas of community policing. A new police commissioner may want to set an example, cause a stir, or otherwise ginger up the troops, but the troops know that he or she

will be gone in a few years and there will be a new commissioner with new interests and priorities (see, for example, on community policing, Fleming and Wood 2006).

### **Conclusion: a party of one**

With Aaron Wildavsky, Charles Edward Lindblom was an American scholar whose work I admired throughout my career. On looking back on his ‘conventional career’, he observed that it involved ‘some prudent adaption to its milieu, a confining set of disciplinary traditions, and a willingness to disregard them growing only slowly with age and security’ (Lindblom 1988: 19). I too was prudent. I sought to meet the expectations of my profession. I worked within the modernist-empiricist paradigm. So, the work on intergovernmental relations highlighted the importance of the different resources available to different levels of government and the bargaining between them. The work on governance not only developed the idea of policy networks but also shifted attention to the differences between the symbolic politics of Westminster government and Parliament and the real politics of policy making in a fragmented institutional environment. The work on the core executive saw a shift from analysing centralization and coordination to the fluctuating, contingent dependencies between central agencies and baronial departments. It highlighted the limits to centralization even within central government, let alone other levels of government. The comparative work on governance and the core executive showed that my ideas travelled to other parliamentary democracies.

However, like Lindblom, with age and security, I, too, came to disregard my inherited disciplinary tradition, a move that was not without its costs. For example, in 1997, I delivered a paper on postmodernism in the study of British government to a mixed audience of historians, political scientists and civil servants at the Public Records Office (PRO) in Kew. The historians in the audience took serious exception to the claim, common in historiography

since Collingwood, that historians construct facts. The criticism was as endless as it was vehement and from people who gave the impression that they had never read any historiography. I thought I gave as good as I got, but afterwards I found a quiet corridor and walked up and down breathing slowly to regain my composure. I now knew the interpretive road would be a rocky one and, like Collingwood, I was in danger of ‘creating a party of one member’ (Toulmin 1978: x).

Curiously, curiosity research appeals to practitioners. Surprisingly, they grasp the interpretive turn. There is a coda to my PRO story. Towards the end of the session, two former permanent secretaries spoke. As they rose, I feared the final blow. I remember thinking, ‘Oh God, what now?’ I misjudged my speakers. Their comments were both sympathetic and apt.

Postmodernism is only a posh way of saying what Henry Ford said: history is bunk! I remember coming to this conclusion when I was the Principal Private Secretary at No. 10. You could not give an accurate account of 24 hours there, especially at times of crisis (i.e. most days). It was a painful re-education of an Oxford educated history student.

And, more succinctly: ‘It seems like chaos. We impose some order for the Minister but it is so arbitrary’. I am English – Yorkshire to be precise – so it was unthinkable that I should hug them for their contribution – but I wanted to!

There is also much sympathy with the notion of storytelling; they know that they tell the minister stories. For example, one short story told to new recruits is that ‘there is a bit of mystique around ministers and they make you feel inferior’. It invokes the idea of hierarchy, the subordinate role of civil servants, and the ceremonial side of being the Queen’s minister. Its meaning is clear: ‘you are a subordinate’. Gossip is another form of storytelling; personalized with a variable regard for accuracy. Submissions and briefs are stories by another name and recognized to be so by the civil servants who tell them. When the Minister

resigned, the civil servants asked: ‘What is our story?’ They wanted to find out what had happened. They talked of ‘getting the story straight’; ‘getting it together’; ‘we’ve got the story’; ‘when you have the narrative’ and ‘we’ve reached agreement on some of the main storylines’. Officials were also explicitly invited to tell a story. So, a focus on storytelling is not an example of academic whimsy. It is an integral part of the everyday practices of public servants, indeed all managers (see also Gabriel 2000; Hummel 1991; Rhodes 2011c).

One referee asked what was novel about my arguments for political anthropology and storytelling. He commented that the French anthropologist Marc Abélès (1991) has been doing this type of work for years on, for example, local politics. Quite correct, but where is the Anglo-Saxon equivalent in political science? Like it or not, there is a dominant social science, predominantly modernist-empiricist, tradition of study in the Anglo-Saxon world, and it has turned its back on the ‘genre blurring’ (Geertz 1983) that characterizes the Continental human sciences. So, my argument for an interpretive approach and political anthropology is an argument for genre blurring. I seek to encourage a willingness to learn from the human sciences.

The same referee also asked what political anthropology and storytelling added to the study of public administration. Turning to political anthropology has several advantages. As Agar (1996: 27) comments, ‘no understanding of a world is valid without representation of those members’ voices’. So, ‘thick descriptions’ get below and behind the surface of official accounts by providing texture, depth and nuance (Geertz 1973: chapter 1). Observations crosscheck interviews, and both allow people to explain the meaning of their actions, providing an authenticity that can only come from the main characters involved in the story. The approach also admits of surprises, of moments of epiphany, accepting serendipity and happenstance because you go where you are led and take what you can get. It explores the negotiated, symbolic and ritual elements of political life, drawing attention to deeper



principles of organization that are not visible to empiricist or positivist approaches (and for a more detailed discussion with examples, see Rhodes 2011c: chapter 10).

Above all, an interpretive approach grounded in observational fieldwork is about ‘edification’ – a way of finding ‘new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking about’ politics and government (Rorty, 1980: 360). I believe an interpretive approach provides a new and better way of speaking about public administration (Rhodes 2011c). I am also convinced that observation is an underused but vital part of the political scientists’ toolkit. It ‘leads to a thoroughgoing revision of our understanding of what it is to open ... the consciousness of one group of people to ... the life-form of another’. It involves ‘enabling conversation’ and enlarging ‘the possibility of intelligible discourse between people quite different from one another in interest, outlook, wealth and power’ (Geertz, 1988: 143 and 147). Edification, empathy and enabling conversations are worthy goals in any walk of life.

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