FROM CORE EXECUTIVE TO COURT POLITICS:

from a bucket of rice to a bowl of jelly*

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One may doubt that high politics have been completely demystified in (modern) states, even that they ever will be (Geertz 1983, 13).

Human nature does not change … the skulduggery – and downright lies – by which Pitt contrived to down Fox … are echoed in the calculated manoeuvrings by which Macmillan repeatedly denied Butler, and by Brown’s obsessive briefing against Blair.’ (Campbell 2010, 7)

Introduction

Is the Court Politics approach useful in the study of the core executive? We discuss recent developments in executive studies and seek to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a focus on court politics. We discuss the ‘prime ministerial predominance’ thesis, presidential studies and ‘institutionalization’, the ‘statecraft’ thesis, and the ‘New Political History’. We argue these contributions converge on the study of court or high politics and hold out the prospect of the theoretical and methodological reinvigoration of executive studies.

Core Executive Studies

The ‘core executive’ is a theoretical idea that recognizes the institutions of the executive are not limited to the prime minister and cabinet, but also include ministers in their departments. It includes ‘all those organizations and procedures which coordinate central government policies, and act as final arbiters between different parts of the government machine’. Thus the core executive comprises ‘the complex web of institutions, networks and practices surrounding the prime minister, cabinet, cabinet committees and their official counterparts, less formalised ministerial ‘clubs’ or meetings, bilateral negotiations and interdepartmental committees. It also includes coordinating departments, chiefly the Cabinet
Office, the Treasury, the Foreign Office, the law officers and the security and intelligence services’ (Rhodes 1995, 12).

The concept was proposed by Dunleavy and Rhodes (1990) and developed and refined in Rhodes (1995), Elgie (1997), Smith (1999); and Marsh, Richards and Smith (2001) over the next decade. It remains a central theme of Rhodes’ work (Elgie 2011). It represented a conscious attempt to shift debate from one of the ‘long-running chestnuts of the constitution’: the relative power of the prime minister versus the Cabinet. Twenty years on, as Elgie (2011, 64) notes, the ‘core executive’ is well established in the political science literature. It is widely deployed in the study of British central government, in European countries and particularly in Australia.

Core executive studies challenged mainstream analyses of the British executive, which were ‘positional’ – assuming power inhered to key positions (the prime minister, the cabinet) and their incumbents. Dunleavy and Rhodes adopted instead a ‘functional’ approach, asking: ‘Who does what?’ and ‘Who has what resources?’ Rather than accruing or being fixed to a particular position, they argued that power is fluid. It varies according to the relative power of other actors and prevailing circumstances – opinion polls, the economy, or to use the phrase attributed to Harold Macmillan, former British Prime Minister, ‘events, dear boy, events’. Power relations vary because all core executive actors have some resources, but no one consistently commands all necessary to achieve their goals:

So, they must exchange resources, for example, money, legislative authority or expertise. These changes take the form of games in which actors seek to realize their objectives and manoeuvre for advantage, deploying their resources to maximize their advantage, while minimizing their dependence on other actors (Rhodes 1997, 203).
Resource dependence thus characterizes relationships within the core executive such that:

Even resource-rich actors, such as the prime minister, are dependent on other actors to achieve their goals. Therefore government works through building alliances rather than by prime ministerial command (Smith 2003, 62).

If, as Elgie (2011, 64) claims, the ideas of the core executive and resource dependence have become the ‘new orthodoxy’ in executive studies, there are variants, most notably prime ministerial predominance.

**Prime Ministerial Predominance**

This thesis is associated with the work of Richard Heffernan and Mark Bennister and we concentrate on their contribution below. However, before so doing, we must note if only in passing, the work of Burch and Holliday (1996, 2004) who anticipated this approach.

Collective government still operates fully from time to time, and partially (in smaller groups of ministers) all the time on specific policy issues. In many ways, it simply has to, as the UK has neither a presidential institutional structure nor presidential institutional capacity. Thus, although bouts of prime ministerial dominance may infect particular governments now and then, they cannot be sustained because the system is not in essence presidential and is not designed to support them. The result is that British government exists, at the Centre, in permanent tension between individual (PM) and collective (cabinet) government, veering by time and issue from one tendency to the other (Burch and Holliday 2004, 21).
Nonetheless, the prime minister is at the core of the core networks supported by enhanced central capacity that increases the power potential of the prime minister. However, ‘the enhancement of central capacity within the British system of government reflects contingent factors, including the personalities of strategically-placed individuals (notably, but not only, the PM). They note that such changes are ‘driven by prime ministerial whim’ and ‘if they so desire, [prime ministers] try to shape the core in their own image. However, the extent to which they can do so ‘depends on the motivation and skill of key actors, and on the circumstances in which they find themselves at any given moment in time’ (Burch and Holliday 1996, 17, 20 and 106).

For Heffernan (2003, 348) the proposition that power is relational and based on dependency is ‘only partially accurate. Power is relational between actors but it is also locational. It is dependent on where actors are to be found within the core executive, and whether they are at the centre or the periphery of key core executive networks’. He agrees the core executive is segmented, but disputes that power is as fragmented and dispersed as Rhodes and others have suggested. An inherently unequal distribution of resources affords leaders unique advantages, creating the potential for prime ministerial predominance:

Heffernan elaborates the personal and institutional power resources available to prime ministers and on which their potential to dominate depends. Personal power resources include: reputation, skill and ability; association with actual or anticipated political success; public popularity; and high standing in his or her party (Heffernan 2003, 351). It follows that the more resources a prime minister has, or can accumulate, the greater their potential for predominance.
Institutional power resources derive from prime minister’s location at the centre of the most important core executive networks. For Heffernan (2003, 356-57) these include: political centrality and policy reach; legitimate authority and prestige; knowledge and expertise; the ability to alter the preferences of other actors and institutions; and agenda control. Other institutional power resources come with the job. They include:

- Being the legal head of government, having the right of proposal and veto, to delegate powers and responsibilities to ministers and departments through the use of Crown prerogatives, and having the right to be consulted, either directly or indirectly, about all significant matters relating to government policy;

- Setting the policy agenda through leadership of the government, control of the cabinet and cabinet committee system and influence over the Whitehall apparatus;

- Organising a de facto prime ministerial department, strengthening Downing Street and the Cabinet Office; and

- Setting the government’s political agenda through the news media using Downing Street as a ‘bully pulpit’.

Proponents of the prime ministerial predominance thesis assume that these developments have strengthened prime ministers at the expense of Cabinet and other players (Bennister 2007; Walter and Strangio 2007). Nor are these trends specific to the UK. There are parallels with the summits of other Westminster, parliamentary, presidential and semi-presidential systems (Peters, Rhodes and Wright 2000). Though they highlight the resources available to political leaders, and note the importance of personality and political skill, these
analyses do not address the prime minister’s capacity to organize and manage the state apparatus and the impact on prime ministerial performance.

Since power-dependence characterizes core executive relationships, it follows that attention should focus on the distribution and dispersal of resources and shifting patterns of dependence between multiple actors.

All core executive actors have certain institutional resources, among them patronage, prestige, authority, knowledge, information and expertise. They also have personal resources such as electoral strength, policy capacity, public standing and political reputation. Together these create political capital. (Heffernan 2005, 616)

Similarly,

All ministers have resources denied to the prime minister, among them a professional, permanent and knowledgeable staff, expert knowledge and relevant policy networks, time, information and, not least, an annual budget (Heffernan 2005, 614).

So, the unit of analysis in core executive studies cannot be solely the prime minister, nor can it be just the Cabinet; power is more widely dispersed. The prime minister remains a key actor who, by virtue of his/her access to institutional and personal resources and position at the centre of key networks (Heffernan 2003; 2005), has potential to exercise significant power. The experiences of Tony Blair, John Howard and Kevin Rudd, who at key points in time were regarded as ‘predominant’ prime ministers, remind us that dynamic forces shape, constrain and sometimes deliberately undermine leaders’ ability to get their own way. Due consideration
therefore must be given to relations between leaders and their colleagues in Cabinet, the party-room, and other ‘followers’ who depend on them, but on whom they also depend.

Indeed, both Bennister (2007, 328) and Heffernan (2005, 607) agree that the core executive approach need not necessarily abandon the idea of a strong executive government; the two approaches are not mutually exclusive. Heffernan’s (2003, 350) many qualifications to the prime ministerial dominance argument are significant.

Prime ministerial authority is both contingent and contextual, and prime ministerial predominance can be real, if temporal. … He or she can predominate only by accruing and using a number of personal resources and making full use the institutional resources that are available. … Predominance grants the prime minister the ‘potential’ for leadership within government, but only when personal resources are married with institutional power resources, and when the prime minister is able to use both wisely and well’ (italics and inverted commas in original).

So, the prime minister’s personal resources are ‘never guaranteed. They come and go, are acquired and a squandered, are won and lost’ and ‘the temporality of his or her institutional and personal power resources must be emphasized’ (Heffernan, 2003, 356 and 369). Moreover, ‘there is … a vast and sprawling system of networks, committees and taskforces where most work is undertaken’ (Bennister 2007, 335). So, the following assessment suggests that the difference between the proponents of resource dependence in the core executive and the argument for prime ministerial predominance is a matter of emphasis only.

Prime minister can be sure-footed or clumsy, be associated with policy success or failure, have a low or a high party standing, a solid or a weak parliamentary reputation, become electorally popular or unpopular. He or she can preside over a
happy or unhappy parliamentary party and can face weak or powerful intra-party rivals. Prime ministers can be lucky or unlucky and face strong or weak inter-party opponents. Often, an underperforming economy, or some other such record of policy failure, can prove the instrument of the prime minister’s downfall (Heffernan 2005, 616-7).

Proponents of the core executive approach never abandoned the idea of strong executive government. Rather, they opened the debate about power of the prime minister to the limits imposed by contingency and context, and identified the variety of core executive practices. By way of example, Elgie (1997) identifies six patterns of core executive practices in prime ministerial and semi-presidential systems:

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

The advantage of this formulation is that it gets away from bald assertions about the fixed nature of executive politics. While one pattern of executive politics may operate at any one time, there can still be fluidity as one pattern is succeeded by another. Take for example, the rapid decline in public support for Kevin Rudd that followed his decision to abandon his commitment to an emissions trading scheme. This policy change created an opportunity for those angered by Rudd’s domineering leadership style, to harness discontent among ministers and the Labor Caucus. Allegiances, including those of Rudd’s former supporters shifted to his Deputy, Julia Gillard. Overnight Rudd was ousted in a party room vote that, lacking support, he didn’t contest (see Stuart 2010). This focus on contingency also concentrates the mind on the questions of which pattern of executive politics prevails? When, how, and why did it change? Focusing on the power of prime minister and cabinet is limiting whereas these questions open the possibility of explaining similarities and differences in the court politics of the core executive (Elgie 1997: 23, and citations). Indeed, ‘predominance can … ebb and flow (Bennister 2007, 340). Few would have difficulty accepting that the prime minister is the ‘principal node of key core executive networks’ (Heffernan 2005, 613; and again see Burch and Halliday 1996).

So, we read Heffernan( 2005) and Bennister and Heffernan (2011) as an important set of caveats to the prime ministerial dominance argument, no doubt reflecting the decline of the Blair presidency. These caveats bridge the gap between their approach and proponents of the core executive approach. By downplaying prime ministerial predominance, Heffernan (2005: 616-7) opens the way for a convergence on the notion of court politics; a point we return to and build on below.

The literature on Westminster governments has noted the pluralization of advice, the institutionalization of central advisory units, and the attendant challenges for coordination and in managing new dependencies. In Westminster systems, prime ministers and ministers traditionally looked to the career public service for policy advice and for structures and routines to support their decision-making. Under the pressures of modern governance they have relied increasingly on staff in their private offices. The task of supporting ministers is now shared between partisan personal staff, non-partisan career officials, external consultants and others. The configuration of ministerial support systems has become more varied, requiring the management of the advisory system. Everywhere the response has been to augment the resources available to the leader. A growing body of literature has documented the institutionalization of the core executive; the accretion of staffing and support units at the summit. Peters, Rhodes and Wright (1999: 15) note that:

Everywhere we see the institutionalization of staffing arrangements, with the institutions of the head of the executive being accorded formal status and increasing prestige… Growth, institutionalization, as well as politicization and hybridization are common features of the staffing of summits. Yet the convergent trends mask the existence of persistent and profound national differences. These differences are visible at several levels: structure, size, composition, and internal organization and culture - and they are rooted in both the different mix of functions pursued by each country's summit staff and in different governmental traditions
There are many pressures for strengthening the summit. They include the 24/7 news cycle and the personalization of politics; the exigencies of the war on terror; increasing demands for domestic policy coordination; and the pluralization of policy advice (Peters, Rhodes and Wright 2000, 6-11). The emergence and growing importance of political staff is a response to these pressures and the need to coordinate inputs from multiple sources (Eichbaum and Shaw 2010; Tiernan 2007). The consequences of the institutionalization of the core executive are a matter of dispute. Some authors assume that the growth of staff support has strengthened prime ministers at the expense of ministers, Cabinet and other players, allowing them to become predominant (Bennister 2007; Walter and Strangio 2007). Others refute this ‘presidentialization’ thesis (see Poguntke and Webb 2005 and for a critique, see Bevir and Rhodes 2006d). The development and growth of personal staffing arrangements could extend leaders’ capacity, but definitely it creates a new set of organizational and management challenges (Tiernan 2007).

Various scholars have highlighted the potential of the presidential studies literature, particularly in offering frameworks for ‘understanding and analysing the components of prime ministerial style and skills, within a framework permitting comparison, generalization and evaluation’ (Theakston 2011, 79). Others comment on inadequacies of the British literature because it is descriptive and normative rather than analytical. The scholarship on British politics is said to lacks ‘distinctive perspectives on, and theories of, leadership that transcend the personalization of power’ (Bowles, King and Ross 2007, 373). For analysing court politics, the American literature on the institutional Presidency is suggestive.

American scholars trace the origins of the institutional presidency to the 1940s, noting a dramatic acceleration to the mid-1970 (Burke 2009; Ragsdale and Theis 1997). So, by Nixon’s presidency, there was evidence that staffing arrangements were organized according
to a ‘standard model’ (Walcott and Hult 2005). Despite misgivings about the pathologies of Richard Nixon’s White House, this model had been largely adopted by his successors (Burke 2009; Kerbel 1991). The persistence of organization and staffing arrangements from one president to the next, and the systemic similarities between the advisory systems of US Presidents indicates that the office (the institution of the presidency) itself, and not simply the personality and style of an individual president, is an appropriate focus for analysis.

In his book *The Presidential Difference*, Fred Greenstein (2004) presents a six-point framework for analyzing the political and personal qualities and skills of US presidents, their characters and leadership styles and their successes and failures in office. He assesses and compares presidential performance in relation to their:

- Proficiency as public communicators
- Organizational capacity
- Political skills
- Policy vision
- Cognitive style; and
- Emotional intelligence.

Among these attributes, presidential scholars have singled out ‘organizational efficiency’ (Kerbel 1991), ‘organization and management’ (Burke 2009) and ‘organizational capacity’ (Greenstein 2004) as important bargaining resources available to presidents, which can contribute to or undermine their prospects for success. Organizational capacity ‘helps’ presidents to cope with the demands of leadership, specifically the ‘bargaining uncertainty’ that confronts them in a system of separated powers (Neustadt, 1991). Overload has been a
key driver of institutionalization of the development of a large, functionally specialized Executive Office of President supporting the leader (see Patterson 2010).

So, in the United States, the concept of the ‘institutional presidency’ is well established (Burke 2009). It recognizes that ‘leadership in the modern presidency is not carried out by the president alone, but rather by presidents with their associates. It depends therefore on both the president’s strengths and weaknesses and on the quality of the aides’ support’ (Greenstein 1988: xx). Scholars of the institutional presidency have described the development of staffing structures and advisory arrangements. They increase the resources available to a President for discharging the duties and obligations of the office by increasing the number of agents acting on his behalf. These studies chart the growth in size and organizational complexity of the units that support the president within the ‘presidential branch’ (Burke 2009).

Normally the differences between the American presidential government and the Westminster model limit the usefulness of transferring American experience (Rhodes and Wanna 2009b). However, the fragmentation of executive authority, the institutionalization of the core executive, the pluralization of advice, and the increasingly personal and leader-centred nature of prime ministerial leadership make American models more relevant than usual. Institutional pluralization and fragmentation create pressures for coordination and coherence. Resource dependence, mutuality, bargaining and exchange are shared imperatives facing political leaders. So, at least some facets of the presidential studies literature are relevant to Westminster polities. Given that the summits face common challenges, the literature on ‘organizational capacity’ is central to the analysis of institutionalization and prime ministerial effectiveness.
Organizational capacity has been variously defined. According to Greenstein (2004), it includes:

- The ability to forge a team and get the most out of it.
- Ensuring presidents get the advice they need to hear.
- Proficiency in creating effective institutional arrangements.

Of course, there are more expansive and ambitious perspectives (see for example, Kerbel (1991)).

Courts and the arrangements to support them are critical to the work of the prime minister, acting as gatekeepers for the agenda and access to the person. The key question when studying British government, therefore, is whether the networks of support at the heart of British government are also key gatekeepers presiding over this ever more institutionalized executive. In answering this question, we define organizational capacity as follows.

- Forging an effective team.
- Coordinating - cooperating and working with others.
- Policy advice - organizing advice, decisions and strategy.
- Managing the prime minister’s office.
- Communicating the government’s ‘narrative’.
- Political management of parliament, the party and pressure groups (Rhodes and Tiernan 2013).

As Sullivan (2011) observes, the goal is to foster ‘a unity of purpose’, by transforming the actions of many people into one voice – in our case the voice of the prime minister. As we
will argue below, the key question becomes whether court politics support or undermine the search for greater organizational capacity.

**Statecraft**

The ideas of high politics and statecraft crept into political science most notably in the work of James Bulpitt. For Bulpitt (1995: 518) ‘The Court’ is ... the formal Chief Executive, plus his/her political friends and advisers’. Members of the court, the political elite, have an ‘operating code’, which is ‘less than a philosophy of government and yet more than a specific collection of policies. It refers to the accepted rules of “statecraft” as employed over time by political elites’ (Bulpitt 1983: 68, n.23). The statecraft of the court comprises: a set of governing objectives (or ‘beliefs’); a governing code (or ‘practices’); and a set of political support mechanisms; e.g. for party management (Bulpitt 1995: 519). ‘Statecraft is about the relationship between ideas and political practice. It is about short term politicking or tactical manoeuvring’ (Buller 1995: 695). It is about gaining and keeping office, creating an image of governing competence and creating government autonomy over ‘High Politics’. It is an exercise in *realpolitik*.

The approach rests on three assumptions. First, Bulpitt (1995, 517) assumes that the Court will ‘behave in a unitary (united) fashion’. Second, he assumes the Court’ possesses a ‘relative autonomy’ from structural factors (1995, 518). Finally, he assumes the Court is rational: that is, will ‘develop strategies which will enable them to attempt to pursue consistently their own interests’ (1995, 519).

There are several problems with this account of Court Politic, but there some preliminary matters to attend to. Rod Rhodes knew Bulpitt in the 1980s when they debated
how to study central-local government relations in Britain (Bulpitt 1980 and 1983; Rhodes 1986 and 1988). Our relations were always amicable but argumentative; ‘robust rebuttal’ was a feature of Jim’s relationships with many colleagues. We see him as an agent provocateur who mounted ‘an iconoclastic assault on the pieties of Whiggism and the Westminster model’ (Bevir (2010, 456). He kept mainstream political scientists on their toes while continuing to build bridges to the mainstream in his choice of essentially behavioural topics. We see him as a source of the theoretical aperçu, not a system builder. He published little, and much of his work is in conference papers and book chapters which he never consolidated into a major book and, we suspect, that was never his intent. So, we have never read his work on court politics and statecraft as anything other than some notes towards an alternative approach to studying British politics. He was challenging others to follow his lead, not building a theoretical edifice. The criticisms that follow should be read in this light.

Bulpitt is well-served by his several followers, most notably Jonathan Bradbury, James Buller and Toby James. The criticisms that follow apply to the statecraft thesis, not just to Bulpitt. His disciples claim him for the realist school of political philosophy. We will argue that a more congenial home would be interpretive political history.

First, a persistent criticism of Statecraft ...’ has been its indifference to empirical refutation’ and, indeed, to methods more generally (see Buller 1999, 704; Rhodes 1988, 33). Bulpitt (1983: 239) concedes the point; ‘the supporting data for many of these arguments is much less than perfect’. As Buller (1999, 704) notes ‘acquiring knowledge about governing codes is a task beset with analytical problems’. We suggest below that the ‘New Political History’ addresses these matters much more satisfactorily.

Second, Buller (1999, 699-705) argues that Bulpitt neglects ontological and epistemological questions, which is undoubtedly an accurate observation, and the muddles that ensue can be clearly seen in Bulpitt’s assumptions about the court. None of these
assumptions are necessary and all betray a lingering modernist-empiricism in his thought. Indeed, Bulpitt (1995, 517) considered all his assumption as ‘operating assumptions, something to guide the analysis until it becomes unsatisfactory’. He qualified the first assumption straight away, calling the question of who is the principal actor as ‘a very real problem’ (1995, 518). For the analysis of court politics, it is less important to ask when the court is united, than to ask when there are factions, and what the consequences are. Bevir (2010, 443) concluded that Bulpitt was unusual in combing modernist empiricism with Tory historiography. We suggest statecraft is better recast as an exercise in interpretive history (see below). We reject Bulpitt’s fixation on modernist empirical topics and suggest it will be more profitable to employ the notion of situated agency and ask what traditions shape the Courts beliefs and practices (that is, its statecraft).

Buller (1999) seeks to resolve many of these issues by appealing to critical realism. This turn creates a new set of problems, mainly because critical realism and Bulpitt’s work are uneasy bedfellows. As Bevir (2010, 445) suggests

Bulpitt’s account of the interests of the central elite and the particular behavioural topics on which he focuses reflect his debt to a Tory Tradition. He draws in particular on historians such as Lewis Namier and Jack Plumb, treating their portrait of the eighteenth century court as an ideal type applicable to the whole of British history. This Tory moment provides him with his distinction between court and country and high and low politics.

There is also a clear overlap with the work of the latter-day Tory historian Maurice Cowling; they share a concern with the political élite, high politics and realpolitik.

Bulpitt’s modernist empiricism has led commentators to assimilate him to the new institutionalism (James 2013) and critical realism (Buller 1999, 705-19) but as Bevir (2010, 446) notes ‘that is only half the story’. Bulpitt equivocated on the notions of
institutions and structure when used as a reified deterministic explanation of elite actors’
behaviour:

‘It may be convenient to leave the definition of structure at any one time to the
designated principal actors; on most occasions they will be able to choose which
structural features preoccupy them and in what sequence they will be tackled’ (Bulpitt
1995, 518).

This view of structure fits uneasily with the critical rationalist claims of ‘necessity’
and ‘emergent properties’; it simply does not admit of structures that have ‘causal powers’
(Buller 1999, 706).

Buller’s views on structure overlap with Heffernan’s (2005, 610) analysis of prime
ministerial predominance:

How do actors exchange resources? They do so under the structures imposed
by the political system. Institutional *imperatives decide* the arrangement of relations
between, say, the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. They also *determine*
intra-executive, legislative and judicial configurations (emphasis added).

Here we have the dividing line between all the approaches discussed above and an
interpretive approach. All reify and overstate the effect of ‘structure’. Structures are best
understood as inherited practices that are always open to change (Bevir and Rhodes 2006b
and 2006c). We suggest below that interpretive theory addresses these matters more
satisfactorily with its notion of situated agency.

**The New Political History**
The main sources on the New Political History are fragmentary. There is no defining statement, no manifesto. Craig (2010) draws together the strands and provides a helpful conspectus of the contribution of historians to the study of ‘high politics’. The founder of this so-called Peterhouse school of history is Maurice Cowling.

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

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

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

Williamson (1999, 12-18) is more succinct. He sees the study of high politics:

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

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

And so to court politics

Court politics have existed throughout the ages (see Campbell 2010) but in its current reincarnation the idea marries the core executive to the analysis of prime ministerial predominance. It shifts analysis of central government away from functions and tasks to the beliefs and practices of interdependent actors. However, to understand
actions, beliefs and practices, we need to grasp the relevant meanings, the beliefs and preferences of the people involved. In other words we need to marry court politics to an interpretive approach.⁹

An interpretive approach begins from the insight that to understand actions, practices and institutions, we need to grasp the relevant meanings, the beliefs and preferences of the people involved. The idea of meaning lies at the heart of the interpretive approach:

We need to go beyond the bounds of a science based on verification to one which would study the inter-subjective and common meanings embedded in social reality … this science would be hermeneutical in the sense that … its most primitive data would be a reading of meanings (Taylor 1971, p. 45).

An interpretive approach seeks to understand the webs of significance that people spin for themselves. It provides ‘thick description’ in which the researcher writes his or her construction of the subject’s constructions of what the subject is up to (adapted from Geertz 1993, p. 9). So, the task is to unpack the disparate and contingent beliefs and practices of individuals through which they construct their world; to identify the recurrent patterns of actions and related beliefs. The resulting narrative is not just a chronological story. Rather, we use narrative to refer to the form of explanation that disentangles beliefs and actions to explain human life. Narratives are the form theories take in the human sciences, and they explain actions by reference to the beliefs and desires of actors. People act for reasons, conscious and unconscious (Bevir 1999, chapters 4 and 7).

In conventional social science terms, we recast the problem of structure and agency using the notion of tradition, which we use to explain why people come to believe what
they do. People understand their experiences using theories they have inherited. This social heritage is the necessary background to the beliefs people adopt and the actions they perform. We see tradition as a starting point, not a destination. Traditions do not determine the beliefs that people go on to adopt or the actions they go on to perform. It is our ability for agency that makes tradition a more satisfactory concept than rival terms such as structure, paradigm, and episteme. These latter ideas suggest the presence of a social force that determines or limits the beliefs and actions of individuals. Tradition, in contrast, suggests that a social heritage comes to individuals who, through their agency, can adjust and transform this heritage even as they pass it on to others. At the heart of this analysis of tradition is the notion of situated agency: of individuals using local reasoning consciously and subconsciously to reflect on and modify their contingent heritage.

The most obvious point stemming from an interpretive approach is its shift of topos from institution to individual; from institutions and positions to the court politics of the core executive. It focuses on the beliefs and practices of core executive actors, the traditions in which they are located, and the games people in relationships of mutual dependence to resolve dilemmas. This shift captures the intense rivalry between, for example, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown or Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. It also rejects any notion of dominance by any one actor or set of actors. As Norton (2000: 116-7) argues, ‘Ministers are like medieval barons in that they preside over their own, sometimes vast, policy territory’. Crucially, ‘the ministers fight - or form alliances - with other barons in order to get what they want’ and they resent interference in their territory by other barons and will fight to defend it’. The analysis of court politics focuses on the beliefs and practices of the political and administrative elite.

Court politics exists as journalists’ reportage, in the auto/biographies diaries and memoirs of politicians and in the pathologies of group think. The nearest usage to that
employed here is Savoie (2009, 16-7) who defines the court as ‘the prime minister and a small group of carefully selected courtiers’. It also covers the ‘shift from formal decision-making processes in cabinet … to informal processes involving only a handful of actors’. This conception is too narrow. We accept there is often an inner sanctum but participants in high politics are rarely so few. We prefer Cowling’s more expansive definition allied to Burch and Holliday’s notion that the centre is a set of networks. These networks are still exclusive. The number of participants is still limited. But, as well as the core network or inner circle, we can also talk of circles of influence (Hennessy 2000, 493-500); use that accords with political folklore.

The court is a key part of the organizational glue holding the centre together. It coordinates the policy process by filtering and packaging proposals. It contains and manages conflicts between ministerial barons. It acts as the keeper of the government’s narrative. It acts as the gatekeeper and broker for internal and external networks. In sharp contrast to Bulpitt, it turns attention away from the Tory moment to an exploration of the several ‘traditions against the background of which elites construct their world views’. There is no assumption of unity only an exploration of ‘whether different sections of the elite … draw on different traditions to construct different narratives of the world’ (Bevir 2010, 455).

It also has something interesting to say about the problems of effective government. For Walter (2010, 9-10), ‘court politics’ implies small, closed group decision-making. He is concerned about the potential for dysfunction – poor decision-making, an inability and unwillingness to engage in ‘rigorous reality-testing’ and other pathologies, if this mode of decision-making should become routine. Rhodes (2011, 275-6) reports a siege mentality, which fosters short-termism, stereotyping, and inward-looking processes of decision making during a political crisis. However, we think it is a mistake to focus on the pathologies of
small group decision making (see also: ‘t Hart, Stern and Sundelius 1997). Rather, we should ask about the several pros and cons of court politics. Thus, Savoie (2008, 232) argues that:

‘Court government suits prime ministers and their courtiers because it enables them to get things done, to see results, and to manage the news and the media better than when formal cabinet processes are respected. Written documents can be kept to a minimum, minutes of meetings do not have to be prepared, records of decisions are not necessary, formal processes can put aside, and only the most essential interdepartmental consultations have to be undertaken. On the downside Savoie (2008, 230 and 339) argues that the key adverse consequences are centralization and the collapse of accountability; ‘the centre has slowly but surely been made deliberately stronger’; … and ‘the chain of accountability … has broken down at every level’. There are also more prosaic but no less important consequences. For example, Pollitt (2007: 173) gives his recipe for losing institutional memory: rotate staff rapidly, change the IT system frequently, restructure every two years, reward management over other skills, and adopt each new management fad. Savoie (2008, 25) agrees ‘senior civil servants no longer have the experience, the knowledge, or the institutional memory to speak truth to power’ (see also Rhodes 2011, 293-5). We need to tease out both the intended and unintended consequences of court politics.

Conclusions

In summary form, our use of the term court politics or court government has five advantages.

First, the term ‘blurs genres’ (Geertz 1983, 19) with the New Political History and builds bridges between various approaches to executive government in political science; for
example, Bennister (2007, 337) cites with approval Bevir and Rhodes (2006d) on court politics.

Second, allied to an interpretive approach, it provides the ontological and epistemological foundations missing from earlier uses of term by, for example, Bulpitt and Cowling. As Craid (2010, 470-74) argues there is a clear affinity between Cowling’s historiography and interpretive political science.

Third, our approach provides the organizing concepts for a systematic analysis of elite actors. We suggest that the notions of traditions, beliefs, practices and dilemmas are effective tools for unpacking the statecraft of elite actors and their networks.

Fourth, we have shown that the toolkit of political science must include the skills of the historian and the biographer. It is no longer enough to see history and biography as ‘furnishing anecdotal material and suggestive counter evidence for the political scientists, in order that the conjectures and models of the political scientists might be strengthened or amended accordingly (Lawrence and Taylor 1997, 15 criticising Kavanagh 1991).

Documentary evidence in its many forms is the bedrock for the analysis of court politics.

Finally, court politics addresses matters of practical import. In the earlier discussion of institutionalization, we suggested the key question was whether court politics support or undermine the search for great capacity. Under what circumstances are court politics an effective form of executive governance? Though briefly, we have shown that the approach is not just an exercise in intellectual curiosity but raises important questions about effectiveness and accountability.

Court politics are ubiquitous:

‘In a curious way the triumph of mass democracy has brought politics full circle. Though Parliament is no longer the cockpit, in other respects we have returned
to the narrow eighteenth century world of patronage, self-promotion and mutual back-scratching where there is nothing at stake but the achievement and retention of office and the opportunities for personal enrichment that it brings. Politics today is little more than a childish game played out by a small and introverted political class, largely ignored by a cynical and alienated electorate except when it throws up some titillating scandal. It was always a game, of course – that was the fascination which kept players like Fox, Disraeli and Macmillan at the table and the audience riveted by every throw of the dice; but it was once a great game, played by serious minded people for serious causes for high stakes. (Campbell 2010, 7)

However, court politics are more often described than analysed, judged rather than unpacked. We have suggested that the best way to study court politics is to use an interpretive approach.

The dominant cleavage in European epistemology is between the positivistic and the Hegelian.

‘The former produces a world “which is granular; where the grains, as in well cooked rice, are discrete from each other and easily separable” and their relationships are describable by theoretical formulations produced in an objective manner by professionals detached from their subject matter. The latter depicts a world of organic wholes composed of interconnected elements. “The interconnected elements have meaning for each other in that they play roles in each other’s fates and the wider plans of which they are parts. Elements in the pattern, such as actions, are what they are in virtue of what they mean to the agents who perform them, that than in virtue of merely external traits (Aronoff and Kubik 2013, 5, citing Geller 1984, 252-3).
We suggest that court politics are a bowl of jelly, not a bucket of rice, and the historian (and the ethnographer) provide the essential tools for exploring the interdependent set of networks, beliefs and practices at the summit of government.

Finally we have suggested that court politics matter, having multiple consequences. On the plus side:

‘Court government provides quick and unencumbered access to the levers of power to make things happen and to pick and choose those political, policy and administrative issues that appeal to prime ministers or that need resolution because the media are demanding immediate answers (Savoie 2008, 231).

On the minus side, court politics engender centralization, the collapse of accountability, a siege mentality, and loss of institutional memory. The study of the court and high politics poses many challenges around access, secrecy and publication but it behoves us to try because court politics matter for effective and accountable government.
REFERENCES


Bulpitt, J. G. (1980). Territorial Politics in the United Kingdom: an analytical prospectus, Department of Politics, Warwick University, mimeo


From Core Executive to Court Politics


NOTES

1 For a review of the several approaches to executive studies, see Rhodes 2006; and Rhodes and Wanna 2009.

2 On prime ministerial predominance, see Bennister 2007 and 2012; Heffernan 2003 and 2005; and Bennister and Heffernan 2011


4 On statecraft, see Bulpitt 1983, 1986, 1995 and 1996. For a useful summary see Buller and James 2011 and for critical evaluations, see Bevir 2010; and Buller 1999. See also Dennis Kavanagh’s obituary in The Independent 25 May 1999; and the special issue of Government & Politics 45 (3) 2010.

5 On the new political history, see: Bentley and Stevenson 1983; Craig 2010; Green and Tanner 2007; Lawrence and Taylor 1997; Pederson 2002; and Williamson 1999, 12-18.

6 Cowling (1971, 1-12) discusses the character of high politics, and Cowling (1967, 311-40) discusses the sources for identifying the beliefs and practices (or in his terms, intentions and political actions) of the political elite. His approach is assessed sympathetically in Craig 2010 and Williamson 2010 and much more critically in Ghosh 1993.
On the continuities of thought between Oakeshott, Collingwood and Cowling, see: Craig (2010, 465-9). On the continuities of thought between Cowling and interpretive political science, see: Craig (2010, 470-74).

On present-day court politics, see Campbell 2010; Rhodes 2011; Savoie 2008; and the references in note 10.

Here we have space for only a brief summary. For a more detailed account of our interpretive approach see Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 2006a and 2010.

On the reportage, auto/biographies, memoirs and diaries relevant to court politics, there are too many items for a complete listing here. Recent examples for Australia include: Blewett 1999; and Watson 2002. Recent examples for the UK include: Beckett and Hencke 2004; Blunkett 2006; Mandelson 2010; Peston 2005; Rawnsley 2001 and 2010; Richards 2010; Seldon 2004; Seldon et al 2007; and Seldon and Lodge 2010.

We would also argue that the ethnographic analysis of elite beliefs and practices is another essential tool but do not have the space to develop that argument here. For examples of ethnographic fieldwork on the British political elite see: Crewe 2005; Heclo and Wildavsky’s (1981) [1974]; and Rhodes 2011. The argument for ethnographic analysis is developed in Rhodes 2013.