

Is the Westminster System Broken Beyond Repair?

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Abstract

Is Westminster dying as a useful conceptual encapsulation of a particular system of public administration? Scholarly critiques over the last decade have suggested Westminster civil services are evolving in ways that erode crucial Westminster “traditions”. Core elements including security of tenure, merit-based selection, non-partisanship, anonymity, and ministerial responsibility are all perceived as in decline or under attack. Influential commentators have proposed concepts such as ‘new political governance’, changing ‘public sector bargains’, ‘court government/politics’ and ‘presidentialisation’ to document and interpret these allegedly paradigmatic shifts in public administration. This paper places these in context by canvassing different accounts of what Westminster *is*, before assessing the critiques about what it has become. The paper argues that Westminster is not broken beyond repair, but rather it has been re-moulded to suit the needs of contemporary governance.

Introduction

The late Polish author and journalist, Ryszard Kapuściński, reflected in 1991 on the myriad ways in which past regimes still govern the future: “Although a system may cease to exist in the legal sense or as a structure of power, its values (or anti-values), its philosophy, its teachings remain in us. They rule our thinking, our conduct, our attitude to others. The situation is a demonic paradox: we have toppled the system but we still carry its genes.” Kapuściński was reflecting on the aftermath of communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe and Ethiopia, but his observation contains a wider truth: the power of a system lies not simply in its formal structures but in its ability to embed itself in the thinking of those who operate within it.

The Westminster system of government is at one and the same time a familiar certainty and an enduring mystery (Wanna 2014). It has no definitive birth date, and – despite the claims of numerous detractors – there is no death certificate proving its demise. Ministers, civil servants and commentators all swear allegiance to it, without sharing a settled definition of what they are in fact adhering to. And yet the idea – and the ideal – of Westminster governance remains ubiquitous. This special issue draws together leading scholars from across the Westminster world to examine the extent to which things actually are changing, and whether Westminster, as a conceptual category for a particular system of public administration, is under threat, dying, or is in fact already dead. And, in the spirit of Kapuściński’s observation, even if the official structures of power have changed, to what extent is Westminster a genetic inheritance that is embedded in the governance and administration DNA across the Westminster world?

‘Westminster’ has become something of a shibboleth. It acts as a byword for good government in the British parliamentary tradition – although what that means remains elusive. Its purported strengths as a mode of government include a tendency to deliver a strong executive (Lijphart 2012), and the presence of a permanent, impartial and professional bureaucracy (Aucoin 1995). These two attributes are fused together through the doctrine of ministerial responsibility to ostensibly provide clear hierarchical lines of authority and accountability (see Uhr 2014), along with competent implementation of government policy. This

apparent simplicity means that Westminster systems loom large in typologies of democratic government as having a capacity for strong decision-making, especially when contrasted with the compromises necessary in separation-of-powers and consensus-based systems.

This introductory paper begins by capturing some of the differing views of what Westminster actually is, before moving to examine the critiques and arguments about what Westminster has become. The special issue focuses in particular on the use of the term Westminster to denote a particular style of public administration. We argue that whilst there is a disconnect between the political rhetoric of Westminster continuity and the reality of Westminster change, this incongruity is itself an embedded feature of the Westminster system that was as true in 1854 as it is in 2016. The fluidity of ideas about Westminster is a defining characteristic of the model. Typologies that try to fix Westminster within defined parameters, as a particular style of public administration, only capture snapshots in time and cannot paint a definitive portrait.

This introduction and the papers that follow it take a different path. We accept that Westminster systems have certain persistent traits or family resemblances, driven by widely accepted traditions and conventions, but we stress the importance of how actors use such traditions creatively in practicing governance and administration. Westminster continues to be invoked as a standard and ideal to mobilize, coordinate and defend governmental actors and actions, and in the process traditions are defined and redefined, adapting old ideas to new governance environments. In short, the idea of Westminster has not so much been broken beyond repair as re-moulded to suit the needs of the times. Like a form of governmental plasticine, it has recognisable qualities, texture and characteristics, but can be bent into a variety of forms without losing its fundamental properties.

What is Westminster?

Before we can usefully examine questions of whether Westminster is broken, we need first to establish what Westminster is. A useful starting point might be to see how practitioners publically use the term. Westminster is frequently cited by political leaders as a shorthand way of invoking certain shared understandings. For example, in early 2015 incoming Queensland Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk assured public servants that “we will return to a Westminster-style model that values and supports a permanent public service” (Vogler 2015). Former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper was also known to invoke Westminster: “...you know, in this country in our system, we have what's called a Westminster style system...We ask people to make a choice of a government. And so I think that the party that wins the most seats should form the government” (CBC News 2015).

Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull recently referred to the Westminster system as requiring party leaders to resign if they lose the confidence of a majority of their party colleagues in the parliament (Turnbull 2015). We could fill the remainder of this article with quotes from politicians about what Westminster means. If we broadened the survey to include the opinions of senior public servants, we could fill the rest of the special issue. Suffice it to say that, for those who actually practice Westminster, the model means a range of things. The resulting portrait is confusing and contradictory, with actors often creatively interpreting and selectively invoking aspects of the Westminster model to further their strategic interests.

While scholars approach the definition of Westminster more systematically and impartially than politicians, they too fail to produce a consensus definition (see Judge 2014, 16-17; Flinders 2010). Here we summarise four “ontologies” of Westminster (cf. Bevir and Rhodes 2010) that are found in the literature. We use “ontologies” to denote the different lenses through which scholars have looked at the Westminster world. Each of the established scholarly definitions restricts the scope of the Westminster model to Britain and some of its ex-colonies. Beyond this core geographical assumption, Westminster is variously defined as: 1. a type of political system characterised by the presence of several objective traits; 2. a web of meanings shared by key governmental actors; 3. a set of persistent and stable traditions that structure political and administrative behaviours; or 4. a series of reciprocal exchange relationships between governmental elites. The following summary of these overlapping ontologies is necessarily cursory; lengthier treatments can be found elsewhere (see Bevir and Rhodes 2010; Boswell and Corbett 2014; Hay 2011; Marsh 2011; Rhodes et al 2009).

1. A list of objective traits: The first ontology suggests Westminster is a collection of objective features that governments of several countries display. The clearest articulation of this approach is provided by Arend Lijphart in his seminal work *Patterns of Democracy*, first published in 1999 and revised for 2012. Lijphart lists ten defining features of ‘Westminster’ democracies, including: single-party cabinets; dominant executives; two-party systems with majoritarian voting; pluralist but highly competitive interest groups; and constitutional flexibility. Lijphart is far from alone in attempting to specify recurring features of Westminster systems (see for example Rhodes et al 2009, and see below). But whereas most lists serve as suggestive heuristics to guide further empirical clarification and differentiation, Lijphart’s positivistic approach takes the definition of Westminster as given. He constructs Westminster in this way to facilitate comparison with non-Westminster countries, especially the “consensual” systems of government that are structured so as to disperse, constrain and share executive power. His comparison of 36 democracies seeks to determine the benefits and drawbacks of majoritarian and consensual democracies in terms of democratic representation and policy effectiveness. While Lijphart acknowledges that majoritarian Westminster systems have long been admired for their decisiveness and pragmatism, he counters that the data suggest consensus models are in fact both more representative *and* more policy effective.

A problem with rigid list-based ontologies is disagreement over what to include on the list. Lijphart, for example, omits the public service dimension from his inventory of Westminster traits. Others place a permanent and non-partisan civil service at the heart of what it means to have a Westminster system (see Rhodes and Weller 2005; Rhodes et al 2009). To quote the late Peter Aucoin, “[a] public service staffed independently of ministers on the basis of merit has long been a central feature of the Westminster model of public administration” (Aucoin 2012, 177). In the UK context, such conventions governing the inter-relationships between ministers and civil servants have often been characterised as the “Whitehall Model.” Ed Page (2010, 408) nominates four distinctive features of the “Whitehall model” as it relates to bureaucracies: political neutrality, generalist rather than technical skills, permanence in a life-long career, and a near-monopoly on policy advice to the executive. A number of authors in this special issue also adopt the term “Whitehall model” as a shorthand characterisation of the way the Westminster system of public administration has evolved in the UK context. But, as we shall see, Westminster has evolved differently in different jurisdictions, which is why we have adopted the term ‘Westminster’ for the special issue as a whole, to allow for a wider field of analysis than a focus on the “Whitehall model” alone would provide for a comparative special issue of this kind.

A further question for the list approach is, assuming we can agree on features, at what point do we decide a country possesses enough of these features to be in the Westminster club?

Lijphart concedes there is no pure Westminster jurisdiction in practice; no country, not even the United Kingdom, meets all the criteria without qualifications, with Barbados coming the closest (Lijphart 2012, 10). These real-world deviations from the ideal type may not be fatal for Lijphart's comparative project. But for this special issue – which seeks to determine if Westminster is still a useful descriptive category – deviations are of central importance. The objective list approach provides limited guidance for us in determining the point at which the idea of Westminster stops being a useful description of institutions, attitudes and dilemmas in our jurisdictions.

2. *A web of shared meanings*: One alternative understanding of what Westminster is avoids list-based definitions and argues instead that Westminster is an evolving 'web of meanings'. In such accounts, Westminster is a language, a discourse used by key political and administrative actors to convey intentions and evoke responses. It is a web insofar as it is comprised of multiple, linked components that are not organized in a hierarchy of importance. Interpretivist scholars of the Westminster model, most notably Mark Bevir and Rod Rhodes, argue that instinctive understandings of what Westminster means are ingrained not just in the minds of political leaders but in the practices of individual public servants based on shared traditions and stories that shape views about how things should be done (see Bevir and Rhodes 2001; 2010; Rhodes 2011). For interpretivists, traditions are given life and form through the beliefs and practices of those who carry and inherit those traditions. And as "situated agents," those actors can themselves reflexively change their beliefs and practices, and thereby change the content of the tradition (for a discussion, see: Rhodes, et al 2009, 26-33). In other words, traditions are the equivalent of living documents that are being constantly re-shaped, rather than unchanging texts passed from one generation to the next. For interpretivists, Westminster is an idea that is given shape and substance by the beliefs and practices of the actors who operate under that system.

Interpretivism tends, as several papers in this issue show, to encourage substantial engagement with practitioners via primary, qualitative data collection. Rhodes' ground-breaking ethnographies of Westminster elites - ministers and senior civil servants - are good examples, but there is an equally important and much more widespread practice of interpretive interviewing, wherein elites are invited to reflect on what Westminster means to them (e.g. Weller 2001). This privileging of the actual experience of officials has also been important for those who analyse bureaucratic leadership through comparative biography as a way of drawing out the ways in which the individual agency of public service leaders has interacted with Westminster traditions over time (see Theakston 1999).

Although increasingly influential, the interpretivism championed by Bevir, Rhodes and others has also come under sustained criticism from critical realists who argue for a stronger structural appreciation of Westminster continuities (see below).

3. *A persistent structuring tradition*: Critical realists argue interpretivism goes too far. They accuse it of suggesting that agency is the only force that really matters. Agency is driven by ideas – critical realists assert that interpretivists explain action in Westminster exclusively with reference to the ideas individual agents carry in their heads. They counter that agents are tethered to certain institutional realities (see McAnulla 2006; 2007; Dowding 2004). These critical accounts of interpretivism argue that there is in fact one dominant overarching understanding, "the British Political Tradition" (BPT) which predisposes individual actors to interpret events through relatively stable institutional lenses (see Marsh and Hall 2007; Hall 2011; Beer 1965; Birch 1964; Greenleaf 1983). Blunkett and Richards identify the core tenets of the BPT as support for a "liberal notion of representative democracy", "a conservative notion of responsibility," and "an emphasis on the need for responsible government" (2011, 179). Westminster, in this type of

account, encapsulates the interaction between the ideas of agents and the institutionalised structures of a dominant tradition.

Both interpretivists and some broader constructivists have argued in response that the critical realist position mischaracterises interpretivism (Boswell and Corbett 2014; Hay 2011). The suggestion that interpretivists think only individuals matter is a misrepresentation for several reasons. Firstly, interpretivists are not interested in individual meanings per se, but what these say about *shared* or *intersubjective* meanings. In other words, interpretivists are interested in what communities of Westminster practitioners think the model means, and how individuals operate within those communities to preserve or shift such shared meanings. In this sense individual actors are assumed to be shaped by their social context. Furthermore, interpretivists accept that some of the ideational content built into shared meanings is not straightforwardly manipulable. For example, traditions and conventions are important elements of the Westminster model. Interpretivists argue these are vague and malleable, but not infinitely elastic; the Westminster imperative to respect tradition and convention therefore circumscribes the scope for change at any given moment.

4. *A reciprocal exchange relationship between elites*: Finally, Westminster can be understood as one of several possible “bargains” between an elected government and a public service over respective roles and powers. This idea came to prominence in Christopher Hood’s work on “public service bargains” (Hood 2002). Public service bargains (PSB’s) represent a form of elite theory, in which those in positions of power work out what each expects, needs and can demand from the other. Hood and Lodge’s (2006) seminal work sets up an analytical triptych of “rewards”, “competencies” and “loyalty” as being the three dimensions along which working rules are negotiated. In Schafferian terms (see Schaffer 1973), the Westminster model is one form of public service bargain, originally settled in the c19th, in which civil servants agree to be anonymous and non-partisan in return for permanency of tenure, which allows them to be frank and fearless in the advice they provide to government. The Westminster bargain differs from that in spoils and consociational systems, where partisan loyalty and ethnic/regional representation influence the negotiated power settlement. Hood suggests this bargain is evolving, shifting from the originally “tacit” model to a more formalized legalistic bargain (see also Rhodes et al 2009 on “codification”). At the same time he sees more radical shifts in bargains in Westminster associated with new public management, moving away from the idea of direct hierarchical control, to more delegated responsibility, with new possibilities for playing “blame games” (2011).

Critics of the PSB approach argue that it assumes and implies a degree of equality in power relationships – as if power is distributed in public services according to the outcome of a negotiation between roughly similar groups. Historical experience suggests that power waxes and wanes according to context. For example, one of Max Weber’s key arguments was that bureaucracies would tend to become very powerful relative to their political masters (who are like “dilettantes”), the latter being “always at the mercy” of the administrators (Weber 1978). The changes wrought by NPM suggest that politicians have in some important ways wrenched back the steering wheel of state from bureaucracies in ways that Weber could not have foreseen. Hood and Lodge (2006) allow for such shifts as being driven through exogenous shocks to the bargaining process wrought by changes in political and economic systems (Hood 2002; Hood and Lodge 2012). A further critique focuses on the strong assumption of actor self-interest. The PSB approach is “cut from the cloth of rational choice institutionalism” (Barzelay and Gallego 2006). Such critiques suggest that PSBs struggle to account for how groups of administrative or political elites can overcome individual self-interest to present a united bargaining position to their opponents (cf. Dunleavy 1985). We would suggest the concept of a public service bargain is

a convenient simplifying metaphor for complex webs of ongoing negotiation and legitimation, in which Westminster discourses play a crucial role in shaping the demands actors can reasonably make of each other, and help to glue administrative and political actors together in communities of shared interest and purpose.

What's Wrong with Westminster?

The large body of research on the Westminster system has generated many diagnoses and prognoses of change, decline and decay. The forms of those critiques have tended to congregate into at least three distinct streams of argument. Bevir and Rhodes (2010) characterise the three components as a “management story”, a “governance story” and a “centralization story.” We draw upon these categories below as a useful starting point for encapsulating the range of criticisms that suggest all is not well with the current state of the Westminster system.

The Management Story

Most accounts of Westminster breakdown take as their starting point the New Public Management (NPM) reforms that emerged more or less simultaneously during the 1980s in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, and to a lesser extent in Canada (Aucoin 1995; Hood 1990; Boston 1996). The history of the rise of NPM has been extensively documented elsewhere (Aucoin 1995; Hood 1990; Hood and Dixon 2015). It is an umbrella term for a complex series of developments whose impact has been felt well beyond the Westminster world. In the UK, NPM was spurred by the view that traditional ministerial responsibility was becoming increasingly impossible, as government grew so large that political executives could not monitor and control all the activities of their departments. Government leaders and a popular British television comedy series (*Yes, Minister*) portrayed bureaucrats as consistently unaccountable and unresponsive, usually self-serving, and only occasionally competent. NPM involved several responses, including the division of ministries into small policy departments and large arms-length “executive agencies” held accountable for meeting targets. The Next Steps initiative under the Major Government was the clearest example of this “agencification” process (Elston 2014). This was coupled with a focus on outcomes-based reporting as ever more sophisticated metrics strived to measure and quantify successes and failures in service delivery.

In the Antipodes governments tried to force greater cost discipline onto agencies via contracting out, contestability and user pays regimes, while Australia removed permanence from departmental secretaries in favour of temporary contracts and individualised performance agreements (Boston 1996; Lodge and Gill 2011; Podger 2007; Wanna et al 2000). In all jurisdictions, public services lost their monopoly on policy advice, as governments looked increasingly to external experts for a second opinion, while ministers hired their own political advisers to filter and challenge the requests and counsel coming from the bureaucracy (Eichbaum and Shaw 2007).

One interpretation of these shifts is that they reject key elements of the Westminster model, especially: the indivisibility of the minister and her officials in terms of accountability and responsibility; the career permanence of officials who are serially loyal to successive governments; and a unified civil service with standardised hiring and promotion systems favouring generalist knowledge. NPM broke the straightforward chain of accountability by splitting policy and delivery, pushing public servants into the limelight as quasi-autonomous and

publically answerable “managers”, and forcing them to adopt partisan orientations as they sought to retain their increasingly tenuous jobs.

An alternative interpretation is that NPM was an effort to reinvigorate the spirit of traditional Westminster public service bargains for changed circumstances (Aucoin 1995). Splitting policy development and delivery was partly about achieving realistic accountability in ministries that had grown astronomically since the Northcote Trevelyan Report and the era of the nightwatchman state. Reformers still wanted ministers held accountable, but it had become unrealistic to expect them to know everything going on in their ministries. In this view, the reformers didn’t break the bargain; the deal had already broken down as a result of broader shifts in the political, social and economic environment.

Furthermore, there has been some backtracking on NPM, such that many authors now speak of a “post-NPM era”. This idea is debated (see Lodge and Gill 2011) but there has been a clear move to reintegrate service delivery within ministries, often referred to as “deagencification.” These moves have been explicitly justified using principles consistent with the Westminster tradition – that the political executive should be “in control of the levers” (Christensen and Laegried 2007; Howard 2015).

The diversity of changes under the NPM umbrella mean it is hard to come to a general conclusion about their effect on Westminster norms and practices. From an interpretive perspective concerned with how ideas are used, we can say that the concept of Westminster was generally downplayed during the heyday of NPM in the 1980s and 1990s, when such ideas and principles were regarded as old fashioned (Rhodes et al 2009). However, Westminster rhetoric appears to have undergone a resurgence in recent years (ibid). For example, Diamond argues that the Cameron Coalition Government in the UK can be characterised as “reasserting core tenets of the Westminster model and Whitehall paradigm: ministerial and collective responsibility, strong leadership, [and] the capacity for ‘command and control’ through the core executive” (Diamond 2014, 145).

Whatever the arguments about the continued strength of the Westminster model, few would dispute that NPM changed the culture and operation of government. One of the most important markers of this shift is that we now think about the state not as a hierarchical entity governed from the centre but a loose network of actors engaged in “governance.”

The Governance Story

The mid twentieth-century days of a growing welfare state, where large bureaucracies dominated policy capacity and delivery in clear hierarchies of authority, have given way to a more networked contemporary governance environment. The best-known metaphor for describing the new realities of power is the rubber-levers analogy that refers to the way in which political leaders pull a policy lever, only to find that it is not in fact attached to any mechanism capable of ensuring direct compliance. Rather, modern bureaucracies have to negotiate policy design, delivery and implementation with a wide range of stakeholders from the private sector, the non-government sector, lobby groups and interest groups, who all play some part in creating and delivering public policy. In Rhodes’s now famous (1997) account, these developments mean the traditional Westminster model, where policy is made in Whitehall (as well as Canberra, Ottawa and Wellington) and hierarchically implemented, has broken down. The once powerful state has been “hollowed out” by NPM and through the broader neoliberal thrust to downsize and retrench government programs and organizations. Government now acts as one player in a network of actors, rather than a preeminent, sovereign authority.

The extent to which governance undermines the Westminster model remains contested. Some critics have suggested that the “first wave” of governance theories overstated the decline in states’ capacity to steer social relations (see Bell and Hindmoor 2009). It is not necessary for our purposes here to weigh into that substantive debate because arguably the networked nature of wider governance relationships need not fundamentally alter the intra-governmental elite relationships between administrative and political leaders that are central to the Westminster tradition.

The Centralization Story

The final stream of argument about the changing nature of Westminster is focussed on the perceived centralization of power in the offices of prime ministers in ways that undermine the traditional roles of parliament, the collective traditions of cabinet government, and the influence of an impartial public service. At its centre is what has been characterised as the “presidentialisation” debate, which suggests that the cumulative impact of the changes is to allow prime ministers to act as presidents in all but name. The presidentialisation thesis has been most strongly associated with the leadership of Tony Blair as British prime minister from 1997-2007. Major works like Foley’s *The British Presidency* (2000), and Seldon’s *Blair* (2004) make the case for seeing Blair’s leadership as the defining case of British presidentialisation, with government being run by, for, and through the Prime Minister’s Office more than ever before. Poguntke and Webb (2005) formalised some of these themes into a comparative model to test for the presence of presidentialisation by assessing changes in the executive face, the party face, and the electoral face of democratic leadership. Their model has been applied as a comparative tool to assess many Westminster jurisdictions, including Australia, where Kefford (2013) found evidence for presidentialisation in all three faces.

There is an equally strong body of scholarship arguing against the idea of presidentialisation in parliamentary systems, centring on the inappropriateness of the label as being able to accurately reflect the differential powers of a president and a prime minister (Dowding 2012; 2013; Heffernan 2005; Hart 1991). For the purposes of this special issue as it examines the future of Westminster as a system of public administration, the main interest of the presidentialisation thesis is the extent to which civil servants have found themselves more marginalised in policymaking processes in increasingly “presidential” systems. A key part of that debate centres on the pluralisation of sources of advice outside the traditional bureaucracy, including the kinds of units set up by Blair within his office to focus on delivery and strategy. These units acted not only as competing sources of advice, but also as conduits for a wider net of advice funnelled straight to the prime minister from various outside think tanks, interest groups and independent researchers. They have been replicated in various guises in Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

The role of these units contributes to wider concerns about the increasing role, size and influence of personal political staff in Westminster system countries. Labelled as “special advisers” in the UK, and “ministerial advisers” in Australia, the staff working under these labels are not employed through regular civil service processes of merit, and owe their employment and their loyalty directly to the political party in power. Importantly, studies in all the major modern Westminster democracies show that their number has burgeoned since the advent of NPM (e.g. Eichbaum and Shaw 2007). In the UK, numbers almost doubled from 38 in 1997 under Prime Minister Major to 70 in 1998 under Prime Minister Blair (Richards 2008, 180). The statistics are considerably more startling in the smaller populations of Australia and Canada where national governments are served by over 400 political advisers (see Aucoin 2012; Tiernan 2007, 244).

It remains a matter of extensive scholarly and media debate as to whether the presence and behaviour of such advisers has changed the role of Westminster bureaucracies, at best by diminishing their influence and at worst by encouraging their politicisation. Page (2010, 414-416) suggests that advisers have not politicised the UK system, and that their influence has waned after the discontinuation of the Blair experiment to grant his two most senior advisers hierarchical authority over civil servants. In Australia, former Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Peter Shergold, has equally denied seeing advisers as a politicising influence. In Shergold's (2013) account, they play a separate but complementary role to that of public servants in serving ministers and providing healthy competition in policy advice. Weller (2001, 101-4) cites interview evidence from departmental secretaries that whilst advisers might not have politicised processes, they certainly provided extra competition for a minister's ear in a way that reduced some of the ready access public servants had previously enjoyed (see also Tiernan 2007).

In New Zealand, Eichbaum and Shaw (2007) argue that the advent of political advisers into the system has added new challenges of accountability, but without displacing the fundamentals of public service impartiality. Critical assessments have perhaps been at their sharpest in Canada, where the late Peter Aucoin suggested a form of "New Political Governance" (NPG) was undermining the fundamentals of Westminster governance by embedding partisanship into the institutional relationships.

NPG is characterized by four main features: the integration of executive governance and the continuous campaign, partisan-political staff as a third force in governance and public administration, a personal politicization of appointments to the senior public service, and an assumption that public service loyalty to, and support for, the government means being promiscuously partisan for the government of the day. (2012, 179).

Critics of the NPG thesis suggest that it exaggerates specific grievances and isolated instances into a systemic critique when elements of Westminster remain strongly identifiable in most jurisdictions (Boston and Nethercote 2012).

There is however broad agreement that the conditions of the "traditional" bargain between ministers and public servants in Westminster systems have changed, even if this isn't universally thought to have led to overt politicisation or "breaking" of the system. Lodge (2010, 100) summarises the traditional position:

The traditional public service bargain has been characterized in the context of British government by 'serial loyalty' (or serial monogamy): civil servants give up their right to express their political views publicly in exchange for obtaining access to the highest level of political decision-making and safe rewards (including pensions), while politicians give up the right to hire and fire civil servants in exchange for receiving enthusiastic and loyal support.

Lodge (2010, 110-11) argues that in the British case "...the stereotypes of a British administrative legacy and its demise need to be qualified. Bargains were not broken, but survived in a state of continuous tension and adaptation." Grube (2012) argues that there has been some change to the extent to which public servants should be allowed or required to engage in "public" activities. As discussed in Grube and Howard's paper in this special issue, there are forces pushing mandarins further into the public limelight to accept a more public form of accountability in a way that alters former conceptions of the public service bargain in Westminster contexts.

So, Whither Westminster?

If the critics are right, and the practices within Westminster systems are now fundamentally different from what they were prior to the advent of NPM, does it make sense any longer to talk about a Westminster model of public administration? In order to grapple with this fundamental question, the contributors to this special issue have focussed in on specific aspects of the characteristics of Westminster public administration that are unique in comparison to the expectations placed on public administrators in other systems. Certain central features in particular are identified: fusion of the political and administrative elite; anonymity for civil servants; ministerial responsibility; and shared understandings of informal traditions. The features are of course all inter-linked in many respects, but each also represent specific traditions of governance that are distinctively captured by the label “Westminster.”

The opening contribution, from Weller and Haddon, strips away some of the layers of accretion that have covered the Westminster system in the fading light of some kind of golden inheritance. As Eichbaum and Shaw have warned previously, there is a risk of “setting up a false dichotomy between Westminster as the embodiment of administrative virtue, and politicization as the repudiation of Westminster and the embodiment of administrative vice” (2007, 609). In other words, it is possible for the term “Westminster” to conjure up images of a type of governance perfection that has misguidedly been placed under attack. Weller and Haddon challenge the notion that there has ever been a “golden age” of Westminster governance. For them, Westminster is by definition set up for evolution. By having a system based on shared understandings and traditions rather than a set of written constitutional imperatives, Westminster retains the flexibility that has seen it survive over 150 years of change without being jettisoned. They argue that Westminster is just as useful a term now as it has ever been for capturing a group of ideas that have form and shape, but were never meant to have constitutive power.

The contribution by Richards and Smith suggests that changes in recent decades are in fact more significant and jolting than this kind of evolutionary characterisation can allow. At some point, change becomes so fundamental as to render the system itself changed in its very essentials. They focus in particular on the conceptual indivisibility of the executive and administrative arms of government as being a core Westminster notion. Conventions of ministerial responsibility and accountability are built on the understanding that the first duty of the public service is to serve the executive government, but that this service is rendered in a symbiotic way. Richards and Smith argue that since the 1918 Haldane report, if not before, ministers and civil servants recognised a mutual shared interest in working as a complementary partnership in giving effect to the programme of the elected government. The doctrine of ministerial responsibility fused them together, with ministers – at least in theory – responsible for the strengths and failures of the work of their civil servants.

Richards and Smith argue that the advent of NPM and its aftermath has operated in the UK context to strip away this model of a shared indivisible partnership, and replaced it instead with a more hierarchical principal and agent model. It is a model of direct hierarchical control, reflecting the increased expectations that ministers will accept responsibility for the orders they give, and public servants will accept responsibility for how they carry them out. This kind of change operates so as to fundamentally alter a component part of Westminster public administration. As the authors indicate, the effective change to a principal-agent approach has occurred within a rhetorical framework that emphasises the continuity of Westminster principles. So whilst ministers emphasise that nothing has changed, this masks the reality that the very fundamentals have in fact changed or are under threat.

The distinction between Westminster as an evolving, “stretchable” set of ideas or as a set of institutional relationships that are at some point “breakable” is a theme that continues into the third paper examining how public servants negotiate the line between appropriate responsiveness and inappropriate partisanship. Grube and Howard argue that institutionalist accounts such as Aucoin’s NPG underestimate the capacity and willingness of senior public servants to exercise agency in managing contemporary pressures to become more partisan. The pressures are real, as are examples of partisanship amongst officials, but Grube and Howard cite interview data and case studies from Australia and Canada to demonstrate that senior public servants retain very clear ideas on what the Westminster tradition requires of them when the pressure is on.

The last thirty years have also seen constant change in the structures of public administration – what is often termed the machinery of government – as governments search for new ways to deliver services through more responsive bureaucratic models (see James 2003). Dommett, Hardiman and MacCarthaigh explore the implications of these changes for the evolution of the Westminster model by examining the trajectory of arm’s length bodies in Britain and Ireland. Independent agencies represent something of a puzzle for Westminster public administration: while they appear to contradict the core Westminster principle of direct ministerial control, they are ubiquitous, holding the lion’s share of public sector employment and service delivery in many modern Westminster democracies. Dommett, Hardiman and MacCarthaigh focus on the recent trend towards “de-agencification” and examine the suggestion that de-agencification represents a return to ministerial hierarchy, or alternatively a shift towards a more “Europeanized” model where agencies and ministries relate to each other via “negotiated interdependence.” They conclude neither account captures the complexity of recent reforms. Contemporary efforts at de-agencification contain both a reassertion of ministerial control, but also much greater attention to the cultivation and management of relationships between ministers, departments and agencies. This new blend is a distinctive feature of recent agency reform programs, and leads the authors to argue that the Westminster model has evolved to more explicitly address the status of arm’s length bodies.

Rounding out the special issue, Lindquist, Eichbaum and Jarvis stand back to provide a comparative survey of how the idea of Westminster has shaped relationships between elected governments, civil society, and civil services in four jurisdictions. They argue that pivotal historical reforms in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom can be seen as a series of ‘dares’ in which leaders were willing to take political risks in order to substantially change the existing boundaries of entrenched practices. Their analysis begins with an in-depth look at the Canadian case over the past decade, where they argue there was widespread concern about a perceived corrosion of Westminster principles under the Harper government. Lindquist, Eichbaum and Jarvis present a picture of Westminster as a model for government that allows for tremendous flexibility and nuanced interpretation, but also as one that is reliant on a depth of political will and courage in order to function well.

In a sense Westminster has always acted as something of a façade – a veil behind which to hide all the complexity, duplicity, and political difficulties of parliamentary government. The contributions to this special issue debate the extent to which that façade has now become unsustainable. Whether Westminster operates as a language, or a set of institutions, or as an elite bargain, it is a concept that continues to command the curiosity of scholars and practitioners alike. We hope this special issue contributes to ongoing debates about what Westminster has been, what it is, and what it may yet become.

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