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The impact agenda and the study of British Politics

Abstract

This article attempts to discern the nature of impact in relation to the British politics sub-field of political studies. It reviews evidence from REF2014 to establish how political scientists working in this area understood, and tried to demonstrate impact. It critically appraises how the impact agenda is affecting how research into British politics is prioritised, undertaken and disseminated, and question whether this is a good thing for the sub-discipline. The implications of this for the shape of British politics research going forward are considered. While welcoming the possibility of a re-centring of scholarly attention on British politics, the article cautions against a retreat to the parameters of the British Political Tradition and the Westminster Model view.

Keywords: impact; engagement; Research Excellence Framework (REF); British politics; Westminster Model.

Introduction

As an academic discipline British politics has, for some time, found itself under strain. In the founding editorial of this journal, Peter Kerr and Steven Kettell highlighted how 'the study of British politics has declined from its erstwhile position as a core area of analytical concern within British universities, to a position whereby it is increasingly regarded as a poor cousin to a number of specialisms which take the international arena as their main focus of inquiry' (2006, p. 3). The establishment of a journal dedicated solely to British politics reflected the 'defensive mood' (2006, p. 4) of the editors and

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arguably the waning status of the field, which previously might have assumed its subject matter was of sufficient importance, and wide enough interest, to justify occupying substantial amounts of space in the generalist political studies journals. That this was no longer automatically the case reflected the internationalisation agenda both within political studies and UK higher education more generally, compounded by the demands of external research assessment. The latter emphasised an 'arbitrary and hierarchical distinction between national and international reputation' (2006, p. 4) which, Kerr and Kettell suggested, served to pressurise scholars 'to distance themselves from studying the politics of a national, regional, or local political space' (2006, p. 5). Writing six years later Matt Beech concurred that British politics scholars face a predicament in terms of how to demonstrate international standing for the purposes of REF, which 'usually refers to recognition in the American academy and in the pages of American journals' (2012, p. 12). With international journal rankings dominated by publications from the United States, which themselves have a clear methodological bias in favour of quantitative political science (Teele and Thelen, 2017), scholars might feel pressure not only to redirect the focus of their research to avoid 'the charge of parochialism' (Beech, 2012, p. 12) but also to alter their epistemological and methodological standpoint, undermining the relatively pluralistic tradition that has historically been a strength of British political studies.

For the discipline of British politics, the issues identified by Beech (2012), and Kerr and Kettell (2006), remain very real. However, this article aims to review the effect of a further, and possibly countervailing trend with increasing purchase in UK higher education, namely the 'impact agenda'. This development raises some important and difficult questions for academia as a whole and for political science generally, but also prompts some which are particular to the study of British politics. These relate to the way in which government, universities and researchers have interpreted what is meant by impact, and how they have sought to demonstrate it to meet the requirements of the impact case studies for the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF). As will be discussed below, one

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striking feature of the REF exercise was the extent to which the domestic arena featured in the impact case studies, standing in something of a marked contrast to the submission of outputs. This raises the prospect of a welcome re-centring of scholarly attention on British politics, or at least a counterbalancing of the incentive to shift the focus of research away from it. Yet it also suggests potentially worrying limitations on how British politics is understood as an academic discipline, and may serve to reinforce the restrictive 'Westminster Model' view. Consequently, I argue that scholars of British politics should not dismiss or disparage the impact agenda out of hand, but that they must proceed with care, mindful of these pitfalls.

The article proceeds as follows. Firstly, it discusses how impact is understood in the context of UK higher education, and the emergence of this agenda. In so doing it reviews some of the criticisms that have been raised regarding the pursuit of impact. Secondly it explores in greater detail British politics and impact in terms of the REF. Thirdly it considers some of the issues for the discipline of British politics that the impact agenda raises.

The impact agenda in UK higher education

The impact agenda can be seen as one which 'prioritises and rewards policy relevance' (Smith and Stewart, 2016: 1). It has its roots in the wider neo-liberalisation of higher education in the United Kingdom which, critics have argued, has undermined the status of universities as institutions for the public good (Collini, 2013). Instead they have been reduced to 'instrumental purposes' (Holmwood, 2017, p.1) and 'reconfigured as global entrepreneurial businesses' (Vincent, 2015, p. 478). In the neo-liberal university, students, as paying customers, become consumers of education as a private good, while 'publicly funded research should be undertaken with specific "beneficiaries" in mind' (Holmwood, 2017, p. 5). Being able to demonstrate the useful and beneficial impact of research has

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accordingly become an essential yardstick for justifying the allocation of public funds to pay for it, reflecting a shift 'from a state patronage to investment model' of research funding (Hammersley, 2014, p. 345). In the social sciences impact has typically been understood in terms affecting public policy, particularly in the context of the desire for more 'evidence-based' policy (Geddes *et al.*, 2017). This drive is underpinned by the assumption that:

Effective use of research has the potential to improve public policy, enhance public services and contribute to the quality of public debate. Further, knowledge of when and how funded research makes a difference should enable research funders to make better decisions about how and where they allocate research funds. (Davies *et al.*, 2005, p. 2).

Researchers are thus required to submit 'pathways to impact' as part of funding applications to the Research Councils, and 'research users' are involved in the consideration of such bids, as well as in the assessment of the impact case studies now integral to the REF. As Martyn Hammersley has argued, this 'effectively implies the incorporation of academic research into the policy-making process' (2014, p. 346).

A variety of concerns have been raised with this direction of travel, across a range of disciplines. Most obviously these relate to academics feeling pressurised to change the focus of their research, to ensure fit with the prevailing policy mood. As well as compromising the notion of academic freedom and the value of the pursuit of knowledge for itself, fears have also been raised that this might 'distort or divert from the foundations of scholarship on which the substantial past success and the social legitimacy of universities has been built' (Hughes and Kitson, 2012, p. 747). In other words, given the often unexpected and incidental discoveries that flow from academic research, overly interfering with

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the processes of academic inquiry risks undermining the basis of the very thing such interventions are designed to promote.

In the social sciences, Hammersley argues, the impact of research findings is largely dependent on their alignment ‘with the prevailing “speed” and “direction” of the relevant form of policy-making and practices at the time’ (2014, p. 348). Inevitably, policy-makers and practitioners will bring their own perspective to the selection of research they see as relevant and to their interpretation of it, meaning that research ‘may be valued where it can be seen as confirming or complementing’ these fundamental working assumptions, but may be ignored, or even viewed as a threat, where it challenges them (*ibid.*). This limits the opportunity for critical scholarship to demonstrate impact in the way it is understood by government and research funders, even if it goes on to have long-term transformative effects on the discipline. More worryingly, the pressure for impact might serve as a disincentive to the pursuit of research that seeks to critique or go beyond current dominant paradigms – the exercise of power through agenda setting (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). For John Holmwood (forthcoming), the impact agenda effectively ‘requires academics to align their research with private interests, rather than a general public interest’. It consequently serves to reinforce populist suspicion that expert knowledge – notoriously derided by Cabinet Minister Michael Gove during the EU referendum campaign – is interest-based. Andrew Vincent has gone further, arguing impact is part of a wider ‘ideological agenda, which together with performance measurement, staff review systems, appraisal and sundry monetary sticks and carrots, aims to induce conformity’ (2015, p. 482-3).

Others, however, take a rather more positive view of the impact agenda, viewing it as an opportunity to promote the relevance of academic research to society more broadly. Research into the attitude of social policy academics (admittedly a discipline which, given its focus, one would expect to be predisposed towards it) found that although most ‘identified concerns’, the majority also perceived

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benefits in the greater emphasis on impact (Smith and Stewart, 2017, p. 113). Within political studies, Thom Brooks (2013) has argued that the impact agenda should be welcomed by political theorists as one which could enhance the status of their sub-discipline. He argues that theorists can be confident that they have impact through 'our thinking about politics, our thinking about public policy more broadly, and through public engagement' (2013, p.210), and the biggest challenge is overcoming scepticism within the field about this capacity, not delivering the impact itself.

Addressing political studies more widely, Matthew Flinders (2013a; 2013b) has similarly argued that the external pressure for more demonstrable impact should be used as an opportunity to counter the growing perception that the academic study of politics is increasingly irrelevant to society. As he states:

[T]he emphasis on relevance should not automatically be viewed as the imposition of a market-based and instrumental logic, but might more productively be viewed as an opportunity to showcase exactly why the study of politics matters, to forge a deeper and more reflective model of scholarship, and to increase the leverage position of the discipline vis-à-vis external research funders. (Flinders, 2013b, p. 623).

Flinders therefore views the impact agenda within the context of the broader direction of travel that he perceives in political science since the 1950s, namely as a drifting along 'a road to irrelevance' (2013b, p. 622) due to increasing professionalism, methodological fetishism, and distancing from political practitioners and the public sphere more broadly. Much of this critique relates to political science as understood in terms of its North American incarnation, but can also be applied in substantial part to political studies in the United Kingdom – particularly in terms of the balkanisation of sub-disciplines, often characterised by such obscure language that they struggle to speak to each other,

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yet alone to an audience beyond the academy. Jennings and Lodge (2016) have lambasted political science for morphing into ‘an elite technocratic enterprise’ which has ‘glorified big data’, while losing its critical capacity and ability to relate to politics as it happens in the real world, epitomised by the way the discipline was blindsided by the votes for Brexit and Donald Trump.

Interestingly, the sub-discipline of British politics stands out as something of an exceptional case in this respect. As the professionalization of political science more generally advanced, to some extent British politics stood against the tide by retaining, at least in part, the tradition of ‘deliberately atheoretical’ writing (Gamble, 1990, p. 404). And even as scholarship on British politics has become more theoretically driven and methodologically rigorous, it has retained a clear commitment to pluralism in both respects, and has been something of a bastion of resistance to the imposition of narrow ‘scientific’ approach to political studies. Here, it is important to highlight that I take the sub-discipline of British politics to encompass a wide range of approaches to the study of a broad definition of ‘the political’ in the geographical space of the United Kingdom, which includes but reaches considerably beyond its traditional concerns with parties and the state. This is reflected for example in the mission statement of this journal, or the pluralism of the *Oxford Handbook of British Politics* (Flinders et al. 2009).¹ This distinguishes it from political science in its Americanised, quantitatively-driven form as critiqued by Jennings and Lodge, even while recognising that the concerns of the latter often overlap with British politics (indeed one worry is that British politics as a sub-field risks becoming overly dominated by the study of public opinion and voting behaviour). Nevertheless, some of the features of the discipline of British politics which contributed to its perceived declining status relative to other areas more attuned to the internationalisation (or Americanisation) of political studies in the UK may leave it well placed to capitalise on a renewed emphasis on impact, engagement and relevance. This is explored further in the section that follows.

Impact, the REF and British politics

As noted in the introduction, a striking feature of REF2014 was the extent to which the domestic arena featured in the impact case studies submitted to sub-panel 21, the Unit of Assessment (UoA) for Politics and International Studies. A total of 56 institutions made submissions to this UoA, of which 17 had all their impact rated as either 3* (internationally excellent) or 4* (world leading).² Collectively these 17 leading institutions for impact submitted 60 case studies, of which 36 included some notable UK coverage, and 22 had the United Kingdom as their primary focus. Across the UoA as a whole a very similar pattern emerges: 166 impact case studies were submitted in total, of which 60 had the UK as their primary focus. As the Main Panel C overview report noted (discussing UoA 21), ‘there was something of a tendency for case studies to draw disproportionately on research on the UK itself – rather more so than for research outputs, for instance’ (REF2014, 2015, p. 81). Not all this research on the UK falls within the traditional boundaries of the discipline of British politics, but much of it did. For example, case studies from the 17 highest ranked institutions included research on the rising salience of English national identity; on standards in public life; on women’s parliamentary representation; freedom of information; House of Commons reform; the UK Cabinet manual and coalition formation; regional funding formulae; and participatory democracy on the left of British politics.

There are several possible explanations for this over-representation of UK-focused research in the impact case studies relative to the submission of outputs. One is the issue of practicalities. Researchers hoping to achieve impact through their research might simply have found it much more feasible to disseminate it to, and engage with, non-academic users in the UK, whether that be at a local, regional or national level. Of course, many impact case studies did focus on international research, but the investment of resources to build and maintain networks overseas could reasonably be expected to be larger than doing so domestically. The need to provide a clear evidence trail with supporting

documentation for impact case studies might similarly have favoured UK-focused researchers, particularly if faced with the need to retrospectively piece together evidence stretching back a number of years.

Another connected factor could be how impact was typically interpreted and understood by departments when assembling their REF submissions. As the Main Panel C overview report also highlighted, while diverse in their coverage, 'case studies tended to focus primarily on policy-related examples' (REF2014, 2015, p. 81). While policy impact can potentially be demonstrated internationally, for example through international institutions or foreign governments, opportunities may be more easily accessible in the domestic arena. Indeed, many of the case-studies which sought to demonstrate impact internationally also claimed it at the national level (for example some cited impact on European Union institutions and the UK government within a certain policy sphere). In short, we can postulate that the barriers to accessing domestic policy-making circles will be lesser for UK-based academics than those they might encounter elsewhere, where their institutional affiliations might carry less reputational weight, or where the emphasis on evidence-based policy making, and willingness to engage with academic researchers, might be lower.

As Geddes *et al.* (2017, p. 2) have noted, a key aspect of academics' efforts to emphasise the policy relevance of their work is 'a growing focus on parliamentary impact'. Analysis by Caroline Kenny (2015) has shown that a fifth of social science impact case studies 'outlined substantive engagement with the UK Parliament' and two-fifths mentioned some such engagement (Geddes *et al.*, 2017, p. 2). Within UoA 21, a large majority of those case studies with their primary focus on the UK mention the Westminster parliament, and/or the devolved legislatures in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Key ways in which academics engage with Parliament are through providing evidence, especially to select committee inquiries, and through having their research cited, for example in a debate or report

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(Kenny, 2015). Given the frequency of calls for evidence by select committees, and the increasing eagerness of Parliament to draw on external expertise, the opportunities for academics to claim impact in this way are considerable, and afford a relatively low-cost way for researchers to show willingness to disseminate their research to a policy-focused audience.

The disproportionate presence of UK-focused research in the impact case studies submitted to REF2014 might also support the observation made by Kerr and Kettell (2006, p. 5) that ‘when we take a closer look at the work of many of our colleagues in British political science departments who would label themselves ‘comparativists’, ‘Europeanists’, or ‘globalisation’ experts, many of these appear still to use Britain as their main point of reference’. If they are correct that much British politics research is essentially relabelled (in response no doubt to pressure to internationalise, especially in terms of journal outputs) that would indicate the existence of a greater breadth and depth of UK-based research on which impact case-studies might be based than might be assumed from surveying the submission of outputs to the REF. It may also signal a greater willingness to explicitly re-centre scholarly attention on British politics, especially as departments prioritise the support and development of impact case studies as a key element of their REF strategies. While the ratings of individual outputs and case-studies are not published, we do know that the discipline of Politics and International Studies as a whole was scored significantly higher in terms of impact than outputs. Some 20.9 percent of outputs were rated 4*, and 40.1 percent 3*, compared to 40 percent of impact case studies rated 4*, and a further 44.2 percent 3*. The focus on developing impact is therefore only likely to increase as institutions prepare for the next REF. From an optimist’s perspective, this provides an opportunity for the field of British politics to approach future research assessment exercises with more conviction than it has in the past, when the sense that it had suffered from the emphasis on international standing in research evaluation was prevalent (Randall, 2012, p. 18). However, the

impact agenda also raises a number of issues for British politics as a discipline, as discussed in the next section.

Issues with Impact and British Politics

As has been discussed, the ascent of the impact agenda raises the prospect of a welcome re-centring of scholarly attention on British politics, or at least a counterbalancing of the incentive to shift the focus of research away from it. However, a number of potential pitfalls present themselves which the discipline must be mindful of, not least as in some ways these threaten to undermine much of the progress that has been made in recent decades in promoting a more reflexive, theoretically informed, and critical study of British politics.

One issue, touched upon above, is the risk of the scope of scholarship being narrowed to prioritise policy-relevant research, particularly that which is likely to be receptively received by government, research funders, or other policymakers. While such research is valuable, it also comes with limitations that it is important to be aware of. For example, in relation to achieving research impact through engagement with parliament, Geddes *et al.* (2017, p. 15) conclude that ‘co-production of research is the deepest and arguably most rewarding form of engagement’, in which users are heavily involved in the entire research process from the design stage. This can produce rich and highly beneficial findings which can be utilised by parliamentarians and those that work alongside them, for example in their efforts to hold government to account. However, as they also recognise, such approaches can be problematic, come with ‘systemic risks and limits’ that often go unacknowledged (Flinders *et al.*, 2016, p. 276). These include conflicts over the goals of the research, the risk of reinforcing existing hierarchical power structures, pressure from funders, and institutional structures limiting the boundaries of the research or how results are interpreted (Flinders *et al.*, 2016, p. 269). Geddes *et al.*

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(2017, p. 11) discovered that ‘actors within Parliament have very specific desires for academic work, wishing it to be visible, accessible, rigorous, cogent, well delivered, pertinent and policy relevant’, and concluded that this ‘suggests the need for engagements that are tailored to or conscious of policy questions or parliamentary requirements’. Yet as one of their research participants observed, MPs in particular are often simply seeking research evidence ‘to give credibility to their view’ rather than to help form it (HL Librarian, quoted in Geddes *et al.*, 2017, p. 13). So, research that meets these requirements might appear to achieve impact through its utilisation in parliamentary debates or reports but only, as Hammersley (2014) highlighted earlier, by aligning with the pre-existing policy outlook, not through challenging it.

For those researching British politics, there are a number of bodies that offer themselves most obviously as possible co-producers, and in some cases funders, of research. Parliament has already been discussed, and others might include local government, government agencies, and government departments. Certainly, the latter sometimes fund or co-fund research with the Research Councils, and have engaged in knowledge exchange partnerships, with academics spending time embedded within them. What links these is that they are the central institutions of British governance understood in terms of the Westminster Model. While the study of British central government and its related organisations and leading actors remains a vital element of British politics scholarship, the discipline has rightly sought to reach beyond this. More fundamentally, it has sought to interrogate the assumptions that underpin the Westminster Model and the dominant British political tradition, which has shown itself to be under increasing strain in the light of a series of institutional crises (Richards and Smith, 2015). The discipline has, at least partially, moved beyond the historical limitations of the Westminster Model in terms of how it understands British politics and democracy, which has opened space for more theoretically driven and reflexive scholarship, reimagining our understanding of the UK state (see Moran, 2017, for one masterly example). Yet if students of British politics have become

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more conscious of these issues, the same cannot be said for wider public discourse where traditional norms remain strong. On the one hand this points to the importance of British politics scholars being more publicly engaged to challenge such understandings. However, on the other it highlights the risk of being dragged into narrower, more 'policy relevant' parameters which could reinforce the 'overly circumscribed conception of, and its theoretically underdeveloped approach towards, its own subject matter' exemplified by the Westminster Model (Kerr and Kettell, 2006, p. 7). In short, if the desire for impact were to restrict the space for varied approaches and subjects of study within British politics the discipline would be much the poorer for it.

This relates to the wider issue of the role of experts in public life, who have found themselves subject to a barrage of populist disdain, culminating in the claim by the then Secretary of State for Justice that 'people in this country have had enough of experts' when making the case for Brexit (Michael Gove, quoted in Mance, 2016). There has arguably never been a greater need for British politics experts to contribute their informed, critical voices to debates about how to reform and modernise the state and democracy, particularly in the light of Brexit. A greater focus on policy relevance might raise the prominence of British politics scholars as experts in certain fields, but perceived closeness to policymakers, politicians or other vested interests might also serve to fuel the public suspicion of experts exemplified by Gove's comments.

Concerns have also been raised that British politics scholars – or at least those with a significant public profile through the media – are, consciously or not, at risk of being co-opted into the 'Westminster bubble' which provides insider access to circles which might be very usefully exploited for research purposes, but to critics might also compromise the impartiality of the researchers themselves, or at least circumscribe the questions they are willing to explore. Jonathan Dean (2016), for example, has accused the British political science community of 'having a Corbyn problem', characterised by

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‘dismissals of Corbyn [which] are presented as merely descriptive (and thus impartial), but are marked by a thinly concealed partisan opposition to Corbyn’s politics’. However, rather than being symptomatic of some sort of collective ideological crusade against Corbynism, the widespread failure to anticipate – or perhaps more importantly, adequately account for – the rise of Corbyn and Labour’s unexpectedly strong performance in the 2017 general election reflects the fact that key tenets of British politics are being challenged on multiple fronts. Faced with demands for instant reactions to, and explanations for, unexpected political twists and turns, it is perhaps unsurprising that scholars have reached for what might be seen as conventional norms (or ‘rules’) of British politics – the Westminster view. Here, the danger is that the quest for impact and public engagement limits the intellectual space for deeper, more critical analyses, and leads to intellectual herding.

Through the medium of Twitter in particular, some scholars are now involved in a degree of public dialogue and ongoing commentary on the state of British politics that is unprecedented, and which is perhaps at odds with more reflective nature of academic inquiry as it was more traditionally understood. There is a balance to be struck between the more measured approach that distinguishes academic commentary from journalism, and a nimbler scholarship that is better placed to contribute to a public educative mission that goes beyond the precincts of our campuses and which is in tune with twenty-first century society. A further issue is the question of who is recognised as an ‘expert’ and afforded the media attention or other impact opportunities associated with this status. Smith and Stewart (2017) have highlighted the potential for greater emphasis on REF-impact to bolster (typically white male) academic elites, and Dean has similarly highlighted the gender imbalance amongst academic commentators on British politics.

Flinders reminds us of ‘the odd tendency, within those British academic circles concerned with the arts, humanities and social sciences, to stigmatise and demonise any academic whose work becomes

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popularised or useful to non-academics' (2013b, p. 634). Common room sneering at 'media dons' is nothing new, but has, as Flinders argues, dissuaded a wider range of scholars from seeking to use the media to take their research to a wider audience. Within the field of British politics, the main figures to achieve media prominence have been a relatively small band of political scientists primarily concerned with the study of parties, elections and voting. This group do hugely valuable work informing the public about the dynamics of elections, but may also have inadvertently helped feed the media obsession with opinion polling. After the tight elections in 2010 and 2015 there was widespread criticism of the fact that so much news coverage was dominated by speculation about the polls and the prospects for a hung parliament and possible coalition formation, that discussion of issues and policies was side-lined. For example, analysis found that the NHS was ranked as the single most important issue by voters in 2015 but was hardly reported, 'making up between 0.7% and 1.1% of total election coverage'. By contrast, the same analysis found that 'by week five of the campaign almost a quarter of all election TV news – 22.7% – focused on the likely "winners" and "losers" in the contest, while possible coalition deals became a more prominent theme from 13 April onwards' (Cushion and Sambrook, 2015, p. 11). While academics can do little to affect media coverage, as scholars of British politics we do have a responsibility to avoid being corralled into media driven narratives. Moreover, the rise of punditry can drive an oversimplification of research findings in an effort to respond to the news cycle, instead of 'posing more critical questions about the nature of social and political change' (Jennings and Lodge, 2016). Indeed, if research is reduced to media-friendly soundbites which fail to capture underlying complexities (even where these have been exposed by the researchers themselves), it risks distorting public understanding politics, and acting as expert fuel to the fire of pre-existing agendas which might be ideologically or commercially driven.

The broadcast and print media, and newer forms of social media, provide vital spaces through which British politics scholars can achieve impact through public engagement. As a discipline, British politics

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can be proud of the fact that it has, at least to some extent, extent stood against the trend of the ‘withdrawal of academics from the public sphere’ which has arguably afflicted the academy more broadly (Flinders, 2013b, p. 629). Our subject matter retains a clear relevance that a wider public can recognise, and living as we are in an era seemingly characterised by rapid and profound political developments, the case for British politics scholars to be publicly engaged has never been higher. But in pursuing such impact we should be careful to retain the academic virtues of critical and reflective scholarship, and mindful of the agendas of those who wish to utilise our expertise.

Conclusion: impactful, engaged and relevant

The study of British politics is an impactful, engaged and relevant area of political science in the UK. It therefore has little to fear from the rise of the impact agenda in higher education. Indeed, the Stern review has suggested that the terms of impact could be broadened in the next REF to more fully capture public engagement activities (Watermeyer and Lewis, 2017), which could further strengthen the relative position of British politics within the assessment of political science. British politics scholars should welcome the call made by the American political scientist Jeffrey Isaac (2015) for a more public political science, and are already at the forefront of efforts in that direction on this side of the Atlantic. Rosie Campbell and Sarah Childs (2013 p. 183) have argued that ‘technical political science needs either to answer ‘real world’ questions or be usable by others to answer them’, and that is a mission to which British politics scholarship, which is empirically focused, has resolutely stuck. There are also clear opportunities for British politics to achieve impact through engagement with policymakers and practitioners.

However, in pursuing a more publicly engaged and impactful approach scholars of British politics need to be wary of potential hazards. Most importantly, we must retain a critical distance sufficient to

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prevent slippage back towards unthinking acceptance of the British Political Tradition as our underlying organising perspective, which a turn towards more theoretically driven scholarship has done much to challenge (Gamble, 1990). Further, in an era of social media and rolling political analysis we must resist any temptation towards intellectual herding, and work hard to retain the capacity to take the long view, and the ability to offer historically informed appraisals not driven by news cycles. As, by confounding widespread expectations the result of the 2017 general election demonstrated, the risk of groupthink is one that we perhaps need to work harder to guard against. Finally, we need to remain vigilant about the disciplining effects of a greater emphasis on impact and public engagement. Normalising impact and engagement as an integral and expected feature of all research risks narrowing our intellectual parameters, leading us to (consciously or otherwise) screen out possible research questions or critical perspectives, or to favour certain research agendas. As students of political power, we cannot afford to lose sight of its exercise over our own behaviour.

Endnotes

¹ The journal *British Politics* seeks to foster 'a broad and multi-disciplinary field of study' incorporating a variety of sub-fields (<http://www.palgrave.com/gb/journal/41293>). *The Oxford Handbook of British Politics* included, for example, chapters on a multiplicity of theoretical approaches, and chapters on identities, inequalities (e.g. gender, race, class), and processes such as marketization, in addition to the more traditional concerns with institutions such as parliament, the core executive, and political parties (Flinders et al. 2009).

² The 17 institutions with 100% of the submission for impact ranked as 3* or 4* were: Bradford, Bristol, Brunel, Durham, Exeter, Keele, Kent, Leeds, UCL, LSE, SOAS, Oxford, Sheffield, Sussex, Edinburgh, Strathclyde, and Cardiff. For full details see: <http://results.ref.ac.uk/Results/ByUoa/21/Impact>

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