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TRADITIONS and GOVERNANCE[*]

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The role of the state is changing under the impact of, for example, globalisation. The changes have been variously understood as the the new public management (NPM), the hollowing-out of the state and the new governance. This special issue of <u>Public Administration</u> explores the changing role of the state in advanced industrial democracies. It focuses on the puzzle of why states respond differently to common trends.

This introductory article has three aims. First, we provide a brief review of the existing literature on public sector reform to show that our approach is distinctive. We argue that the existing literature does not explore the ways in which governmental traditions shape reform. Second, we outline an interpretive approach to the analysis of public sector reform built on the notions of beliefs, traditions, dilemmas and narratives. We provide brief illustrations of these ideas drawn from the individual country articles. Finally, we outline the ground covered by all the chapters but we do not summarise and compare their experiences of reform. That task is reserved for the concluding article.

The Reforms

The wave of public sector reform that began in the 1980s is commonly referred to as the new public management (NPM). The term refers to a focus on management, not policy, and on performance appraisal and efficiency; disaggregating public bureaucracies into agencies which deal with each other on a user pay basis; the use of quasi-markets and contracting out to foster competition; cost-cutting; and a style of management that emphasises, among other things, output targets, limited term contracts, monetary incentives and freedom to manage (see Hood 1991 from whom we

paraphrase this list). It is said to be a global phenomenon. It is a policy ambition for international organizations like the OECD (1995) and the World Bank (1992). However, it rapidly became clear, to paraphrase Aaron Wildavsky, 'if NPM is everything maybe it is nothing'. The label now covers all types of public sector reform; it excludes nothing.

Several commentators have noted that the differences are of far greater interest than the similarities. Christensen and Lægreid (1998: 470-71; also citing Kickert 1997 and Olsen and Peters 1996) identify a sharp distinction between Anglo-American reforms and Continental reforms. They conclude 'NPM is not an integrated and consistent theory, but rather a loose collection of diverse doctrines, principles and measures which are partly in opposition to one another'. In a similar vein, Hood (1995) abandons his early characterisation of NPM, suggesting the case for NPM as a global paradigm was overstated. These several commentators remark that the ideas of NPM are internally contradictory, calling for hierarchic steering and egalitarian empowerment in the same breath. Also the likenesses in NPM are superficial, masking significant underlying differences. The trend to the NPM is not uniform; for example, traditional public administration persists in the Commission of the European Union (EU) and Germany. The aims and results of NPM differ. In the UK, NPM aimed to create the minimalist state. In Norway, it aimed to protect the state. The language of NPM obscures differences. So, NPM covers agencification in Britain but not in Australia, regional devolution in France but not in Britain. Moreover, terms such as decentralisation refer to deconcentration in an organisation or devolution to sub-national governments. Several of the individual parts of NPM are not new; for example, performance measurement. Distinctiveness lies in the package not in the

parts but there is no uniform, agreed package. Finally, the meaning of NPM has changed; for example, in Australia the early focus was corporate management but it gave way to a focus on contracting. So, the label masks far more than it reveals.

The literature on reform in general, and NPM in particular, is voluminous. There have been several attempts to explain recent public sector reform in Western Europe (see: Aucoin 1995; Christensen and Lægreid 2001; Hood 1996; Naschold 1995; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000; Pollitt and Summa 1997; Rhodes 1997c chapter 5; Wright 1994: 104-8). We see little point in providing yet another survey. However, we do need to show that our approach is distinctive so, briefly, we summarize some of the main contributions.

Hood (1996: 273 82) focuses on 'English awfulness', right-wing party politics, poor economic performance, and scaling down big government. He finds none an acceptable explanation of the variations. Naschold (1995: 215-17) argues that the successful implementation of public sector 'modernization' depends on path dependency' (or 'historical traditions, cultural norms and established practices'); political mobilization by advocacy coalitions of administrative and political elites; the institutionalization of such coalitions; and influential meta-organizations and institutions that produce knowledge (and on path dependency see Hall and Taylor 1996: 941-2; and Hay and Wincott 1998: 955-6). He does not try to explain why the reforms differ in their aims, measures and outcomes. Wright (1994: 104-10) identifies five types of administrative reform in Western Europe: continuous adjustment; responses to specific political crises; pragmatic structural change; reform as its own cause; and comprehensive programmes. He argues that six factors fuelled the changes.

- Economic depression and fiscal pressures leading to budget deficits.

- The 'New Right's' ideological distrust of 'big government' and accompanying determination to redraw the boundaries of the state.

- International interdependence, especially Europeanisation, which further increased regulation and introduced new administrative pressures (for example, regionalisation).

- Public expectations about and disenchantment with government performance. Government does too much and whatever it does, it doesn't work.

- International management fashions, especially NPM.

- Information technology, which made it easier to introduce changes.

As a final example, Pollitt and Summa (1997: 13-15) identify four factors: economic pressures, the nature of the political system, administrative structures and party political doctrine. They favour an institutional approach, concluding that 'the most convincing explanations … appear to rest … upon the characteristics of the political and administrative systems already in place. … [T]hese characteristics … most significantly influenced what was possible in terms of the scope, process and speed of reform (and this argument is developed in detail in Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000: especially chapter 3; see also Peters 1997: 262).

We are sympathetic to Pollitt's institutional approach with its emphasis on variations in the political-administrative system but have two criticisms. First, he takes the characteristics of each political-administrative system as given. He does not unpack the idea of path dependency by describing how and why the system got to where it is today. We provide such historical accounts. Second, he does not explore other than in

passing the role of individual agency as a cause of change. In particular, there is little

of the beliefs and actions of elite actors. We focus on actors' beliefs. Of course, we are

being unfair. In effect, we are saying Pollitt does not adopt an interpretive approach.

He does not, nor would he want to. But we develop such an approach. We argue both

that elite actors' beliefs about their governmental traditions shape public sector reform

and that this interpretive approach adds significantly to our understanding of the

subject.

The Approach

<u>Why Beliefs?</u>

As early as the 1950s, philosophers forcefully criticized positivism but political

scientists often failed to take seriously the consequences of rejecting a positivist

notion of pure experience (see for example Quine 1961 pp. 20-46). They cling

tenaciously to the positivist idea that we can understand or explain human behaviour

by objective social facts about people. In doing so, they remove interpreting beliefs

from the ambit of political science. So, when political scientists reject positivism,

they are usually distancing themselves only from the idea of pure experience; they

still want to abstain from interpreting beliefs. Typically, political scientists try to

avoid direct appeals to beliefs by reducing them to intervening variables between

social facts and actions. So they infer that a voter believes in (say) socialism from

their working-class occupation or trade union membership.

Once we accept there are no pure experiences, however, we undermine the positivist

case against interpreting beliefs. A rejection of pure experience implies that we

cannot reduce beliefs and meanings to intervening variables. When we say that senior

local government officers in charge of a department of social services have a vested interest in increasing their department's budget and employing more social workers, we use a particular theory to identify their interests from their position. Someone with a different set of theories might believe either that someone in that position has different interests; for example, loyalty to their politician and implementing his or her policies as efficiently and speedily as possible. The important point here is that how the people we study see their position and their interests inevitably depends on their theories, which might differ significantly from our theories. Officials might possess theories that lead them to see their position as administrators serving the public interest, rather than as chief executives employing the best managerial practice of the private sector. Or they might see their interests as sustaining best professional practice in social work, not maximizing the turnover of caseloads.

To explain peoples' actions, we implicitly or explicitly invoke their beliefs and desires. When we reject positivism, then we cannot identify their beliefs by appealing to the allegedly objective social facts about them. Instead, we must explore the beliefs and meanings through which they construct their world, including the ways they understand their location, the norms that affect them, and their interests. Because people cannot have pure experiences, their beliefs and desires are inextricably enmeshed with theories. Thus, political scientists cannot read-off beliefs and desires from objective social facts about people. Instead they have to interpret beliefs by relating them to other beliefs, traditions, and dilemmas.

Of course, political scientists grapple with these issues. Although some dismiss all efforts to wed interpretation with positivism, others do not. However, the more they disentangle themselves from positivism, the more they stress interpreting beliefs.

There remains, for example, much ambiguity about how we should think of institutions.

On the one hand, institutions are said to take a concrete, fixed form; that is, they have given operating rules or procedures that govern the actions of the individuals. This notion is unacceptable because it leads political scientists to ignore the effects of contingency, inner conflicts and the several constructions of actors in an institution. If we think of institutions in this way, we adopt the mistaken, positivist standpoint because we do not interpret what institutions mean to the people who work in them. Rather we assume the allegedly objective rules prescribe or cause behaviour. There are two problems with this assumption. First, people not only willfully choose to disobey a rule, but also, they subvert, ignore, avoid and redefine them. Second, we cannot read off peoples' beliefs and desires from their social location. Rules are always open to interpretation. It is not just a question of literal meaning but also a question of to whom the rule applies to and of how to apply the rule in any given situation.

On the other hand, institutions are said to include cultural factors or beliefs, suggesting they do not fix such meanings or the actions of the subjects within them. If we open institutions in this way, however, we cannot treat them as if they were given. Rather we must ask how beliefs, and so actions, are created, recreated, and changed in ways that constantly reproduce and modify institutions. While we should welcome such a decentring of institutionalism, we might wonder whether we should still think of the approach as, in any significant sense, institutionalist. Explanations are no longer cast as if behaviour was the result of rules but of the multiple, diverse

ways in which people understand, and react to, conventions. Appeals to institutions are, therefore, misleading shorthand.

This commentary on institutionalism suggests that, if we reject positivism, then our notion of institutions desperately needs a micro-theory. Institutionalists can avoid engaging with beliefs and preferences only if they can deduce what they are from the position a person holds in an organization. Of course, that is exactly what we cannot do if we reject positivism. The new institutionalism lacks a theory of individual action. Rational choice's theory has had a significant impact on the new institutionalism precisely because it is a theory about individual preferences and rational action.

Because rational choice theory views actions as rational strategies for realizing the preferences of the actor, it reduces the motives of political actors to self-interest (see for example Downs 1957). Yet, as most rational choice theorists now recognize, there are no valid grounds for privileging self-interest as a motive. So rational choice theorists have expanded their notion of preference, moving toward a 'thin' analysis of preferences, requiring only that motives be consistent. The problem for rational choice theorists thus becomes how to fill out the notion of preference on specific occasions. At times, they do so by suggesting either that preferences are more or less self-evident, 'natural' or that preferences can be assumed from the positions people occupy. Obviously, however, this way of filling out the idea of preference falls prey to our earlier criticism of positivism. Faced by such issues, rational choice theorists might conceive of people's actions as products of their beliefs and desires without saying anything substantive about what these beliefs and desires might be (compare Mitchell 1993 with Vicchaeri 1993: 221-4). Once again, we should welcome such a

decentering of rational choice theory, while wondering whether we should still think of the approach as, in any significant sense, rational choice. Our explanations would now be based, not on deductions drawn from assumptions of self-interest and utility-maximization, but on appeals to the multiple and diverse beliefs and desires that motivated the actors. The formal models of rational choice theorists would be ideal-types, except when empirical interpretations of the beliefs and preferences of actors matched the beliefs in the models (and for a more detailed discussion see Bevir and Rhodes 2003).

The purpose of these theoretical reflections is not to undermine all appeals to institutions or rules. Our arguments do not prevent appeals to self-interest or the use of deductive models. We do not deny that quantitative techniques have a role in political science. To reject any of these approaches or tools outright would be hasty and ill considered. None of these approaches is monolithic. Political scientists inspired by an approach often do work that manages to overcome the limits of the theories they use. Our theoretical reflections suggest only that we need to tailor appeals to institutions, rationality, models, and statistics to recognize that political science is an interpretative discipline focused on the beliefs of the relevant actors. And there could be no clearer example than Stillman's argument that the United States was founded by men and women who escaped the Old World's oppression to find liberty in the New World. This belief in liberty reappears time and time again in the exercise of personal freedom from state authority. It is, he claims, the central theme of the American experience.

Why Traditions?

The forms of explanation we should adopt for beliefs, actions, and practices revolve around two sets of concepts (see Bevir 1999: 187-218 and 223-51). The first set includes concepts such as tradition, structure, and paradigm. These concepts explore the social context in which individuals exercise their reason and act and show how much weight they give to their social context when reasoning and acting. The second set includes concepts such as anomaly, reason, and agency. These concepts explore how beliefs and practices change and the role individual agency plays in such change.

We define a tradition as a set of understandings someone receives during socialization. So, a governmental tradition is a set of inherited beliefs about the institutions and history of government (cf. Davis 1998: 158; Perez-Diaz 1993: 7). Although tradition is unavoidable, it is so as a starting point, not as something that governs later performances. We should be cautious, therefore, of representing tradition as an unavoidable presence in everything people do in case we leave too slight a role for agency. In particular, we should not imply that tradition is constitutive of the beliefs people later come to hold or the actions they then perform. Instead, we should see tradition mainly as a first influence on people. The content of the tradition will appear in their later actions only if their agency has led them not to change it, where every part of it is in principle open to change.

Positivists sometimes hold that individuals are autonomous and avoid the influence of tradition. They argue people can arrive at beliefs through pure experiences, so we can explain why people held their beliefs by referring to those experiences. Yet once

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we reject positivism, we need a concept such as tradition to explain why people come to believe what they do. Because we cannot have pure experiences, we construe our experiences using theories we have inherited. Our experiences can lead us to beliefs only because we already have access to the traditions of our community.

Our social heritage is the necessary background to the beliefs we adopt and the actions we perform. Some political scientists adopt a strong version of this conclusion. They argue that a social structure, paradigm, or episteme governs not only the actions we can perform successfully but also our beliefs and desires. Strong structuralists argue that meanings and beliefs are the products of the internal relations of self-sufficient languages or paradigms. They thus leave little, if any, room for human agency: they suggest that traditions, structures, or paradigms determine or limit the beliefs people might adopt and so the actions they might attempt.

However, as Giddens (1990 p. 153) argues, agency is inevitable because of 'the circularity of social knowledge'. 'New knowledge (concepts, theories, findings) does not render the social world more transparent, but alters its nature, spinning it off in novel directions'. So when a government provides financial support for single parents it simultaneously legitimates that form of family relationship and undermines conventional family arrangements, even though it does not intend to do so. Policies are theories that change people's perceptions of the problems the government seeks to resolve. Policy implementation provides information on how a policy is working and that data become a further source of policy change. As people identify and understand the norms imposed on them, whether by government policy or the broader social context, their beliefs can change to accommodate, alter or reject those limits.

Social contexts only ever influence, as distinct from govern, the nature of individuals. Traditions are thus products of individual agency. This insistence on agency may seem incompatible with our earlier insistence on the unavoidable nature of tradition. However, our reasons for appealing to tradition allow for individuals to change the beliefs and practices they inherit. Just because individuals start out from an inherited tradition does not imply that they cannot adjust it. On the contrary, the ability to develop traditions is an essential part of our being in the world. We are always confronting slightly novel circumstances that require us to apply tradition anew, and a tradition cannot fix the nature of its application. When we confront the unfamiliar, we have to extend or change our heritage to encompass it, and as we do so, we develop our heritage. Every time we try to apply a tradition, we have to reflect on it, we have to try to understand it afresh in today's circumstances. By reflecting on it, we open it to innovation. Thus, human agency can produce change even when people think they are sticking fast to a tradition they regard as sacrosanct.

As humans we necessarily arrive at our beliefs, and perform our actions, against a social background that influences those beliefs and actions. But we also have a capacity for agency. We can reason and act innovatively against the background of tradition. We are dealing here with the problem of structure and agency. Like the structuralists and their successors, we should reject the idea of the self-constituting person. Yet we should do so without denying the possibility of agency. It is our ability for agency that makes tradition a more satisfactory concept than rivals such as structure, paradigm, and episteme. These later 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.

We should be wary of essentialists who equate traditions with fixed essences to which they credit variations. Dicey (1914 pp. 62-9) and Greenleaf (1983 pp. 15-20) illustrate clearly the difference between an essentialist notion of tradition and our own. Dicey divided the Victorian period into three. 1800-1830 was an era of legislative quiescence or an era of old Toryism. The Benthamite spirit of inquiry and governmental reform typified 1825-1870. 1865-1900 was the era of collectivism, irresistible yet unwelcome. There have been many challenges to this interpretation of nineteenth century administrative history but Dicey's defence of individualism against collectivism had an influence on interpretations of British government that can be seen to this day. Thus, Greenleaf describes the British political tradition as a dialectic between two opposing tendencies: libertarianism and collectivism. Libertarianism stresses four things: the basic importance of the individual; the limited role of government; the dangers of concentrating power; and the rule of law. Its antithesis, collectivism stresses: the public good; social justice; and the idea of positive government. But categories such as individualism and collectivism are ahistorical. Although they come into being in the nineteenth century, they remain static, acting as fixed categories, ideal types, into which individual thinkers and texts are forced.

We see tradition is a starting point, not a destination, and instances cannot be constructed by comparison with the features of a tradition. Traditions do not determine the beliefs that people go on to adopt or the actions they go on to perform. They are also diverse. In France, Elgie (pp xx-xx below) distinguishes between the

Left and the Right as the basic intellectual foundations of French political life. Within the Left, he distinguishes between statist socialism and anti-statist socialism. Within the Right, he distinguishes bonapartism, *orléanisme* and *ultracisme*. As with the main traditions, there are competing interpretations of each of these traditions each of which has altered over time. Such is the diversity.

A particular relationship must exist between beliefs and practices if they are to make up a tradition. For a start, the relevant beliefs and practices must have passed from generation to generation. Traditions must be made up of beliefs and practices relayed from teacher to pupil to pupils' pupil and so on. Such socialization may be intentional or unintentional. The continuity lies in the themes developed and passed on over time. As beliefs pass from teacher to pupil, so the pupil adapts and extends the themes linking the beliefs. Although we must be able to trace a historical line from the start of a tradition to its current finish, the developments introduced by successive generations might result in beginning and end having nothing in common apart from the links over time. Nonetheless, an abstract set of beliefs and practices that were not passed on would be a summary at one point in time, not a tradition. It would not relate moments in time to one another by showing their historical continuity. A tradition must consist of a series of instances that resemble one another because they exercised a formative influence on one another.

As well as suitable connections through time, traditions must embody suitable conceptual links. The beliefs and practices a teacher passes on to a pupil must display a minimal level of consistency. A tradition could not have provided someone with an initial starting point unless its parts formed a minimally coherent set. Traditions cannot be made up of purely random beliefs and actions that successive individuals

happen to have held in common. The point is clearly illustrated by Kickert's account (pp. xx-xx below) of the origins of corporatism in the Netherlands. Although a term originated in the early 20th century as the Catholic response to the new industrialised society, nonetheless he traces its roots in centuries-old traditions of deliberation, co-operation, tolerance, pragmatism and consensus.

Although the beliefs in a tradition must be related to one another both temporally and conceptually, their substantive content is unimportant. Because tradition is unavoidable, all beliefs and practices must have their roots in tradition. They must do so whether they are aesthetic or practical, sacred or secular, legendary or factual, pre-modern or scientific, valued because of lineage or reasonableness. Our idea of tradition differs, therefore, from political scientists who associate the term with customary, unquestioned ways of behaving (Oakeshott, 1962 pp. 123 and 128-9) or with the entrenched folklore of pre-modern societies. At the heart of our notion of tradition are individuals using local reasoning consciously and subconsciously to reflect on and modify their contingent heritage.

Why Dilemmas?

Dilemma provides one way of understanding the role of individual agency in developing traditions. Our capacity for agency implies that change originates in the responses or decisions of individuals. Whenever someone adopts a new belief or action they have to adjust their existing beliefs and practices to make way for the newcomer. To accept a new belief is thus to pose a dilemma that asks questions of existing traditions. A dilemma here arises for an individual or institution when a new idea stands in opposition to existing beliefs or practices and so forces a

reconsideration of these existing beliefs and associated tradition (Bevir 1999 chapter 6). Political scientists can explain change within traditions, therefore, by referring to the relevant dilemmas. Traditions change as individuals make a series of variations to them in response to any number of specific dilemmas.

For example, the dilemma posed by the increasing size and scale of government fuelled changes in the British constitution. It was no longer possible to have a view of the constitution rooted in a minimalist, caretaker role for the state. The dominant interpretation of that constitution was Dicey's formalist, normativist style of public law, which stressed a rule-oriented conception of public law. The key functions of the constitutional law were adjudication and control of the executive. This stress on the separation of powers and the subordination of government to law confronted the functionalist style in public law that emphasizes law as part of the apparatus of government, playing a regulatory and facilitative role and sustaining an instrumentalist social policy (see Loughlin 1992: 60). The Liberal view of the constitution and its key doctrines of parliamentary sovereignty and ministerial accountability was decisively transformed by the Whitehall view of the constitution with its emphasis on executive power and the role of the executive as the guardian of the national interest; a precursor of the 'strong state'.

Jann (pp xx-xx below) argues that, in the 1990s, the idea of the 'activating state' emerged in Germany to counter the difficulties of steering the modern state. Politicians and intellectuals close to the Social Democrats, and obviously inspired by 'Third Way' and 'New Labour' debates, were responsible for this new agenda. Steering problems were seen, not simply as a function of state and bureaucratic failure, but as the result of the inherent complexity and interdependencies of modern societies. To

cope with this dilemma, new links between state and society were invented, enabling new modes of societal self-regulation, rooted in negotiated public-private coordination. This new agenda allowed the state to remain an important actor for developing public welfare while giving it a reduced and shared role in problem solving.

It is important to recognize that we cannot straightforwardly identify dilemmas with allegedly objective pressures in the world. People vary their beliefs or actions in response to any new idea that they come to hold as true. They do so irrespective of whether the new idea reflects real pressures, or, to be precise, irrespective of whether it reflects pressures that political scientists as observers believe to be real. In explaining change, we cannot privilege our academic accounts of the world. What matters is the subjective, or more usually, intersubjective, understandings of political actors, not our scholarly accounts of real pressures in the world. The task of the interpretive political scientist is to recover the shared, intersubjective dilemmas of the relevant actors. The task is not to privilege scholarly accounts, although, of course, the pressures political scientists believe to be real often overlap with the actors' views of the relevant dilemmas. Thus, academics, leaders of the socialist and social democratic parties and of trade and civil servants unions in Norway agree that recent changes approximate to the supermarket model of the state (see Christensen pp. xx-xx below). All struggle with the dilemma of retaining control over the economy while resisting market principles that are seen as undermining democracy and creating inequality and yet improving state efficiency.

Dilemmas often arise from people's experiences. However, we must add immediately that this need not be the case. Dilemmas can arise from theoretical and moral

reflection as well as experiences of worldly pressures. The new belief that poses a dilemma can lie anywhere on a spectrum from views with little theoretical content to complex theoretical constructs only remotely linked to views about the real world. A good example is the notion of globalization. Globalization is one dilemma that admits of many interpretations. Hay (2002) distinguishes between the economic outcomes of globalization and the effects of the discourse of globalization. The economic effects include the straightforward theory that high taxation drives capital away, a view for which there is little evidence. Nonetheless politicians act as if there is a link between taxation and capital mobility and reduce taxes. So, the social construction of globalization becomes crucial to explaining political actions.

A related point to make here is that dilemmas do not have given, nor even correct, solutions. Because no set of beliefs can fix its own criteria of application, when people confront a new event or belief they necessarily change traditions creatively. It might look as if a tradition can tell people how to act; how to respond to dilemmas. At most, however, it provides a guide to what they might do. It does not provide rules fixing what they must do. A tradition can provide hints on how its adherents might respond to a dilemma. The only way to check if an individual's actions are consistent with the beliefs of a tradition is to ask whether that individual and other adherents of the tradition are happy with those actions. Because individuals respond creatively to dilemmas, it follows that we will recognize change everywhere. Indeed, even when people think they are merely continuing a settled tradition or practice, they could well be developing, adjusting, and changing it. Change can occur when people think they are sticking fast to a tradition. Traditions and practices could be fixed and static only if we never met and faced novel circumstances. But, of course, we are always

meeting new circumstances. The state and political institutions are in perpetual motion.

Although dilemmas do not determine particular solutions, we can understand the solutions at which people arrive by the character of both the dilemma and their existing beliefs. Consider first the influence of the character of the dilemma. To hold on to a new idea, people must develop their existing beliefs to make room for it. The new idea will open some ways of adjusting and close down others. People have to hook it on to their existing beliefs, and their existing beliefs will present some opportunities and not others. People can integrate a new belief into their existing beliefs only by relating themes in it to themes already present in their beliefs. Change thus involves a pushing and pulling of a dilemma and a tradition to bring them together.

<u>Why Narratives?</u>

Our interpretive approach explains actions by reference to the beliefs and desires of actors, and it explains these beliefs by traditions and dilemmas. Political scientists explain many features of political life in this way already. Examples include not only the particular actions of prime ministers but also broad patterns of behaviour such as the rise of social movements and identity politics. Although the relevant beliefs and desires are many, complex, and hard to disentangle, political scientists still turn to them to explain human life. We use the term 'narrative' to refer to this form of explanation; it describes the form theories takes in the human sciences (Bevir 1999: 252-62 and 298-306).

Perhaps the best-known narrative in British government is the Westminster Model. It refers to the language, map, questions and historical story used to capture the essential features of the British system that, through sheer longevity, form the conventional or mainstream story. It is also a long-standing member of the Australian family of governmental traditions (Davis 1998). Thus, Weller (1989 pp. 5-8) identifies the main elements of the story as: strong cabinet government; the importance attached to constitutional conventions; a loyal opposition; and parliamentary sovereignty taking precedence over popular sovereignty. Also talking about Australia, Parker (1979) describes a Westminster 'syndrome', which is characterized by the doctrine of ministerial responsibility; neutral officials distinct from a political set of ministers who have the last word if there is a dispute; and a line of accountability through the minister to the cabinet, parliament, and indirectly the electorate. Most of these facets of Australian (and British) government are the subjects of keen dispute nowadays. Equally much is left out of the Westminster account. These debates do not concern us here (but see Lucy 1993 on the Westminster and other models of Australian government). All that matters is that the story and its beliefs in (say) ministerial accountability continue to inform the actions of the political-administrative elite in Australia (see Wanna and Weller pp xx-xx below).

It is often claimed that positivist political science provides causal explanations while interpretive approaches provide understanding of beliefs, motives, and actions. The problem with these definitions is they suggest political scientists using an interpretive approach try only to understand or reconstruct objects, not to explain them. Yet interpretive political scientists often write as if their narratives explained actions by

pointing to their causes. Scholars from all sorts of disciplines use the word cause to describe the explanatory relationship between people and events. When they do so, they typically use the word cause to indicate the presence of a significant relationship of the sort characteristic of explanation in their discipline. Narrative is a form of explanation that works by relating actions to the beliefs and desires that produce them.

Narratives depend on conditional connections. When individuals act on their beliefs and desires, there is a conditional connection. Conditional connections are neither necessary nor arbitrary. Because they are not necessary, political science differs from the natural sciences. Because they are not arbitrary, we can use them to explain actions and practices. Conditional connections exist when the nature of one object draws on the nature of another. They condition each other, so they do not have an arbitrary relationship. Equally, the one does not follow from the other, so they do not have a necessary relationship.

In narratives, pointing to conditional connections that relate people, events and ideas to one another explains actions and practices without evoking the idea of necessity. Although these narrative structures also appear in works of fiction, we need not equate political science to fiction. Political scientists offer us narratives that strive, to the best of the narrator's ability, to capture the way in which events did happen in the past or are today, whereas writers of fiction need not do so. Political scientists cannot ignore the facts, although we must accept that no fact is simply given to them.

The articles

We use governance as our preferred shorthand phrase for encapsulating the changing form and role of the state in advanced industrial societies and a key facet of these changes is public sector reform. We explore how these reforms affected governance. Do they multiply networks? Do they reduce the steering ability of core executives? The changes include: privatization, marketization, corporate management, decentralization, regulation and political control. However, public sector reform is only one source of change in modern government. Our analysis also focuses on the broader notion of governance as the changing boundary between state and civil society and seeks both to map its dimensions and explain the various ways in which it is understood and explained. We recognize the dangers in using one phrase or word to describe the changes because the several traditions in each country will employ different languages. 'Governance' as applied to British government will mean something different to 'governance' in France. The point is to identify the different ways in which recent changes are constructed and see if we can place these constructions in long-standing but continuously evolving traditions. We stuck with governance because the label is widely used but we believe the label to be elastic. So, the articles identify the several governmental traditions of each state to construct the political and administrative elites' narratives and practices of governance.

Every contributor covers the following topics.

1. The changes (if any) in the 'governance' of the 'state'.

2. How national elites understood and constructed the object of study (the state, governance); that is, what beliefs informed the actions through which they made, and made sense of, the changes.

3. The competing governmental traditions that underpin these elite beliefs.

We focus on elite beliefs about public sector reform, not academic models. So, we use the actors' own words or texts to convey their views on such dilemmas as state overload, the results of inflation on the public sector, and the distinctive nature of their country's public administration. We sought to document elite constructions of governance in general and public sector reform in particular. We are not providing our account of the problems. To tell the stories of elite actors, we go to the historical record and actor-centered sources of beliefs and actions. The main sources were: parliamentary debates and questions, committee hearings; government consultation papers and other official publications (including official statistics); media reports, including television documentaries, as well as newspaper reports and investigations; memoirs, autobiographies and diaries; biographies; interviews with past and present ministers and officials; confidential elite seminars; cabinet and other 'secret' papers (when available); and secondary sources, whether written by participants, journalists or academics.

Recent changes, and the distinctive response of individual countries, cannot be understood without placing them in their historical context. So each article uses historical narratives to construct living traditions (plural) that provide distinct and distinctive interpretations of state transformation. We do not focus on a common period. The choice of historical period depends on the questions asked and the

traditions under study, although most of the articles concentrate on the post-war period.

It is only by comparative analysis that we can identify and explain such variations. So, the articles cover Australia, Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and the USA. We chose the countries to cover the main state traditions: Anglo-Saxon (no-state) tradition of Britain and America; the Germanic (organicist) tradition; the French (Napoleonic or Jacobin) tradition; and the Scandinavian tradition, which mixes the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic. So, the authors of the country studies seek to write historical narratives of elite constructions of public sector reform. They reconstruct the beliefs of elites to unpack the ideas that inform the changing actions and practices of governance in the several countries. They describe dilemmas to explain why governance changed. The order of the articles follows our choice of states. We start with the non-state tradition of America and Britain followed by Australia as a significant variation on the Westminster tradition. We then turn to continental Europe beginning with that exemplar of the *rechsstaat*, Germany, followed by the Netherlands. France is the exemplar of the Napoleonic tradition. Finally, we conclude with the Scandinavian tradition and Norway. While this introductory article draws examples from every country covered in this special issue, we do not summarize these chapters here or compare the multifarious experiences of reform in our several countries. Rather, each article has an abstract and, in the final article in this special issue, we compare and contrast the countries to see what lessons emerge.

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