

Understanding British Government: Analysing Competing Models

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Bevir and Rhodes' interpretive approach underpins the Differentiated Polity Model (DPM) which has replaced the Westminster Model as the dominant model of British politics. This article critiques both the interpretive approach and the DPM, arguing that the latter fails to recognise the continued importance of the role hierarchy, inequality and a dominant political tradition play in British politics, omissions which result, in large part, from its roots in an interpretist position. As such, the main aim of the article is to defend an alternative conception of British politics, the Asymmetric Power Model (APM), by considering three empirical areas in which these two models differ substantially: whether hierarchy or networks are the dominant mode of governance in the UK; the extent and importance of structured inequality in the UK; and whether there is a dominant tradition in British politics.

Keywords: British politics; models; epistemology

Mark Bevir and R. A. W. Rhodes' (2003, 2004, 2006a and 2006c) interpretive approach to the study of politics generally, and British politics particularly, is clearly establishing some purchase in a field of study which has often been regarded as atheoretical.¹ Indeed, Peter Kerr and Steven Kettell claim (2006, 11), in the introduction to a new journal focusing upon British politics:

The most self-confident and influential attempt at a post-positivist approach to date, however, has come in the form of 'interpretivist' political science. Here, Bevir and Rhodes have been particularly prominent in generating a wholesale critique of the problems associated with traditional approaches to British politics, and in offering in their place a deliberate attempt to move beyond ... the Westminster model.

Kerr and Kettell also emphasise the link between Bevir and Rhodes' interpretive approach and the Differentiated Polity Model (DPM), initially developed by Rhodes (1997). In addition, they claim, 'the contemporary period has also witnessed the formal supplanting of the WM with that of the "governance" thesis, expressed most coherently in the Differentiated Polity model, as the dominant organising perspective within the field of British politics' (Kerr and Kettell 2006, 13).²

In this article, I critique the DPM arguing that, unlike the Asymmetric Power Model (APM), which is the alternative I consider here, it fails to recognise the continued importance of the role of hierarchy, inequality and a dominant political tradition in British politics, an omission which results in large part from its roots in an



interpretist position. My aim is to show that the APM offers an interesting alternative conceptualisation of British politics.

As such, this article is divided into three substantive sections. The first section critiques Bevir and Rhodes' position, while the second section examines the link between their interpretive position and the DPM, before considering the APM. In the third section, I look empirically at three areas where the DPM and the APM differ substantially: whether hierarchy or networks are the dominant mode of governance in the UK; the extent and importance of structured inequality in the UK; and whether there is a dominant tradition in British politics.

1. Interpretivism, Critical Realism and the Meta-Theoretical Issues

Given that Bevir and Rhodes have frequently outlined their interpretive approach (2003, 2004, 2006a and 2006c) and their debate with Stuart McAnulla (see Bevir and Rhodes 2006b; McAnulla 2006) has highlighted many of the differences between their interpretivism and critical realism, here I merely emphasise two points that are crucial to my argument: first, Bevir and Rhodes fail to take critical realism seriously; second, they approach the key meta-theoretical issues which underpin how we conceptualise British politics (structure and agency, the material and the ideational, institutions and ideas and stability and change) in a limited way, privileging one side of the dualism, rather than treating them as a duality.

(a) Neglecting Critical Realism

Bevir and Rhodes treat positivism, or modernist empiricism as they call it, as their 'other' and, consequently, pay little attention to critical realism. So, for example, they argue (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 200), 'We prefer an interpretive approach with its governance narrative to the positivism lurking within most accounts of the Westminster model'. Here, the implication is that, if one does not adopt an interpretive approach, and utilise the DPM as a way of understanding British governance, then one is operating with a positivist, or modern empiricist, approach, tied to the Westminster Model (WM).

In fact, Bevir and Rhodes (2006b) only discuss critical realism in their response to McAnulla, arguing that it is tainted by modernist empiricism. Specifically, they argue (*ibid.*, 399), 'McAnulla holds out the intriguing prospect that critical realists might be able to rethink their position to make it post-positivist and perhaps even post-foundationalist'. As such, they regard critical realism as both foundationalist, which it largely is, and positivist, which it certainly is not.

(b) Meta-Theoretical Issues: Structure and Agency, the Material and the Ideational, Institutions and Ideas and Stability and Change

As we shall see below, the DPM and the APM are rooted in different positions on these key meta-theoretical issues. Bevir and Rhodes, reflecting their interpretivism,

privilege agency, the ideational, ideas and change. In contrast, and despite what Bevir and Rhodes claim, critical realists see all these relationships as dialectical; that is, interactive and iterative. Here, I look briefly at the first three of these dualisms/dualities, before focusing on the key relationship between stability and change.

Bevir and Rhodes consistently argue that structures do not exist independently of agents. In this vein, they claim, 'The greater the emphasis we place upon the contingency and particularity of beliefs, actions and practices, the harder it becomes to explain them by aggregate concepts or social processes' (Bevir and Rhodes 2006a, 5). As such, structures play little, if any, role in their explanations; certainly they play no independent causal role.

Similarly, Bevir and Rhodes privilege the ideational over the material:

People modify their beliefs or actions in response to new ideas they come to hold as true. They do so irrespective of whether these ideas reflect real pressures, or, to be precise, irrespective of whether they reflect pressures we believe to be real (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 36).

At the same time, while Bevir and Rhodes argue (2003, 27) that their work 'focuses on the interaction between ideas and institutions', their approach again privileges one side of the dualism:

Interpretive theories deny that institutions have a reified or essential nature. They challenge us to decentre institutions; that is, to analyse the ways in which they are produced, reproduced and changed through the particular and contingent beliefs, preferences and actions of individuals (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 41).

In contrast, Bevir and Rhodes contend that critical realists are structuralists, materialists and institutionalists (see Bevir and Rhodes 2006a, 18). In fact, a critical realist would argue (Hay 2002; McAnulla 2006) that structures provide the context within which agents act and, as such, constrain or facilitate actions. However, it is agents who interpret that structure, and this interpretation is affected by the agent's prior values, experiences and practices. Those agents, in acting, change the structure. Subsequently, that 'new' structure forms the context within which agents act and the actions and outcomes may also have changed, or added to, their values, experience or practices.

Similarly, as a critical realist, I would argue that, while the ideational does not merely reflect the material, and indeed can change material relations, the resonance of ideas is constrained by those material relations (for a more extended discussion see Marsh 2007a). As such, the relationship between the material and the ideational is again dialectical. In addition, in my view institutions are structures, norms and practices that are shaped by, and in turn shape, the ideas within the institutions about policy and organisation. In both cases the relationship is dialectical.

The question of the relationship between stability and change is at the core of social inquiry and deserves particular attention. Bevir and Rhodes do move beyond synchronic³ approaches to the analysis of stability and change (see Hay 2002, ch. 4 for a summary of approaches to the study of continuity and change; and Marsh

2007a for an attempt to move beyond Hay), but do so by treating change as ubiquitous (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 37). In their view, 'Another theme shared by interpretive approaches is an emphasis on the contingency of political life' (Bevir and Rhodes 2006a, 3).⁴ So, change is privileged and stability downplayed.

In contrast, I think we need to take the historical institutionalist and critical realist argument about path-dependency more seriously, because this allows us to look much more closely at the relationship between stability and change. Bevir and Rhodes pay little attention to path-dependency; it has no entry in the index of either book, although there is one, unsurprisingly critical, aside (Bevir and Rhodes 2006a, 195):

Our interpretive approach to British governance does not read off actions from allegedly objective social facts about institutions or people. Rather it leads us to explore the historical and contingent patterns of belief that inform current governmental practices in Britain. So, instead of describing reified institutions with alleged path-dependency, we decentred the relevant traditions and explored how they were modified in response to dilemmas.

As such, they assert that a path-dependency argument inevitably privileges structure over agents, the material over the ideational, institutions over ideas and, most importantly, stability over change. However, a path-dependency argument is not a determinist argument; rather it suggests that the past constrains and facilitates, without determining, present outcomes (see Marsh 2007b and 2007c).

I have outlined the differences between my position and Bevir and Rhodes' on these meta-theoretical issues because these differences have clear implications for how we analyse British politics. So, to give just two examples of how my analysis differs from that of Bevir and Rhodes, first, I highlight the independent causal powers that material structures have, and thus the importance of structured inequality; and second, I argue that, while ideas crucially affect outcomes, they do so in institutional settings that can, and often do, inhibit change.

2. From Theory to Model

In this section, I outline the DPM and show how it relates to Bevir and Rhodes' interpretive approach before turning to the APM and its links to critical realism.

(a) Bevir and Rhodes' Interpretive Approach and the Differentiated Polity Model

We need to examine the link between the interpretive approach and the DPM which Bevir and Rhodes acknowledge (2003, 4). Table 1 outlines the characteristics of the DPM, which Rhodes developed in direct response to the WM (on the WM, see Gamble 1990), comparing it to the APM discussed later.

The move from a focus on government to a focus on governance has been one of the most noticeable developments in recent political science. As Rhodes (1997, 15)

Table 1: The Differentiated Power Model and the Asymmetric Power Model Compared

Differentiated Power Model	Asymmetric Power Model
Governance, rather than government	Governance, rather than government
Mixed modes of governance, but networks main mode	Mixed modes of governance, with hierarchy main mode
A hollowed-out state	Strong government, although increasingly challenged
Power-dependence, involving evolving, and open, exchange relations	Power-dependence, involving asymmetric exchange relations
Intergovernmental relations	Intergovernmental relations
A segmented executive	A strong, if segmented, executive
Contested political traditions	Dominant political tradition, with increasing contestations
Focus on the plurality of civil society, reflected in the involvement of the private and the voluntary sector in network governance	Structured inequality in society
Pluralism	Asymmetries of power

argues, 'The term "governance" refers to a change in the meaning of government, referring to a new process of governing'. He defines governance as involving 'self-organising, inter-organizational networks characterized by interdependence, resource exchange, rules of the game and significant autonomy from the state' (Rhodes 1997, 15).

More specifically, Rhodes (1997) sees this change as involving the replacement of hierarchy and markets by networks as the dominant mode of modern governance. In this vein, Bevir and he argue, 'governance as networks is a common and important development in advanced industrial societies where the relationship between state and civil society has changed dramatically' (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 54). They contend that, in large part, such change stems from the increased complexity, dynamism and diversity in contemporary society, which, in turn, results from a variety of processes, including globalisation, devolution and the growth of non-governmental organisations and leads to a 'hollowing out' of the state. Of course, complexity, dynamism and diversity are at the core of the inter-pretist position.

The concept of 'hollowing out' is very important in the analysis. Bevir and Rhodes argue: 'The state has been hollowed out from above by international interdependence, and from below by for example marketisation, and sideways by agencies' (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 58). Such hollowing out suggests that 'the growth of governance has further undermined the ability of the core-executive to act effectively, making it increasingly reliant on diplomacy' (ibid., 58). The new form of governance involves a continuing process of negotiation between the various levels

of governance; or, to put it another way, contemporary governance involves negotiations within and between networks, rather than the assertion of authority by government. So, Rhodes and Bevir argue, 'The governance narrative claims to capture recent changes in British government in the way the Westminster model cannot' (*ibid.*, 54; see also *ibid.*, 6). Overall, the putative move from government to governance, from hierarchy to networks as the dominant mode of governance and towards a hollowed-out state, which are crucial elements of Rhodes' DPM, fit very happily with, indeed can be derived from, Bevir and Rhodes' interpretive position.

Power-dependence, exchange relations and intergovernmental relations are other key aspects of network governance and also fit happily with an interpretive approach. Here, the view is that the government is not dominant, but rather involved in a series of exchange relations with both sub-national governments and the private and voluntary sectors. So, while the government has certain resources, notably authority and legitimacy, the private and voluntary sectors also have resources, for example, information and the capacity to reduce government's cost both by co-operating in the administration of policy and, perhaps increasingly, being involved in the delivery of services. Similarly, while central government may make the laws, sub-national governments also have legitimacy and are responsible for delivering a broad range of services. As such, central government and both sub-central government and the private and voluntary sectors are interdependent and this is the basis of the exchange relations. The WM emphasised that British government was characterised by a strong, united, core executive, but, in contrast, the DPM also asserts that the executive is segmented; that there are differences within the core executive, between ministers, departments and co-ordinating mechanisms, which mean that, once again, the polity is characterised by contestation and exchange relations.

The idea that there are contested traditions within British governance is a core element of Bevir and Rhodes' interpretive approach. They suggest that there are four contesting traditions within the UK: Tory; Liberal; Whig; and Socialist. However, to Bevir and Rhodes traditions are not static and should not be reified; rather, agents are bearers of one, or a mixture, of them and they may, or may not, invoke them to explain/understand and respond to dilemmas.⁵ A dilemma is:

any experience or idea that conflicts with someone's beliefs and so forces them to alter the beliefs they inherit as a tradition. It combines with the tradition to explain (although not determine) the beliefs people go on to adopt and so the actions they go on to perform (Bevir and Rhodes 2006a).

Here, it is important to emphasise that this view of traditions is linked to Bevir and Rhodes' interpretive approach, leading to a focus upon diversity, contestation, agency and the role of ideas.

The last two features of the DPM that I have identified are not included by Rhodes in his list of the model's features, although the emphasis upon plurality is easy to establish. Bevir and Rhodes do not talk of plurality as such, but it is a key feature of both an interpretive approach and the DPM. Certainly, there is no acknowledgement at all in Bevir and Rhodes' work of any key divisions in civil society, based, for example, on class, gender or ethnicity, that might shape individual behaviour or

political outcomes. This reflects their interpretive position and the fact that, as argued earlier, they deny the existence of structures that constrain or facilitate agents. As such, for Bevir and Rhodes civil society is made up of agents who operate within traditions that they reflexively monitor in response to dilemmas. Plurality, together with contingency and the ubiquity of change are the key features of their analysis.

The idea that the DPM is a pluralist one may be more contentious. Of course, to an extent it depends on what one means by pluralism. I acknowledge that the DPM does not assume that the inevitable outcome of politics is a balanced polity; one in which everyone gains. However, there is a strong emphasis within the model on power being diffuse, rather than concentrated. So, to reiterate the last paragraph, there is no structured inequality that privileges a dominant class, gender or race. More directly, power is shared, perhaps it's better to say negotiated, between different levels of government and between government and agents negotiating on behalf of/representing other sectors. The outcome may not be a balance in quite the sense that classical pluralists would suggest. However, the strong implication is that such negotiation is likely to be based upon a continuing exchange relationship which will be undermined if one partner involved in the exchange feels it is consistently losing out. Consequently, in my view this is a pluralist model, certainly when compared to the APM which sees power as concentrated.

(b) An Alternative: Critical Realism and the Asymmetric Power Model

Unsurprisingly, given their failure to take critical realism seriously, Bevir and Rhodes do not consider the APM (see Bevir and Rhodes 2006a, ch. 5; for the APM see Marsh et al. 2002 and 2003; McAnulla 2005), although it clearly offers a viable model, distinct from both the WM and the DPM.

The APM is outlined in Table 1. In essence, this model accepts that there has been a move from government to governance, but suggests that there has been much more path-dependency than Bevir and Rhodes acknowledge. More specifically, it contends that hierarchy, rather than networks, remains the dominant mode of governance and government remains strong, although increasingly challenged; the power-dependencies and the associated exchange relationships are clearly asymmetric; there is a dominant, if contested, political tradition; and the structured inequalities in society are reflected in asymmetries of power.

The model thus emphasises path-dependency, but does not see this as determining outcomes. Rather, and here we see the influence of critical realism, it sees the relationships between structure and agency, the material and the ideational and institutions and ideas as dialectical. So, it suggests that the unequal distribution of resources within British society is reflected in access to the policy-making process and, thus, privileges some groups and disadvantages others. However, unequal access to resources and to the policy-making process does not determine the policy outcomes. So, you cannot 'read off' policy outcomes on the basis of a knowledge/understanding of the patterns of inequality within society, in particular because such patterns of inequality are interpreted by agents. This interpretation will be

affected, but again not determined, by discourses/narratives about the patterns of equality/inequality within society. Such narratives will be contested, although there is likely to be a dominant discourse that constrains and facilitates, but again does not determine, outcomes. At the same time, of course, different agents use resources more or less effectively. Finally, agents, in acting, can change the structure, notably in this case as a result of policy change, and the changed structure becomes the context within which the agents subsequently act.

It almost inevitably follows that the relationship between the material and the ideational is dialectical. So, the material inequalities do not have a direct effect on outcomes, but rather they are narrated and it is this narration which has an effect. As an example, Colin Hay and Ben Rosamond (2002) argue that New Labour was influenced by the dominant UK discourse about globalisation, which emphasised that globalisation was a positive force which could not be resisted, rather than by the actual extent of globalisation. However, in my view, the narration of material inequalities is not open; in many senses it is constrained by the 'real' pattern of structured inequality. As such, the discursive construction of material inequalities affects outcomes, but the resonance of this discourse is affected by the material realities; so, in the case of globalisation, the actual extent of globalisation constrains the effect of the discourse of globalisation.

The model also sees the relationship between institutions and ideas as dialectical. So, for example, I argue below that a particular view of democracy, a dominant political tradition based on a limited liberal notion of representation and a conservative notion of responsibility, underpins the institutions and processes of British politics. Of course, this idea of democracy is contested, but that contestation takes place within a set of institutions and processes underpinned by that dominant tradition.

It should be clear then that, in large part, the differences between the DPM and the APM reflect the different ontological and epistemological positions of their proponents. However, they also reflect different readings of contemporary British politics and in the last section of this article I turn to this issue.

3. Comparing the Models: Understanding Contemporary British Politics

Here, I look empirically at the three areas where the DPM and the APM differ most clearly, arguing that the DPM underestimates the continued importance of hierarchy, structured inequality and a dominant political tradition in the UK. I am not a positivist, so I do not think I can prove this contention. Rather, my argument is that the evidence I adduce and the argument I develop are worthy of serious consideration by Bevir and Rhodes and others.

(a) Hierarchy vs Networks

As we saw, Rhodes argues that network has replaced hierarchy as the dominant mode of governance in the UK, and beyond. I take issue with this view, focusing on

one example that initially might seem to confirm Rhodes' position: New Labour's putative commitment to participatory governance.

Of course, a commitment to more participation and empowerment would be a key element in a move towards networks as the dominant mode of governance. I am very sceptical for two major reasons. First, there is little evidence that New Labour had a broader commitment to a more participatory democracy (see Gamble 2006; Marsh and Hall (2007)). Second, New Labour's emphasis on active citizenship and participatory governance seems more about control than empowerment. Here, I examine this second argument, which, to the extent it is correct, would suggest that hierarchy remains a crucial, perhaps the crucial, mode of governance in the UK.

Janet Newman (2005, 128–129) identifies a variety of governance initiatives introduced by New Labour: deliberative forum; citizen panels; user empowerment; consumer consultation; user or citizen involvement on the governing boards of public institutions; and participatory evaluation. Interestingly, all these initiatives are in the area of what Jim Bulpitt terms 'low politics'.⁶ Indeed, I agree with Newman (2005, 122) who argues: 'underpinning the normative statements about the importance of public involvement and dialogue ... is a set of government concerns about policy legitimacy and effectiveness'.

In addition, most of New Labour's policy initiatives, even in the area of 'low politics', reflect a concern with control, rather than empowerment. As Nicolas Rose (1999) emphasises, new forms of governance are designed to incorporate citizens into new fields of power which appear to grant autonomy, but demand greater responsibility. Newman (2005, 128) makes a similar point:

New governmental strategies may involve calling into being particular conceptions of the public realm and may define—or constitute—the public in particular ways. Here, participatory governance can be understood as a new political rationality through which citizens, users or communities are constituted as governable subjects.

Many analysts are sceptical about New Labour's commitment to participatory governance. So Newman (2005, 130) argues: 'Participatory initiatives may fall short of the ideals of empowerment or co-production and become part of a fundamentally managed rationality'. She also contends (*ibid.*, 133) that 'power imbalances mean that public officials' "claims to truth" tend to prevail over the experiences and knowledge that the collaborating publics bring to those interactions' (see also Sterling 2005).

Perhaps Peter Somerville (2005) makes this point most forcibly. He argues that we need to make a distinction between empowered citizens, who are given a say in all key decision-making processes, and disciplinary citizens, who are signed up, but not listened to, and thus used to legitimise elite decisions. In his view, New Labour's participatory governance involves disciplinary citizens.

More specifically, Rebekah Sterling (2005, 148) examines how partnerships work under New Labour, arguing: 'research consistently finds that most partnerships involve participation by only a small number of people and, with a few isolated

exceptions, issues of community diversity, "race", gender, disability and class still receive little attention in partnership practice'. As such, participatory governance often creates '[a] veneer of consensus [which] can mask power relations between the "partners" that could work to silence some voices and bolster others' (Sterling 2005, 149; see also Saward 2005, 190). So, participatory governance in areas of low politics can often be exclusionary and it is the usual suspects,⁷ the poor, women, those from ethnic minorities and the young, who are excluded.

Overall, I would argue that, while networks are a key feature of contemporary governance, this example suggests that hierarchy remains a crucial mode of governance in the UK. Of course, this is an argument that fits better with the APM than with the DPM.

(b) Structured Inequality and Access to the Policy-Making Process

My argument here has two parts: first, British society is characterised by structured inequality; and second, this is reflected in access to the policy-making process. I shall look briefly at both issues. This is a key element of the APM, but is not considered in the DPM, which, as we saw, is unsurprising given Bevir and Rhodes' privileging of agency.

(i) Unequal Shares

There is structured inequality in the UK. Indeed, in the first six years of the Labour government, the top 1 per cent of the population increased their share of the national wealth from 20 per cent to 23 per cent, while the share of the poorest 50 per cent shrank from 10 per cent in 1986 to 5 per cent in 2002. Similarly, income distribution remains unequal, with the top 10 per cent of the population receiving over a quarter of the income in 2002/3 (see National Statistics Office, <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/focuson/socialinequalities/>).

Class/social economic status and income are also clearly related to education. So, in 2002, 77 per cent of children in Year 11 in England and Wales with parents in higher professional occupations gained five or more A* to C grade GCSEs, compared to 32 per cent of those with parents in routine occupations (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/focuson/socialinequalities/>). Similarly, in the same year 87 per cent of 16-year-olds with higher-status parents were still in further education, compared with 60 per cent of those with parents in routine jobs. When it comes to higher education (HE), the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) figures on HE participation reveal deep inequalities. They argue:

there are broad and deep divisions in the chances of going into HE according to where you live. Young people living in the most advantaged 20 per cent of areas are five to six times more likely to enter higher education than those living in the least advantaged 20 per cent of areas (http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2005/05_03/).

Social status is also strongly related to health. Manual workers die earlier than others, so, for the period 1997–99, the life expectancy at birth in England and Wales

for men in the professional group was 7.4 years more than for those in the unskilled manual group (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/focuson/health/>). In addition, infant mortality is significantly higher among the lower status groups (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/focuson/health/>).

It is also important to note that, while over the post-war period social mobility has clearly increased, more recently this trend has reversed and origins still crucially shape, although they do not determine, destinations. So Jo Blanden et al. (2005), in a key recent study of social mobility, found:

- Intergenerational mobility fell markedly in the 1980s and 1990s in the UK, with the cohort of people born in 1970 being less mobile than those born in 1958, although the situation had not deteriorated for the more recent cohorts.
- The decline is in large part a result of educational opportunity. There is a strong relationship between family income and educational achievement and increased opportunities to stay in education beyond 16 and 18 have disproportionately benefited the better-off.

There is also clear social inequality rooted in gender. So, the average full-time pay gap between men and women in 2005 was 17.9 per cent (www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk/women_work/pay.htm). In the same vein, men were twice as likely to be managers as women. However, women do fare better in educational terms. Girls outperform boys at both GCSE and A-level. So, in 2001–02, 58 per cent of girls in their last year of compulsory education gained five or more A* to C grade GCSEs, compared to 47 per cent of boys. Similarly, 43 per cent of young women gained two or more A-levels or equivalents, compared to 34 per cent of young men. In addition, as compared to men, women are more likely to go to university and as likely to get a first class degree (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/focuson/gender/>).⁸

As far as ethnicity is concerned, similar inequalities are clear, although the pattern is not uniform. Rates of employment are lower for ethnic groups; in 2002 the ethnic employment rate was 59 per cent, compared with the overall rate of 75 per cent. Unemployment is higher among ethnic groups, especially Black Caribbean (12 per cent) and Black African (14 per cent) men, compared with 4 per cent among white males. Ethnic incomes are also lower. So, for example, Pakistani and Bangladeshi working households have incomes 50 per cent below the national average (http://www.cre.gov.uk/research/statistics_labour.html#income). In terms of education, in 2004, Chinese (79 per cent of girls and 70 per cent of boys) and Indian (72 per cent of girls and 62 per cent of boys) pupils were the more likely to obtain five or more A* to C grade GCSEs than whites (47 per cent boys and 57 per cent girls), with Black Caribbeans achieving least (27 per cent of boys and 44 per cent of girls). Similarly, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and Black Caribbeans (11 per cent in each group) were less likely to have a degree than whites (17 per cent) (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/focuson/gender/>), while Chinese (31 per cent) and Indians (25 per cent) had the highest rates. In terms of health, ethnic minorities have lower life expectancy than whites, lower levels of self-reported health and higher rates of long-term illness or disability (<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/focuson/health/>).

(ii) Access and Influence

Unsurprisingly, political participation is also related to social status, gender and ethnicity. So, Charles Pattie et al. (2004) show that those who are richer and/or with a higher socioeconomic status are more politically knowledgeable (table 3.7), more interested in politics (table 3.9), more likely to discuss politics (table 3.11), more satisfied with British democracy (table 2.17), more trusting of people (table 2.4), more personally efficacious (table 2.18) and more politically active (table 3.4). People from higher social economic backgrounds are also much more likely to be MPs, ministers and senior civil servants (Marsh 2002).

Pattie et al.'s (2004, table 3.4) findings indicate limited gender differences in the ways in which men and women relate to politics and participation. They found that participation was not related to gender, but women were less knowledgeable about (table 3.7), interested in (table 3.11) and likely to talk about (table 3.11) politics than men. Women were also less likely to feel personally or politically efficacious (table 2.18). Unsurprisingly, women are under-represented in the political sphere, although less so than in the past. In 2005, women made up 28 per cent of the UK senior civil service, including 24 per cent of the top 600 jobs. Similarly, in 2003, 36 per cent of appointees to non-departmental public bodies were women. After the 2005 election, 20 per cent of Westminster MPs (128) were women. In addition, women account for 19 per cent of the membership of the House of Lords, 50 per cent of the National Assembly of Wales, 39 per cent of the Scottish Parliament, 17 per cent of the Northern Ireland Assembly and 24 per cent of UK Members of the European Parliament (all 2005 figures). All these figures show a significant increase on previous levels. In this vein, after a cabinet reshuffle in May 2006, there were 8 female cabinet members (36 per cent), the greatest number ever by a considerable margin.

Pattie et al. (2004) found that ethnicity was not particularly significant in relation to propensity to engage in political action (table 3.4) or in terms of civic beliefs and citizenship values (table 3.18), although interpersonal trust was higher among white respondents (table 2.14). However, they also report that non-white categories of respondents were more likely to be involved in micro-political actions concerned with public services such as education or health than white respondents (table 4.9). In terms of access to key political positions, after the 2005 election there were 15 MPs from ethnic minority backgrounds, of whom two were women. In 2005 3.5 per cent of councillors were from ethnic minority backgrounds, as were 4 per cent of members of the House of Lords. While four of the UK MEPs were from an ethnic minority, there were no ethnic minority members of the Welsh Assembly or the Scottish Parliament. More broadly, in 2003, 5.3 per cent of quango members were from an ethnic minority.

The most important question is how these inequalities are reflected in policy outcomes. Of course, we cannot assume that, because those in key political positions tend to come from privileged positions, they inevitably act to forward the interest of the groups from which they come. However, here I want to revisit my earlier work with Rhodes on policy networks.

Bevir and Rhodes acknowledge the importance of policy networks in British politics, but see them as evidence that networks are the dominant form of governance in the UK. In doing so, they ignore the key conclusion of Marsh and Rhodes' book (1992) which assessed both the form and membership of the networks in different policy areas and their influence over policy. This conclusion was clear; tight policy networks, which persisted over time and in which members shared clear policy objectives, were dominated by three sets of interests: economic interests; professional interests; and the government. Such policy communities, with agriculture as the archetypal case, dominated some, but by no means all, areas of policy-making, developing policy in the interests of the networks' members.

Of course, the research for Marsh and Rhodes' edited book was completed in the early 1990s and I would acknowledge that there have been changes. However, the whole tenor of my work with Rhodes (Marsh and Rhodes 1992), Martin Smith (Marsh and Smith 2000) and Dave Toke (Marsh and Toke 2003) on policy networks as a mode of interest group intermediation, rather than as a mode of governance, emphasises that: networks are structures, within which agents act; members of those networks have privileged access to policy-making; and membership of the tightest, and thus usually the most influential, networks is restricted, reflecting, in my view, the broader-structured inequality within society.

Overall then, in my view, there are clear and persistent inequalities based on class/income, gender and ethnicity. They are persistent, although not unchanging. Of course, Bevir and Rhodes might acknowledge the existence of such inequalities, but, for them, they cannot have causal affects, given their interpretist position, and they do not feature in the DPM. In contrast, the APM views class, gender and ethnicity as structural constraints on the disadvantaged and structural facilitators for the advantaged. They do not determine, but do affect, individual opportunities, although how much of course is an empirical question.

(c) A British Political Tradition

The APM suggests, contra Bevir and Rhodes, that a particular view of democracy, a British Political Tradition (BPT), underpins the institutions and processes of British government (for an extended discussion see Marsh and Hall (2007)). This BPT is based on a limited liberal notion of representation and a conservative notion of responsibility, which, together, entail a 'top-down' notion of democracy in which 'government knows best'. This BPT has established a path-dependency, in part because challenges to it occur within the context of institutions and processes that are shaped by it. Of course, this view of democracy is not uncontested and has not remained unchanged, but change occurs within a path-dependent context.

I want briefly to illustrate the resonance of this argument through a consideration of the fate of New Labour's constitutional reform agenda. The initial proposals enshrined in the 1997 Election Manifesto were radical and, if enacted, would have transformed the nature of British democracy, undermined the BPT and moved the UK towards a more participatory democracy. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Marsh 2004; Marsh and Hall (2007)), these proposals were mostly de-radicalised, in large part because the attempts at reform occurred within the framework of

institutions and processes that were underpinned by the BPT. Only Scottish devolution was enacted without such de-radicalisation (see Marsh and Hall (2007)).

The point is easily made if we consider two elements of New Labour's constitutional agenda: electoral reform and freedom of information.

(i) Electoral Reform

New Labour initially moved quickly to establish the Jenkins Commission, but its terms of reference required that any reform proposal still ensured the continuance of strong government, effectively a synonym for majority government and an endorsement of the BPT. Unsurprisingly, the Commission recommended a very limited move towards a proportional system. Perhaps even more significantly, by the 2001 election New Labour no longer had a firm commitment to a referendum on the issue.

During this period, the Labour government introduced an additional member system for the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh and London Assemblies and utilised the single transferable vote system (STV) in Northern Ireland for Assembly and local elections and a regional party list system for the European Parliament. Three points are important here. First, Labour is not always opposed to more proportional systems. Second, it introduced or accepted other electoral systems in each of these cases because there were overwhelming political reasons to do so. STV was regarded as essential in Northern Ireland because, in such a sectarian society, it is crucial to ensure that the legislature reflects these divisions accurately. European law required a proportional electoral system for the 1999 European elections, so there was no alternative but to move in that direction. Even so the Labour party favoured a party list system which at least, unlike STV, gives the parties significant control over who is elected to represent them. The change in Scotland owes most to the fact that the details of devolution emerged from the Scottish Constitutional Convention which had a strong representation of Liberal Democrats whose support the Labour party needed to ensure the legitimacy of their devolution proposals. Once the Scottish electoral system was decided, it would have been very difficult not to follow that precedent in Wales. Third, while the other electoral systems elsewhere in the UK may serve as models for changes in the Westminster system in future, at present the relative novelty of these changes elsewhere is used by Labour as a reason for caution as regards change in the Westminster electoral system.

In my view, Labour failed to deliver on its commitments in this area largely because of the changes which occurred in the political and electoral context after it embraced the possibility of electoral reform in the early 1990s. At that time, after four consecutive election defeats, many in the party thought it unlikely that they could win power as a majority government again. Consequently, it moved towards the Liberal Democrats and flirted with electoral reform. After the 1997 election, with a majority of 179, the situation looked very different. As such, it's not surprising that, while it fulfilled its initial commitment in establishing the Jenkins Commission, it resisted any real change. In addition, while opinion polls show a majority in favour of electoral reform (60 per cent strongly favoured or favoured

change in an ICM poll in October 2000), it did not feature as a significant issue in the 2001 election. Thus, a failure to deliver on the 1997 commitment to a referendum on the issue clearly did not cost Labour many votes.

(ii) Freedom of Information

The Freedom of Information proposal was clearly de-radicalised as it went through the policy-making process; indeed the White Paper and the Bill reflected very different ideas about democracy. The White Paper, *Your Right to Know*, published in December 1997, was the responsibility of the Cabinet Office and David Clark, who was Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and seemed to be inspired by the policy ideas of the constitutional reform lobby. It was based on the view that parliament and the population should be able to hold government accountable and that, in order to do so, they need accurate information about what government is doing, and how and why it is doing it.

However, many of the cabinet were always unhappy with the idea of a radical Freedom of Information Act. Indeed, Clark's only strong allies were the Lord Chancellor, Derry Irvine, and, at first at least, and crucially, the prime minister. The first crucial change in the emasculation of the proposal came with the sacking of Clark in the first reshuffle of ministers in July 1998. At the same time, responsibility for drafting the Freedom of Information Bill passed to the Home Office. This was very significant because the Home Secretary, Jack Straw, had strongly opposed the development of a radical bill in the Cabinet Committee.

Consequently, the proposal was de-radicalised and the Bill was based on the view that, while some information should be released, government should control the process.⁹ Any other system would result in less effective government. In the terms used here, the constitutional lobby operated with a participatory view of how democracy should function, while the government remained solidly rooted in the BPT.

Two other points are also important, the second particularly so. First, few among the electorate thought freedom of information was an important issue, so Labour lost few votes on this issue in 2001. Second, senior civil servants were even more opposed to radical freedom of information legislation than Labour ministers. Civil servants object to freedom of information because it would severely affect the nature of their job. They would always need to be concerned about the public perceptions of their actions, which would mean they would be less efficient and effective. As such, in this instance they were very happy to help ministerial opponents of the White Paper de-radicalise it. Overall, civil servants, perhaps even more than ministers, are proponents of the key epithet of the BPT: government knows best.

My basic argument is simple. The BPT is a crucial factor in explaining how the British political system did, and does, operate, particularly when it comes to issues concerning constitutional reform. It has an effect in three ways. First, this particular view of democracy underpins the institutions and processes of British government. In the context of the discussion here, it is that view of democracy which shaped the

development of the highly centralised political system with relatively little autonomy for sub-central government, the simple majority electoral system and the Official Secrets Act. Second, current debates about constitutional reform take place within an institutional setting inscribed with the British Political Tradition. This does not mean that change is impossible, but it clearly circumscribes the likelihood of radical change. Third, and this is obviously related, this view of democracy is the one which most politicians, certainly, but by no means exclusively, when in government, and almost all civil servants share. This shared culture of 'government knows best' is a crucial feature of British politics.

In Conclusion

Bevir and Rhodes have made a significant contribution to the study of British government, moving beyond the description that has characterised so much of the work in this area. However, in my view, their work would be better if they did not conflate the positions of those who disagree with them. Not everyone who disagrees with them is a positivist, or modernist empiricist. Similarly, not everyone who criticises the DPM accepts the WM. My aim in this article has been to show both that a critical realist approach offers an alternative perspective on British politics and that the model which is derived from that perspective, the APM, presents an alternative to both the DPM and the WM. In particular, I have argued that the APM recognises the continued importance of the role of hierarchy, inequality and a dominant political tradition in British politics, while the DPM denies their importance, in large part because of its roots in an interpretist position. Overall, my argument is not that the DPM has no empirical purchase, but rather that there is an alternative which needs to be seriously considered.

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Notes

1. Indeed, this was a key emphasis of the introductory articles to both of the journals with a particular focus on British politics: *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations* (Editors, BJPIR 1999, 3–4); and *Journal of British Politics* (Kerr and Kettell 2006, 18–19).
2. There are 73 references to the Differentiated Polity Model in Google Scholar.
3. A synchronic approach produces a snapshot of a particular time, so there is no temporal dimension, a comparative approach compares snapshots of two separate times, so there is little, if any, consideration of the process involved, while a diachronic approach offers a longitudinal study, a video to retain the analogy of stability and change over time, focusing on the process.
4. See also: 'The content of the tradition will appear in their later actions only if their situated agency has not led them to change it, and every part of it is, in principle, open to such change' (Bevir and Rhodes 2006a, 7).
5. To Bevir and Rhodes (2006a, 9), 'Dilemmas and traditions cannot fully explain actions both because actions are informed by desires as well as beliefs and because people are agents who respond creatively to any given dilemma. Although dilemmas sometimes arise from experiences of the world, we cannot equate them with the world as it is because experiences are always theory-laden. Like meanings in general, dilemmas are always subjective or inter-subjective'.

6. The distinction between 'high politics' and 'low politics' was invoked by Bulpitt (1983) as a key aspect of what he termed the dual polity theory. He argued that in areas of high politics (economic policy, foreign affairs, defence and we would suggest constitutional matters) British governments (Bulpitt thought particularly Conservative governments) jealously guarded their authority and were reluctant to share powers, while in other areas, of low politics (particular areas concerned with the delivery of services), they were less concerned and more willing to cede powers to local government. In the current situation one might extend the dual polity thesis to suggest that the area of low politics includes not only local government, and devolved government, but also most of the scope of so-called network governance.
7. Interestingly, Walters (2004, 36) argues in a similar vein: 'governance discourse seeks to redefine the political field in terms of a game of assimilation and integration. It displaces talk of politics as struggle or conflict. It resonates with "end of class" and "end of history" narratives in that it imagines a politics of multi-level collective self-management, a politics without enemies'.
8. Gender inequalities are not unidirectional. Women are healthier; they live longer, on average by five years, and there are higher levels of morbidity at all ages for men than for women (<http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/doh/ih/part2i.htm>).
9. It must also be acknowledged that there were changes during the Bill's passage through parliament which made it more liberal, but they were limited.

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