

Everyday Life in a Ministry : Public Administration as Anthropology

R. A. W. Rhodes

The American Review of Public Administration 2005 35: 3

DOI: 10.1177/0275074004271716

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://arp.sagepub.com/content/35/1/3>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



[American Society for Public Administration](#)

Additional services and information for *The American Review of Public Administration* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://arp.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://arp.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://arp.sagepub.com/content/35/1/3.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Jan 24, 2005

[What is This?](#)

EVERYDAY LIFE IN A MINISTRY ***Public Administration as Anthropology***

R. A. W. RHODES
Australian National University

This article seeks to answer two questions: What do we know about the work of ministers and permanent secretaries? How do we know what we know about ministers and permanent secretaries? To do so, it describes a research project on life at the top of British government departments and discusses the issues raised by trying to do research and write a political anthropology of the daily life of ministers and civil servants. The article has four sections. First, it surveys briefly the existing literature on ministers and top civil servants. Second, it describes the scope and methods of the project. Third, it reports some early findings. Finally, it reflects on the distinctive contribution of ethnographic research to understanding British government and the problems of elite interviewing, nonparticipant observation, and research on the powerful.

Keywords: *ethnography; British government; ministers; permanent secretaries*

All policy is autobiography.

—Davis (2002, p. 10)

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

What do we know about the work of ministers and permanent secretaries? How do we know what we know about ministers and permanent secretaries? I seek to answer these questions by drawing on some of the early findings of an ethnographic analysis of life at the top of three British government departments. The article surveys briefly the existing literature on ministers and top civil servants to see how it answers my two questions, describes the scope and methods of the project, and reports some early findings. Finally, I reflect on the

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This essay is a revised version of a paper to the panel on "Mediating the Self, Extending the Citizen: Key Institutions and the Practices of Everyday Life," Australian Anthropological Society, annual conference on "Anthropology and Pragmatism," October 1 to 3, 2003, University of Sydney. I must thank the conference participants, the editors of ARPA, Jenny Fleming, Bob Goodin, Barry Hindess, and John Wanna for helpful comments. I owe a special debt of gratitude to the politicians and public officials without whom this article could not have been written. The views expressed are those of the author alone.*

Initial Submission: May 14, 2004

Accepted: September 15, 2004

AMERICAN REVIEW OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, Vol. 35 No. 1, March 2005 3-25

DOI: 10.1177/0275074004271716

© 2005 Sage Publications

distinctive contribution of ethnographic research to understanding British government and on the problems of elite interviewing, nonparticipant observation, and research on the powerful.

I focus on British government, but this restriction will not affect the general relevance of my comments. As Fenno (1990, p. 128) observes of American political science, “not enough political scientists are presently engaged in observation” of politicians. His stricture applies equally to Australian and British public administration (Rhodes, 2002). To be blunt, we do not watch ministers and civil servants at work. Of course, there are various relevant literatures on departments, ministers, top civil servants, and qualitative research methods in public administration. None are extensive.

Marsh, Richards, and Smith (2001, p. 1) note “there is an absence of research into government departments,” and James (1999, p. 251) comments that public administration “has neglected ministers and their departments” (for a full review of the literature, see Smith, Marsh, & Richards, 1995). There are many ministerial biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, and diaries, but, as James (1992, p. 254) notes, “ministerial memoirs proliferate, but are often not much use to a student of Whitehall.” Even the “veritable blizzard” of memoirs since the 1980s led to little of quality (James, 1999, p. 252). Norton (2000, p. 101) comments there has been “a dearth of scholarly literature on senior ministers.” There are no studies based on nonparticipant observation, and the few quantitative studies are arid (Blondel, 1985; Rose, 1987; for a critical assessment see Dogan & Pelassy, 1990, p. 116; Chabal, 2003). Barberis (1996, p. xvi) is surprised “there has never been a book specifically devoted to permanent secretaries” and argues we know little about these officeholders beyond the popular television programs *Yes Minister* and *Yes Prime Minister*. There are few memoirs by senior civil servants, and all too often they are “unintentionally revealing of the more tortuous cast of mandarin mind” (James, 1992, p. 255; see, for example, Bridges, 1950; Dale, 1941; Denham, 2002; Part, 1980). There were exceptions to these judgments when they were written. There are some useful novels (e.g., Clark, 1966; Edelman, 1961; Snow, 1964). There have been some valuable additions to the literature in recent years, but the general point remains valid. We have few nonfiction accounts of life at the top of British government.

First, let me note the more important exceptions. Among political scientists, the work of Heady (1974), Heclo and Wildavsky (1974), Marsh et al. (2001), and Rhodes and Dunleavy (1995) are important sources on ministers and their departments. Barberis (1996) filled the gap and wrote a book specifically devoted to permanent secretaries (see also Theakston, 1999, 2000). Rhodes and Weller (2001) provide a comparative analysis of departmental secretaries that includes interview material on how they see their world. H. Young and Sloman (1982, 1984) quote extensively from their interviews with top civil servants. Among politicians, Kaufman (1980) is funny as well as informative on being a minister, and Bruce-Gardyne's (1986) comparable effort deserves more attention than it gets. The undisputed classics among ministerial diaries are Benn (1990), Castle (1984), and Crossman (1975). Among ministerial memoirs, Jenkins (1991) is worth consulting and Lawson's (1992) detailed account of economic policy is impressive. As Gamble (1994, p. 38) points out, few memoirs set out to describe ministerial policy making, and since 1979 few tomes from Conservative ministers repay the effort of reading them. There is some relevant material in Fowler (1991) and D. Young (1990). Journalists spend much time and effort on prime ministers, but such doyens of the profession as Andrew Rawnsley (2001), Peter Riddell (1989), and Hugo Young (1989) rarely descend from such Olympian heights. The exceptions include Peter Hennessy's (1989) book on Whitehall, with its incomparable anecdotes, and Jeremy Paxman's (2002) patchy and finally commonplace account of ministers and their motivation.

There are some useful case studies with material on departmental and ministerial decision making (see Burch & Holliday, 1996; Butler, Adonis, & Travers, 1994; Greenaway, Smith, & Street, 1992; Rhodes & Dunleavy, 1995). So, for all of their importance, ministers and top civil servants have been studied rarely. Also, there are some significant weaknesses in this literature.

First, the approach of much of the literature is “modernist empiricism” (Bevir, 2000, p. 470; see also The Editors, 1999, pp. 2-3). Adherents of a modernist empiricism study political actions and institutions as atomized units that they examine individually before assembling them into larger sets. They do this by comparing and classifying their likenesses and differences. Thus, institutions such as civil services or ministers are treated as discrete objects that can be compared, measured, and classified. In short, modernist empiricism takes facts as given and divorces them from their context of beliefs to legitimate its claims to objective knowledge.

I reject explicitly the idea of given truths whether based on pure reason or pure experience: All perceptions, and so-called facts, arise within the context of a prior set of beliefs or theoretical commitments. As a result, any claim to describe neutrally an external reality must be treated with suspicion. I emphasize the constructed nature of our claims to knowledge. In contrast with atomization, classification, and measurement, I stress interpreting political actions and institutions to reveal how webs of belief informed by traditions construct them (for a more detailed discussion, see Bevir & Rhodes, 2003).

Second, existing conventional accounts of the top of government offer the reader the author’s analysis supported by short quotes from civil servants and ministers selected to support the argument (e.g., Garrett, 1972; Kellner & Crowther-Hunt, 1980; Plowden, 1994). In other words, we get the author’s critical view of the worlds of ministers and civil servants, commonly with prescriptions for changing it. Even where reform is not on the author’s agenda, social scientists still privilege their interpretation (e.g., Heady, 1974; Marsh et al., 2001). I know of only one study that relies on and reproduces interviews, allowing officials to speak for themselves, and that was with middle-level management, not the administrative elite (Silverman & Jones, 1976).

Finally, theory is not an optional extra, but much work on Westminster and Whitehall remains institutional and descriptive, informed by implicit theories. Smith (1999, p. 116) argues that British politics textbooks only “make a cursory nod towards analysis and theory, they rarely use theory in their substantive chapters.” We need “theoretically informed studies of British politics” (The Editors, 1999, p. 3). The academic literature on ministers and departments exemplifies the point.

In place of modernist empiricism, I argue for an ethnographic approach. Ethnographers reconstruct the meanings of social actors by recovering other people’s stories from practices, actions, texts, interviews, and speeches (e.g., Geertz, 1973, chap. 1; Taylor, 1971, pp. 32-33). Thus, I follow Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, p. 2) in making the basic claim for the ethnographic method that “it captures the meaning of everyday human activities.” It encourages the researcher to get out there and see what actors are thinking and doing. It generates descriptive accounts valuable in their own right (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 237). It is exploratory—“unstructured soaking” (Fenno, 1990, p. 57)—and encourages fresh lines of thought. Ethnography or nonparticipant observation encompasses many ways of collecting qualitative data about beliefs and practices—for example, diary analysis, shadowing, elite interviewing, and participant accounts. (On the several forms of nonparticipant observation relevant to public administration, see Dexter, 1970; Eckstein, 1975; Fenno, 1990; Geertz, 1973; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Richards, 1996; Sanjek, 1990; Silverman, 1997,

2000; Strauss, Schatzman, Ehrlich, Bucher, & Sabshin, 1973; and Yin, 1994. For applications to British government, see Bevir & Rhodes, 2003; Glennerster, Korman, & Marslen-Wilson, 1983; Heclo & Wildavsky, 1974; McPherson & Raab, 1988.)

The difference between the mainstream and an interpretive approach can be shown easily. There is a noteworthy literature on elites, such as permanent secretaries, that assumes we can read off the beliefs and practices of top civil servants from their institutional position and socioeconomic background (e.g., Barberis, 1996; Harris & Garcia, 1966; Richards, 1997; Theakston, 1999, 2000; Theakston & Fry, 1989). An interpretive approach denies that beliefs and practices can be so determined. Rather, political scientists should study the texts—the writings, lectures, interview transcripts, and actions—of civil servants and ministers to identify their beliefs and use private documents as an invaluable check on public pronouncements. Similarly, compared with many versions of rational choice, an interpretive approach does not assume or take as given people's preference nor does it assume self-interest is the prime motivator but seeks to find out what their preferences are and what motivated them to act.

EVERYDAY LIFE AT THE TOP: SCOPE AND METHODS

The aim of the project is to describe the changing world of permanent secretaries and ministers through an account of their careers and how life in government has changed since they joined. I seek to draw a portrait; that is, an account of what the world looks like through their eyes.

Paraphrasing Weick (1995, chap. 8), I unpack beliefs and practices by adopting the following methods or rules of thumb:

1. Study actions (or practices) in context (of traditions).
2. Rely on what participants say and do; on their definition of what they are doing and why.
3. Watch people at work.
4. The fieldwork produces patterns, not hypotheses, and we judge these patterns by their believability, not against prior theories or models.
5. Thick descriptions are as crucial as, for example, replicable data sets.
6. Focus on meanings, not frequencies.

My methods were diary analysis, shadowing, elite interviewing, and nonparticipant observation (and field notes). I also expect to draw on accounts provided by the participants. The fieldwork began in January 2002 and ended in April 2004. There are seven primary data sources:

1. Repeat interviews with nine permanent secretaries (two $\times$ 2-hr taped and transcribed interviews at a minimum).
2. Interviews with three secretaries of state and three ministers (one $\times$ 2-hr taped and transcribed interviews).
3. Interviews with 19 other officials (one $\times$ 1-hr taped and transcribed interviews).
4. Copies of curricula vitae, speeches, and public lectures.
5. Two days of nonparticipant observation in each private office (two ministers and three permanent secretaries).
6. Five working days each shadowing two ministers and three permanent secretaries.

7. Committee and other papers relevant for meetings during Numbers 5 and 6.

The original selection of interviewees sought to combine male and female, recent with long-standing appointments, central agencies and other departments, and London-based with devolved and Brussels-based appointments. Once the project was under way, I snow-balled interviews, asking each interviewee who else I could usefully talk to. I took whatever interviews I could get. The interviews covered nine broad topics: personal information, career, relationship between ministers and permanent secretaries, departmental management, external relations, transition to a Labour government and changes since 1997, the future of the senior civil service, effects on private life, and likes and dislikes. Civil servants and ministers provided the information for citation but not for attribution without express permission.

EARLY FINDINGS

To protect the identities of the departments and their staff, I have changed all the names. In this section, I introduce the cast of characters. I illustrate the methods used and show how they help me identify the beliefs and practices of the permanent secretaries and ministers. I also essay some generalizations about the behavior of officials and politicians.

THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

The scene is London and the hurly-burly of the square mile around the Palace of Westminster (i.e., Parliament) and Whitehall (i.e., the central departments of the national government also known as ministries). The specific sets are three middle-ranking domestic service ministries, all within a 10-minute walk of Parliament. The main characters are the appointed public or civil servants and the elected secretary of state or minister. The top official in the department is known as the permanent secretary. Most are middle-aged, White, university-educated men who have spent their working lives in the senior civil service. They are a small, elite group who work closely with the elected politicians. The project covers the second term of the U.K.'s Labour government, which began on June 8, 2001. The prime minister and head of the government is Tony Blair. He appoints all ministers, both secretaries of state and junior ministers, who are drawn mainly from the majority party in the elected House of Commons, but some junior ministers will be from the nonelected House of Lords. The secretaries of state are members of Cabinet, the fulcrum committee of British government, although its role and importance varies with the whims and wishes of each prime minister. The other key, coordinating central bodies are the Treasury, which holds sway on all matters financial, and the Cabinet Office, which is home to a rag bag of central functions unkindly referred to as the rest home for the pet projects of past prime ministers.

Private offices support both ministers and permanent secretaries. Civil servants staff both offices. A principal private secretary, who will be a young, fast-stream civil servant with a bright future, heads each office. The chief difference is that the minister's private office contains ministerial advisers. They are political appointments, not career civil servants. They are on tap but not on top. The private offices vary in size from 4 to 16, although ministerial offices were always larger. Most ministries are divided into functional directorates headed by a

director general, although the terminology varies. Few departments directly run services. They have hands-off service responsibilities. They work with and through agencies headed by a chief executive. Broadly speaking, the department is responsible for policy and the agency for implementation.

METHOD

Diary Analysis and Workload

Commentary

At the outset, I must comment on the limitations of the data drawn from the diaries. The diary secretary in the permanent secretaries' private office keeps the diary. There is no standard method of recording appointments. So, a meeting with a named individual in one department will be recorded as a 1:1 (one to one) in another diary. Although I coded all meetings with the minister as policy, that meeting could be about anything. Similarly, a meeting with an official colleague could have much policy content, and nothing in the diary would show that. Each diary secretary went through his or her permanent secretary's diary with me but obviously could not remember the topic of every meeting. The diary is an incomplete record in other ways, too. There are many meetings on the spur of the moment—colleagues pop in for a quick chat, the minister wants a minute. The differences in the total hours worked by each permanent secretary are more likely to reflect the incompleteness of the diary record than real differences in workload. We did not always agree on how to code some activities. For example, I thought trips to agencies located outside London should be coded as representational, whereas the permanent secretary thought it should be coded as internal management. As the project is about how ministers and permanent secretaries see their world, their views prevailed. Finally, the list of specific activities is less diverse than the diaries reveal simply because I had to limit the categories to get a degree of comparability. In brief, the portrait is broad-brush. It is an approximation of their workload.

The work of a permanent secretary is conventionally divided into the policy, management, and representational roles. Figure 1 shows how much time is spent on the representational role (26% to 30%) and how little on policy (7% to 13%). Although I have no time-series data, I am confident the time spent on management is a substantial increase on 20 years ago. The increase reflects a shift of time and effort from policy-related work to managing the department. However, and perhaps more significant, it reflects the longer hours worked. All my interviewees knew they worked longer now than at any other period in their career. Most were reluctant to compare their workloads with that of their predecessors but, when pressed, thought life in early times was less pressured. Some thought a 5-year stint was enough given the demands of the job. The "Other" category refers to a miscellany of indecipherable entries.

Table 1 shows the diversity of the permanent secretaries' workloads. To some extent it is seasonal—the budget comes but once a year. Accountability to Parliament is a core doctrine of the Westminster model, but it accounts for precious little of a permanent secretary's time, although appearances before the Public Accounts Committee involve intensive dress rehearsals. Here, however, the diary is misleading. The departments all have elaborate procedures for processing parliamentary questions, although they involve the permanent secretary only rarely. However, issues of fiscal propriety are a constant backdrop to their work.

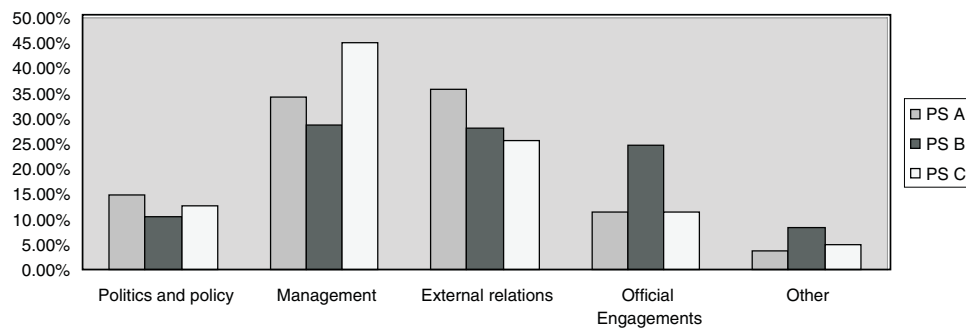


Figure 1: Comparing Permanent Secretaries

Perhaps most dramatic is the finding that only 6% of their time is spent working alone reading and preparing papers, although this figure is slightly misleading. My figures refer only to time allocated in the diary. They exclude, for example, reading the files. It is not just the minister who has to consume endless towers of paper. It is the lot of permanent secretaries also. Much reading and writing is done in the early evening when the diary is empty and outside office hours, traveling to and from work.

In sum, as with senior managers in the private sector, permanent secretaries spend their time communicating, not thinking, meeting people, not writing papers or developing strategy. It should also be borne in mind that meetings are not only about decisions but also about departmental memory. They are the mechanism for the permanent secretary to get an update on where the department is with a particular topic.

There is also a culture of long hours. Most work a 40- to 50-hr week as a matter of routine and often much more. Official engagements in the evening consume large chunks of time. They can lead to behavior akin to a bear with a sore head, not because they have drunk too much but because they have been bored too often for too long.

Long hours are the fate of the private office. It is staffed as long as the permanent secretary (or minister) is there and often longer, getting ready for the following day. They are young and the expense of London housing drives them to the outer ring. Journey times of more than an hour are not unusual. Bluntly, join the private office and lose your private life. The expression "I'll never forget what's his name" applies to spouses rarely seen in daylight hours. Permanent secretaries can also live a long way out, but they are older and better paid, so they can afford a small flat in central London as well as a comfortable house in Cambridge or Hertfordshire.

On a more personal note, it is worth stressing the unrelenting pace of work. If the phrase *lonely at the top* is a cliché, it is not without meaning. Permanent secretaries and ministers live in a small, even claustrophobic, world. There are few people they can talk to other than one another. Secrecy may be an obsession, but there are some good reasons for it—for example, I sat in on discussions that I could have used for personal profit through insider trading—and being circumspect is unavoidable.

Notebook

Below I give an extract from my field notes made during a crisis about training. It covers 40 minutes in the life of the permanent secretary. I sat in his room throughout, taking notes as

TABLE 1: Three Secretaries Comparison: A Full Year's Activities

<i>Activities</i>	<i>Permanent Secretary A</i>		<i>Permanent Secretary B</i>		<i>Permanent Secretary C</i>	
	<i>Hours</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Hours</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Hours</i>	<i>%</i>
Policy and politics						
Secretary of state	84:45	5.39	72:50	5.11	96:05	5.41
Other ministers	56:55	3.62	34:20	2.41	59:35	3.36
Parliament	31:30	2.00	17:45	1.24	22:30	1.27
Media	8:45	0.56	21:00	1.47	30:00	1.69
Substantive policy	50:45	3.23	1:45	0.12	15:15	0.86
Subtotal	232:40	14.80	147:40	10.36	223:25	12.59
Management						
Strategy	24:15	1.54	42:45	3.00	53:45	3.03
Thinking time	6:45	0.43	1:30	0.11	133:15	7.51
Board	90:30	5.75	53:05	3.72	118:15	6.66
Budget	14:00	0.89	6:15	0.44	14:15	0.80
Manage general	272:10	17.31	208:05	14.59	327:50	18.48
Manage KITs	95:15	6.06	42:25	2.97	33:00	1.86
Mentoring	5:30	0.35	7:00	0.49	14:00	0.79
One to one	28:40	1.82	46:10	3.24	106:35	6.01
Accounts officer	1:00	0.06	2:45	0.19	0:00	0.00
Subtotal	538:05	34.22	410:00	28.75	800:55	45.14
External relations						
Whitehall	163:35	10.40	145:10	10.18	149:10	8.41
Wednesday morning meeting	33:00	2.10	29:00	2.03	37:15	2.10
Other U.K. organizations	181:30	11.54	96:20	6.76	188:30	10.62
Center of government	27:05	1.72	8:00	0.56	36:20	2.05
Agencies	65:00	4.13	27:05	1.90	0:00	0.00
European Union	91:30	5.82	36:40	2.57	0:00	0.00
Other governments	3:30	0.22	56:45	3.98	44:00	2.48
Subtotal	565:10	35.94	399:00	27.98	455:15	25.66
Official engagements						
Conferences, etc.	47:30	3.02	56:40	3.97	80:30	4.54
Working lunches	13:30	0.86	125:15	8.78	12:00	0.68
Evenings	118:30	7.54	171:20	12.01	112:15	6.33
Subtotal	179:30	11.41	352:15	24.70	204:45	11.54
Other						
Hello meetings	0:00	0.00	20:45	1.46	36:15	2.04
Cancellations	0:00	0.00	0:00	0.00	0:00	0.00
Phone calls	1:15	0.08	0:00	0.00	6:40	0.38
Private	27:00	1.72	67:50	4.76	1:30	0.08
Miscellaneous	13:40	0.87	19:45	1.38	25:40	1.45
Don't know	15:15	0.97	8:45	0.61	20:00	1.13
Subtotal	57:10	3.64	117:05	8.21	90:05	5.08
Total	1572:35		1426:00		1774:25	

NOTE: KITs = keeping in touch.

if I were his private secretary. Every permanent secretary always has a private secretary taking notes at any meeting unless he specifically decrees otherwise. I draw mainly on interviews with nine permanent secretaries (one female) and six ministers (three female). To protect individual identities, I use the male pronoun throughout.

Day 3: Wednesday, Permanent Secretary's Office

The day before the events described here, several newspapers reported that a national agency had made important mistakes, and the papers dramatized the mistakes with heart-breaking human-interest stories.

The permanent secretary arrives at 9:07 and starts talking about last night. He had had a glass of wine with the minister before he left. The minister was in a state. The minister thinks there will be accusations of not being in control.

Private office pops in and inquires what the permanent secretary has done about the efficiency memo. He has done nothing, so he tells the private office, "Harass me about it." But he is doing nothing because he doesn't like it. "Too complex, calls for too much information and will be a burden on the director generals."

There is tension in the air. The responsible director general, Press Office, and principal private secretary to the minister arrive for an unscheduled meeting. They've just left the minister, who was in the loading bay waiting for the official car—off to a meeting. The minister wants dramatic action now. Off the top of the minister's head, he wants an independent inquiry with the chief executive to chair it. The permanent secretary and director general must talk to the chief executive now. The minister insists we must be seen to address the issue. "The minister knew he was being over-the-top." The minister is back at 13:00 and wants a meeting.

The meeting is rehearsed where they are. The officials in the agency are seen as too hands on. The press is bad. It's a lead story in all the main newspapers (and that's the sensationalist tabloids as much as the serious broadsheets). The story is spreading, as is public concern.

Permanent Secretary: Let's pause. I'll discuss with the chief executive and come back for 13:00.

He has to be at the Cabinet Office for the usual Wednesday morning meeting of all permanent secretaries. It is a strategy meeting (he makes it obvious that strategy comes second to the crisis but he has to go).

Press Officer: The minister will only get one shot at it. We can't go for a drip, drip response.

Director General: And we can't wait.

They leave.

Permanent secretary muses aloud (to the author) as he gets ready to go to the Cabinet Office:

The minister is worried. It's important for a minister to have success. It helps when you have to deal with the crises. We have had too many crises—in recent months the department has had three. It gives the impression we are not in control. The minister is not a big hitter (in the Cabinet or the government), and so the minister is worried about the future. It's also true for the junior minister if he wants a promotion. It doesn't directly affect me, but I want the department to be a success. And nowadays we move on after 3 to 5 years.

The director general returns briefly. He is unhappy about one of his senior managers: "He should be here on a day like this" (that is, cancel preexisting appointments because protecting the minister is the overriding priority). The minister is already unhappy with him. You (permanent secretary) should be aware of this. He is not proactive enough. The director general then reports on yesterday's events. The meeting with the agency officials

“went fine.” “The worry is we still don’t know what it’s all about.” The minister wants a report and wants advance notice of what it will say. The minister wants to see the “alternative scenarios.” We need to respond quickly, and the minister’s not sure all officials are “on the ball.” The minister is “unnerved” by press reports. The agency’s press briefing was factually accurate but the presentation was “appalling.” The director general repeats the minister’s call for an inquiry headed by the chief executive.

Permanent Secretary: Not a good idea. Don’t suggest the idea to the chief executive. Just tell him the minister is alarmed and wants decisive action. We must have the facts. It’s a big issue. What more can be done?

Neither the permanent secretary nor the director general knows exactly what happened or why. A letter from the agency has been made public and it can bear several interpretations. The press have seen the letter and put the worst possible construction on it.

Permanent Secretary: Yes, I know, and I’ve told the minister that, but it isn’t what the agency meant.

The director general leaves, and the permanent secretary tells the diary secretary to rearrange his diary. He schedules a 13:00 meeting with the minister and cancels an honors meeting (to discuss who will get a gong).

Permanent Secretary: I’ll have to explain what’s going on at perm secs. There’ll be some relief it’s me not them! No. They’re more supportive than that . . . but only slightly [laughs].

First time he’s laughed this morning. The permanent secretary is a relaxed individual, but the tension is manifested in his businesslike manner minus the usual social niceties of humor.

The Press Office rings. He briefs them about contacting the chief executive, and he stresses that we must build the chief executive up. Press Office wants to see him. They want 5 minutes on what we know.

Permanent Secretary: No. I know there’s an issue, but I don’t want my mind cluttered up with the detail.

The need to “get the story straight” becomes a recurrent motif.

9:48 goes to perm secs. On the way down to the car—it is about 400 m to the Cabinet Office—his private office briefs him on a meeting with another permanent secretary at the end of the Wednesday morning meeting.

Commentary

Even this short extract—it covers 41 minutes—encourages several reflections on life at the top. First, the permanent secretary’s schedule is hectic. His life is a continuous series of meetings, planned and unplanned. The pace is fast and unrelenting. In all three private offices, the private office told me the permanent secretary wanted to avoid back-to-back meetings, and in every office the permanent secretary had them most days of most weeks. Thus, at 4:00 p.m., the permanent secretary arrives at his fifth meeting that day and cannot remember why he is there. He confesses to his lapse of memory, asks a junior colleague “to

get him up to speed,” then takes over the meeting after a few minutes when he remembers. And most meetings are not about making decisions. They are about refreshing the department’s memory, updating everyone on where we have gotten. Thinking time, writing time, reading time: all were at a premium.

Top civil servants and ministers learn through the stories they hear and tell one another, and such stories are a source of institutional memory, the repositories of the traditions through which practitioners filter current events. The basis for much advice is the collective memory of the department, its traditions if you will. It is an organized, selective retelling of the past to make sense of the present. Permanent secretaries explain past practice and events to justify recommendations for the future. Most, if not all, civil servants will accept that the art of storytelling is an integral part of their work. Such phrases as, “Are we telling a consistent story?” and “What is our story?” abound. They do not use the word *storytelling* but talk of “getting the story straight.” Throughout the crisis, the emphasis fell on finding out what happened, analyzing the situation, testing the facts, and judging how things would play publicly. Lying is a worse sin than error, accident, and even incompetence. In telling the story, they are also rehearsing lines and explanations to see what they sound like. Is it plausible? They want the reactions of their colleagues so they can anticipate the reaction of a larger, external audience. However, in using the word *storytelling* I do not want to give an odd impression of what was going on. Many of the meetings I attended were not about making formal decisions. They were part of the process leading up to a decision taken around the minister’s table or at the department’s management board. The word *storytelling* does not imply that no decisions emerged. However, it does capture the care taken in preparing for decisions. Top civil servants can be risk averse. They are careful about facts in case they are shown to be in error later. A simple illustration will suffice.

On his desk, the principal private secretary had a red phone dedicated to monitoring the conversations of the permanent secretary. He kept a handwritten note of any potentially delicate or decision-making call. Everyone called this phone the Bat phone after the instrument used by the mayor of Gotham City to summon the redoubted caped crusader. Regrettably, there was no spotlight projecting the departmental logo on a low-lying cloud. Even more regrettable, the Bat phone has now been replaced by a modern phone. But still, calls are monitored. The world of the department is a world where even a casual remark in a phone call can have important repercussions. Such care and caution may seem exaggerated, but it is nothing compared to the maelstrom the media can unleash on the unwary. Ministers may call for the civil service to be less risk averse. They do not mean it because it can and does unleash career-damaging headlines.

Interviews

Below, I give an extract from an interview that took place before the crisis. I edited the transcript to correct the English, no more. The permanent secretary is talking about his minister.

Author: What do you expect from your minister?

Permanent Secretary: [long pause] Well I expect . . .

Author: Presumably you have got expectations about what you are supposed to do out there.

Permanent Secretary: Yes.

Author: And therefore you expect the minister to support you.

Permanent Secretary: Yes, I expect that. You said something earlier about holding civil servants to account for delivery, but I expect the minister to take ultimate responsibility for the success of our operations.

Author: That's for the public presumably? In private they are going to hold you to account.

Permanent Secretary: Yes they are, but I expect us to share that responsibility, which my minister has done. I expect the minister to give very clear leadership about what they want. I expect an engagement with us on the really difficult issues, the willingness to listen to us, and then clarity of decision. And I have certainly got that from my minister. But you also get a willingness to listen, which is legendary really. So I want that. I want my ministers to be very influential with their colleagues because I need them to go out there and argue for resources and so on, of course. And because in our world the ability to persuade and communicate is so important to getting everybody to go along with you, I need ministers who are very good publicly and very good at connecting with their audiences and communicating. I don't know what else I need from them.

Author: It's not quite the same question, but it is going to sound like it. What do you like in your ministers?

Permanent Secretary: Do you mean what do I like in them, what do I actually like, or what would I like them to be?

Author: Obviously you would like them to meet all those expectations, but you might like certain kinds of personalities, you might like certain characteristics in the minister, personality characteristics. If you look at the textbooks, people use phrases like *married* because they get so close to one another you almost know what the other one is going to think before they say it.

Permanent Secretary: I am completely devoted to the minister, I am. I don't mind being on the record. Why? Well because, and I think this is stroke of luck, we worked together on policy before, and we therefore had developed a relationship of trust which we were able to transfer immediately on that first day after the election to permanent secretary and secretary of state. I don't suppose that won't be replicated ever, will it?

We share a lot of understandings and share a lot of values, really, about the policy system. I completely understand how the minister is going to react. If I am there at 9:00 on the morning or earlier, it's because I know that I just need to say something to the minister about what is going on that day because I know that will be an issue. We have learned how to read, how we react to certain situations. We have also been through some difficult things together, and we have stood together.

What do I like about the minister? The minister has an almost unique ability to connect with the audience. That is something quite special about the minister which people don't see on these big occasions, but the minister has that ability. The minister is somebody who listens intently to others and to civil servants and respects the advisers, all of them. And the minister is someone who trusts people and enters genuinely into a debate. The best debates I have had about policy, in my entire career, are around the minister's table because the minister is in an equal position where, you know, together we are exploring the solution.

Author: Yes, OK.

Permanent Secretary: And, of course, eventually, the minister then takes the decision, but the minister is able to create a sense of a team working towards the minister's achievements.

Author: You've worked with several ministers over the years.

Permanent Secretary: Yes, and I've liked a lot of them.

Author: What do you dislike about ministers?

Permanent Secretary: [very long pause; sound of drinking]

Author: You can always edit it out.

Permanent Secretary: I know that. It's difficult. I was trying to think of the ones I didn't like and then trying to generalize what I didn't like about them. What I most dislike is when all they are interested in is themselves. That is the moment which I have disliked most and when it seems that everything that they do is not for the public good but for their own position and career, self-

advancement. That is what I have most disliked, and occasionally that has been so. There is something of that in a lot of ministers. It is in all of us isn't it—in civil servants too? But just occasionally there have been people who have put that a long way ahead of anything else, and I disliked that.

I dislike it when you can't get them to think straight. Oh, I have some civil servants like that as well. You know, I think ministers are just human beings like all the rest of us. They share exactly the same range of strengths and weaknesses as the rest of us. Sometimes, because of the position they occupy, myths develop about them that magnify their strengths and weaknesses. There aren't a lot of things I don't like about ministers.

Author: Short-termism?

Permanent Secretary: I am very tolerant of that because it is sort of in the nature of the beast. Of course, I mean the changes, the chopping and changing and the short-termism. I'm afraid I accept that as part of the political process, and maybe I am too tolerant of it, but I just accept it goes with the territory. I am sometimes amazed that governments are as long-term as they are. The prime minister said the other day about something which will remain nameless, "It's amazing, isn't it, that we are investing in this; the benefits are probably coming in about 25 years time" [permanent secretary laughs]. Some of the benefits of policy now are the result of decisions taken a long time ago.

Commentary

For many academics, the Westminster model is an outmoded account of British government, but it is not for top civil servants. When Sir Robert Armstrong (1985) restates the constitutional position that "the duty of the individual civil servant is first and foremost to the Minister of the Crown who is in charge of the department in which he is serving," he states a belief widely shared by top civil servants. What is the function of the Westminster model? The short answer is, to legitimate the role of the civil servant. In classic Weberian fashion, the doctrine of ministerial responsibility means that the role of civil servants is to follow orders and that of politicians is to give them. So, a belief in the Westminster model is integral to the anonymity and political impartiality of civil servants.

Similarly, there is a belief in a public service ethos. Sir Richard Wilson (2002) defines the character of the civil service as integrity, political impartiality, merit, ability to work for successive governments, and public service. On public service he comments, "What attracts people to the civil service is the wish to make a contribution to the community. We have some of the best, most challenging jobs in the economy at every level. This gives us a deeply committed workforce."

They may live in the era of new public management, but long-established patterns of behavior persist. They are captured by the term *generalist*, which is someone who is clever, loyal, reasonable, and able to synthesize complex arguments quickly and clearly for the lay minister.

What shines out of my interview extract is the permanent secretary's loyalty to his minister. Perhaps the greatest crime in the civil service canon is to betray one's minister. Loyalty is a core belief and practice socialized into the newest recruit to the senior civil service. And that loyalty can spill over into, literally, devotion. He was "very upset" when the minister had to resign. And loyalty is extended not only to ministers but also to other colleagues. The corollary of trusting ministers and civil servant colleagues is that they trust you. And trust is not just a matter of personal loyalty. It is also about being trusted to get on with the job, of being kept in the loop, and of respect for one's judgment.

A process of socialization sustains these beliefs and practices. A new fast-stream recruit will have a mentor to guide him or her through the early years. They will have patrons as they progress through its ranks. They will work in a private office and have a stint in either the Cabinet Office or the Treasury, perhaps both. They are taught the norms and values of the higher civil service and learn about personal behavior, the job and its values, and the framework of the acceptable. They are socialized into the idea of a profession. Now that civil service appointments are increasingly made by open competition, there are fears the newcomers will not be socialized in the service's traditions. They will not have sat across the desk from a mentor learning the rules of the Whitehall village game. They will not have had a patron to advise them on career development. They will not have worked the rites of passage through a private office, the Treasury, and the Cabinet Office. Thus, the public service ethos could be eroded. Loyalty might become conditional and contingent, and formal mechanisms of coordination may replace the glue of trust and shared codes.

The Minister

Missing from my three commentaries is the minister. Although ministers share many of the beliefs and practices of their top civil servants, there are significant differences. The most obvious is their concern with publicly visible performance and being seen to make a difference. Making a difference has distinct, if related, meanings. Obviously, it refers to legislation and policy that changes the lives of citizens. It also refers to the minister's standing in the pecking order of the governing party. Ministers seek to be onside with the prime minister and the chancellor and look, first, to survive in the Cabinet and, second, to move to one of the great departments of state such as the Treasury or the Home Office.

Of course, such behavior can be dismissed as an egotistical search for a place in history books. Such a judgment may be true of some. Others believe they can make life better for children, the elderly, or whichever section of society they govern. It places them in the media eye, to a frightening extent. I saw one minister, who to the best of my knowledge had made no mistake, hounded by the press. They were not interested in the facts of the case. They did not know, and did not want to know, the accurate story. They wanted a headline. They wanted blood in the guise of a resignation. I saw a minister taut with worry trying to fend off the pack. The voice gave facts. The body spoke tension. The minister's hands were clasped together on the tabletop, as taught in the media classes they all take. But the legs were twined and twisted under the table, and the breathing was shallow and rapid. The journalists did not listen. They talked among themselves. The press treated the minister as an object, not a person.

It is hard to overestimate the impact of the media (press, radio, and television). The private offices religiously scan the newspapers for any story affecting their departments. There is a daily cuttings service for the scurrilous tabloids, the serious broadsheets, regional newspapers, and the professional journals. Surprisingly, there is no daily, written summary for the minister or the permanent secretary of the stories on radio and television. The office television is only switched on for big events, which includes the budget, but is just as likely to be tuned to England's key qualifying match in the European Championship. Of course, there is a section of the department dedicated to managing the media, and it has close relations with radio and television, setting up interviews, events, and official announcements. For all major events affecting the department, it will brief ministers and civil servants. The Labour government has achieved some notoriety for its emphasis on spin, and every department seeks to

stay onside with the government's communication's strategy. But the printed word remains the preferred medium of communication in the everyday life of the permanent secretary and the private office.

Ministers not only live in a fishbowl, they also have to be adaptable. They move from meeting to meeting, engagement to engagement, and topic to topic with barely time to read, let alone digest, their briefing. The diversity can be breathtaking. One moment it is the daughter of a civil servant on a school project, the next it is a party of overseas visitors bringing comradely greetings from their political party, a meeting of businesspeople on new legislation followed by the unions, then the private office wants to sort out the diary and related papers before the minister is taken to a public speaking engagement. Lunch is a sandwich, bought by the private office, eaten while signing various letters and replying to e-mails. So it goes—endlessly.

Both ministers and permanent secretaries have private offices to help them cope with their daily routines, and the literature describes them as forcing grounds for rising civil servants. They may be, some of the time for some high flyers. But much of the work is boring. Private office works long hours. The minister is never unattended. But most of the work is mail, papers, and appointments. It is exciting because it is working at the top of the organization for the top people, but it is routine because the aim is to make sure everything runs as smoothly as possible. The maxim is “no surprises.” The minister and permanent secretary have to be in the right place at the right time and with the right papers. Keeping them happy is the cardinal virtue.

Diary secretaries are key players in keeping everyone happy. They regulate access to the minister and the protocol is strict and covers all Whitehall. There is a hierarchy of ministers. So, the more junior minister rings and waits to be put through to the senior minister. Senior ministers wait for no one on the phone. Some diary secretaries had been in post for 20 years. They moved with their minister and permanent secretary. They know what he wants before he wants it. The young fast-stream civil servant sitting opposite on an 18-month posting will be eaten for breakfast, if the diary secretary can be bothered. It is rarely necessary. To remain fast stream, you learn fast.

What is striking about the worlds of politician and administrator is their similarities. Both confront unrelenting events that they struggle to grasp with the help of a private office that exists only to serve. Distinctions between policy and management, politician and civil servant are meaningless when confronted with the imperative to cope and survive. But coping is not a dramatic activity. It is surprisingly ordinary. Private offices exist to domesticate trouble, to defuse problems, and take the emotion out of a crisis. The style of the permanent secretaries is low key. There are rituals aimed at relaxing the new arrival and making him or her feel at home. Tea and coffee are served at virtually every meeting. Stothard (2003) refers to “coffee sipping amity” (p. 34) and to the messengers who deliver it as “a source of continuity and a kind of comfort” (p. 61). In my departments, it was tea more often than coffee, but the quality of ritual comfort remained. Stories are built up through successive meetings with colleagues. KITs—keeping in touch—and 1:1s are the mechanisms for managing everyday life, sharing experience, arriving at stories, and building loyalty. They are crucial to domesticating a hectic life. And its ordinariness should not mislead. These everyday routines are unquestioned and to a degree unrecognized. So, they not only make the exceptional ordinary, but they can also make the unacceptable acceptable.

CONCLUSIONS: PROSPECTS AND PROBLEMS

So What?

After reading a draft of this article, one colleague commented, “Fun stuff, but at the end of the day, so what?” He has a point. “What do we know from this project that we don’t from *Yes Minister* or from our own experience of working in any organization?” What practices that puzzle outsiders make perfect sense when viewed against the backdrop of beliefs and traditions described in my story? I find it odd that I am expected to answer this question. It reflects the mainstream bias to ostensibly hard evidence, especially as the answers are obvious. Knowledge of one’s own organization is not the same as evidence about the beliefs and practices of another organization. No one would dream of mistaking one’s own organization for the universe of organizations. We study organizations to identify both the common and the unique. Similarly, *Yes Minister* was fiction. My story is not. Thick descriptions are a well-established tool in the social sciences, valuable both in their own right and as a corrective to approaches that read off beliefs from social structure.

Each of my illustrations provides distinctive observations on the characteristics of everyday life at the top. It may try the reader’s patience, but let me repeat some of the key observations. First, the workload for both permanent secretaries and ministers is heavy and diverse. The pace of events is relentless and endless. They live in a goldfish bowl. My experience of universities and other organizations leads me to describe the workload of permanent secretaries and ministers as punishing. The idea popularized by Anthony Trollope that departments are rest homes for the idle and incompetent has been embraced by political parties and tabloid newspapers ever since. It is palpable nonsense. Indeed, the fieldwork prompted the opposite reflections. It made me acutely aware of the limits to human ability; of the fragility of the webs of meaning and action that we weave. As crises unfolded, it was tiring simply watching people cope, and I was not emotionally engaged with the events. I am no doctor, but over several months I saw one permanent secretary display obvious signs of stress—white pallor, a greyness of flesh tone, taut skin around the eyes, and an absence of humor previously ever present. Decision making under stress becomes a source of stress. It is an adrenalin high. They miss the action acutely when they leave office. But they pay a price in health and in their personal lives. It prompts doubts about the quality of advice and decision making under such conditions.

On reading this paragraph, all three top civil servants insisted they were “not in a permanent state of crisis” and “the punishing schedule is manageable because one is able to control and shape the timetable and the decision-making processes.” They preferred to dismiss their several crises as “a one-off.” When I was shadowing, every department had a crisis. Everyone told me of other recent crises. Everyone told me it was exceptional: “It’s not like this normally.” Maybe, but compared to universities or local government—two other types of organizations with which I am also familiar—life in a government department is more demanding because they live in a media goldfish bowl that can take any problem and make it a crisis. So, the interesting observation is about the capacity of senior officials and politicians to absorb crises and treat them as if they are one-offs.

Second, civil servants and ministers learn through the stories they hear and tell one another. Such stories are a source of institutional memory, the repositories of the traditions through which practitioners filter current events. Also, in the corporate world, the wish to get the story straight would translate into “find a story that won’t come unstuck further down the

track.” But the civil service did not do that. They did not look for a reliable, defensible story; they wanted to know what had happened. They wanted to present an accurate account of events. It seems obvious that the roots of this belief lie in the public service ethos of integrity and impartiality and the risk-averse tradition that seeks to protect the minister.

Third, civil servants believe in the Westminster model, which is integral to their anonymity and political impartiality, in a public service ethos, and in loyalty to the minister. For example, they stick fast to the Westminster model’s constitutional conventions. Ministerial responsibility may be a fiction in that ministers do not resign when their departments are at fault. But civil servants act as if ministerial responsibility is a brute fact of life (see also Marsh et al., 2001).

Fourth, a key maxim is *no surprises*. This can refer to the private office making sure the minister and permanent secretary are in the right place at the right time and with the right papers. It can also refer to the frightening extent to which they live in the media eye and need to be adaptable, to cope with the many uncertainties. Private offices exist to domesticate trouble, defuse problems, and take the emotion out of a crisis. Permanent secretaries exist to point out the hole to the minister before he falls in, to pull him out of the hole afterward, and then to argue that he never fell in.

Fifth, distinctions between policy and management and politician and civil servant are meaningless when confronted with this imperative to cope and survive. Hecló and Wildavsky (1974) coined the phrase *political administrator* to cover both permanent secretary and minister. They were so dependent on one another in carrying out their respective roles, each was one side of the same coin. Ever since, although reforms have emphasized their different roles, every crisis has continued to demonstrate their mutual dependence. The distinction between permanent secretary and minister is as arbitrary as that between politics and management and policy and implementation.

Sixth, rituals are the key to managing this pressurized existence. Everyday routines are unquestioned, unrecognized, and surprisingly ordinary. Crisis management may be about the press conference, questions in parliament, and the television interview. It is also about chats, meetings, tea, a drink after work, and the everyday routines that domesticate the unexpected. To my earlier example of the tea ritual, I can add the conventions of polite behavior. People do not run, they do not shout, and they do not express overt emotion. Points are made politely. There are few if any cries of “rubbish,” and even expostulations are expressed mildly. All defer to the chair. Remarks are addressed to others through the chair. Indeed, the committee remains the mechanism for bringing together people and information within and between departments. E-communication has not replaced the committee; it just means the minutes are produced more quickly. Even to an Englishman it all seems very English, and that is an observation, not a criticism.

Of course, the obvious retort to these comments is that we knew it already. That is an ever-present danger for all who are doing political research. But the portrait of a storytelling administrative and political elite with beliefs and practices rooted in the Westminster model that uses rituals to domesticate crises is not the conventional portrait. If there were a clear understanding of the role of ritual and routine, then it would be possible to avoid the side effects of reforms. During the 20th century, civil servants were socialized into the idea of a profession. Now that civil service appointments are increasingly made by open competition, there are fears the newcomers will not be socialized in the service’s traditions. Loyalty might become conditional and contingent, and formal mechanisms of coordination may replace the glue of trust and shared codes. Or, to move down the organizational hierarchy, what will be

lost when messengers go? Originally, as their name implies, they delivered mail. But e-mail has decimated that task, and the coffee machine, the outsourced delivery of food, and the microwave oven eat at their remaining overt tasks. Their covert role as office glue will be lost. Every cup of tea signals the meeting of a generic London accent with middle-class vowels to discuss the weather, TV, a new baby, or how you are—to which the answer is “Well, thank you.” Any itemizing of complaints would be well out of order. It breaks tension. Perhaps it is the music of our cribs, but the clatter of cups and saucer and the sound of a teaspoon on china are wondrously reassuring. Few see the demise of the messenger as an example of work being depersonalized, but that is one consequence.

The Case for Ethnography

Ethnographic research has two principal features as a source of data. First, it gets below and behind the surface of official accounts by providing texture, depth, and nuance, so the story of the department has richness as well as context. Second, it lets interviewees explain the meaning of their actions, providing an authenticity that can only come from the main characters involved in the story. The method is an essential tool in political anthropology intended to yield thick descriptions. Face-to-face, in-depth, elite interviews and nonparticipant observation are central to producing such thick descriptions.

An interpretive approach resolves the theoretical difficulties that beset more positivist versions of British government. It decenters institutions, avoiding the unacceptable suggestion that they fix the behavior of individuals within them rather than being products of that behavior. It replaces unhelpful phrases such as *path dependency* with an analysis of change rooted in the beliefs and practices of individual actors. And yet it allows political scientists to offer aggregate studies by using the concept of tradition to explain how they come to hold those beliefs and perform those practices (I do not have the space to develop the idea of tradition in this article, but see Bevir & Rhodes, 2003).

The approach also opens new research agendas—it is fruitful, progressive, and open. It will open a wide range of new areas and styles of research about the beliefs, preferences, and practices of many political actors—from prime minister to individual citizens—as they preserve and modify traditions and practices from Toryism and Parliament to, say, New Age travelers and forms of protest.

I am all too aware of the limits of ethnography. The most important limitation to the analysis in this project concerns my role as nonparticipant observer. I report the interviews as if I am neutral and as if the data are given to me in a pure or unmediated form. I am not that naive. All observers construct their material drawing on their prior theories. I accept that the department's story is my construction of how my interviewees see their world and that it is crucial to locate people's beliefs and practices against a background of traditions.

It is commonly argued that ethnographic research on the powerful encounters many difficulties. There is the endemic secrecy of British government that permeates everything; for example, permanent secretaries are not supposed to talk publicly about their membership of the honours committees in case they get lobbied! Interviews are said to be an unreliable source of data because interviewees “unselfconsciously project an official self-image” (Lee, 1995, p. 149), and politicians are seen as self-serving to the point of misleading. As Seldon (1995, p. 126) observes, “The author frequently had reason to wonder whether some former ministers had served in the same administration so at variance were their accounts of the way coordination took place at the heart of Whitehall.”

Moreover, there are often no written sources to cross-check the accuracy of interviews, and their veracity is undermined when they are not attributed. Finally, it is claimed that non-participant observation always affects the behavior of the observed. All these points are valid. None present insurmountable obstacles.

British government may well be excessively secretive, but since 1992 the civil service has sought to encourage academic research (Rhodes, 2000, pp. 1-2). However, even if more research does equate to less secrecy, it is not synonymous with open. It became clear during my negotiations about access that secrecy would be a greater problem when it was time to negotiate my way out of the departments; only now, the problem was called clearance. So, I sought to do nonparticipant observation and the shadowing in departments that were roughly similar. If there were problems with attributing quotes and describing the behavior of named officials and politicians, then I could write, as here, a composite portrait of the department and its minister. I could not do a believable composite if I combined, for example, a domestic service minister, the Treasury, and the Foreign Office. I chose three middle-ranking, domestic service ministries that could be merged to provide a realistic composite if an attributed version of life in each department proved impossible. It was an essential fallback position.

With only two exceptions, everyone was willing to speak on tape. By the end of 6 hours of interviewing, most were relaxed and willing to chat about anything, historical or present-day. Almost no one can talk in sentences, with commas and full stops, for any sustained period of time. Equally, few can uphold a public posture over a 6-hour interview. Many have a need to talk. As Rawnsley (2001, p. xi) observes, "They have to tell an outsider because they are so worried about whether it makes sense or, indeed, whether they make sense," or, in other words, "How do I know what I think until I hear what I say?" The interviewer is cast in the role of providing reassurance.

Of course, as Lee (1995) points out, we have to decode the official self-image, and we do so in two ways. First, we can locate the official ethos and language in its historical context by comparing text, whether they are official publications, files, or interview transcripts. Second, all of us during our everyday lives develop skills in interpreting what others mean when they speak to us. Thus, we judge whether someone is lying by many verbal and body cues. We do not leave such skills at the door of the interview room. Every interview involves such judgments. Similarly, the interviewer's relaxed voice and body language can ease the interviewee into the conversation. The forensic humiliation of the duplicitous politician is not for the academic. Rather, we seek to relax and encourage, although even the most experienced interviewer cannot establish rapport on every occasion.

Andrew Rawnsley (2001, pp. xvii-xviii) "chose to conduct all interviews on a background basis" because on-the-record interviews would suffer from a lack of candor. Rawnsley quotes Robin Cook on the art of the interview: "to talk for an hour without saying anything too interesting." Jeremy Paxman (2002, p. 207) encountered a similar lack of candor when seeking to shadow Alan Milburn, the secretary of state for health. Despite innumerable letters and phone calls, Paxman not only failed to get a day on which he could shadow the minister, he could not even get a decision. After 6 months, he was granted a day, 6 weeks after the deadline for his book! That is not my experience, and Paxman and Rawnsley are reporting the lot of the journalist, not the academic. There are significant differences between us.

First, journalists have newspaper deadlines. I do not. Nothing said to me would be seen in a newspaper column the following day. To minimize possible sensitivities, I told everyone I knew that my findings would not be published until some 2 years after completing the field-work. So, there was time for at least one more round of musical chairs at the top of the

departments. Second, I was not looking for a story. My reputation did not hinge on banner headlines and scoops. My stance toward the data was not skewed by the need to provide the eye-catching headline or the sensationalism that sells newspapers. Third, my focus was everyday life, and I focus on the commonplace. Journalists love the feeding frenzy of a crisis. For journalists, everyday detail adds flesh to a story, but it is not the purpose of the story. For me the detail is the story. Fourth, interviewees had transcripts of their interviews to check any quotes. Fifth, the interviewee approved all attributed quotes. Sixth, I had no known political affiliation nor had I played the role of government critic. I took seriously Fenno's (1990, p. 67) advice on the rules of neutrality:

[I] have not registered with a party; I have not engaged in partisan activity; I sign no political petitions; I join no supporting organisations or interest groups; I engage in no radio TV or newspaper commentary. I do not allow my name to be used for political purposes.

Finally, on the Economic and Social Research Council's "Whitehall Programme," I worked with many senior civil servants for more than 5 years, and I assume I was deemed reliable. Whatever the relative importance of these several factors, the simple fact is that senior civil servants and ministers talked frankly on tape at great length. They allowed me to observe them and their private offices in action for days at a time.

It is also claimed that the idiographic, thick descriptions that arise from ethnography preclude generalizations; but, an interpretive approach can produce generalizations when to generalize means to diagnose and make informed conjecture. Geertz (1973, 1983) views ethnography as a soft science that guesses at meanings, assesses the guesses, and draws explanatory conclusions from the better guesses. And it is thus possible to generalize. Theory provides a vocabulary with which to express what symbolic action has to say about itself. It is not about prediction. I prefer the looser idea of informed conjecture (Morton, 1996) to prediction (see also Baldamus, 1972). Political scientists can offer informed conjectures or narratives that explain practices and actions by pointing to the conditional connections between beliefs, practices, traditions, and dilemmas. And their conjectures are stories, understood as provisional and unfolding narratives about possible futures (for a more extended discussion, see Bevir, Rhodes, & Weller, 2003).

It is all too easy to affect the relationship between yourself and the observed, causing them to behave differently. My aim was to remain the outsider, but for lengthy on-site visits and extensive repeat interviews, you have to have a conversation and relate to the people around you. You are sucked into events, even if it is only casual badinage to ease tension. My stay in the department provides several examples. One permanent secretary reduced his corporate civil service commitments when he saw how much time they took up. One changed his private secretary after an in-confidence briefing about the workings of his private office. During a crisis, one permanent secretary treated me as a confidant. He was not interested in my opinions. He was thinking aloud and wanted someone to listen. Always I tried to blend in with the wallpaper, but I was an object of some interest to the private office and the permanent secretary, and they sought to engage with me. I could not stay out and keep their confidence even though I wanted to remain distant.

I also had three ways of checking the veracity and reliability of my data. First, I interviewed several other members of the departments, officials and politicians, besides the ministers and the permanent secretaries. Second, I had access to the written records of meetings. Finally, the project was not based on elite interviews alone but also on fieldwork and, as Sanjek (2000, p. 281) argues, nonparticipant observation is an essential complement to

interviews. Thus, interviews recorded at a different time from the nonparticipant observation are a way of corroborating the claims of a speaker. The permanent secretary's loyalty to his minister was clear from his behavior; for example, rearranging his day so he and his staff could rally round.

In sum, we need to do more observation of politicians and civil servants at work, and that means more studies using ethnographic methods (Rhodes, 2002). An interpretive approach is an exercise in "edification"—a way of finding "new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking about" British government (Rorty, 1980, p. 360). It does so by decentering institutions using ethnography as a means of capturing beliefs and practices, and history as a means of explaining such beliefs and practices. As with any other method of research, ethnography has its strengths and weaknesses, but, as with all other methods of social research, it confronts the intractability of its subject matter.

In the end, life is a private act. We do not know what another man feels when he thinks his thoughts. We see what we see, hear what we hear, read what we read, and are puzzled by the rest. (McDonough, 2003, p. 706)

Statecraft is also stagecraft. So, we seek to understand political and administrative actors on their stage. But, as we try to discover what the play means to them—as we see their gestures and hear their lines—we remain puzzled because other people's thoughts are private acts.

REFERENCES

- Armstrong, R. (1985, February 25). *The duties and responsibilities of civil servants in relation to ministers* (Note by the Head of the Civil Service). London: Cabinet Office.
- Baldamus, W. W. (1972). The role of discoveries in social science. In T. Shanin (Ed.), *The rules of the game*. London: Tavistock.
- Barberis, P. (1996). *The elite of the elite*. Aldershot, UK: Dartmouth.
- Benn, T. (1990). *Conflicts of interest: Diaries 1977-1980*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Bevir, M. (2000). Prisoners of professionalism: On the construction and responsibility of political studies. *Public Administration*, 79(2), 469-509.
- Bevir, M., & Rhodes, R. A. W. (2003). *Interpreting governance*. London: Routledge.
- Bevir, M., Rhodes, R. A. W., & Weller, P. (2003). Comparative governance: Prospects and lessons. *Public Administration*, 81(1), 191-210.
- Blondel, J. (1985). *Government ministers in the contemporary world*. London: Sage.
- Bridges, E. (1950). *Portrait of a profession*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Bruce-Gardyne, J. (1986). *Ministers and mandarins*. London: Macmillan.
- Burch, M., & Holliday, I. (1996). *The British Cabinet system*. Hemel Hempstead, UK: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Butler, A., Adonis, A., & Travers, T. (1994). *Failure in British government: The politics of the poll tax*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Castle, B. (1984). *The Castle diaries 1964-70*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- Chabal, P. M. (2003). Do ministers matter? The individual style of ministers in programmed policy change. *International Review of Administrative Science*, 69(1), 29-49.
- Clark, W. (1966). *Number 10*. London: Heinemann.
- Crossman, R. H. S. (1975). *The diaries of a Cabinet minister: Minister of housing* (Vol. 1). London: Jonathan Cape.
- Dale, H. E. (1941). *The higher civil service of Great Britain*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Davis, G. (2002, September 26). *A little learning? Public policy and Australian Universities*. Professorial Lecture Series, Griffith University, Queensland, Australia.
- Denham, R. (2002). *The mandarin's tale*. London: Politico's.

- Dexter, L. (1970). *Elite and specialized interviewing*. Evanston, IL: North Western University Press.
- Dogan, M., & Pelassy, D. (1990). *How to compare nations: Strategies in comparative politics* (2nd ed.). Chatham, NJ: Chatham House.
- Eckstein, H. (1975). Case study and theory in political science. In F. I. Greenstein & N. Polsby (Eds.), *Handbook of political science: Strategies of inquiry* (Vol. 4, pp. 79-137). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Edelman, M. (1961). *The minister*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- The Editors. (1999). Editorial: Studying British politics. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 1(1), 1-11.
- Fenno, R. F. (1990). *Watching politicians: Essays on participant observation*. Berkeley: University of California, Institute of Governmental Studies.
- Fowler, N. (1991). *Ministers decide*. London: Chapmans.
- Gamble, A. (1994). Political memoirs. *Politics*, 14(1), 35-42.
- Garrett, J. (1972). *The management of government*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Geertz, C. (1983). *Local knowledge*. New York: Basic Books.
- Glennister, H., Korman, N., & Marslen-Wilson, F. (1983). *Planning for priority groups*. Oxford, UK: M. Robertson.
- Greenaway, J., Smith, S., & Street, J. (1992). *Deciding factors in British politics: A case study approach*. London: Routledge.
- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (1983). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. London: Routledge.
- Harris, J. S., & Garcia, T. V. (1966). The permanent secretaries: Britain's top administrators. *Public Administration Review*, 26(1), 31-44.
- Heady, B. (1974). *British Cabinet ministers*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Heclo, H., & Wildavsky, A. (1974). *The private government of public money*. London: Macmillan.
- Hennessy, P. (1989). *Whitehall*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- James, S. (1992). *British Cabinet government*. London: Routledge.
- James, S. (1999). *British Cabinet government* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Jenkins, R. (1991). *A life at the center*. London: Macmillan.
- Kaufman, G. (1980). *How to be a minister*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson.
- Kellner, P., & Crowther-Hunt, N. (1980). *The ruling servants*. London: Macdonald Futura.
- Lawson, N. (1992). *The view from No. 11: Memoirs of a Tory radical*. London: Bantam.
- Lee, M. (1995). The ethos of the Cabinet Office: A comment on the testimony of officials. In R. A. W. Rhodes & P. Dunleavy (Eds.), *Prime minister, Cabinet and core executive* (pp. 149-157). London: Macmillan.
- Marsh, D., Richards, D., & Smith, M. J. (2001). *Changing patterns of governance in the United Kingdom*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave.
- McDonough, J. (2003). *Shakey: Neil Young's biography*. London: Vintage.
- McPherson, A., & Raab, C. (1988). *Governing education*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press.
- Morton, A. (1996). Folk psychology is not a predictive device. *Mind*, 105, 119-137.
- Norton, P. (2000). Barons in a shrinking kingdom: Senior ministers in British government. In R. A. W. Rhodes (Ed.), *Transforming British government: Changing roles and relationships* (Vol. 2, pp. 101-124). London: Macmillan.
- Part, A. (1980). *The making of a mandarin*. London: Deutsch.
- Paxman, J. (2002). *The political animal*. London: Michael Joseph.
- Plowden, W. (1994). *Ministers and mandarins*. London: Institute for Public Policy Research.
- Rawnsley, A. (2001). *Servants of the people: The inside story of New Labour*. London: Penguin.
- Rhodes, R. A. W. (2000). Introduction: The ESRC Whitehall Programme: A guide to institutional change. In R. A. W. Rhodes (Ed.), *Transforming British government: Changing institutions* (Vol. 1., pp. 1-22). London: Macmillan.
- Rhodes, R. A. W. (2002). Putting the people back into networks. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 37(3), 399-415.
- Rhodes, R. A. W., & Dunleavy, P. (Eds.). (1995). *Prime minister, Cabinet and core executive*. London: Macmillan.
- Rhodes, R. A. W., & Weller, P. (Eds.). (2001). *The changing world of top officials: Mandarins or valets?* Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Richards, D. (1996). Elite interviewing: Approaches and pitfalls. *Politics*, 16(3), 199-204.
- Richards, D. (1997). *The civil service under the Conservatives 1979-97*. Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press.
- Riddell, P. (1989). *The Thatcher decade*. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.
- Rorty, R. (1980). *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.
- Rose, R. (1987). *Ministers and ministries: A functional analysis*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon.
- Sanjek, R. (Ed.). (1990). *Fieldnotes: The making of anthropology*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

- Sanjek, R. (2000). Keeping ethnography alive in an urbanizing world. *Human Organization*, 59(3), 280-288.
- Seldon, A. (1995). The Cabinet Office and coordination, 1979-87. In R. A. W. Rhodes & P. Dunleavy (Eds.), *Prime minister, Cabinet and core executive* (pp. 125-148). London: Macmillan.
- Silverman, D. (Ed.). (1997). *Qualitative research: Theory, method, practice*. London: Sage.
- Silverman, D. (2000). *Doing qualitative research: A practical handbook*. London: Sage.
- Silverman, D., & Jones, J. (1976). *Organizational work*. London: Collier-Macmillan.
- Smith, M. J. (1999). Institutionalizing the "eternal return": Textbooks and the study of British politics. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 1(1), 106-118.
- Smith, M. J., Marsh, D., & Richards, D. (1995). Central government departments and the policy process. In R. A. W. Rhodes & P. Dunleavy (Eds.), *Prime minister, Cabinet and core executive* (pp. 108-124). London: Macmillan.
- Snow, C. P. (1964). *Corridors of power*. London: Macmillan.
- Stothard, P. (2003). *30 days: A month at the heart of the Blair War*. London: HarperCollins.
- Strauss, A., Schatzman, L., Ehrlich, D., Bucher, R., & Sabshin, M. (1973). The hospital and its negotiated order. In G. Salaman & K. Thompson (Eds.), *People and organizations* (pp. 303-320). London: Longman.
- Taylor, C. (1971). Interpretation and the sciences of man. *Review of metaphysics*, 25(1), 3-51.
- Theakston, K. (1999). *Leadership in Whitehall*. London: Macmillan.
- Theakston, K. (2000). Permanent secretaries: Comparative biography and leadership in Whitehall. In R. A. W. Rhodes (Ed.), *Transforming British government: Changing roles and relationships* (Vol. 2., pp. 125-145). London: Macmillan.
- Theakston, K., & Fry, G. K. (1989). Britain's administrative elite: Permanent secretaries 1900-1986. *Public Administration*, 67(2), 129-147.
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. London: Sage.
- Wilson, R. (2002, March 26). *Portrait of a profession revisited*. Speech presented at Admiralty Arch, London.
- Yin, R. K. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods* (2nd ed). London: Sage.
- Young, D. (1990). *The enterprise years: A businessman in the Cabinet*. London: Headline.
- Young, H. (1989). *One of us*. London: Macmillan.
- Young, H., & Sloman, A. (1982). *No minister: An enquiry into the civil service*. London: BBC.
- Young, H., & Sloman, A. (1984). *But chancellor: An inquiry into the Treasury*. London: BBC.

R. A. W. Rhodes is a professor of political science and head of program in the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, and emeritus professor of politics at the University of Newcastle, United Kingdom. He is the author or editor of 20 books, including recently Understanding Governance (1997), Transforming British Government: Changing Institutions (Vol. 1), Changing Roles and Relationships (Vol. 2; 2000), and (with Mark Bevir) Interpreting British Governance (2003). He has been editor of Public Administration since 1986. He is president of the Political Studies Association of the United Kingdom.