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Understanding and Explaining Civil Service Reform: A Reply to Dowding and James

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Dowding and James's response to our critique of the bureau-shaping model makes some important criticisms that we welcome.¹ However, we suggest that they ignore the empirical evidence we

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¹ D. Marsh, D. Richards and M. J. Smith, 'Bureaucrats, Politicians and Reform in Whitehall: Analysing the Bureau-shaping Model', *British Journal of Political Science*, 30 (2000), 461–82.

presented in our original article (because of their narrow definition of acceptable data) and we believe that they misunderstand our arguments because of the positivist paradigm within which they operate. Our response covers three main issues – epistemology, methods and evidence.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Dowding and James criticize or praise us for being ‘interpretative sociologists’. If labels matter, then we regard ourselves as critical realists. As such, we are interested in explanation, as are positivists like Dowding and James. However, we have a different understanding of explanation than they have, and, in particular, we have a different view of the role of theory in explanation. To a positivist, deductive theory is used to generate hypotheses that are then tested. If a hypothesis is falsified, then the theory needs to be revised to account for that observation. Our position differs in three key respects. First, in our view, not all relationships between social phenomena are observable; so, hypotheses cannot just be tested against direct observation. Secondly, to us, theory is not something that is used to generate hypotheses, rather, it is something that is used to interpret what is observable, and indeed what cannot be observed (because it is a deep structure). Thirdly, we would argue that the way in which structures (deep or otherwise) affect outcomes is mediated by the agent’s understanding and interpretation of his or her structured environment. What this means is that our view of social science, and thus of doing research, differs from that of Dowding and James. Our research focused on two approaches that are usually absent in rational choice research: the use of interview data that deal with the agent’s understanding of both his/her situation and the actions of others; and a historical analysis.

ON METHODOLOGY

Dowding and James are critical about the use of interview material, because it can often be ‘unreliable’ or ‘soft’ data; here, the usual criticisms are that respondents may lie, may selectively recall or may tell the interviewer what they think s/he should know. We recognize the problems of this type of data.² Equally, such biases can be countered or reduced by triangulation – comparing the views of respondents, interviewing a variety of politicians and civil servants, comparing with existing primary and secondary literature. At no point is our evidence based *solely* on memoirs or on interviews.

There are three points important here. First, Whitehall is a predominantly closed world and, as such, it is relatively difficult to generate other forms of data (indeed, it is the reliance on crude aggregate data that leads to the problems of the bureau-shaping model). Secondly, Dowding and James presume that there are some ‘good’, unflawed, data somewhere, when in fact all data have flaws. Thirdly, and most importantly in our view, most politicians and civil servants stressed the role of politicians in the reforms of the civil service. This is what they understood had happened and that understanding must surely play an important part in any fuller explanation of the changes that took place in the 1980s. It seems astounding that Dowding and James believe that actions are a better indicator of preferences than interview responses. This is a voluntarist, ahistorical and astructural approach. People often do things that they do not want to do.

Elsewhere, we emphasized that Next Steps cannot be explained independently of the historical context in which it occurred. So, we argue first that the Next Steps reforms have to be viewed against the background of the Rayner Scrutinies³ and the Financial Management Initiative and not as an isolated change. In terms that a historical institutionalist would use, there is a considerable degree of path dependency involved here. This is something that rational choice theorists often neglect, in their desire to attain rigorous and, hence, parsimonious explanation. So, in our original article, we suggested that the political context was important. The Thatcher government’s reform strategy

² See D. Richards and M. J. Smith, ‘Interpreting the World of Political Elites: Some Methodological and Epistemological Problems’ (paper presented to the PSA Annual Conference, University of Aberdeen, 2002).

³ The Rayner Scrutinies were a set of reviews of the efficiency of government which took place in the 1980s.

was driven by a belief that Whitehall was an institution committed to consensus politics, big government and defending the status quo. In resisting this 'conservative' force, the government was also emphasizing its image of governing competence, what Bulpitt calls its Conservative statecraft.⁴ The point here is that rational choice approaches tend to downplay such historical contextual factors because they assume preferences; certainly, Dunleavy's approach appears ahistorical. The rational choice response is of course that these are external factors and it was senior civil servants' reactions to these factors that led to bureau-shaping. However, our point is that these changes occurred despite, not because of, the civil service, and in most measures of official preferences this is not the type of world that civil servants want. Dunleavy may have been right in predicting the form of some of the changes that occurred, but his explanation that it was a consequence of utility maximization by officials is *wrong*.

ON EXPLAINING CHANGE IN THE BRITISH CIVIL SERVICE

Our article refuted the core hypothesis of the bureau-shaping model in four ways:

- (1) Our interviews suggest, whatever the acknowledged problems of elite interviewing, that it is difficult to categorize the sole preference of civil servants, in terms of the pursuit of policy work. Whilst some clearly prefer this type of work, others prefer management (indeed this must be an empirical question and not an assumption of the model). There is not one simple, single, preference.
- (2) A clear hypothesis of the bureau-shaping model is that core budgets will be protected and programme budgets cut. The opposite in fact had occurred by the mid-1990s with the Fundamental Expenditure Review and Comprehensive Spending Review under Labour producing cuts in core budgets.
- (3) Using a range of policies, government tried to make senior officials more managerial – even though James clearly states that the aim of the agency programme was to stop this occurring. In particular, the Senior Management Review reduced the number of senior civil servants (something the bureau-shaping model would not have predicted) and clearly demarcated Grade 5s upwards as managerial positions.⁵ Consequently, those involved in making policy are increasingly Grades 7 and Higher Executive Officers. Under the Labour government, it also appears that the policy-making role is shifting to consultants, political advisers and special advisers. As a result officials are losing their monopoly of policy advice. The clearly stated bureau-shaping hypothesis – that the pattern of reform is a consequence of the desire of officials to retain control of policy – has been strongly undermined by the reforms that have occurred since 1997.
- (4) Despite their claims to be 'empirical political scientists', Dowding and James's argument seems to be based on a counterfactual – that had the reforms not been undertaken, officials would be undertaking more management than they are now. This is non-falsifiable.

There is no doubt that rational choice has offered new ways of thinking about the motivation of agents and, more generally, the processes of reform in Whitehall. However, we believe that alternative methodologies can underline some of the simplifications that occur as a consequence of rational choice assumptions. We believe that, even in its own terms, rational choice fails to demonstrate what the preferences of officials are (it just assumes them) or to accept that its hypotheses are refuted. Moreover, its ahistoricism leads to the false assumption that reform is a consequence of the preferences of particular agents. Whatever the elegance of the bureau-shaping model, the lack of empirical support suggests that it cannot explain public sector reform.

Dowding and James claim that the 'dialectical approach' we advocate can only be 'superior' (*sic*), presumably to their own public choice accounts, 'if it generates some predictions at variance with the bureau-shaping model which their empirical evidence then corroborates'. They do not

⁴ J. Bulpitt, *Territory and Power in the United Kingdom* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983).

⁵ Here, we use the pre-1995 Senior Management Review grading system in order to assist in understanding.

acknowledge that, unlike their rather lofty view of what is achievable by political scientists, we never set out in our article to create a 'better' predictive model. Instead, our aim was to provide a critique of Dunleavy, as our own research indicated his analysis was wrong, and to provide what we saw as a more convincing explanatory account of the process of Next Steps reform. As critical realists, we see our goal as trying to provide as full an explanation as possible of political phenomena. We are sceptical of positivist approaches to political science that aspire to generate predictive models. Our epistemological position leads us to conclude that this is more often than not a futile task, strewn with methodological problems. Our interest in critiquing the bureau-shaping model was never to generate a 'better' predictive model, particularly as the original model did not work in the first place!