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Forty Years Studying British Politics: the Decline of Anglo-America

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Abstract: The still present belief some forty years ago that British politics was both exceptional and superior has been replaced by more theoretically sophisticated analyses based on a wider and more rigorously deployed range of research techniques, although historical analysis appropriately remains important. The American influence on the study of British politics has declined, but the European Union dimension has not been fully integrated. The study of interest groups has been in some respects a fading paradigm, but important questions related to democratic health have still to be addressed. Public administration has been supplanted by public policy, but economic policy remains under studied. A key challenge for the future is the study of the management of expectations.

Keywords: Anglo-America; interest groups; public administration; public policy; governance; expectations.

Any assessment of the state of discipline in British politics has to take account of two factors: intellectual developments in the discipline itself and changes in the system of higher education. There is no doubt that the study of British politics has become more sophisticated over the last forty years. When I started to publish in 1968, there were still traces of the Whig view of history, reflected in the assumption that the British system of government and politics was both exceptional and superior, at least that it was particularly well adapted to British (read English) culture. Of course, already by that time more sophisticated treatments were available, notably Beer's historically grounded analysis (Beer, 1965) and the fresh textbook perspective provided by Richard Rose. (Rose, 1974) Both of these authors were Americans.

The last forty years have seen great advances in both theoretical and methodological sophistication. This is not to claim that work on British politics forty years ago was completely atheoretical, although there were plenty of examples of a low level descriptive empiricism. Nevertheless, the community power debate in the United States between elitists and pluralists was very influential. How well it translated to British circumstances is open to question, but it did lead to a number of masterly studies of British cities. (Jones, 1969; Newton, 1976).

However, forty years ago British politics was gripped by an era of technocratic reformism exemplified by the prime ministerial terms of Harold Wilson and Edward Heath (1964 – 1976). In political terms they were more similar than they liked to admit. Both of them believed, reasonably enough, that the British political process was in need of modernization and reform. This necessarily had an impact on the activities of political scientists who were drawn into debates about the reform of Parliament where the work of Bernard Crick (1964) was highly influential, civil service reform, the reorganization of central government and local government reform. In the 1970s, after the rise of the Scottish and Welsh Nationalist parties, devolution came on to the agenda and in the longer run this was the debate that was to be most influential in terms of changing the character of British politics. The conflict in Northern Ireland produced one of the best pieces of political science of the period (Rose, 1971), but in many respects this period represented the higher water mark of the British tradition of public administration studies.

In theoretical terms we have seen more sophisticated forms of Marxist analysis in the form of 'Open Marxism', exemplified in the work of Peter Burnham (1994). The discursive turn in political science has been influential and there has been more interest in how issues on the political agenda are framed. Forty years ago the political agenda was more or less treated as a given and attention

focused on how issues were processed once they were on the agenda, not how they were constructed.

Election studies have continued to develop in terms of sophistication. An inspection of the pages of the *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* shows the deployment of sophisticated econometric techniques. Forty years ago it was possible to claim with some authority that 'Class is the basis of British politics: all else is embellishment and detail.' (Pulzer, 1967). As class cleavages have eroded, more attention has turned to the impact that voters' perception of competence and party leaders have on their electoral choices. Legislative studies have been invigorated by the compilation of a database of Parliamentary votes by Phillip Cowley showing increasing rebelliousness by backbenchers over time. (Cowley, 2011).

Compared with the United States, rational choice has had relatively little impact on the study of politics in Britain. This is in spite of the attempts of Patrick Dunleavy to rescue it from association with a particular political position (Dunleavy, 1991) or the excellent historical analyses undertaken by Iain McLean (2001). Indeed, Colin Hay argues that rational choice is responsible for much of what is wrong with contemporary British politics. (Hay, 2007) Perhaps what Hay is pointing at is what happens when quite sophisticated ideas transmit from intellectual to public debate. Another example of this would be the term 'quango' which was originated by Antony Barker (1982) to describe a specific form of 'chosen instrument' of governance but has become a general term of vilification for public agencies. In the case of rational choice, while it is true that there are some Americans who treat it as a kind of theology which is the only path to true knowledge, the work of writers like Downs (1957) and Olson (1965) is interesting even when it is wrong or incomplete. The work of Elinor Ostrom (1990) shows how one can creatively adapt these approaches to generate fresh and important insights.

Much of the best work has continued to be historically informed. This is evident in the work of Andrew Gamble who ranks alongside Michael Moran as the leading British political economist of his generation. In developing concepts like the 'Anglosphere', Gamble (2003) has necessarily had to delve into Britain's past, not out of any nostalgic Whig preoccupation with British uniqueness, but to understand how the choices that Britain made in the past shaped the choices that are faced today. In the language of historical institutionalism, which has indirectly been influential in British political science, path dependencies were created. For example, there was a brief window of opportunity at the end of the First World War to move Britain in the direction of a high quality, high wage manufacturing economy based on industrial cooperation. Similarly, Bulpitt's (1986) development of the notion of 'statecraft' was based on a thorough reading and deep understanding of British history.

What informs a lot of these activities is an attempt to grapple with the nature of the British state. For those influenced by Whig thinking, the term 'state' was to be avoided as a continental European construction, the notion of the 'Crown' giving a sufficient degree of mysticism to cloak rule by an oligarchic elite. Moran has traced the evolution of the state in ideal typical terms from its original laissez faire or night watchman form through the command or Keynesian welfare state to the regulatory state. (Moran, 2003). More attention has been paid to the secret state, both through the work of Peter Hennessey (2003) and his students on the development of Britain's cold war nuclear strategy and on the security services (Aldrich 2010). When I first started teaching one

student would stay silent through most of the seminar and then invariably asked, 'This is all very well, but what is the attitude of the chiefs of police on this question?' British political science has not engaged very systematically with the role of the police or, for that matter, the military.

The world has become more interdependent in the last forty years and it is no longer possible to deal with Britain's external relations in terms of a box marked 'foreign policy analysis'. Nevertheless, there is a tendency in British politics textbooks to think that the European Union (EU) can be satisfactorily dealt with in a distinct chapter rather than reflecting the way in which it is integrated on a daily basis in many aspects of British policy-making. The issue of Britain's involvement remains a highly divisive one in British politics and it is another topic that benefits from historical analysis.

Globalization remains an essentially contested concept. It was an important theme in what was, on the whole, a rather rich literature on New Labour in government. There is always a doubt about whether British political science is quite as effective at analyzing the Conservatives in office. The argument made in relation to New Labour and globalization was they used a particular construction of globalization to justify their policy approach. There is undoubtedly some validity in this argument, but the broader implications of globalization require continued reflection. One does not have to accept the views of those who argue that globalization has made the nation state irrelevant to admit that the terms of political engagement have been changed in an important way. Britain has, of course, always been heavily engaged in the outside world, not least in military terms and the relationship with the United States has been a shaping one in post-war politics. The emerging countries are now becoming more important in economic and political terms and Britain's relationship with them deserves more attention. Meanwhile, the global financial crisis has emphasized the importance of globalization and there has arguably been a strong analytical response by British political scientists, for example Gamble (2009).

The central section of the article will examine two aspects of the study of British politics in greater depth. They are not necessarily the most important areas, and they happen to be ones with which I have been associated, but they arguably illustrative of some of the changes that have taken place. The study of public administration has been largely supplanted by the study of public policy. On one level, this has permitted the deployment of a more sophisticated toolkit, but it also reflects an erosion of the public sphere. The study of interest groups was an important part of the revival of the study of British politics in the 1960s and 1970s, but it has arguably recently become something of a fading paradigm.

Interest groups: a fading paradigm?

It was W J M Mackenzie's in two articles in 1955 that drew attention to pressure groups as a promising area of study (Mackenzie, 1955a) and one that required conceptual clarification. (Mackenzie, 1955b). Finer (1966) made a distinctive contribution. This was an era in which case studies of particular areas of interest group activity were still produced and made a real contribution to understanding. Probably the classic study was Self and Storing's (1962) *The State and the Farmer*. What remains valuable about this study is its historical perspective and the way in which it emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between interest and state.

However, the study of interest groups owes a great debt to American authors who stimulated the systematic analysis of interest groups in Britain: Christoph (1962), Eckstein (1960), Wilson (1961), Wootton (1963) come immediately to mind. But the doyen of them all was undoubtedly Samuel Beer. Beer approached the subject historically and was as much preoccupied with the study of *interest* as he was with interest organization. Beer started his work with a relatively optimistic view of the contribution that interests made to the British polity which he saw as deeply rooted in the country's history. He saw a 'widespread acceptance of functional representation in British political culture.' (Beer, 1969, p. 329). Under the post-war managed economy and welfare state, government required from pressure groups 'advice, acquiescence and approval.' (Beer, 1969, p. 330). The analysis presented was basically a benign one of the influence on policy exerted by consumer and producer groups and the narrowing of the ideological divide between the parties. British politics are portrayed as representing a balance between 'the powerful thrust of the new politics of group interest and, on the other, the continuing dynamic of ideas.' (Beer, 1969, p. 386). As Beer states in the concluding sentence of the original book: 'Happy the country in which consensus and conflict are ordered in a dialectic that makes of the political arena at once a market of interests and a forum for debate of fundamental moral concerns.' (Beer, 1969, p. 390). All this is consistent with a once prominent strand in American political science which saw lessons to be learnt from the disciplined two party system in Britain which also appeared to successfully manage group interests,

Over time he became more sceptical as he saw the damage wrought by the unsuccessful attempt to impose a tripartite solution in Britain, leading to a diagnosis of pluralistic stagnation in *Britain Against Itself* (Beer, 1982). The central argument was that 'the collectivist polity, that culminating success of political development in the postwar years, itself engendered the processes which converted success into failure'. (Beer, 1982, p. xiv). Beer explained, 'Intrinsic to the collectivist polity was a heightened group politics. This rising pluralism so fragmented the political system as to impair its power of acting for the long-run interests of its members.' (Beer, 1982, p. 4). The decline of parties relative to the rise of interest groups removed a major restraining influence: 'The new pluralism had been kept in order, as it had been bred, by the robust regime of party government in the 1940s and 1950s. The fatal conjunction occurred when the new group politics confronted from the mid 1960s, a party regime with diminishing powers of aggregation.' (Beer, 1982, p. 210).

The insider-outsider typology was developed to understand some of the dynamics of relationships between interest groups and the state in Britain. (Grant, 2000). Its argument was most groups would want the 'insider' status that brought a continuing relationship with government but that it was government which groups would enjoy that status. This in turn brought with an obligation to abide by informal 'rules of the game' which could constrain group activity. Nevertheless, insider groups were generally likely to enjoy greater success in achieving their objectives than outsider groups. It might reasonably be argued that this typology has passed its 'sell by' date, having first sensibly been modified by Grant Jordan and his Aberdeen colleagues (Maloney, Jordan and McLaughlin, 1994) and then dealt knockout blows by Whiteley and Winyard (1987) who argued that the model confused strategy and status and Ed Page who showed that outsider groups were substantially outnumbered by insider groups, 'with pure outsiders only a small minority, fewer than one in twelve.' (Page, 1999, p. 210).

Nevertheless, a period of secondment spent in Defra suggests that the distinction does still have some meaning in terms of the way in which government operates. In particular government recognizes core stakeholder groups and considerable emphasis is placed on the management of the relationship with those groups. However, radical groups are unlikely to be satisfied with such a relationship and to resort to various forms of direct action, a development that has been traced in the social movements literature. The emergence of the 'Occupy' movement in 2011 emphasizes the complementarity of this approach to the pressure groups one which examines influence that is often exerted in a way that lacks transparency.

To a large extent the discussion of single interest groups and their relationship with government has been supplanted by the extensive literature on policy communities and networks. This literature seeks to look at a range of actors engaged in exchange relationships, although government departments and pressure groups remain prominent in the networks that have been studied empirically. This literature enables us to look at a whole set of relationships and the dynamics of development, but a common criticism is that while it helps us to understand process, it does not explain policy outcomes.

There are a number of topics that arise from the study of pressure groups that concern the democratic health of the polity. The role of single issue interest groups has attracted some interest from analysts who have reflected on the condition of contemporary democracy, but the analysis has not been pursued in any depth. 'Single-issue pressure groups add to the demands made on the political system to deliver without aiding any understanding of the need to balance competing demands.' (Peters, Pierre and Stoker, 2009, p. 331). They form part of a generalized demand, reflected and amplified by the media, that 'something should be done' about particular problems without specifying how the resources might be found or which alternative activities might be curbed to release them. All too often government is provoked into 'tough new measures' which are ill thought through, insufficiently resourced, add to the complexity and extent of regulation and ultimately fail to achieve their objectives, feeding a pervasive cynicism about political activity.

As political party memberships have fallen, interest group memberships have risen but they do not generally have the same arrangements for internal democracy, thus limiting their contribution to political participation more generally. If interest groups were to be counted as 'stakeholders', in a sense as partners in governance, they should meet certain minimal standards of transparency and accountability (which some groups such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace and Oxfam have tried to develop in conjunction with each other through an Accountability Charter). The impressive corpus of work by Jordan and Maloney (2007) shows that the vast majority of individuals who support NGOs are not interested in exercising voice, although even a relatively passive membership can be mobilized as was shown by the National Trust campaign against proposed changes to planning policy in 2011. But perhaps the real point of such groups is what they achieve rather than how they do it. If others do not speak up for those groups, no one may speak up for them: 'Many politically marginalised and socially unpopular groups lack the resources to effectively mobilise collectively ... insisting on internal democracy and participation as a pre-requisite to access would simply remove a large number of NGOs from formalised political forums.' (Halpin, 2009, p. 276)

One of the most important recent developments has been the transformative power of the internet in relation to interest organization. It lowers the entry price for organization by

substantially reducing the costs of doing so (all one needs is a laptop and a connection) and it makes mobilization both easier and more speedy. It contributes to more accessible and more populist forms of politics which challenge the monopoly of the political class. Twitter becomes important in defining the political issues that receive attention in a 24-hour news cycle. Facebook offers an electronic space within which political mobilization can occur. 38 Degrees is an organization that was set up on the internet in 2009 and aspires to create 'an avalanche for change'. It claims to have mobilized 800,000 people and to have been influential in a number of campaigns such as that to stop plans for forest privatization or to secure the implementation of an EU directive on Human Trafficking.

Pressure group and interest studies are no longer at the heart of political science, attracting some of the leading figures in the discipline in the way that they once did. Writers like Beer used the study of interests as a lens through which to view and analyze British politics. Such grand narratives may no longer be possible, but the study of interests and their organization is an important part of studying how democracy functions and how it might be improved.

Whatever happened to public administration?

The traditional study of public administration in Britain was in part seen as concerned with the machinery of government and how it worked and in part with imparting a set of values that were seen as epitomizing the 'public service'. It was both vocational in orientation and mildly reformist in intent. As one of the doyens of the subject put it:

The general university approach was institutional. It concerned attention on the authorities engaged in public administration, analysed their history, structure, functions, powers, relationships. It enquired how they worked and the degree of effectiveness they achieved.' (Robson, 1975, p. 195).

It should therefore come as no great surprise that public administration suffered 'both in USA and UK from an unglamorous, even second-rate, image.' (Dunsire, 1999, p. 368). Those working in the area were well aware of these problems and commissioned a report on *Teaching Public Administration* which was considered at a special weekend meeting of the Public Administration Committee. The report 'lists a fair number of books on British administration published in recent years, it is significant that these include little in the way of new theory, few contributions, therefore to an international literature. Where is the Simon, the Riggs, the Crozier of Britain?' (Ridley, 1973, p. 2).

The field did undergo something of a theoretical revival in the 1980s, even if it meant the application of theories developed elsewhere such as organization theory, contingency theory and bureaucratic theory. However, the very assumptions of *public* administration came under attack from rational choice theory and the new managerialism. Rational choice saw bureaucrats not as seeking to disinterestedly pursue some general public interest but rather as self-seeking individuals

pursuing their own goals of utility maximization. New public management entailed breaking up public bureaucracies, contracting work out and using private sector management styles. Traditional public administration had been intimately involved with the creation of the post-war Keynesian Welfare State and was by definition relatively “statist” – bureaucratic, hierarchical and centralized.’ (Dunsire, 1999, p. 361). Intellectual arguments that justified the dismantling of that state form and its replacement by something more permeated with private sector values found a ready audience among the New Right.

Against this background academics shifted their attention from public administration to public policy. There was plenty of intellectual encouragement to do so in the work of Theodore Lowi, Austin Ranney and others. What was the point of studying decision-making processes if nothing was said about outputs, let alone their outcomes? The strand of work on implementation by Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) also focused attention on the fact that government programmes often fell well short of their stated objectives. Hence, in the leading journal *Public Administration* ‘There is one significant trend between 1970 and 1989, the growth in the number of articles which focused on public policy making’. (Rhodes, Dargie, Melville and Tutt, 1995, p. 4).

All this might seem to be a simple story of intellectual progress: an essentially descriptive paradigm with a focus on formal structure is replaced by a more theoretically guided approach which seeks to ask a broader range of questions. In large part that is the case, but some qualifications are necessary. First, the risk those who specialize in the study of public policy become experts on a particular policy area and lose sight of the broader issues that need to be pursued: indeed, this is probably a risk in political science generally given the pressures for specialization. However, that risk is reduced because many analysts have combined writing about specific policy areas with an assessment of more general themes such as the tools or instruments of government in the case of Christopher Hood (1983). A second risk is that if the public sphere continues to diminish or is increasingly permeated by the values of the private sector, is there anything that is distinctively public left to study? Governments, of course, continue to make policy on a very wide range of subjects, but the governance literature has tried to capture the shift from rowing to steering and from hierarchical to more networked forms of activity.

Nevertheless, there are some losses from the disappearance of the institutionalist tradition. Governments continue to make changes in the machinery of government, often for expedient reasons, but there is little in the way of critical external scrutiny of these changes and the way in which they impact on the effectiveness of government. (For a recent exception see Heppell 2011). The ‘bonfire of quangos’ that was promised by the Coalition Government focused on such matters as

whether their senior management was overpaid, rather than proceeding from first principles about whether the function performed by the 'quango' needed to be performed by government and, if it did, whether it might better be performed by a public agency than a central department. It is perhaps not surprising that some proposals to abolish quangos have had to be dropped.

There is a rich tradition of political economy in Britain, but the study of the processes of economic policy-making remains in some respects relatively neglected. For a long time the study of economic policy was overshadowed by the 'decline debate' which constituted a search for the causes of relatively poor British economic performance. In time this came to be seen as a particular construction which served the purposes of a variety of interests and ideological positions. In part as a by-product of the decline debate, there has been a considerable literature on the Treasury which does stand at the heart of British economic policy-making. The Bank of England has, however, been relatively neglected by political scientists, although receiving some attention in the work of Peter Burnham.

What has not been systematically studied is the relationship that stands at the heart of British economic policy-making, that between the prime minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer, although we have plenty of political memoirs covering the topic. I did suggest a typology that might provide a starting point for the study of the relationship (Grant, 2002, p. 190) given that the most important variables include the extent to which the Chancellor has an independent political base and is ambitious for higher office and whether the prime minister is prepared to grant autonomy and support to the chancellor. Many of the relationships seem to start well and then deteriorate, e.g., Thatcher and Lawson, Brown and Darling. What does seem to be the case is a not infrequent dysfunctionality in this crucial political relationship. More generally, after a period when economic policy appeared to become technocratic, rule-driven and depoliticized, it is at the centre of the political debate once more.

Where do we go from here?

The future of the study of British politics is closely tied up with developments in higher education in Britain. Political science in Britain has become much more professionalized over the last forty years, reflected in the development of the Political Studies Association (Grant, 2010). Studies of British politics have become more theoretically guided and the empirical basis for analysis has improved. This is not just in terms of quantitative techniques, but through the deployment of approaches previously relatively little used in political science such as participant observation. (Rhodes, 2011).

Archival sources have also been interrogated in a much more theoretically systematic fashion, the work of Peter Burnham being a prime example of this.

Higher education in Britain faces a period of great uncertainty. How full cost recovery fees will impact on the number of students taking degrees in politics remains to be seen, but there is bound to be some effect as some students decide not to come to university at all while others opt for more specifically vocational degrees. MA courses attracting overseas students are likely to become a more important part of the revenue stream, but these courses tend to focus on subjects like international relations, international political economy and development studies. Relatively few students come to Britain to study UK politics. Domestic students also often wish to focus on these subject areas and this has led to British politics sometimes being dropped as a compulsory module in undergraduate programmes. All these trends may reduce the number of students taking PhDs on British politics and the number of specialists teaching and researching in the area.

If I was to single out one change in the study of British politics over the last forty years it has become less overtly Anglo-American. In the 1960s many of the influential writers in British politics were Americans and were interested in Anglo-American comparisons. They were often motivated by a view that the disciplined party model of British politics had something to offer that was lacking in American politics. Many of them taught courses in American universities with a specifically British focus, but many of these courses have now disappeared. But although the American influence has declined, the study of British politics has not become systematically Europeanized. There is still a tendency to treat the European Union as an exogenous variable which somehow has to be assimilated into traditional models of British politics.

It is difficult to improve on the intellectual agenda set out in the first issue of *British Politics*: more disciplinary cohesion; more theoretical engagement and a greater integration between theoretical and empirical analysis; more meta-theoretical engagement in continuity and change narratives, including an historical dimension. (Kerr and Kettell, 2006). British politics is recognizably similar to what it was forty years ago. The most potentially significant changes are Europeanization; devolution and an erosion of British identity; disengagement with conventional political institutions and processes; and more resort to the politics of the street.

If there was one area I would select for future study, it is the management of expectations. Britain has been living beyond its means in terms of consumer and public debt for some time. Even if the structural deficit can be brought under control without inflicting lasting damage on the economy, and the EU is not seriously undermined by the eurozone crisis, geo-political changes in the

world are not favourable to Britain. The population is ageing rapidly and the implications of this have received relatively little attention at a meta level. The expectations of the electorate remain high levels of personal consumption, good public services, the opportunity to buy one's own house, transparent and responsive governance and other particularly English demands such as no intrusive development which may undermine economic growth. Whether all these expectations can be met in an economy growing slowly is open to doubt, but how those tensions arising from a failure to do so can be contained remains uncertain.

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