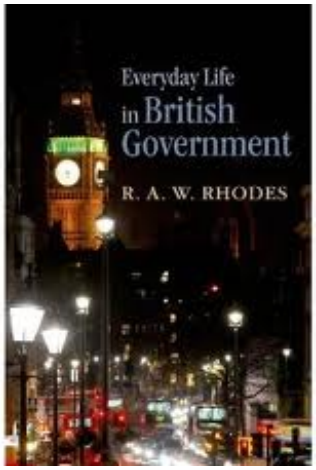
Book Review: Everyday Life in British Government

***Steve Coulter** reviews **R.A.W. Rhodes'** fascinating and insightful work on the inner workings of the Whitehall machine, which lends truth to many of the rumours about the chaotic nature of New Labour.*

Everyday Life in British Government. R.A.W. Rhodes. Oxford University Press. April 2011.



How does the British political elite think and act? And how can we know how they think and act? Many, if not most, political scientists concern themselves with the formation and outcomes of policies, and how these are shaped by institutions. But policies are made and put into effect by human beings so it stands to reason, perhaps, that a good way of getting to the bottom of how this is done is by close observation of those at the top of government calling the shots.

Everyday Life in British Government by R.A.W. Rhodes sets out to do this. Rhodes' methodology is that of a political anthropologist; data for his study consists of direct observation of the beliefs, customs, rituals and practices of those going about their business of making government work.

Rather than offering an institutional or public choice analysis of the inner workings of government, therefore, Rhodes offers instead a thick description of everyday life in a Whitehall department. Having secured an extraordinary degree of access, Rhodes followed around his subjects for a year during the second term of the Blair government, paying close attention not just to the things they did, but also why they did them and their feelings and beliefs about their actions.

The result is a fascinating and surprisingly readable and entertaining book. Politicians and bureaucrats, believe it or not, are just like us – well maybe not quite. They swear, make mistakes, and bitch and gossip about each other and their enemies (usually the Treasury).

A number of themes emerge clearly from this entertaining political theatre. Personal relationships, between and among ministers, advisers and civil servants, are hugely important. Possessing 'management' skills, a career-killer for civil servants before the 1980s, is now seen as a vital part of the job.

Everyone has a role to play. Senior Ministers are treated like gods at the hub of their departmental 'court' – right up until the day they are sacked. Junior ministers behave like frustrated courtiers and are left with the duties that the Secretary of State does not want, or has no time for. The civil servants who feature here emerge as largely hard working, bright individuals who care about making a difference.

Pan-governmental networks loom large in all of this, with departments merely one of a policy-making quorum that also includes the Treasury, Number 10 and the largely ineffectual Cabinet Office. Rhodes addresses charges that Blair's regime saw a colossal degree of centralisation in Number 10, albeit under the watchful and paranoid eye of the Treasury, and finds this largely to be the case.

But parliament, reassuringly, also looms large, with Ministers and officials devoting huge amounts of time and energy to preparing for Questions and Committee appearances.

Perhaps the most startling observation, and the one which probably explains most about government, is how little time is left for thinking about policy. Both ministers and civil servants work punishing hours, but much of their time is taken up with functions, politicking and obsessing about 'delivery'. Meetings are endless, with numerous briefing papers circulated beforehand, but clear decisions about direction and implementation don't always result.

Political scientists of a more positivist bent will doubtless gripe about the extreme subjectivity of this approach. Rhodes' 'interpretive' method, focusing on the 'meaning' of the actions of actors, offers few hard conclusions about why the Blair – or any government – was how it was and did what it did.

But then Rhodes is not attempting a comprehensive overview of the Blair era. His aim is to probe and demystify the 'black box' within which policy is made. His book offers a fascinating insight into the inner

workings of the Whitehall machine and renders all too believable many of the revelations about the chaotic nature of New Labour contained in the memoirs of many of its leading participants.

Dr Steve Coulter *recently finished his PhD at the European Institute at LSE, and is now Senior Economics Analyst at BBC News.*

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