

# The changing British policy style: from governance to government

[Jeremy Richardson](#) explains how the British policy-making style has been steadily shifting away from governance and towards government. Here he examines some of the main features that characterise this long process, and concludes that Brexit should usher in a return to governance.

There are two broad schools describing the British style of policy-making. First, what for decades was seen as the typical British adversarial and hierarchical policy style, the so-called 'Westminster Model', reflecting an *impositional* policy style, what I equate with *government*. And second, a contrasting model emphasising a more collaborative and deliberative policy process, especially involving interest groups, reflecting a *consensual* policy style, what I term *governance*. Britain has, for several decades, been steadily shifting towards *government* and away from *governance*. Below, I examine some of the main features apparent in this long process.

## The austerity and reform deficits 'turns'

The arrival of the Thatcher Government in 1979 presaged a clear shift in policy style from governance to government. There is, of course, a danger of creating a myth that everything changed under Mrs Thatcher. In reality, changing things was not always so easy. For example, talking expenditure restraint was (and remains) relatively easy; delivering it not so. Indeed, public expenditure was somewhat higher in 1990 than it was in 1979. However, the fact that Mrs Thatcher and all governments which followed did not achieve all that they set out to do in terms of public expenditure restraint does not show that the policy style remained unchanged.

The emphasis on austerity had implications for the UK policy style as a whole. For example, there were growing demands for higher public expenditure that were not met, thus changing the relationship between government and groups. In practice a considerable amount of policy change emanated from the *austerity turn*. Policy change came from the political level, top down, not emerging from interest groups and civil servants, bottom-up.

The austerity turn's importance has been its effect on actor behaviour, irrespective of its actual financial outturn. Other post-war governments had been forced to apply severe budgetary restraint (notably under Harold Wilson and the IMF crisis in 1976) but this was *force majeure*. For Mrs Thatcher and subsequent governments, austerity was an over-arching belief system, from which nearly all action flows. This belief system had a seismic quality about it and had the capacity to cut across hitherto autonomous policy sectors. The growing power of the Treasury in the 'austerity turn' is illustrated by the experience of ministers in the Coalition Government. *For example*, Nick Harvey (former Minister for the Armed Forces) was particularly acerbic about the role of the Treasury (and, indeed Number 10 and the Cabinet Office). [He comments:](#)

I was just astonished by the extent to which Number 10 and the Treasury and the Cabinet Office stuck their nose into departmental affairs... I had just no idea the extent to which they micro-managed and nosed into departmental affairs. I was absolutely horrified by it to be honest.

His ministerial reflections capture the essence of the post-1979 policy game in which attempted budgetary retrenchment changed the rules of the game in at least two respects. First, the primary objective of policymaking changed, namely expenditure reduction rather than policy improvement. Secondly, there appear to have been process changes, particularly relating to how the Treasury did business with Departments. The old policy 'franchises' came under long-term expenditure pressures from Thatcher, through the Blair, Brown, and Coalition Governments, with added force under the Cameron Conservative administration.

However, caution is needed in characterising the three and a half decades post-Thatcher as solely about austerity. An equally important trend has been underway, namely attacking 'reform deficits'. The Thatcher Government started a continuing process of tackling what she saw as many reform deficits created by policy community politics, or the 'governance' policy style. The long-term trend has been to move policymaking from the private management of public business back into a more public sphere, resulting in the reduction of power for many established interests such many of the professions, trade unions, and even hitherto powerful business interests

## Ministerial/Civil Service relations and the changing policy style

There have also been important changes *within* government departments, namely a change in the balance of power between senior civil servants on the one hand, and Ministers and their personal partisan staff (Ministerial advisers) on the other. The trend to increase the amount of external advice has produced a situation where many ministers (and their external advisers, both official and informal) arrive in office with a more ideational policy portfolio in that they have their own strong priorities on what policy change is needed. There has been a shift from civil servants warning ministers and keeping them out of trouble, reflecting the traditional risk aversion normally attributed to the British civil service, towards 'carriers' of ministerial ideas, willing to try to implement policies even when lacking broad policy community support.

The changing relationship between ministers and civil servants has important effects on policy style because civil servants are now less able to strike a consensus with interest groups, as the civil servants often arrive at the table to decisions already made, rather than to engage in a process of mutual learning and exchange in order to generate policy solutions. The zone for negotiation is often much smaller than hitherto, and this fundamentally changes the nature of the interaction between civil servants and groups, and hence the policy style itself.

However, the fact that the more hierarchical or *impositional* policy style has made possible a lot of policy change does not mean that it has actually increased the policy system's capacity to solve policy problems effectively. There are big risks inherent in the new policy style under which consultation is much more constrained.

### **Government without governance is a difficult and risky business**

If the Westminster model is now rather more in place, radical policy change should be easy to achieve. A clear party policy line and a parliamentary majority should ensure that all will run smoothly, through to successful policy implementation, textbook style. In practice, the real world is more intractable. Pressman and Wildavsky's [classic work on policy implementation](#) had as its subtitle, 'How high hopes in Washington were dashed in Oakland California'. Their central message was that there was more policy failure than success in the US. The more centralised British state might hope to fare better than a federal system.

But I am cautious in accepting this view, not least because the pace of policy change in Britain, especially that driven by 'the centre' is quite frenetic. For example, David Halpern (Head of Number 10's Behavioural Insights Team) [describes](#) life behind the shiny black door of Number 10 as akin to a hospital Accident & Emergency Department. He comments that 'in such a world, there's often not the time, nor the patience, for the answer to be "more research needed"'. There is more than a hint here of a 'pop-up' style of policymaking where chaps (mostly!) with seemingly clever policy ideas get to implement them without the need to consider the views of, or seek the support of, the affected interests.

Indeed, [Crewe and King](#) argue that 'there is at the heart of the British system a lack of deliberation'. Their studies show that a lack of consultation, or ignoring the messages resulting from consultation, was often a cause of policy failure. For example, they see the massive failure of Mrs Thatcher's Poll Tax as in large part due to the fact that the Government 'conferred with almost no one outside Whitehall (and ignored the views of two outside assessors whom they did consult)'.

Of course, excessive group power can lead to reform deficits. However, effective interest group involvement in both problem definition and policy formulation does have an inherent logic. Groups have been historically integrated into public policymaking for good practical reasons. Their participation in the policy process contributes essential knowledge which policymakers lack, and it generally raises policy effectiveness providing it is properly managed and balanced.

My worry is that there have been some re-enforcing trends at work in Britain over the past thirty years that have shifted the central focus of the policy process from better policies towards more overtly political ones. The austerity and reform turns; the strengthening of the centre in relation to policy departments; the increased role of political advisers in initiating policy change; a drift towards a more subservient civil service; and an apparent increasing number of cases where interest groups are marginalised, can have a cumulative adverse effect on the quality of policy-making. 'Strong government' has a nice ring to it, but it is high risk too.

### **Postscript on Brexit**

Brexit is a case in point as it is certainly the most complex policy problem facing Britain in the post-war period. At the core of the policy problem is the urgent need to negotiate favourable trade deals with many states. Both government and interest groups have a strong incentive to get things right in trade negotiations and, therefore, to collaborate very closely. Moreover, trade negotiation expertise in government is in short supply and so at least some groups can expect high levels of integration in policymaking.

In contrast, many groups, such as environmental and women's groups will find it difficult to exert influence under a hard Brexit where the UK moves to a de-regulated economy. More generally, Brexit will certainly repatriate government/interest group relations from Brussels. The reduction in group influence at the national level has often been more than compensated by a shift in the locus of policymaking from London to the Brussels '[policy-making state](#)' as UK groups across virtually all policy sectors have exploited an alternative venue. In that sense, the trends that I have described have been moderated for interest groups. *Sans Bruxelles*, one can expect groups to become more active at the national level.

Moreover, it would be foolish for government to marginalise groups and to pursue a top-down style of policy-making when faced with the truly huge task of deciding what to do about the massive amount of EU legislation that will remain in place on day one of Brexit, albeit as British law. Interest groups, above all, know best which EU laws are working well, which are not, and which are no longer needed. Thus, Brexit should usher in a return to *governance*.

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Note: the above draws on the author's [published work](#) in *British Politics*.

### About the Author

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