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Martin J. Smith

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To Jean

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Foreword: Transforming Government

There are enormous gaps in our knowledge of the key actors and institutions in British government. We cannot do simple things like describing the work of ministers of state, permanent secretaries, and their departments. Also, there have been large changes in British government during the post-war period, such as: the growth of the welfare state; the professionalism of government; the consequences of recession; the effects of New Right ideology; the impact of the European Union; the effects of new technology; the hollowing out of the state; and the new public management, with its separation of policy and administration. We do not know how these changes affected British government. And we cannot understand the effects of these changes by focusing only on Britain. We must also analyse the experience of the advanced industrialised democracies of Europe and the Commonwealth.

To repair these gaps in our knowledge and to explain how and why British government changed in the post-war period, the Economic and Social Research Council mounted the Whitehall Programme on 'The Changing Nature of Central Government in Britain'. This series on 'Transforming Government' reports the results of that four-year research programme. The series has five objectives:

- Develop theory – to develop new theoretical perspectives to explain why British government changed and why it differs from other countries.
- Understand change – to describe and explain what has changed in British government since 1945.
- Compare – to compare these changes with those in other EU member states and other states with a 'Westminster' system of government.
- Build bridges – to create a common understanding between academics and practitioners.
- Dissemination – to make academic research accessible to a varied audience covering sixth-formers and senior policy-makers.

The books cover six broad themes:

- Developing theory about the new forms of governance.
- The hollowing out of the state in Britain, Europe and the Commonwealth.
- The fragmenting government framework.
- The changing roles of ministers and the senior civil service.
- Constitutional change.
- New ways of delivering services.

Martin Smith's book on the British core executive is a major addition to the series.¹ He redefines conventional accounts of the British executive by developing three arguments:

- It is misleading to focus on personality and on the role of the Prime Minister and key ministers. There are many actors with complex interdependencies in the core executive. All control some resources. No one actor can succeed without exchanging resources. Power is everywhere.
- Actors are central but so are structures. We must understand the structural and historical context in which the core executive works.
- Power is relational, based on dependency not domination. We must focus on the context, resources, structures and the choices of actors in the core executive. These structures of dependence take the form of overlapping policy networks.

Chapter 2 assesses critically the Westminster model of British government, arguing that it omits too much and explains too little. It then develops the power–dependency model of the core executive. Chapter 3 places the core executive in a wider socio-economic and historical context, exploring the changing pattern of dependencies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Chapter 4 deconstructs the conventional analysis of the power of the Prime Minister and cabinet. Chapter 5 explores the roles and relationships of minister and civil servants, again stressing their mutual dependence. Chapter 6 analyses the weakness, not the strength, of the core executive, especially its difficulties in developing a coordinated, strategic approach. Chapter 7 critically appraises the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, documenting the seemingly endless and fruitless search to strengthen central capability. Chapter 8 explores the impact of the EU and other international interdependencies on the core executive. Chapter 9 draws the

argument together and should show even the casual reader the swingeing implications of Smith's analysis.

The core executive has changed in six ways in the post-war period. There has been a shift from bureaucratic to decentralised management. The core executive sets the overall policy direction, avoiding detailed intervention. The public sector is smaller. Economic interest groups have been excluded from the policy process. There is less consensus between politicians and officials. The centre manages networks rather than controlling bureaucracies. So, Smith's conclusions about the capability of the British centre are dramatic. For example, he argues that the core executive is increasingly concerned with governance rather than government. The core executive is no longer sovereign (if it ever was) but is at the centre of networks of different organisations, which it does not directly control. Fragmentation is pervasive. Co-ordination is elusive. The cabinet is now almost universally accepted as nothing more than a rubber stamp; it has become almost a dignified part of the constitution. And that constitution has not kept pace with the changes that have occurred in government.

One of the challenges facing everyone on the ESRC research programme was to build bridges between the academic community and research users. Smith takes the present-day analysis of the British executive out of the academic journals and makes it accessible to a larger audience for the first time. I expect the book to change the way in which we discuss the power of the British executive. Gone forever are the hoary old clichés of prime-ministerial power, replaced by a recognition that power is everywhere and understood through the language of dependence, networks, governance and choice.

R. A. W. Rhodes

*Director, ESRC Whitehall Programme, and
Professor of Politics, University of Newcastle*

Note

1. The ESRC Whitehall Programme had published six books by April 1998.
J. Bradbury and J. Mawson (eds), *British Regionalism and Devolution*. London: Kingsley, 1997.
P. Day and R. Klein, *Steering but not Rowing? The Transformation of the Department of Health: a Case Study*. Bristol: Policy Press, 1997.
R. A. W. Rhodes, *Understanding Governance: Policy Networks, Governance, Reflexivity and Accountability*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997.
R. A. W. Rhodes and P. Dunleavy (eds), *Prime Minister, Cabinet and Core Executive*. London: Macmillan, 1995.

P. Weller, H. Bakvis and R.A.W. Rhodes (eds), *The Hollow Crown*. London: Macmillan, 1997.

J. Seargeant and J. Steele, *Consulting the Public. Guidelines and Good Practice*. London: Policy Studies Institute, 1997.

For further information about the Programme and its publications contact Professor R.A.W. Rhodes, Department of Politics, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU. E-mail address: r.a.w.rhodes@ncl.ac.uk.

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MARTIN J. SMITH