



Institutional Crisis in 21st-Century Britain

Edited by DAVID RICHARDS,
MARTIN SMITH AND COLIN HAY

UNDERSTANDING GOVERNANCE



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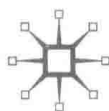
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Preface and Acknowledgements

Institutional Crisis in 21st-Century Britain emerged from a conference we organised during the summer of June 2012. It sprang from our sense of frustration that while there had been various commentary pieces appearing by then in the written media discussing the broader nature of the various crises examined throughout this volume, the focus in the academic literature tended to be rather narrower, reflecting instead on the problems besetting individual institutions. There was then an obvious lacuna – a need for a more rigorous exploration of the extent to which the wave of perceived institutional crises revealed over recent years might in some way be collectively related, as opposed to simply being a matter of serendipitous coincidence. The aim of this edited volume is to address this lacuna.

There were two obvious challenges that we, as editors, faced in plotting how best to approach this task. The first concerned the range and variety of institutions confronting potential crises. Such breadth meant that in terms of contributors, should we draw on expertise from political science alone, or adopt a broader strategy casting our net right across the social sciences? We opted for the latter with the view that such plurality would add a greater richness and wider perspective to our understanding of the relationship between institutions and the effect(s) wrought by crisis narratives. This in turn presented a second challenge concerning the issue of coherence. It is the norm in most collections of this kind for the editors to try and impose a common conceptual framework, ensuring a degree of continuity in the way in which each contributing author distils her or his analysis. But in our case, given the diversity of the contributors' disciplinary fields, such an option did not appear readily available. As such, it was not clear we would be able to achieve the usual levels of coherence for this type of enterprise. As outlined in the volume's Introduction, our strategy was then to ask the authors to each consider a common set of questions regarding the institutions they were writing on with the hope that, in the least, some common themes might emerge.

Yet if hindsight is one of the vices within the social sciences, so be it. For when we came to reflect on the synergies to emerge on receipt of the individual chapters, it became apparent that the crisis pathologies

underpinning many of the accounts they offered chimed with themes discussed elsewhere in a more exclusively political science literature concerning what can be referred to as a 'critical approach towards the British political tradition' (Hall 2011). So, when subsequently penning the book's Introduction and Conclusion, we were retrospectively afforded the luxury of being able, in true inductive fashion, to appeal to the literature on the British political tradition (BPT) to offer what we regard as a coherent analytical framework round which much of the book is organised. This provided the coherence we originally believed would elude us. The tenets of this literature are set out in more detail in the introductory chapter. But to give the reader some flavour of the arguments it alludes to, it touches on themes of elitism, hierarchy, secrecy and the absence of real transparency and accountability. These were all characteristics that were regularly referred to throughout the individual chapters concerning the problems besetting each respective institution.

Having then been given the opportunity to present the BPT as a common conceptual approach interwoven, in various ways, throughout the volume, it is also useful to reflect on the antithesis to such a tradition, as offering a potential diagnosis to the problems discussed forthwith. One obvious attempt to break from the BPT was that made by America's Founding Fathers, and their normative appeal to popular sovereignty, a separation of powers, a system of checks and balances and, of course, federalism. Over 200 years on from the Declaration of Independence, numerous other, more participatory, delegative, transparent and pluralist approaches to the way both systems of government and their related institutions organise themselves are now in operation.

The UK, we therefore conclude, in addressing its own crises, needs to move on from the iron-cage of its own history and with it the various 19th-century trappings we identify as continuing to underpin both the organisational forms and cultures of many of its key institutions. To quote from Abraham Lincoln in his first inaugural address from Washington DC in 1861,

This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it, or exercise their revolutionary right to overthrow it.

If we could indulge for a moment, by lifting this musing and transposing to a modern-day setting, our hope is that the current wave of institutional crises afflicting UK institutions garners more than just a

weariness (and with it potential apathy), but rather acts as a catalyst for a wave of reforms, suggesting that sometime in the near future change, rather than continuity will win the day.

Finally, in the process of compiling this edited volume, some heartfelt thanks are long due. First, to all the contributors, thank you for your forbearance, responsiveness (in most cases) and reflexivity. Your collective participation has undoubtedly enriched the final product. A special mention also to Vivien Lowndes (Nottingham) who attended the initial conference and who provided a number of thought-provoking insights. Thanks to the editorial team at Palgrave Macmillan – Amber Stone-Galilee and Andy Baird in particular – for the support and assistance offered throughout the various stages of production. Thanks also to Rod Rhodes, the editor of the *Transforming Government* series for his receptive, but incisive comments when we first approached him with the idea for this book and for allowing us to contribute to what is one of the outstanding series in political science. Also, of course, deep thanks to our nearest and dearest – for all your tolerance and forbearance – it is really appreciated.

Finally, a brief note on the person to whom this book is dedicated. Sadly, in January 2013, at far too young an age, Steve Buckler lost an all too brief battle with cancer, that most pernicious of diseases. At the time of his passing, he was the longest serving member of the Department of Political Science and International Studies at Birmingham University and a political theorist of eminent repute. His academic forays had also led at times to some noteworthy contributions to the literature on British politics. More importantly, he was both a sometime colleague and good friend to a number of us who have contributed to this book. We know he would have been sympathetic to the over-arching critique presented within this volume and it is to his memory that this book is most appropriately dedicated.

DR, MJS and CH, January 2014

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Introduction: A Crisis in UK Institutions?

David Richards and Martin Smith

Introduction

There is an obvious, but striking contrast between the 1950s, an age often framed against a back-drop depicting popular, widespread deference, respect and trust towards the 'great' institutions of the state such as parliament, Whitehall, the judiciary, the armed forces, the established Church, etc., and today, where rarely a week passes when one or other institution is not being drawn into publicly defending itself against accusations of nefarious practice, corruption or maladministration. To give a flavour, in the brief time it has taken to pen this introductory chapter, the media have carried a variety of stories – either real or alleged – concerning:

- failures in child protection
- unacceptable practices in various NHS primary care trusts
- a smear campaign against the Stephen Lawrence family organised by the police
- the failure of the Liberal Democrats to properly investigate sexual harassment within their party
- union manipulation in the selection process of Labour MP candidates
- the Conservative MP Patrick Mercer resigning from his party over concerns surrounding cash for questions
- the conviction of the BBC presenter Stuart Hall for child-sex offences following on from the arrest of other current or former BBC employees on similar charges in the wake of the Jimmy Saville affair
- the arrest and prosecution of a number of media figures as part of the Eleveden and Weeting operations investigations into illegal media practices

- three UK banks being investigated for shutting exchanges out of the credit derivatives market.

The list is by no means exhaustive and it may be that the substance behind some of the above accusations is less than solid. What is clear is that many of these crises are pervading what were once seen as venerable and trusted institutions in both a contiguous and recurrent fashion. As Figures 0.1 and 0.2 illustrate, people increasingly see politicians as self-serving and there has been a clear decline in the trust of once highly regarded institutions. In the current climate, deference and trust appear long gone. The new zeitgeist is framed by a climate of public distrust and suspicion forged on a view that institutions prioritise self-interest over the public good.

Such a transformation in the perception and status of institutions over a relatively short period of time prompts the question why? Is it, for example, the result of a set of pathological institutional problems; rising expectations of the electorate; or the 24-hour media cycle? Indeed, one of the themes alighted on in this volume, which surveys the landscape of institutional crisis across the UK, is whether these events really are symptomatic of a broader institutional malaise and whether the recurring crises which seem to affect public institutions are symptomatic of a broader crisis. Is there any connection between these apparent crises and, if there is, what does it tell us about the UK political system?

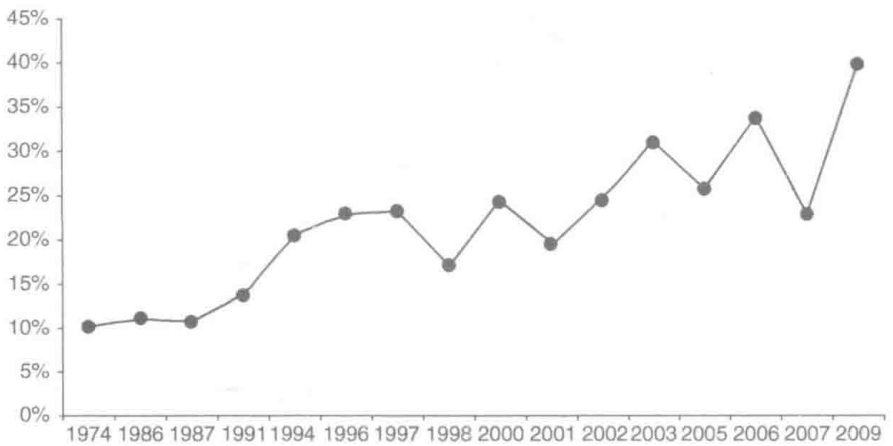


Figure 0.1 Percentage who 'almost never' trust UK governments (of any party) to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party
Source: Cousins (2011).

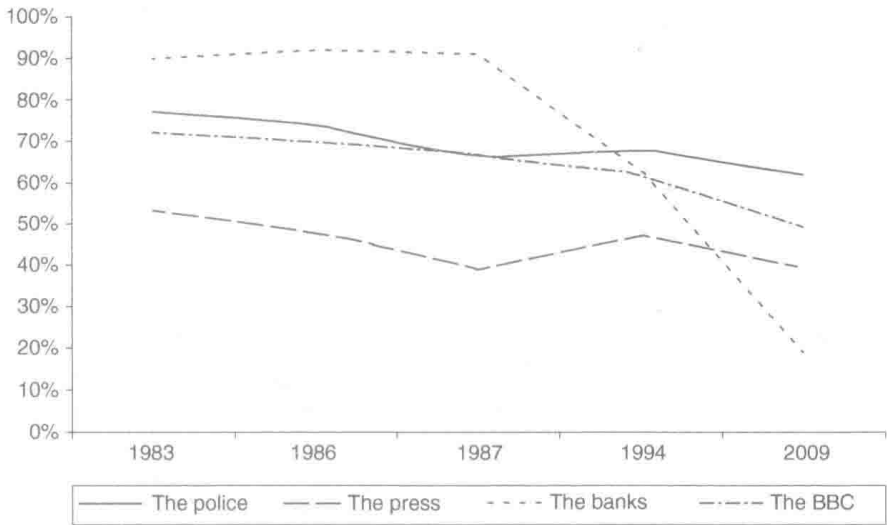


Figure 0.2 Trust in UK institutions

Source: Cousins (2011).

For some, crises are seen as being linked to the financial crisis to emerge in 2007–8, which has subsequently had a profound effect on the political economy of the developed world. This, of course, is not unique to the UK context. The extent of the economic downturn has created sizeable problems for various governments in terms of continuing to provide the level of public services citizens have come to expect throughout much of the latter half of the 20th century. In countries such as Greece and Spain, there have been dramatic reductions in public provision and public sector pay, coupled to large increases in unemployment. This has led to the prospect of wider political crises as voters question the ability of their political leaders, in some cases unelected technocrats, to deal with the scale of the problems that they face.

If we return to the UK context, at the same time that the financial crisis has unfolded, there is the perception of a domino effect, a crisis contagion spreading across a range of different institutions – parliament, Whitehall, political parties, local government, Europe, the police, the media, the Union (of UK nations), etc. – potentially culminating in what we might label a more general crisis within UK institutions. While the notion of crisis itself could clearly be contested, the common perception to take root is that the status quo is challenged in various ways and in different areas that would have been unthinkable half a century ago.

This sense of crisis is raising a series of fundamental questions, not only over the formal and informal rules and current working practices surrounding key institutions within the UK state, but more particularly over their claims to legitimacy and perhaps more pertinently the ability of institutions to adapt to new forms of governance, and the implications of new media. A brief, more generic survey of some of the key events associated with this dynamic might include:

- 2006–7 – the so-called (by certain parts of the media) ‘cash for honours’ scandal concerning alleged links between political donations and life peerages
- 2008 onwards – the financial crisis, and its aftermath, that not only revealed the extent to which key financial institutions had embraced unsustainable models of risk and poor governance working practices but also revealed inadequacies within the existing regulatory framework coupled to a dysfunctional relationship between key oversight bodies – the Treasury, the Financial Service Authority and the Bank of England
- 2009 – the MPs’ expenses scandal exposed the pathology within Westminster of an embedded culture of self-regulation, secrecy and club-like government that rendered it, in the eyes of many, as not fit for purpose and further added muster to an existing debate over arguments concerning the lack of legitimacy engulfing the formal arenas of UK politics
- late 2009 onward – an emerging European sovereign debt crisis and its impact on domestic politics across a range of areas
- 2011 – the ‘hacking scandal’ to emerge from parts of the UK media, but most notably the News International organisation, which revealed a set of informal, insider, elite, networked relationships between the political class, the media and the Metropolitan Police. This prompted a range of questions over the way these different institutions interact with one another and the ‘hidden’ effect these interactions have had on institutional working practices
- October 2011 – the Liam Fox affair once again raised the spectre of nefarious practices associated within the lobbying process across Whitehall and beyond, reigniting questions that had previously been raised more than a decade earlier over the ‘cash for questions’ affair and the subsequent creation of the Nolan Committee to examine standards in public life
- winter 2011–12: the move towards a 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, triggering the potential emergence of a crisis of the Union

- 2012 – a growing debate about the UK's membership of the European Union, with the Conservative Party committing itself to an in-out referendum after 2015 if returned to power
- 2013 – UKIP win 25 per cent of the vote in the local elections, symbolising a loss of faith in the major parties, reflected for example in the earlier electoral success of 'minority' party candidates elected to parliament in Bradford and Brighton.

It has been argued that the real importance of these apparently 'contingent' crises is that they have in different ways revealed a set of more embedded, long-term, though more subtle and complex crises afflicting the UK political system concerning issues of representation, parties and participation. This rather different set of crises may be clustered round the general theme of a 'crisis of legitimacy'.

The aim of this edited volume is to examine the nature of these supposed crises and to address an overarching question:

- To what extent is there a general crisis of institutions in the UK?
In the context of this issue, this volume also sets out to consider:
- What, if any, links exist between the different perceived crises?
- And, more specifically, is there any relationship between the more recent 'contingent crises' and the notion of a set of longer term, embedded 'crises of legitimacy'?

Understanding crisis

There is a sense in the United Kingdom that crisis is always with us. At the national level, there have long been arguments about the sustainability of the UK economy and indeed much of the post-war historiography of UK politics is focused around the issue of decline and the sense of crisis that such decline has created for institutions (Kenny and English 2000). In some approaches, crisis was endemic to the UK revolution due to the failure of a satisfactory bourgeois revolution (Anderson 1964) and the deeply embedded consequence of empire (Douglas 1986). Here, crisis was more often than not depicted as a structural aspect of the failure of the UK political system to properly modernise post hegemony. For Anderson (1964), the UK state was in crisis in the 1960s as a consequence of its historical development since the English civil war of the 17th century. However, Thatcherism was supposed to have unshackled the UK economy and indeed much of the 1990s and 2000s saw the UK economy growing faster than its continental partners.