POLITICAL TRADITIONS

AND UK POLITICS

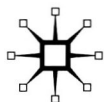## MATTHEW HALL

Political Traditions and UK Politics

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Philip Hall

Acknowledgements

The idea for this book arose as part of research I undertook part-time from 2004 to 2009 at the University of Birmingham. Its foundations, however, can be traced back much further. My interest in politics and history began in the 1980s at the height of Thatcherism. For me, witnessing the Miner's Strike, the abolition of the GLC and later, the Poll Tax, whilst listening to the likes of Billy Bragg and Paul Weller raised numerous questions concerning the nature of UK politics and society. I am pleased to have the opportunity to acknowledge the contribution made by numerous people over the years to my attempts to find some semblance of answers to those questions.

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On a personal level I would like to offer my warmest thanks to my friends and family who have been with me throughout this. In particular, honourable mentions go to my Mum and Dad for their constant support and encouragement over the years as well as for their help in fostering my interests in all things 'political'; my sister Jo for buying me Emile Burns's *Introduction to Marxism* for Christmas in 1988 so I 'would know what I was talking about'; to Mandy and the rest of the Bishops, who supported me through so many years in ways I can never fully say thank you for; and to Taryn whose immeasurable kindness, intellectual prowess and proofreading skills were instrumental in the final moments of completing my thesis and the production of this book. Thanks for everything one and all!

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During my A levels I encountered two fundamental sources of influence and inspiration. The first, Dr John Burgess, inspired and challenged me sufficiently to want to continue my studies at degree level.

The second was the publication of Charter 88's demands for constitutional reform. Coming across this as I first sought to understand and critically engage with the UK's political system had a profound influence on me, shaping and driving my concerns regarding democratic practice in the UK.

I was hugely fortunate as an undergraduate at Sheffield University in the early 1990s to encounter a number of truly outstanding political analysts. Amongst these the work of Martin Smith, David Marquand and Andrew Gamble has influenced my own. In the History Department, I was privileged to be taught by Professor Ian Kershaw. It was in his seminars on the Nazi regime that I first encountered the centrality of questions concerning intention and structure.

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and inspiring. Dave's original work on the BPT clearly inspired the interpretation offered below, as it has the work of a number of his former students. The idea of a British Political Tradition allowed me to bring together the various ideas, concerns and understandings I had previously developed into an interpretation of British political life over time. However it was his encouragement for me to stretch myself and try to write the best work I could that made the most telling contribution. For this, for his reviewing of my work and for his constant support, encouragement and engagement I offer my most profound and heartfelt thanks. This book is a modest token of my lasting respect for, and thanks to, him.

Contents

Introduction

Various changes that were instituted by the Labour government during its tenure between 1997 and 2010 have marked a significant moment in the history and development of the British political system. These changes, which Tony Blair described as 'the biggest programme of change to our democracy ever proposed' (Blair 1994), have seen reform of numerous aspects of the institutions and processes of British politics. Since 1997 we have witnessed the reform of the House of Lords (1999), the introduction of both the Human Rights Act (1998) and the Freedom of Information Act (2000), the creation of a Supreme Court for the UK (2005) and devolution for Scotland and Wales (1998). Amongst these there has seemingly been a lack of uniformity of approach or intent. For example Scottish devolution was introduced with speed and without any significant attempt to de-radicalise the original proposal. However Freedom of Information was significantly de-radicalised and electoral reform for Westminster did not occur (Marsh and Hall 2007; Marsh 2008a).

Taken together, such is the impact of these changes and those that have been left unresolved that further reforms of the British political system now appear likely. Indeed the somewhat unprecedented Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition formed in 2010 announced in its first Queen's speech various constitutional reforms including fixed-term parliaments, the power of recall, a largely elected second chamber and a referendum on the introduction of the Alternative Vote for Westminster elections. Explaining the eventual fate of these reforms, if and when they occur, will raise further questions regarding change and continuity in British politics.

Any consideration of recent developments in British politics encounters two notable trends in accounts of British political life. Firstly the

majority of explanations of the British political system have been characterised by reference to the Westminster Model (WM). The WM has been, until recently, the dominant organising perspective in British politics (Gamble 1990; Kerr and Kettell 2006) for those attempting a broader explanation of the British political system. In the past the WM was often seen as a paradigm that should be exported around the world. However in recent years the WM has become increasingly contested (see for example Rhodes 1997; Marsh, Richards and Smith 2001; Bevir and Rhodes 2003; 2006b). The development of new approaches such as the 'Differentiated Polity Model' (DPM) (Rhodes 1997) and the 'Asymmetrical Power Model' (APM) (Marsh, Richards and Smith 2001) has provided a fresh challenge for analysts of the British political system. All explanations of British political life over time must now respond to the criticisms of the WM offered by these new approaches and see to demonstrate how it remains in any way relevant to British politics. Rather than accept this model as a reality as much political analysis has done (Norton 1984; Hanson and Walles 1990), or see it as 'the other' to now be rejected as the 'governance thesis' does (Rhodes 1997; Bevir and Rhodes 2003), we should seek to identify the ideational underpinnings of the institutions, process and discourses of that narrative through the notion of 'political traditions'. In doing so we can more fully explain both the key features of British political life and change and continuity over time.

Alongside the dominance of the WM, a tendency towards British exceptionalism has characterised many accounts of Britain's political development.[1] Conventional analyses of the British political system often neglect detailed consideration of the complex range of dynamics that produce outcomes. This is particularly, though not exclusively, the case with discussion of change and continuity over time. Conventional accounts have tended towards the Whig interpretation of history, emphasising the linear, gradual development of British political life over time. In this a tendency towards exceptionalist accounts of the British mode of democracy that allege the superiority of Britain's historical development can be detected. Taken together, the focus on Whiggish developmentalism and the WM has promulgated a distorted picture of power and democracy within Britain. In particular we can find a tendency towards emphasising the essential pluralism of British politics, rather than highlighting the persistent patterns of structured inequalities and elitism which dominate British society and its political relations.

British exceptionalism in developmental terms remains evident in many overviews of the British political system (see for example Wright

2000). However views steeped in the Whig interpretation of history fail to capture the complexity of the process of change and continuity over time. They tend to ignore the peculiarity of the British mode of political development (Anderson 1964). They also tend to afford the political (and socio-economic) elites a benign and benevolent role that fails to adequately identify or explain the interplay of the socio-economic and the political. The role of the political and social elites has been distorted or forgotten via the Whig narrative, as have their motives. Rather than being groups that were fearful of the idea of democracy itself and unwilling or reluctant to yield their power and influence, they are all too often transformed into the benevolent, interest-free overseers of the gradual extension of democracy (Bagehot 1867; Norton 1984). Conventional approaches not only mask the underlying continuities in who rules Britain but also ignore the possible manufacturing and promotion of consent through the promulgation of the WM narrative. By focusing on the notion of predominant and competing political traditions we can more fully understand the development of British political life over time.

Nor do references to 'the essential political homogeneity of the British people' (Hanson and Walles 1990: 3) accurately portray the reality of British political life historically. Political ideas, attitudes and cultures can and do become dominant and widely accepted. However to suggest that consensus alone is the hallmark feature of British politics significantly underplays a history of ideational conflict and contestation over time. Indeed the hard-fought struggle for some semblance of democratic governance based upon universal suffrage has been supplanted by a narrative of 'evolutionary' development towards a stable and efficient political system based upon democratic elections and responsible and reasonable governance.

This latter point returns us to the relationship between the structures and practices of British government and the broader economic and social strata in UK society. This has been an area of analysis all too often neglected by introductory textbooks and mainstream analyses of the British political system. Indeed the tendency to overlook or even ignore the importance of socio-economic elites within British politics has been amplified by the alleged 'decline of class' and the rise of postmodern approaches in academic circles. Contra this trend the approach to political traditions below seeks to reassert the importance of socio-economic factors historically in the framing of the institutions, processes and practices of the British political system. Indeed the continued relevance of notions concerning structured inequality and asymmetrical

power relations should be recognised, as should their impact upon both the institutions and process of British government, and crucially, on outcomes. The predominant ideas, institutions and processes of British politics both reflect and reinforce broader inequalities in British society and contain inherent biases towards certain groups and particular types of political strategy.

This book therefore has two fundamental concerns. Firstly in order to tackle the issues emanating from the failings of traditional accounts of British politics it seeks to critically consider the usage to date of the concept of political traditions in relation to British politics. Secondly it develops a critical concept of the predominant and competing political traditions operating in Britain. Here the aim is to suggest how the institutions and processes associated with the WM can be better conceptualised as emanating from ideas that were a product of the structured inequality of UK society historically and from ideas that reinforced those inequalities. Over time these institutions and ideas became the dominant prism through which politics and political developments were viewed. The book also seeks to offer a concept of how change and continuity in British politics may be explained by stressing the centrality of conflict and contestation in driving historical change and continuity. Furthermore it develops the idea of asymmetrical resonance of political traditions over time, explained in part through reference to contingent events. As such the book is set out as follows:

Beginning with a brief overview of the WM, Chapter 1 unpacks and evaluates existing conceptualisations of the British Political Tradition (BPT). Considering first the classical approach to the BPT found in the work of Oakeshott (1962), Birch (1964), Beer (1965) and Greenleaf (1983a; 1983b; 1987), we will then review a more critical but underutilised approach to the concept found in the work of Marsh and Tant (1989), Tant (1993) and Evans (1995; 2003). From an appreciation of these approaches we can identify the strengths and weaknesses of the concept and suggest why it has been either ignored, underutilised or taken for granted until recently.

In Chapter 2 our attention will turn to the recent work on political traditions, namely that of Bevir and Rhodes (2002; 2003; 2004; 2006a; 2006b; 2006c; 2008a; 2008b) and Marquand (2008). In particular the former's 'new interpretivism' invokes a controversial discussion of tradition to explain outcomes in British politics which is gaining widespread consideration and credence.[2] In particular the usage of the notions of competing traditions by both Bevir and Rhodes, and Marquand is an interesting and welcome development.

Chapter 3 critically explores the concept of tradition by considering how it has been and is best viewed, thus remedying one of the major omissions of work on political traditions to date. Particular emphasis will be placed upon considering how traditions are maintained, reinforced or adapted over time. The contention is that traditions perform functions in relation to the wider social, economic, cultural and political relationships in society and they help to perpetuate patterns of dominance and inequality over time. Predominant and competing traditions operate within society and the interaction between them offers much to those attempting to explain socio-political outcomes. Throughout this chapter tradition will be considered in relation to key meta-theoretical relationships such as structure and agency, the material and ideational, institutions and ideas, and change and continuity. This chapter closes with a consideration of the idea of a political tradition and the possible heuristic value of this concept.

Chapters 4 and 5 revisit the idea of a British Political Tradition (BPT) and offer a detailed explanation of the development of the predominant political tradition in the UK. Chapter 4 considers the development of that tradition historically and its key discourses and architects. This tradition is based upon two discourses which emphasise an elitist concept of democracy, and two further discourses concerning change and national distinctiveness. In Chapter 5 we will then turn to the relationship between the predominant tradition and the institutions of British governance. Finally the relationship between the BPT and structured inequality in the UK will be considered. Throughout these chapters the emphasis will be on the link between the dominant ideas in British politics and the ideas, values and interests of socio-economic and political elites in the UK.

Chapter 6 focuses on a competing political tradition which emphasises a more participatory concept of democracy, thus contesting central tenets of the predominant tradition. This competing tradition can also be traced back through British history and it is possible to identify its key architects and discourses. We will also focus on the challenges emanating from this competing tradition over time and briefly consider the relationship between this tradition and actors in British politics. The contestation between the predominant tradition and this competing tradition can help to explain the development of political outcomes over time, including many recent constitutional reforms.

Chapter 7 focuses on challenges emanating from the nationalist tradition in British politics. This has emphasised different concepts of how territorial politics should be conducted in the UK. Once again we can

demonstrate how this tradition can be traced back through British history and identify its key architects and discourses by focusing on its expression in the constituent parts of the UK. Contestation between the nationalist tradition and the predominant tradition helps to explain the development of territorial relations in the UK over time.

Of central significance to the issues discussed in this book is the concept of a British Political Tradition and it is to this that we will now turn.

1

'Variations on a Theme': Political Tradition in Explanations of British Politics

Introduction

The British Political Tradition (BPT) is a concept that has been utilised by a number of authors to explain the nature of British politics and the ideas that underpin political practice in the UK.[1] Two points should be noted initially. Firstly the Westminster Model (WM) has been the dominant prism through which the British political system has been described and analysed. For this reason we should start by briefly outlining this model. A range of explanations for the WM's dominance have been advanced (Gamble 1990; McAnulla 2006a; Kerr and Kettell 2006). However until recently, in general terms, there has been a lack of detailed focus on the role of ideas in shaping political institutions[2] (Hay 2002a: 2004).

Having outlined the WM, various conceptualisations of the BPT will be discussed. There is no agreed definition of what constitutes a political tradition and consequently, it is possible to identify differences between authors who advocate the existence of a distinctive BPT. What is clear is that those using the concept all do so to describe and comment upon the ideas and values that have influenced British politics over time. Indeed it is the focus on the ideational, rather than the institutional, that is often seen to differentiate the BPT from the WM.

The Westminster Model

The dominant organising perspective used in explanations of British politics has been the Westminster Model (WM) (see for example Norton

1984; Punnett 1987). Indeed it is clearly articulated in the canonic descriptions of the British political system (see for example Bagehot 1867; Dicey 1885; Jennings 1936). Verney (1991: 637) states:

> The characteristics of the Westminster model...include: strong cabinet government based on majority rule; the importance attached to constitutional conventions; a two-party system based on single member constituencies; the assumption that minorities can find expression in one of the major parties; the concept of Her Majesty's loyal opposition; and the doctrine of parliamentary supremacy, which takes precedence over popular sovereignty except during elections'.[3]

However more recently Marsh, Richards and Smith argue that it has been 'used more as a shorthand, normative, organising perspective to portray a particular image of the British political system, rather than a theoretically, well developed and explicit model of how British politics works' (2003: 306).

In particular the ideational foundations of the institutions and processes narrated by the WM were/are almost entirely ignored or under-explored, despite the fact that these ideas and values have been at the 'core of the theory and practice of British government for (over) three hundred years' (Miliband 1982: 20).

The WM traditionally refers to the institutions and processes of British government and has remained largely constant since Dicey (1885) outlined its main features. According to Dicey the WM is underpinned by the two pillars of the constitution, Parliamentary Sovereignty and the Rule of Law, with the former encapsulating the contention that the Westminster Parliament:

> under the English constitution, has the right to make or unmake any law whatever, and, further, that no person or body is recognised by law as having a right to override or set aside legislation to override or set aside the legislation of Parliament. (1885: 37–8)

As Gamble (1990: 407) notes in the UK: 'Parliamentary sovereignty meant that the public agencies which made up the state were subordinate to the will of Parliament and were obliged to enforce its decisions.' This potential for Parliament and the party that dominates it to wield its influence over the UK has meant that the WM and its underlying assumptions have been hugely influential on views of and approaches