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**CORE EXECUTIVE STUDIES TWO DECADES ON**

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**Abstract**

The concept of the 'core executive' was introduced by Dunleavy and Rhodes in 1990. Two decades on, what is the state of core executive studies? This article argues that the language of the study of central government has been transformed. In addition, there is now a much broader consideration of the central government space, incorporating ministers, civil servants, and so on. Within core executive studies, the resource-dependency approach has become dominant. Arguably, though, with its insistence on a structural element to power and its focus on prime ministerial predominance, much of this work collapses back into an interpretation that is close to the conclusions of the pre- 1990 debate. Currently, only the interpretive, ethnographic approach proposed by Rhodes and his co-authors challenges the new orthodoxy. This article suggests that a resolutely positivist account of the core executive would provide a similar challenge and spark a lively and very welcome debate.

The concept of the 'core executive' was first introduced by Dunleavy and Rhodes (1990) two decades ago. The decision to coin a new term was quite deliberate. The aim was to provide a concept that changed the terms of the debate about British central government and that could also be applied comparatively (ibid., p. 4). The wording of the concept was equally deliberate. The core executive was deemed to comprise "all those organizations and structures which primarily serve to pull together and integrate central government policies, or act as final arbiters within the executive of conflicts between different elements of the government machine" (ibid), thus emphasising the collection of institutions that coordinate policy in central government, rather than privileging particular institutions, such as the prime minister or the cabinet. Two decades later, the aims of the exercise have been met. The "term 'core executive' has become well established in the political science literature" (Burch and Holliday 2004, p. 2). The debate about prime ministerial vs. cabinet government in Britain has been relegated to academic history. While the concept of the 'core executive' has not travelled to the US, it has certainly been applied to many European countries and, particularly, Australia. Overall, in the same way that the concept of 'governance' has replaced that of 'government', so the concept of the 'core executive' as an element of the so-called Anglo-Governance school of study, has emerged as part of the "new orthodoxy" (Marinetti 2003, p. 295).

This article charts the development of core executive studies. It begins by reviewing R. A. W. (Rod) Rhodes' contribution to the literature, identifying three phases of his work on this topic. It then reviews the core executive literature more generally, distinguishing between the studies that focus on relations within the core executive and studies that focus on relations between the core executive and other actors. This literature is then evaluated. The argument is made that while the concept of the core executive has indeed emerged as a new orthodoxy, particularly in relation to the study of the British central executive, some of the conclusions of the contemporary literature are similar to those that were critiqued so effectively by Rhodes two decades ago.

## **R. A. W. RHODES AND THE STUDY OF THE CORE EXECUTIVE**

The concept of the 'core executive' was first identified in an article by Dunleavy and Rhodes (1990). This article was then revised by Rhodes (1995a) alone, such that "it is most accurately described as new" (Rhodes, 1995b). Since this introductory work, Rhodes has repeatedly returned to the topic of the core executive and core executive studies. Generally, it is possible to identify three phases to Rhodes' work in this area. The first phase is characterised by the presentation of the concept of the 'core executive' and by the argument for a resource-dependency approach to core executive studies. The second phase is marked by the incorporation of developments within the core executive into Rhodes' broader argument about the 'hollowing out' of the state. The third phase is defined by the application of Bevir and Rhodes' interpretive or 'decentred' approach, comprising theoretical justifications for this approach and ethnographic studies of the core executive. While there is a chronological element to these three phases, I use them more as an organising device. This is because Rhodes consistently returns to issues raised in his earlier work. Moreover, in this article I will focus overwhelmingly on themes raised in the first phase of Rhodes' work, because there are other articles in this special issue that deal specifically with Rhodes' contribution to the study of governance and with his interpretive approach.

The initial motivation for introducing the concept of the core executive was a shared frustration with the exclusive focus on "long-running 'chestnuts of the constitution', especially the controversy about the relative power of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet" (Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990, p. 4). The characterisation of this debate was damning: "evidence cited on both sides of the PM versus Cabinet power controversy remains meagre and largely anecdotal, with the disorganized 'inside dopester' generalizations of elite personnel themselves substituting for systematic decisional studies" (ibid.). In this context, the introduction of the concept of the 'core executive' was designed to provide a "neutral description of a field of study" (ibid.) with no normative ideals underpinning it. The concept also had the "considerable advantage of being applicable to other countries with radically different systems of government, such as presidential structures" (ibid.). Crucially, the concept of the 'core executive' was defined functionally (ibid.). Consistent with the aim of widening

the focus of the debate from the overwhelming emphasis on the positions of the prime minister and the cabinet and the powers supposedly inherent in those positions, the term 'core executive' directed "attention to the extent and efficacy of, and the various mechanisms for, coordination" (Rhodes 1995a, p. 12). It refers to "all those organisations and structures" (ibid.) that coordinate policy, rather than privileging an account of the power of one position-holder above that of another. Hence, while the definition emphasises the coordination function of the core executive, it also stresses the fragmentation (ibid.) of coordinating structures within the core executive arena.

A key element of Rhodes' initial work on the core executive was the identification of six variants (Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990, p. 6), or "models" Rhodes 1995a, p. 15), of the prime minister/cabinet government debate. Given the emphasis that was placed on the restrictive dualism of the existing debate, it is seemingly paradoxical that in Dunleavy and Rhodes' review of the contemporary literature they immediately identified a broader range of viewpoints (Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990, p. 5) than at first they seemed to signal. However, the logic is that the introduction of the concept of the 'core executive' encouraged "a more sympathetic reading" (Rhodes 1995a, p. 15) of the existing literature that allowed interpretations other than the standard PM vs cabinet government debate to emerge. Thus, six variants of the traditional debate were identified: prime ministerial government, prime ministerial cliques, cabinet government, ministerial government, segmented decision making and bureaucratic coordination. These models are key to Rhodes' work not least because he continues to champion them as a way forward in the study of the core executive (see below), but also because they are consistent with his resource-dependency approach to the study of core executive politics.

The resource-dependency approach predates Rhodes' identification of the core executive, its origins lying in his earlier work on policy networks and local government (e.g. Rhodes 1981). This approach can be identified in the original description of the segmented decision making model (Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990, p. 14). It was also identified as one of the new directions for core executive research (Rhodes 1997, pp. 201-21). Again, there is a contribution on Rhodes' network approach in this special issue, so I will not dwell on the details. The

central point, though, is that Rhodes approaches the issue of core executive fragmentation and coordination from a resource-dependency perspective. Linking his approach with the policy network literature, he states:

actors in the core executive depend on other actors to achieve their goals. So, they must exchange resources, for example money, legislative authority or expertise. These exchanges take the form of games in which actors seek to realize their objectives and manoeuvre for advantage, deploying their resources to maximise their advantage while minimizing their dependence on other actors (Rhodes 1997, p. 203).

The key intuition is that in contrast to the prime ministerial/cabinet government debate where power is assumed to be fixed, for Rhodes power is “contingent and relational” (Rhodes 2007, p. 1247). So, he argues, “the core executive is segmented into overlapping games in which all players have some resources with which to play the game and no one actor is pre-eminent in all games” (ibid.).

The final piece in this part of the puzzle is Rhodes’ insistence that core executive politics is essentially fluid. Given, for Rhodes, power is contingent and relational, resources are not fixed. They do not inhere in any position. Instead, the resource relationships vary between core executive actors. They vary as much as a function of the state of the economy or the effects of political scandals as much as they do as a function of “the ironies and unpredictabilities of politics, including luck, accident, unintended consequences or misunderstanding” (Rhodes, Wanna and Weller 2009, p. 26). Thus, the first phase of Rhodes’ work on the core executive drew, and continues to draw, attention to two questions: Who does what? and Who has what resources? (Rhodes 2007, p. 1247). The answer to the first question is that multiple actors are potentially involved in the coordination of policy at the centre of government. The answer to the second question is that actors possess varying resources both in different areas of core executive relations at any given time and more generally across time. Therefore, for Rhodes, patterns of core executive politics are inherently variable.

The second phase of Rhodes’ work on the core executive relates to the integration of the concept into his wider thesis about the ‘hollowing out’ of the state. There are two elements to this argument. The first is based on the

observation that the core executive has become more fragmented over time, particularly since the 1980s. He states:

While the British core executive was already characterized by baronies, policy networks and intermittent and selective coordination, now it has been further hollowed out by the unintended consequences of marketization that fragmented service delivery, multiplied networks and diversified the membership of those networks (Rhodes 2007, p. 1248).

So, the development of the core executive is one aspect of the hollowing-out process. The second is based on the argument that the changing nature of the core executive is part of a broader process. It is broader in the sense that developments within the core executive were said to be merely one manifestation of the changing nature of the state, including privatisation, Europeanisation, devolution and so on (Rhodes 1994). It is also broader in the sense that the hollowing-out process was not necessarily restricted to Britain (*ibid.*, p. 139), even if this was the main focus of Rhodes' work.

The final phase, so far, of Rhodes' work on the core executive is characterised by his presentation, often with Mark Bevir, of an interpretive approach to politics. This approach has its own logic, which will be discussed in a separate article in this issue. For the purposes of this study, though, the key element is that such an approach decentres "networks, shifting the locus of analysis from the institutions to individuals, and focus[es] on dilemmas to explain how networks change" (Bevir and Rhodes 1999, p. 215). Rhodes has applied the interpretive approach to the study of the core executive in two ways. The first concerns the work on New Labour in government and, particularly, the Blair premiership, or, more accurately, criticisms of claims of a Blair 'presidency'. For example, relying primarily on the view of practitioners, Bevir and Rhodes (2006a, p. 681) tell "stories about the dependence of the prime minister on the court politics of the core executive and on the networks of service delivery". They conclude with an interpretation of the Blair premiership that is entirely consistent with the resource dependency approach, stating:

Blair has to work in, with and through a complex web of organisations, governments and networks with his power constrained by ever more pervasive and complex patterns of dependence ... governance. We live in a land where barons vie for

favour in the court of a would-be president as dependent on them for support as they are on him for favours (ibid., p. 686).

The second application of the interpretive approach comprises the very recent work on the 'departmental court' (e.g. Rhodes 2009). Based on observational fieldwork, Rhodes reports "scenes and dialogues" (ibid., p. 438) from the office of the central departmental secretariat. The term 'departmental court' is used deliberately because it

encourages a focus on: the everyday politics of the department's core executive; on the beliefs and practices of the court; on the competition between Ministers, and between Ministers and civil servants; on the conflicts between the sections of the department, and on the relationship between civil servants and [special advisers] (ibid., p. 440).

In other words, what emerges from this study is, once again, a picture of the changing patterns of power-dependent relations within a core executive.

Overall, while the theoretical foundations and the empirical application of Rhodes' work on the core executive have evolved over time, there is a remarkable consistency to this work. While the original article on the core executive was co-authored with Patrick Dunleavy, the definition of the concept was entirely consistent with Rhodes' earlier work on fragmentation in centre-local relations and the networks of coordination that operate in this arena. In turn, this work was consistent with Rhodes' later work on the 'hollowing out' thesis and his broader work on governance. Moreover, in the 1990 article one of the new directions for future core executive research was identified as the potential for "differentiated accounts of the central executive" (Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990, p. 20). Rhodes championing of a resource-dependency approach and then his application of a decentred, interpretive approach has provided such an account.

## **CORE EXECUTIVE STUDIES GENERALLY**

In the two decades since the introduction of the concept of the 'core executive', the term has now become commonplace in academic parlance. Within this realm, two broad avenues of research may be identified, one that focuses on the relationships between the different actors within the core executive and another

that concentrates on the core executive's relationship with other state actors. Again to avoid overlap with other articles in this issue, I will focus primarily on the former.

The first broad avenue of core executive research focuses on relations within the core executive itself. Here, Martin Smith's approach seems at first to correspond most closely to Rhodes' own work, indeed Smith's (1999) book includes a forward by Rhodes himself. Like Rhodes, Smith argues that there is a need to "reconceptualise central government" (ibid., p. 37). He uses Rhodes' notion of the core executive as the vehicle with which to do so. Moreover, he adopts a resource-dependence approach, stating that "simple notions of power that are hierarchical and zero-sum are not adequate for an understanding of how policy-making occurs" (ibid.). Consistent with Rhodes' work, he concludes that "the notion of prime-ministerial government makes little sense" (ibid., p. 105). Instead, he argues:

The Prime Minister can neither govern – as governing occurs through a myriad of institutions – nor actually make decisions without dependence on a whole range of other actors and institutions, and without taking account of structural context (ibid.)

This approach would be so close to Rhodes' own that it would be unremarkable were it not for the very last part of the above sentence. In his work, Rhodes eschews the concept of structure, deeming it to be "unhelpfully vague" (Bevir and Rhodes 2008, p. 730). For Rhodes, power is essentially relational. It does not inhere in any institution, position, or structure. Therefore, while Rhodes can agree with almost all of Smith's analysis, there remains an ontological gulf between them.

The vast majority of work on the British core executive is more consistent with Smith's realist epistemological approach (ibid. p. 244) than with Rhodes' post-foundational interpretivism (Bevir and Rhodes 2008, p. 730). This can be found in the later work of Smith with Marsh and Richards. Their presentation of an 'asymmetric power model' of British politics includes the Rhodes-like assumption that "the British system of governance is characterized by exchange relations between various actors" (Marsh, Richards and Smith 2003, p. 308). However, they also argue that there are "continuing patterns of structured inequality which affect the institutions and processes of British politics" (ibid.).



For these authors, this “asymmetry is also reflected in the core executive. The core executive is segmented, but even so, the key resources in the system lie with the prime minister and the chancellor of the exchequer” (ibid.). A similar argument is made by Heffernan (2003, p. 348). He acknowledges, citing Rhodes, that “executive actors and institutions operate in an environment in which resources are exchanged, and where the resolution of problems is dependent on co-operation among resource-dependent actors and institutions”. However, similar to Smith, he also distances himself from Rhodes’ approach:

Power is relational between actors, but it is also locational. It is dependent on where actors are to be found within the core executive, and whether they are at the centre or the periphery of key core executive networks (ibid.)

Thus, in contrast to Rhodes, Heffernan presents a model of prime ministerial predominance (ibid., pp. 349-350). According to this model, there is always the potential for prime ministerial power, even if such power can only be guaranteed precisely when “personal power resources are married with institutional power resources, and when the prime minister is able to use both wisely and well” (ibid., p. 350). In other words, for Heffernan, like Smith, power within the core executive is contingent and personal, but also structural.

Another research agenda that is related to this literature is the question of whether or not the British core executive has become more presidentialised over time. This debate has been rumbling around for many years, but it was brought into focus by Michael Foley’s (1993) book and subsequent work (e.g. Foley 2004). He presents a model of ‘spatial leadership’, whereby prime ministers have come to resemble US presidents. They remain reliant on parties to a much greater degree than their US counterparts, but they have have invented a space between themselves and government in which personal leadership is emphasised (Foley 1993, p. 264). In the sense that Foley does not operationalise the concept of the core executive and that he does not attempt to make use of resource-dependence theory or any of the other elements of the Rhodes et al. toolkit, then he remains apart from the mainstream approach as exemplified by the work of people such as Smith and Heffernan. However, in the sense that Foley places himself outside the standard debate about prime ministerial vs. cabinet government and that his work has generated a debate about the nature of the contemporary British core

executive, then he represents part of the new wave of core executive studies. Indeed, when Bennister (2007, p. 328) tries explicitly to bring together the core executive and presidential approaches, he adopts a framework that is almost indistinct from Heffernan's prime ministerial predominance approach.

When we move from the study of Britain to comparative analysis, we find that the concept of the core executive has also found some purchase. For example, like their British counterparts, comparativists who use this concept almost uncritically accept the idea that power is relational and contingent. For example, Helms (2005, p. 22) states that he "does not share the belief of some British scholars that the question as to whether there is cabinet or prime ministerial government (or 'presidentialism') is irrelevant". However, he does "acknowledge that it is reasonable to conceive of the leadership process as an exchange of resources among different players" (ibid.). Equally, while adopting what amounts to a resource-dependence approach, most comparativists also stress that particular positions benefit from a greater degree of resources than others, though there can be variations across time and place. This is the essence of Elgie's (1995) interactionist approach to political leadership, a study which Rhodes (1997, p. 213) cites approvingly for its emphasis on the resources of political leaders, though he criticises this approach for its failure to incorporate the literature on policy networks (ibid., p. 214). In his work, Weller (2003) engages with the 'old' cabinet government debate, but he tries to transform it, emphasising the varying nature of prime ministerial/ministerial relations and redefining the notion of 'cabinet government' as "a working set of arrangements, not a set of rules or a given distribution of power" (ibid., p. 720). For example, even though Weller privileges accounts of the continuing centrality of the cabinet to Australian politics, he does so in a way that is consistent with a basic resource-dependency approach and that stresses the importance of personality and political skill (Weller 2007, chap. 15). Recently, Fleischer (2009) has applied a resource-dependence approach to the comparison of policy advice in Britain and Germany. Finally, it should also be noted that Bennister's (2007) attempt to combine the core executive and presidential approaches is based on a comparative study of Britain and Australia.

One element of the comparative literature that sets it apart from studies of Britain is the work that has built on Dunleavy and Rhodes' (1990) idea that there can be different variants, viewpoints, models, or narratives of core executive politics. For example, Andeweg (1997, p. 62) identifies two dimensions of cabinet government, each of which has three types of collegiality and collectivity. The result is a 3x3 table with nine variants of cabinet government. This framework is cited approvingly by Helms (2005, p. 233). For his part, Elgie (1997) tries explicitly to rework Dunleavy and Rhodes' (1990) original set of core executive models so that they can provide a comparative framework for capturing different patterns of core executive politics. Other writers have used or adapted these models, relating them to Ireland, Austria, Portugal, and Scotland and Wales (O'Leary 1991; Müller 1994; Lobo 2001; Lynch 2006 respectively). While this work may seem to have a whiff of 'old institutionalism' about it, generally it is conducted in a way which is very different from the traditional prime ministerial vs. cabinet government debate. This is because it widens the focus of analysis to include ministers, civil servants and other actors within the wider core executive, and also because writers usually frame their work in a way that is consistent with the resource-dependency approach. That is to say, it is usually assumed that there is no dominant model of core executive politics. Instead, countries can move from one pattern of core executive politics to another as the resources of the different actors vary. For this reason, Rhodes continues to see the potential in this approach, citing it positively on a number of occasions (Bevir and Rhodes 2008, p. 733; Rhodes 2006, p. 337; Rhodes 2007, p. 1255; Rhodes, Wanna, and Weller 2009, p. 32). He states that "it gets away from assertions about the fixed nature of executive politics" (Bevir and Rhodes 2008, p. 733) and that while "only one pattern may operate at any one time, there can still be a fluid pattern as one succeeds another" (ibid.). Thus, Rhodes champions this approach because it is consistent with his way of thinking about essentially contingent power relations within the core executive.

The second broad avenue of research focuses on the core executive's coordination functions as whole. It emphasises the functional aspect of the core executive's policy management. This work is mainly descriptive, charting changes in the organisations within the core executive and how their roles have

changed. Brady and Catterall's (1997) work on the tasks of government is a good example of this literature in the British context. Indeed, much of Burch and Holliday's (1996) book has this focus. This work has also had a certain resonance outside Britain. For example, Hayward and Wright (2002) analyse the changing nature of the French core executive in great detail. Walzenbach (1999) provides a comparative study of core executive coordination in France and Germany. Holliday and Shinoda (2002) compare the evolution of the British and Japanese core executives, while Shinoda (2005) examines solely the Japanese case. Zubek (2001, 2005) focuses on the Polish case, notably in relation to the transformations that have occurred in the context of EU membership and the transposition of EU policy directives. Goetz and Margetts (1999), Goetz and Wollman (2001) and Zubek (2010) address similar issues in the case of Central and East European executives more broadly. Laffan (2006) and Laffan and O'Mahony (2007) also address the core executive response to the EU, but in the context of West European countries. Goetz (2008) discusses the role of the core executive in the patterns of governance in European countries as a whole. All of these writers explicitly operationalise the concept of the core executive, usually citing Rhodes' definition of the term.

The common thread to this second avenue of research is the way in which it tends to discuss the development of the core executive in relation to other state actors. The focus tends to be on the coordination capacity – read 'strength' – of the core executive in the context of the broader governance system. For example, Zubek (2001, p. 912) cites Rhodes' definition of the core executive and shows that in Poland the core executive's "capacity to shape policy remains checked by significant systemic, political and organizational constraints". Equally, in his comparative work (Zubek 2010) demonstrates that core executive capacity varies from one country to another as a function of many factors ranging from broad constitutional rules to more contingent and transient external and domestic conditions. When discussing the core executive in this way, the literature is closely related to the second phase of Rhodes' work, namely the way in which the development of the core executive affects patterns of governance as a whole. This point is clearly illustrated in the debate between Holliday and Rhodes. Holliday (2000) criticises Rhodes' 'hollow state' model, arguing that the centre, or

core executive, is stronger than Rhodes' decentred model. It is also present in Marsh et al.'s asymmetric power model. Again, in contrast to Rhodes, they argue that there "are external constraints on executive power, so to an extent there has been a hollowing-out of the British state, but these constraints should not be over-emphasized" (Marsh, Richards and Smith 2003, p. 308). A difference between the British work in this regard and work on other countries is that equivalent debates have yet to emerge. Outside the UK context, writers have charted the development of the core executive in great detail and have placed these developments in the context of wider issues related to governance more broadly, but these interpretations have yet to be challenged. Therefore, while Rhodes recently, and perhaps controversially, pronounced "the death of the first wave of governance narratives" (Bevir and Rhodes 2006b, p. 59) as they relate to studies of the British core executive, there is no doubt that the first wave of such scholarship is still alive and kicking when it comes to studies outside the British context.

## **CORE EXECUTIVE STUDIES TWO DECADES ON: AN EVALUATION**

Having provided an all-too-brief synthesis of core executive studies and having focussed primarily on Rhodes' contribution in that context, how do we sum up the state of this area of research two decades on? The first observation is that the language of the study of British central government has been transformed. With the exception of books and articles written primarily for A-Level school students, the debate about prime ministerial vs cabinet government has disappeared. In terms of academic research, the old debate has been supplanted by the concept of the core executive and by a terminology and set of assumptions that are associated with this concept, i.e. with a resource-dependency approach, with a focus on the relationship between developments within the core executive and broader issues of governance, and so on. In contrast to the 'old chestnuts' of the British constitution, there is now a new debate. Are the power relations between the actors in the core executive exclusively contingent or are they at least in part structural? What is the overall coordinating capacity of the core executive? Is the core executive decentred, or does it retain a strength relative to other state actors?

The ways in which these questions are posed would be unfamiliar to any Rip van Winkle who emerged from two decades of academic slumber. For once, therefore, it is not an exaggeration to claim that there has been a paradigm shift in the terms of the debate about British central government and the responsibility for this shift lies squarely with the research agenda that was, and continues to be, established by Rhodes and his various collaborators.

The second observation is that the concept of the core executive has travelled. In the European and, particularly, Australian context, the concept has been applied in ways that would be familiar with experts on the British core executive. That said, there are precious few genuinely comparative studies that operationalise the concept of the core executive. Instead, most of the work outside the British context comprises studies of individual countries. Moreover, much of the European work remains primarily descriptive, particularly in relation to work on the overall coordinating capacity of core executives. For example, how has the core executive responded to the imperatives of EU membership or deeper European integration? What institutional changes within the core executive has European integration necessitated? Furthermore, while much of the language and many of the assumptions of the British work are identifiable in studies of European core executives, the same level of debate is not apparent. There are not competing interpretations of central government that use the language of the core executive. Instead, there are single interpretations that may have challenged conventional accounts, but that have yet themselves to be challenged using the language of core executive studies. Thus, while the concept of the core executive has travelled, core executive studies remain in their infancy outside the UK context.

The third observation is that, rather like the term 'governance', the term 'core executive' serves as a wonderful flag of linguistic convenience, which is partly why the concept has become so prevalent in the UK and why it has also travelled elsewhere. For example, many of the contributions in Poguntke and Webb eds. (2005) use the term 'core executive' when discussing the presidentialisation of political leadership. In this context, though, the term is being used instrumentally to refer to developments within some central executive space rather than analytically to account for why any such

developments have occurred. The reason why the term is used so frequently in this way is that the concept of the core executive has no inherent explanatory power. It is a neutral term and was deliberately chosen to be so. It emphasises that the full range of actors within the central government territory need to be included in any study of power in that context, but it does not tell us anything about the power of those actors themselves or the relations between them. The essential malleability of the term 'core executive' is the reason why its use has become *de rigueur*. It is a wonderfully convenient term. The result, though, is that the universe of 'core executive studies' includes a great deal of work that could, quite happily, use a different term and have no less analytical purchase.

The fourth observation is that while there has been a transformation of the terms of the debate about central government in Britain, some elements of UK core executive studies are perhaps less innovative than they might at first appear. For example, arguably, the thesis about the presidentialisation of the British core executive is merely an updated version of the old prime ministerial vs. cabinet government argument. While the presidentialisation debate sidesteps many of the implicit or explicit norms and terms of the old debate, the story of presidentialisation is fundamentally consistent with it. Indeed, Bevir and Rhodes (2006a) have provided a trenchant critique of the presidentialisation thesis along these lines. As Rhodes et al. put it, the debate about prime ministerial vs cabinet government "is no mere historical anachronism. It is alive and well today" in the form of the debate about presidentialisation (Rhodes, Wanna and Weller 2009, p. 35). Similarly, one element of the asymmetric power model is the claim that within the core executive the prime minister enjoys a degree of structural power, or, to put it in Heffernan's terms, that there is the potential for prime ministerial predominance. In this way, though, for Bevir and Rhodes (2008, p. 732) "the argument about asymmetric relationships within the core executive resurrects the old argument about the power of the prime minister". In other words, while the model championed by Marsh, Smith, Heffernan, Bennister and others uses the new language of core executive studies, there is a sense in which this work quickly collapses back into an interpretation that is not far removed from the conclusions of the pre-1990 debate. Thus while there has undoubtedly been a paradigm shift in the language of the study of British central government, some

of the substantive conclusions that have resulted from this shift are not very far removed from many of those that were critiqued so effectively two decades ago.

The fifth observation is that, whatever Rhodes' criticisms might be, within the universe of British core executive studies the resource-dependency approach is almost completely dominant and that within this approach the asymmetric power model with its prime ministerial predominance variant is also largely unquestioned. What are the challenges to this new orthodoxy? O'Malley (2007) claims to provide a new perspective with his choice-based approach. However, he explains policy outcomes as the interaction of institutional and personal resources and he does so in a way that is entirely consistent with the resource-dependency approach and the prime ministerial predominance variant of the asymmetric power model, indeed he cites Heffernan approvingly in this regard. In other words, despite the author's claims, we should see O'Malley's contribution as a refinement of the new orthodoxy rather than as a different approach altogether. For their part, Hargrove and Owens eds. (2003) place the emphasis on skill and political leadership. However, this work relies on narratives of political leadership and argues that the "balance of personal and political resources" (Hargrove 2003, p. 17) helps to explain policy outcomes. Thus, while this approach finds no need to operationalise the concept of the core executive, it is still consistent with the resource-dependency approach. Equally, while Bowles et al. (2007) do refer to the concept of the core executive, they make a plea to apply US theories of presidential leadership to the study of the UK, particularly Neustadt's 'power to persuade' approach. Even though Neustadt's work does not explicitly use the framework of the resource-dependency approach, it is entirely consistent with it. Overall, there is the distinct possibility that the resource-dependency approach and the asymmetric power/prime ministerial predominance model could themselves become the new long-running 'chestnuts' of British political studies, if they have not done so already.

In this context, the final observation is that the third phase of Rhodes' work on the core executive, applying an interpretive approach usually in conjunction with Bevir, stands out in the context of the contemporary literature. Rhodes has taken the logic of networks and power resources to its natural conclusion, presenting a decentred approach to the core executive and



governance generally, insisting on narratives and interpretations of core executive actors, and engaging in ethnographic field work that generates new narratives of the core executive. This approach is genuinely new and different from all of the existing work on the core executive. The difference is epistemological. Whereas political scientists, even critical realists like Marsh, offer interpretations of political life, Rhodes offers “interpretations of interpretations” (Bevir and Rhodes 2006c, p. 84). In other words, the aim is not to provide an accurate description of reality in the way participants in the prime ministerial vs. cabinet government debate tried to do or as the proponents of the presidentialisation approach, or the asymmetrical power model, or the prime ministerial predominance model try to do. Instead, the aim is to “tell stories that enable listeners to see executive governance afresh” (Bevir and Rhodes 2008, p. 733). While it is too early to tell whether or not this aim will be met, what we can say is that Rhodes and his collaborators are currently engaged in a genuinely innovative approach to core executive studies.

The strength of Rhodes’ work, with Bevir, is that it is based on a set of explicit epistemological premises and that it then applies these premises logically and consistently to the study of the core executive. The danger is that the interpretive approach will lead to ‘mere’ story-telling and that while each story, by its very nature, will be new, any fresh insights into the core executive will soon be subject to the law of diminishing returns. While the asymmetric power model provides an alternative approach to the study of the core executive, the challenge is for a new approach to emerge. The most likely candidate in this regard is the formulation of a resolutely positivist account of the core executive. Such an account would not be the “mildly apologetic positivism” (Bevir and Rhodes 1999, p. 233) upon which Rhodes has, quite rightly, poured scorn, nor would it be a principal-agent account that examined only vertical power relations between pairs of actors (Rhodes, Wanna and Weller 2009, p. 26). Instead, it would be a ruthlessly rigorous positivism based on theory-driven hypotheses that would be tested by the collection of new and reliable data. To date, only Dunleavy’s (1995) wonderfully innovative, but unreplicated, study of cabinet committees, and Dowding’s work on ministerial tenure (for example, Berlinski, Dewan and Dowding 2007) have approximated such an approach, and

even then Dowding has generally eschewed the language of core executive studies. Arguably, only a full-blown positivist account has the potential to match the rigour of the approach that is currently being championed by Rhodes and Bevir. Indeed, with its emphasis on iterated interactions between competing actors and with its aim to explain why resources vary across actors both at any one time and across time, there is perhaps less intellectual space between such a positivist account and Rhodes' interpretive approach than there might at first appear to be. Indeed, while Rhodes has argued that the use of natural science methods in the human sciences is "comically improper" (Bevir, Rhodes and Weller 2003, p. 196; Rhodes 2007, p. 239), he has also implied that there might be room for a "rapprochement between an interpretive approach and quantitative techniques, formal models, and the like" (Bevir, Rhodes and Weller 2003, p. 198). Such a rapprochement would indeed represent an innovative development in core executive studies and would certainly challenge the new orthodoxy.

## CONCLUSION

Two decades on from Rhodes and Dunleavy's (1990) path-breaking article, the language of the study of central government has been transformed. Core executive studies have replaced prime ministerial vs. cabinet government studies and the focus of academic attention has shifted. There is now a much broader consideration of the central government space, incorporating the study of ministers, civil servants, agencies and the like. Crucially, the ontological foundations of work in this area have also become much more explicit. Both within the core executive and between the core executive and other actors power is now considered to be relational. In short, the resource-dependency approach has become utterly dominant. Whether power is essentially relational or whether it is at least partly structured is the subject of debate, though the latter perspective has undoubtedly emerged as the new orthodoxy.

In this context, two decades on core executive studies stand at a new crossroads. The decentred, interpretive, ethnographic approach championed by Rhodes et al. may not live up to expectations or, perhaps more likely given its epistemological foundations, it may operate in an intellectual ghetto, generating

its own terms and debates but rarely intersecting with other work. If this scenario comes to pass, then work consistent with the asymmetric power model, including the prime ministerial predominance interpretation, will go largely unchallenged. The danger, though, with this scenario is, to paraphrase Rhodes, that while the debate about prime ministerial predominance may be “fun” (Bevir and Rhodes 2008, p. 733), there is the possibility that the resource-dependence approach itself will itself become one of the long-running ‘chestnuts’ of political science, and particularly British political studies. There will always be new examples to discuss. The relations between core executive actors will always vary. In this scenario, the reossification of core executive studies is a genuine risk. The challenge is for new approaches to emerge. A resolutely positivist account may be the way forward in this regard. Such an account would certainly lead to a lively debate and, whatever else, that would surely be a good thing.

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