

The New British Policy Style: From a British to a Scottish Political Tradition?

Abstract

The new context of coalition government and the ‘Big Society’ suggests that the UK government is moving towards a style of politics followed successfully in Scotland, extending a partnership approach from national to local forms of government. Yet, the two arenas have never been as far apart as is commonly imagined. The majoritarian (UK) and consensus (Scottish) labels are misleading. British politics¹ is not as exceptional as it is often made out to be, while Scottish politics retains many elements of its British counterpart. This article assesses the state of British politics in this light. It sets out a counter-exceptionalism thesis based on the theory and evidence from public policy. It then summarises the post-devolution evidence, producing insights on the British policy style when compared to the ‘new politics’ in Scotland.¹

Introduction

It is too easy to present the British political tradition as exceptional or unusual based on a simple caricature: it preserves representative over other forms of democracy; is a majoritarian system with a concentration of power; its leaders are presidential; its politics are adversarial; policymaking is top-down without due consultation; departments are hierarchical and run by command and control; and so on. The aim of this article is not to reject this caricature out of hand (since it is possible to confirm elements of it in particular circumstances). Rather, it rejects its use as shorthand; as something whose pervasiveness is asserted much more than it is demonstrated. It argues that most of the more convincing literature does its best to present a different way to understand British politics. This literature has two forms. Public policy theory identifies elements of policymaking that transcend political systems and qualify the idea that some are unique. For example, all political systems contain boundedly rational decision makers and policymaker attention lurches from issue to issue in all systems because no actor has the ability to consider all issues. Similarly, no core executive has the ability to control all aspects of the policy process. Instead, they devolve most decision making to lower levels within (and, perhaps increasingly, outwith) the government machine. The empirical material often investigates the idea of British peculiarity and finds that the evidence does not match the rhetoric; British governments operate in much the same way as their European counterparts. This approach flourished with the study of policy communities and networks (and implementation) and continued with the current focus on governance – work that points to a considerable diffusion of power, and a debatable amount of central government control of the policy process, within the British system.

Yet, the caricature is still alive and well (most notably in Lijphart, 1999), existing as a shorthand way to compare a UK majoritarian system with political systems less prone to its

¹ The definitive version is available at www.wileyonlinelibrary.com.

top-down and competitive excesses. The main consequence of this caricature is a skewed understanding of the British policy style (often defined simply as the way that governments make and implement policy - Richardson, 1982: 2). We focus too much on limited examples of centralisation without considering the analytical consequences. We confirm that core executives are important by focusing on what they are doing rather than what they *cannot do as a result*. Rose's (1986) famous motto is that if policymakers pay attention to one issue they must, by necessity, ignore at least 99 others. Consequently, when we focus on instances in which ministers pays a disproportionate amount of time and energy internalising a single issue, we ignore the fact that the bulk of her/ his remaining responsibilities carry on without top-level involvement. This universal constraint to policymaking is what brings different political systems together. It also provides an element of continuity in our study of British politics over time – the people may change, and their attention may lurch to different issues, but the same basic processes and constraints endure. To paraphrase Rose (1984; 1990), parties and governments make a difference, but they also inherit massive commitments. They reject or amend some of those commitments, but they accept and deliver on most. This is no more or less true in the UK.

This article explores these points in a comparison of British and Scottish politics within the context of apparently competing political traditions. The so-called ‘architects of devolution’ (McGarvey and Cairney, 2008: 14) are perhaps the guiltiest of perpetuating a caricature of the British political tradition to present devolution in the most positive light. The argument is that a, “‘top-down’ system, in which power is concentrated within government, is not appropriate for a Scottish system with a tradition of civic democracy and the diffusion of power” (2008: 12). A proportional electoral system with a strong likelihood of bargaining between parties would replace a plurality system that exaggerates majorities and produces one party dominance. A consensual style of politics would replace the adversarial style in Parliament. Power sharing with the Scottish Parliament would replace executive dominance, particularly under periods of minority government. There would be more consultation beyond the ‘usual suspects’ and ‘the people’ would get more chance to contribute to the political process (2008: 11-2). Indeed, this might even solve problems related to governance (defined in this case as a loss of central control of the direction of policy): more consultation means greater group ownership of policies and fewer problems of implementation; while, a departure from command-and-control and policy driven by targets will produce fewer unintended consequences (Cairney, 2009a: 6-7). Overall, the shift from old Westminster to the new Scottish Parliament (as one of the newest ‘consensus democracies’) would produce a more consensual political system with fewer problems of government.

A decade of evidence suggests that these claims were largely misleading. Coalition and minority government is the norm, but the electoral system has not produced a remarkably different type of consensus politics. Or, at least, ‘consensus’ is difficult to observe and pin down (is this really what it looks like?). While there is some evidence of parliamentary influence, the executive-legislative relationship is firmly in the Westminster mould (indeed, there is little evidence to suggest that its influence is any greater than Westminster’s). While the Scottish Government consults widely, so too does the UK government (Cairney, 2008).

While the Scottish Government has a more traditional relationship with service delivery organisations (appearing to rely more on local government and less on alternative service delivery), it does not have fewer problems of governance (Cairney, 2009a). Overall, the differences in the two systems are not nearly as stark as the majoritarian/ consensus distinction suggests. Instead, both systems are bound by common logics related to the role of the executive and the need to engage in policymaking that is largely incremental and based on close relationships with pressure participants (a point first made to identify a common *European* policy style – Richardson, 1982).

In other words, the new context of coalition government and the ‘Big Society’ suggests that the UK government is moving towards a style of politics developed successfully in Scotland, extending a partnership approach from national to local forms of government. Yet, the two arenas are not as far apart as is commonly imagined. The aim of this article is to assess the state of British politics in this light. It sets out a counter-exceptionalism thesis based on the theory and evidence from public policy. It then summarises the post-devolution evidence, producing further insights on the British policy style when compared to the ‘new politics’ in Scotland. Finally, it considers lessons that the UK can learn from its Scottish counterpart. The advantage to the argument presented in this article is that, if the systems are as directly comparable as I suggest, then the lessons from one system to another are highly relevant and adaptable. This can relate to practical issues on the potential for successful coalition government (see Cairney, 2011a) and the role of social partnerships. It can also reinforce a particular analytical approach to the study of British politics in the near future. There was a tendency in Scotland to treat 1999 as ‘year zero’, suggesting that only the future mattered and that radical change was definitely afoot, ‘often reflecting hopes and aspirations over serious analysis’ (Mitchell, 2006). While there may be less hope in the UK context, there is still the same need for an understanding on the continuities of policymaking as well as its novelty in the Cameron/ Clegg era.

UK Majoritarianism versus the European and Devolved Policy Styles

Let us consider two contrasting ideas regarding the UK as a political system. The first, expounded most famously by Lijphart (1999), is that the UK’s majoritarian system is almost the polar opposite of the consensus democracies to be found in many Nordic countries, Switzerland, Belgium, and others (plus the EU political system). The second is the argument in Richardson’s (1982) edited volume that the UK shares a common policy style with its consensus democracy counterparts. Our concern is how best to characterise the British policy style: with reference to a ‘majoritarian’ government that exploits the centralisation of power to impose policy decisions without consultation, or to the diffusion of power across policy sectors and relatively consensual relationships between groups and government. While the latter has been accepted within much of the British public policy literature (albeit with some heated debates about the *extent* of power diffusion), the former still has a strong hold in comparative politics.

Lijphart’s (1999) narrative suggests that policy styles flow from electoral systems and the distribution of power. He sets up a simple distinction between policy styles in countries

which use plurality and proportional electoral systems: the former exaggerates governing majorities, produces a concentration of power at the centre and encourages majoritarian, top-down government; the latter diffuses power and encourages the formation of coalitions and the pursuit of consensus. Under proportional systems, power is dispersed across parties, encouraging the formation of coalitions based on common aims. This spirit of ‘inclusiveness, bargaining and compromise’ extends to the relationships between group and government, with groups more likely to cooperate with each other and governments more willing to form corporatist alliances (Lijphart, 1999: 2-3). In contrast, the plurality system exaggerates governing majorities; control of the legislature is held by a single party and power is concentrated within government. This asymmetry of power extends to the group-government arena, with groups more likely to compete with each other and governments more likely to impose policy from the top down. This picture of UK politics is very much in keeping with the ‘British political tradition’ highlighted by most papers in this volume.

The frustration for colleagues such as Grant Jordan (in correspondence) is that Lijphart’s argument has been restated following two decades of ‘policy communities’ work (starting with Richardson and Jordan, 1979) that challenges the majoritarian UK caricature. Richardson et al’s (1982) argument is that different political systems enjoy similar policy styles. Most (Western European) countries share a common ‘standard operating procedure’ based on two factors: a generally incremental approach to policy (radical departures from policy decisions negotiated in the past are rare) and an attempt to reach consensus with interest groups rather than impose decisions. These governments face the same basic constraints. First, the size of the state, and scope for ‘overload’, necessitates breaking policy down into more manageable sectors and sub-sectors. Power is effectively spread across government because the more specialised subsectors are less subject to top-down control. Ministers and senior civil servants devolve the bulk of decision-making to less senior officials who share power with interest groups when they exchange access for resources such as expertise. Second, the logic underpinning ‘bureaucratic accommodation’ of the most affected interests is strong since it encourages group ownership of policy and maximises governmental knowledge of possible problems. This ‘logic of consultation’ (Jordan and Maloney, 1997) often produces stable arrangements within policy communities (which are now generally described as close-knit policy networks).

The latter picture does not preclude the identification of top-down forms of policymaking when, for example, parties have non-negotiable manifesto commitments or senior ministers compete to dominate high profile decisions (Jordan and Richardson, 1982: 98). Rather, it produces the call for more evidence on, rather than assumptions about, the most common British policy style (Cairney, 2008: 354). In short, we need to look beyond the headlines related to ‘spectacular’ ministerial activity to identify the more humdrum day-to-day decisions being taken in less visible and less contentious arenas (Richardson, 1982: 199). This concern became particularly important during a Thatcher era that was widely assumed to be marked by conviction politics (fostered by a majoritarian system), the rejection of consultation and the imposition of policy (Marsh and Rhodes, 1992: 8). Subsequent debates on the nature of consultation demonstrated that the British policy style was complex and

varied over time, sector and issue. Although consultation appeared to be rejected at a ministerial level, it was often merely displaced to other parts of the government machine (Cairney, 2002). There were still close relationships between groups and government and a top-down process only accounted for a small proportion of the British style. These points were reinforced in the literature that critiqued discussions of Blair's 'Presidentialism' (see for example Bevir and Rhodes, 2006) and suggested, in a direct qualification of Lijphart (1999), that the formal concentration of power in Britain tends to be used, 'with a certain informal restraint' (Adam and Kriesi, 2007, 140). Kriesi, Adam and Jochum's (2006: 357-8) empirical study suggests that UK policy networks do not live up to their majoritarian reputation: 'British policy networks turned out to be quite fragmented, resembling more closely those expected for consensus than for majoritarian democracies ... This implies that future research should no longer aim at national level generalizations about power configurations and policy processes'.

Overall, the policy communities approach suggests that we cannot read off behaviour simply from formal institutions, or expect to make concrete conclusions based on an appeal to political traditions. This approach enjoys a close relationship with the broader public policy literature that identifies factors which transcend political systems and traditions. For example, punctuated equilibrium theory (the version associated with Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; 2009, not new institutionalism) and incrementalism both draw on the classic focus on comprehensive rationality. Comprehensive rationality represents an 'ideal' description of the power of a central decision-maker to research and articulate a series of consistent policy aims and then make sure that they are carried out. The point is that the assumptions necessary to demonstrate this power – that organisations can analyse information comprehensively, separate values from facts, rank policy preferences and make policy in a linear fashion – are unrealistic. Therefore, models of the policy process seek to describe what happens when these assumptions are relaxed or rejected: the search for knowledge is limited by capacity and ideology; problem definition is determined by both facts and values; policy makers have multiple, and often unclear, objectives which are difficult to rank in any meaningful way; and, the policy process is difficult to separate into stages and may not be linear (Cairney, 2011b). Most employ Simon's (1976: xxviii) term 'bounded rationality' which suggests that policymakers and organisations 'satisfice' rather than maximise their utility, and use simple rules of thumb to address the fact that they cannot research and consider the effects of all options.

Punctuated equilibrium theory considers the effect of bounded rationality on agenda setting. Since decision makers, the media and the public all have limited resources (time, knowledge, attention) they cannot deal with the full range of policy problems. So, they ignore most and promote few to the top of their agenda. This explains the existence and breakdown of policy communities. Issues are framed in a particular way (for example as humdrum or technical because the fundamental issue has been solved) to limit the number of participants who can claim a legitimate role. Those excluded from communities have an interest in challenging this image. The role of knowledge and new evidence becomes crucial to divert attention to other aspects of the same problem. If a new and competing image is stifled by policy

communities, then groups pursue ‘aggressive venue-shopping’ to seek influential and receptive audiences elsewhere (the courts, other types of government, the media, and the public). In some cases this is successful and we witness a shift from negative to positive feedback (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). Periods of negative feedback are defined by limited government attention; policymakers will ignore or be resistant to new information gathered from the experience of other countries. In periods of positive feedback, those ideas may be given disproportionate attention by policymakers focussed acutely on one issue at the expense of most others. Given the limited attention spans of ministers and governments, the consequence of intense levels of attention to one idea (which may produce policy punctuations) is that most ideas with the potential to destabilise existing policy arrangements are ignored. These conditions transcend political systems and endure over time.

Second, the UK may be no less subject to incrementalism than other countries. Many commentators from other countries have identified the UK as an inspirational system that is not subject to the same incremental processes (see Hayes, 2001: 2 on the US, Krauss and Pekkanen, 2004 on Japan, Fabrini and Gilbert, 2000: 28 on Italy and Kitschelt and Streeck, 2003: 2 on Germany). Yet, most aspects of incrementalism do not relate specifically to political systems. Rather, they relate as much to the limited information and cognitive abilities of policymakers and the need to build on past policies. Top-down decision making is often ‘politically expensive’ (Richardson et al, 1982: 10). It is also cognitively expensive and a drain on the resources of time-constrained policymakers. Simply put, they can only ride roughshod over so many existing commitments.

The list of conditions that transcend systems goes on. The UK is as subject to inertia as most other systems. While majoritarianism may be associated with the ability to change policy quickly from the top-down, the evidence for this is not persuasive. Rather, Rose (1990; Rose and Davies, 1994) highlights the effect of decades of cumulative policies; newly elected policymakers inherit a huge government with massive commitments. Since governments are more likely to introduce new than terminate old policies, the cumulative effect is profound. Similarly, Hogwood and Peters (1983) argue that the size and scope of the state is such that any ‘new’ policy is likely to be a revision of an old one following policy failure. Policy succession is more likely than innovation because the issue already has legitimacy, the resources for a service delivery institution exist and policy has an established clientele. More significant innovations require policy termination to reduce costs before committing new resources. Yet, complete termination also has immediate costs, may smack of failure without direct replacement, may be opposed by groups associated with the policy, and may be undermined by organisations operating in relative anonymity (if policy is ‘technical’ or obscure) or seeking new ways to justify their existence. Policymaking may be more about dealing with the legacies of past decisions than departing incrementally from them.

The same can be said for discussions of rationality and governance. Studies of multi-level governance suggest that large fragmented governments lack a powerful ‘centre’: ‘No single actor has all knowledge and information required to solve complex, dynamic and diversified problems, no actor has sufficient overview to make the application of needed instruments effective, no single actor has sufficient action potential to dominate unilaterally in a particular

governing model' (Kooiman, 1993: 4). Rather, policy outcomes result from the complex interplay between governmental and non-governmental actors at a variety of levels. Similarly, a 'street-level bureaucracy' approach to implementation suggests that although legislation is made at the 'top', it is influenced heavily by the public sector professions (teachers, doctors, police officers, judges, welfare officers) who deliver it. Policy is effectively made by street-level bureaucrats at the 'bottom' when dealing with their clients. Since they are subject to an immense range of (often unclear) requirements laid down by regulations at the top, they are powerless to implement them all successfully. Instead, they establish routines to satisfy a proportion of central government objectives while preserving a sense of professional autonomy (Lipsky, 1980).

Further, the UK shares with other systems the same basic interplay between power and ideas. The use of ideas performs two main functions. First, they can be used to undermine policy change. Policymakers establish a language and set of policy assumptions that excludes most participants – representing, for example, a paradigm in new institutionalism (Hall, 1993: 279) or a policy monopoly in the study of group-government relations (Baumgartner and Jones, 2009). Second, they can be used to challenge the status quo. Much of the literature focuses on radical change: paradigmatic, 'third order' change occurs when existing ideas are associated with profound policy failures, producing a shift in power that displaces existing policymakers and/ or causes current experts to fall out of favour, causing a complete shift in the way that policy is understood and made within government (Hall, 1993: 287); policy punctuations occur when new and significant ideas are adopted, sweeping aside existing policy monopolies (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 237); major change follows a 'window of opportunity' and the coming together of three streams – a policy problem attracts attention, the right solution is available, and policymakers have the motive and opportunity to adopt it (Kingdon, 1984; Liberman, 2002); or, it follows a 'shock' to a policy subsystem, causing the dominant coalition to engage in a fundamental rethink of its ideas or the minority coalition to exploit its position to gain a more prominent role (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Weible et al, 2009). We may also identify 'incremental change with transformative results' (Streek and Thelen, 2005: 8-9). Ideas or shared beliefs may become 'institutionalised' - taken for granted and accepted as the starting point when we consider policy problems, but not as fixed structures (Blyth, 2002: vii-viii; Hay, 2006: 65). Instead, they are 'constantly in flux, being reconsidered and redefined as actors communicate and debate with one another' (Béland and Cox, 2010: 4; see also Schmidt, 2006: 113; 2010: 3). In either case, Rose's point still applies – a change, by government ministers, to the way that policy is understood within some British policy communities suggests that most will escape their attention. As in other political systems, punctuations and third order change are rare, regardless of the form of democracy, concentration of power and willingness by ministers to take strong and decisive action.

Comparing British and Scottish Politics

In this light, a comparison with Scottish politics provides two immediate lessons: do not read off behaviour directly from institutions (these apparently different systems operate in similar

ways) and do not expect too much policy and institutional change in short time periods (since elements of continuity can still be found in Scotland, 12 years on).

These lessons can be derived from a comparison of UK and Scottish policy styles. The new Scottish Parliament was sold as the alternative to the politics of ‘old Westminster’. The plans were very much in the Lijphart consensus democracy mould: a proportional electoral system, to share power between parties and encourage coalition building, and the widening of participation with groups to foster cooperation and resist the temptation to internalise policy formulation (McGarvey and Cairney, 2008: 13). Yet, the broad-picture evidence on this new comparator is very similar to the UK/ other European countries comparison. On the one hand, there is evidence that devolution opened up the consultation process for pressure participants, with groups reporting high levels of satisfaction when engaging with government (Cairney, 2008; Keating *et al.*, 2009). The process is ‘open and consultative’ and groups point to the ease of access, with civil servants (and often ministers) a ‘phone call away’ (see McGarvey and Cairney, 2008: 236). On the other, there is evidence to suggest that similar processes still operate in London; a similar logic of consultation still exists across the UK (Cairney, 2008).

This mixed picture is reinforced if we analyse specific case studies. For example, the process associated with the UK Mental Health Bill from the late 1990s confirms the caricature of the top-down UK government and contrasts markedly with a consensual style in Scotland. The UK Government presided over a ten year stand-off with groups, followed by limited legislation (just enough to be ECHR compliant);ⁱⁱ the Scottish Government oversaw a two year consultation process that produced consensus and extensive legislation. Yet, further investigation reveals that a series of factors effectively had to be in place (perhaps like the coming together of streams in Kingdon’s analysis) to cause what is really a departure from the ‘normal’ British style. In the absence of these factors, policymaking returned to the normal style which was very similar to that found in Scotland. Indeed, there is something impressive about the UK government’s ability to compartmentalise issues to retain this style; this close consultation on most other issues was maintained largely with the same groups (Cairney, 2009a: 364). Few, if any, studies go beyond anecdotal evidence or very specific ‘headline’ examples to suggest a systematic difference in the consultation practices of the majoritarian UK and consensus Scotland (instead, consultation practices may be as likely to vary by policy issue or over time - Cairney, 2008: 364). Further, few studies show that the UK government suffers greater problems of implementation following opposition from interest groups; if anything, groups in devolved territories are less happy with the final outcome (2009a: 356).

Indeed, if devolution to Scotland (itself a challenge to the idea of a British political tradition) has showed us anything it is that the British policy style extends to intergovernmental relations. Like consultation with groups, IGR has largely been informal, quiet and between executives rather than formal and in the public and parliamentary eye. This setup reflects a similar logic to policymaking in which top-down policymaking is problematic, politically expensive and generally unnecessary. Instead, executives have sought ways to cooperate, much in the same way that governments form close relationships with groups: portraying the

system of deciding Scottish public expenditure as technical and automatic (using the ‘Barnett formula’); passing Sewel motions that give Westminster permission to legislate on behalf of the Scottish Parliament; and, generally avoiding the use of formal mechanisms such as joint ministerial committees. This relationship has continued (albeit in a modified form) following the election of the SNP in 2007 and UK coalition in 2010.

These lessons can also be derived from analysis of coalition and minority governments. ‘Power sharing’ between the executive, legislature and the public was a key, albeit vague, slogan in the run up to devolution (Scottish Constitutional Convention, 1995; and there was an expectation for the ‘Executive to govern’ - Scottish Office 1998; McGarvey and Cairney, 2008: 90). Consequently, the Scottish Parliament was set up as a hub for popular participation (including a new public petitions process) and vested with an unusual range of powers (when compared to other West European legislatures): the fusion of standing and select committee functions, to enable members scrutinising legislation to develop subject based expertise; the ability of select committees to call witnesses and oblige ministers and civil servants to attend; and, the ability to hold agenda-setting inquiries and to initiate legislation if dissatisfied with the government response. Committees were also charged with performing two new roles to ‘front-load’ the legislative process and make up for the fact that, in the absence of the House of Lords, there would be no revising chamber. First, they would have a formal pre-legislative role, charged with making sure that the government consults adequately with its population before presenting legislation to parliament (a power perhaps used twice in 10 years - McGarvey and Cairney, 2008: 91; 104). Second, they would consider both the principles of legislation and specific amendments to bills before they were discussed in plenary. All of this took place within the context of an electoral system likely to produce coalition government (and hence cooperation between at least two parties) or minority government (with a single party perhaps obliged to cooperate with multiple parties).

Yet, the Scottish experience has shown that these institutional innovations had a limited effect on the executive-legislative relationship. The first eight years of devolution were marked by a form of majoritarian coalition government that would not seem out of place in the UK. The coalition dominated a punishing legislative schedule, producing the sense in which committees became part of a ‘legislative sausage machine’ rather than powerful bodies able to set the agenda through the inquiry process (Arter, 2002: 105). While there is *some* evidence of parliamentary influence during the scrutiny of government legislation (Shephard and Cairney, 2005), the coalition produced and amended the majority of bills (McGarvey and Cairney, 2008: 106; reinforcing the rule of thumb by Olson, in Arter, 2006: 250, that the executives initiate 90% of legislation and get 90% of what they want). The Scottish Parliament and its committees enjoyed neither the resources to scrutinise government policy effectively nor the stability or independence necessary to assert their new powers. Further, although members and committees have the ability to initiate legislation, the same rules apply: members are constrained by party affiliation and limited resources, while committees rarely find the time or inclination to legislate. Therefore, after a honeymoon period in the first parliamentary session, the Scottish Parliament produced a level of non-executive

legislation comparable in number and scope with Westminster (McGarvey and Cairney, 2008: 103). The effects of the new institutions and relationships were thin on the ground.

This relationship continued from 2007, when the SNP formed a minority government. There were notable differences in approach, such as the decision not to introduce legislation (on issues such as constitutional change and the local income tax) for which the Scottish Government had insufficient support, and many more instances in which it lost parliamentary votes (most related to non-binding motions). However, the Scottish Government has also found that it can pursue most policy decisions with recourse to some new legislation, its use of the existing law, a distribution of funding, and its relationships with other bodies such as local authorities. Most notably, it still enjoys the imbalance of resources between executive and legislature; the Scottish Parliament is unable to fill the legislative gap and its ability to scrutinise government policy is still limited by a lack of resources (and reliance on the Scottish Government for most of its information).

Conclusion

Despite their institutional differences, and traditions, the UK and Scottish Governments do not operate in a radically different way. The new Scottish policy style was a movement away from a UK setup that didn't exist and any hopes for a radically new executive-legislative relationship have never been realised. In turn, the UK government cannot move from something that doesn't or won't exist: its relationships with the outside world and Parliament will not change radically. The level of continuity in both systems, and the lack of difference between them, is significant, reflecting the common constraints that political systems face. The UK shares with other countries a set of policy conditions that are universal rather than tied to specific traditions, political systems or periods of time. Resources and power are concentrated in the executive (when compared to the legislature), but also devolved and dispersed to other arenas because boundedly rational policymakers cannot personally control large political systems or, indeed, pay attention to more than a small fraction of their responsibilities. We should be careful not to forget the level of continuity that this setup causes within all political systems even during the most exciting times. We should not assume that the UK government will be relatively willing and able to preside over more radical change than its European or devolved neighbours just because it is ostensibly a majoritarian system and ministers are expected to take charge of hard decisions. Instead, we should study the longer term processes that occur beyond the headlines (and remember that long periods of incremental change punctuated by bursts of change, in some areas, is a universal theme).

Of course, there is a danger of going too far; of appearing to reject the scope for unusual degrees of change during particular eras or crises. Such an argument would be difficult to support during this period of economic retrenchment prompted by an economic crisis and a government willing to exploit it; to use it as a powerful frame when making unpopular choices. Instead, the article merely encourages us not to assume that such major policy choices will be carried out as fully intended or to the degree that is currently advertised.

It would be equally difficult to deny all aspects of UK distinctiveness when there are clear UK/ Scottish differences. For our purposes, the most relevant difference is Scotland's size and the perceived relative need for its government to centralise policymaking to ensure an adequate degree of accountability (ultimately to Parliament). There are moves in both systems to decentralise: in the UK it may be marked by the 'Big Society' idea in which individuals and local groups are given the power to deliver services; in Scotland it is marked by the devolution of responsibilities to local authorities. In both cases, the move is incremental: in the UK, it may merely reinforce non-government service delivery; in Scotland it reinforces an existing degree of local autonomy; in both, it extends the devolution of power and responsibility that already takes place. The key difference may be in levels of the tolerance of autonomy. In Scotland it is relatively easy (and advantageous, given its low civil service size and policy capacity) to maintain oversight through partnerships in which there is a meaningful degree of personal contact (largely between civil servants and other actors). In the UK, there is a greater need for relatively impersonal mechanisms of control, creating the irony that the more you let go the more you regulate. However, Scotland can provide some lessons because they share two things in common. The first is an imbalance of power between government and Parliament. The Scottish approach has produced some casualties, such as when Fiona Hyslop lost her job as Education Secretary when local authorities did not use their funding to harmonise class sizes. However, on the whole, the Scottish Parliament does not possess the resources to keep up with, and advertise any perceived failings of, the process of decentralisation and the move to 'single outcome agreements' as a long term evaluation of government progress. Second, there has to be a political payoff to decentralisation. In Scotland, there were many: the desire to present an image of governing competence (getting councils on side when Labour could not); the pursuit of a council tax freeze before introducing a local income tax; and, the added bonus of shuffling off responsibility for funding crises in local government (as in Aberdeen City in 2008). There do not seem to be the same payoff in London for the Big Society. Perhaps, in *this* case, there is a bigger payoff in exploiting the image of strong decisive ministers so entrenched in the British political tradition.

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ⁱ The article uses 'British politics' and 'British policy style' to refer primarily to politics and policy regarding the UK Government.

ⁱⁱ Perhaps confirming the willingness of ministers to make unpopular decisions, but not their ability to get their own way.