THE IRREPRESSIBLE ROD RHODES: CONTESTING TRADITIONS AND BLURRING GENRES

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Rod Rhodes spent 25 years as the Editor of *Public Administration* before he retired from that role at the end of 2010. These essays in his honour are intended to celebrate the achievement of those 25 years and reflect on his contribution to the worlds of public administration and political science. Rod has now consolidated the standing of the journal as one of the most significant locations for work on public administration. At the same time, over his career, he has prodded and probed, challenged and innovated, in a wide range of areas. The essays in this special edition have been designed around his intellectual interests over the 40 years of his career, from local government, and networks, to ethnography and narratives. Each author was asked, as appropriate, to identify Rhodes’ impact and to assess the present state of the literature. Three articles consider the state of the discipline in the UK, the USA and in the world of comparative politics. Rod is then given the opportunity to reflect on his career and where his interests might lead. As ever he wants the last word! This introduction provides the context for his career and charts in broad terms his intellectual trajectory and contribution.

In a desk I had come across some of my father’s old engagement diaries of the Forties and the Fifties. Endless ‘meetings’ fill the day. Civil servants drift in and out. Lunches. Virtually indistinguishable from my own. What’s the point. Nothing to show for it at all. He will be remembered only for his writings and his contribution to scholarship. (Alan Clark 1993, p. 37 on his father, Sir Kenneth Clark; italics added)

Rod Rhodes would sometimes cite the sentence in italics when he met an academic who had aspirations for higher service. In spirit he still believes it himself, even though he actually spent 11 years heading departments and another four running the Whitehall Programme. He writes books, he says, and would like to be remembered by them. But of course he has done more than just that.

For 25 years he was Editor of this journal, ensuring its position among the leading public administration journals and making it a forum where scholars are proud to publish. 25 years is a long time to edit a journal. The Editor of *Public Administration*, 1986 to 2010, can be said in a breath. It sounds less impressive, and takes less space on a CV, than 100 edited books. To list each of the 100 volumes so covered, the articles published therein (often after resubmission), and the many more submitted, reviewed and rejected, would begin to give some idea of the massive editorial load that Rod has borne over the years. Some of us may have helped a bit, reviewing an odd article here, missing a deadline there, but for him the pressure has been constant. It is a job in itself, and an essential one for the health of our subject.

Rod has made many more contributions to our understanding of public administration. He has opened new theoretical ideas, helped put concepts such as governance on the map: not alone of course, for the academic enterprise consists of give and take, of point and counterpoint, but he is there in the midst of the debate, and invariably a

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Rhodes is nothing if not an enthusiast, someone who will not ask others to do what he is not prepared to do himself. He has written extensively and always controversially. As he converted from behaviourism to interpretivism (and the word converted is used precisely), he becomes more evangelical in his support of the new ideas than many who might have espoused them far longer, and less vocally. At the end of this special edition is a select compilation of his publications, by no means all but enough to indicate the range of his researches and the energy with which he pursued them. All that, on top of editorial and administrative responsibilities, is a considerable achievement and testimony to years of endeavour.

So, this special issue serves as a Festschrift, to honour his contribution and to take seriously the different ways he has influenced our subject. It charts those enthusiasms, those developing ideas. It is structured around the chronological research stages of Rod’s career, organized by the crucial turning points that sent his career or his research in new directions. It starts with local government, and ends with narratives and storytelling. It explores the differentiated polity, the core executive, governance, the Whitehall project, ethnography and interpretivism. Three contributors were asked to assess various states of play: in comparative public administration, and in the discipline in Europe and the USA. Baron Wilson of Dinton, Cabinet Secretary (1998–2002) when Rod was running the Whitehall project, provides a practitioner’s perspective. In each case the authors were asked to consider Rod’s contribution to the area and then, more generally, to provide an accounting of the development of the theories within the discipline. They have often chosen different ways to pursue that remit. That was their prerogative but, combined, they provide a striking account of the various sections of our discipline and of Rod’s contribution to it.

To better understand the subject of this Festschrift in Public Administration one must recognize that there are really two Rhodes, and it is the interplay between these two Rhodes that underlies the vicissitudes of his career. On the one hand, there is the R. A. W. Rhodes of international fame who is the conscientious scholar, intensively driven, ever-curious, sometimes a little solitary, reserved and detached, and at times decidedly pedantic if not cussed, and yet often patient, generous and supportive. R. A. W. Rhodes is the name and guise under which he continually publishes. Intellectually, the ‘R. A. W. Rhodes’ we hear speak or whose work we read is an incurable iconoclast; working away from the norm; sceptical of mainstream interpretations and orthodoxies; experimenting with difference, and exploring other influences to reshape his research interests. He plays the scholar wanting to speak truth to power or certainly tell powerful people things that they don’t necessarily want to hear. As a scholar he is not one to remain trapped in one mode of inquiry or stay chiselling away in one field for his entire life. Change and variety are essential.

There is also the other Rhodes, one that appears less in these pages but one that is necessary to appreciate too, the Rod Rhodes who qualifies as the world’s oldest teenager, the person who bores easily, plays air-guitar, sings Led Zeppelin, Elvis Costello and Neil Young, grew his hair past his shoulders in his 50s, plays rock constantly whether in his study or university department and consumes lurid biographies of deceased rock stars. Even he cannot explain his liking for Iron Maiden and country ‘heart’ songs. Add in accomplished cook, ardent reader of crime fiction and devotee of both rugby league and cricket and you have a potpourri of enthusiasms. Here lies an important observation about his make-up. If we ask what drives both these Rhodes’ personas it is important above all else to realize he is a man of boundless enthusiasms; old ones pile on new ones.
absorbing his energies. So, in his 40s he gave up smoking, curtailed his drinking, took up long-distance jogging, and vowed to run the London marathon, slowly, in his 70s. He swapped his appreciation of English ale for single-grape red wines, on which he lectured many a dinner companion and waiter. He left behind the strictures of ‘Little England’, first to globetrot the capitals of Europe, then to encompass America, before finally settling Down Under, first in Canberra then in Hobart. He is an intriguing hybrid of Tigger and Toad – A.A. Milne’s bounding Tigger and Kenneth Grahame’s Toad of Toad Hall – jumping all around the place with limitless enthusiasms and going from phase to phase. And if they are quintessentially English references, then so be it. Rhodes may be a citizen of the world and an Australian national; he remains a Yorkshireman.

In this introduction we seek to trace his career and research. Each section follows the turning points in his career, the new directions, the fresh enthusiasms.

**A PROVINCIAL BEGINNING**

There was nothing in his background that suggested an academic or peripatetic career. ‘Roddy’, as he was known to his mother, came from a family of small mill owners, what would later be termed ‘Thatcher’s shopocracy’, in Bradford. The family was run by his grandmother: Nell to the grown ups but Nan to the kids. Widowed at 33 with four small boys, she took over running the mill. She dominated her children and spoiled her grandchildren. The family moved between Methodist and Pentecostal churches, a family of non-drinkers apart from Nan’s ginger wine!

The 1960s both brought social change and a new *zeitgeist*. There were practical changes: new universities and state scholarships that opened up opportunities for Rhodes’ generation that had been closed to its parents. Everything was possible; new worlds were there, in Britain and overseas. His non-conformist background stressed the importance of education and individual worth. There was also an anti-authoritarian streak in the culture and in the music. The films that impressed him, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, *A Kind of Loving*, all cast the northern lad as an outsider with a chip on his shoulder, always demanding attention and being louder and louder when he did not get it. His then heroes, Bob Dylan and John Lennon, were fiercely independent and opposed to established authority. Growing up at the time posed a dilemma between nervous conformism and bucking the system.

Rod was sent to the local Moravian Fulneck Boys School. He hated it with a passion: the regimentation, the casual bullying by prefects competing to see how many juniors they could beat. When he became a prefect he tried to have the practice banned, unsuccessfully. On the other hand, he loved cricket and rugby and dreamed of opening the batting for Yorkshire. He played in the school 11 as a somewhat slow opening batsman and an occasional off-spin bowler. He would take himself off to Tests and county games at Headingley and carefully keep score. Once he attended a Yorkshire schools trial, but soon realized that many of the other boys were bigger, stronger, and probably more talented than he was. He could not wait to leave school after he had passed two of his three A levels. The thought of going to university never occurred to him.

Instead he got a job at Power Petroleum in Leeds, a 40-minute bus ride away. The firm was as regimented as school. That highly organized working environment may have engendered the discipline that required a clean desk at the end of the day, but it was also mind numbing. Staff sat in serried ranks and were segregated by gender. It was forbidden for anyone in the men’s office to go into the women’s without permission. As
the youngest office-boy, Rod often had to go to the women’s section to deliver messages and tea and the women there enjoyed shocking the sheltered Methodist-educated youth with loud descriptions of their exploits of the previous night.

Company policy allowed Rod to enrol in the Higher National Certificate in Business Studies at the local technical college. Three hours a night, three nights a week for the next two years, he attended classes after work before catching the bus home. Only three of 39 lasted the course. Rod then got angry when the firm decided to promote a person who had failed the course which he had just passed. He did not delete the expletives in expressing his views, and therefore was sent to the regional manager for admonition and perhaps dismissal. Fortunately the manager, a war veteran, thought the incident was funny. He told Rod that he was wasting his time in that dead-end job and should think of going to university.

Bradford College of Advanced Technology was just transforming into Bradford University. Rod applied to the Business School and his certificate marks were good enough to gain admission. He cruised through the first year, doing well enough but not fully engaged. Then he enrolled in courses on ‘Managing the Nationalised Industries’, ‘Public Finance’ and ‘Political Sociology’. Suddenly he became fascinated and his marks jumped. He did all the courses available in what might now be classed public administration and he ended with an upper second degree, held back only by the not-so-good marks in his early years. Now an opportunity to do graduate work became a possibility.

Rod had become interested in the work of Brian Smith and Jeffrey Stanyer (see, for example, Stanyer 1967) at Exeter University, who combined organization theory and behavioural political science with public administration. The professor there, Victor Wiseman (1966), had written on political sociology. Rhodes applied to Exeter for a postgraduate degree and was awarded a Social Science Research Council research scholarship. Then the dean of the Bradford Business School suggested that he apply for Oxford. ‘They don’t take the likes of me’, was Rod’s abrupt reaction. ‘Why the likes of you never get into Oxford is because they never bloody apply’ was the retort. So he applied, was called for an interview that went badly, and was rejected. While he waited for the academic year to begin at Exeter, he got another call. He had been interviewed by the wrong panel, for sociology not political science. ‘Could he come back?’ He did and was this time accepted for a BPhil in political science. He rang Wiseman who said of course he should go to Oxford. Exeter was prepared to release him. He went to Oxford.

It was a disaster. In a year of course work, he was tutored by Brian Barry and John Plamenatz, who he found interesting tutors but less than inspiring lecturers. But he chafed at the restrictions imposed by colleges on their young charges, particularly when he was fined after his fiancée stayed the night. He only found more social ease when the couple moved to Headington Quarry, an outer suburb.

Rod shifted to a doctorate. His thesis was a comparison of the Oxford City Council and the Oxford Shire Council. It was a community power study, taking its initial inspiration from Robert Dahl and using as a more direct model Michael Lee’s Social Leaders and Public Persons (1963). He had little supervision since his supervisor went overseas for two years and he was officially given George Jones at the LSE as a replacement; that required rare trips to London. The thesis was behavioural and quantitative, using socio-demographic data and SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Indeed, he attended the first 10-week summer school in statistics for social scientists at the University of Essex, merrily checking his punched cards while puzzling over finite mathematics. His examiners, Lord Redcliffe-Maud and Norman Chester, were old institutionalists, historians rather than...
political scientists. There was no intellectual meeting of minds at the *viva*. Eventually, after a delay of almost a year, Rod was given the written reasons why the thesis had not passed. He resubmitted. That led to another problem. Rod had already written an article critical of the Redcliffe-Maud Royal Commission on local government. Now, he was asked by *Public Administration* to review a book Redcliffe-Maud had co-authored on *English Local Government Reformed* (1974). He thought it poor and duly said so. He was worried because the *viva* on the resubmitted thesis was due soon, but a senior colleague assured him that it would be months before the review was published. Unfortunately, the editor showed Maud the review. The *viva* was icy. The examiners were unimpressed and Rod was awarded the runner’s up prize of a BLitt.

**APPRENTICESHIP: FROM OLD INSTITUTIONALISM TO POWER DEPENDENCE**

By this time Rod was working at Birmingham University at the Institute of Local Government Studies (INLOGOV). He had, without being aware of it, applied to the section that delivered management training courses to overseas administrators. So, he lectured to officials from round the world before shifting across to work with John Stewart in teaching British local officials. It was an institute where staff had to earn their keep by covering their salary. The pressures were constant and there was little time for any sustained original research. Rod agreed to take on responsibility for short course training. He was reluctant to do so initially because he feared the lack of opportunities for research would make promotion hard. He was assured that would no problem. But it turned out it was. He was not promoted and chose to accept a job at Strathclyde.

Before he moved to Glasgow, he had a semester at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. Kingston was a rough town under ‘heavy manners’. The university had more than its fair share of ex-colonial administrators – ex-pats – who were not on Rod’s wavelength. Between heavy manners and ex-pats, even simple pleasures could be challenging. A drive in the country was spoiled when they were stopped by soldiers at a road block and stood against a rock face. When Rod asked what was happening, he was thumped in the kidneys by a rifle butt.

Rod returned to Strathclyde where he enjoyed working with Lewis Gunn, Doug Pitt and Brian Hogwood. Other colleagues were irritating because they objected to him going to London for research, rather than sitting in his office waiting for students. When Rod forcibly told one such critic to get lost, relations became ‘strained’. Then a job came up at Essex. It was a good department. It was nearer the research he wanted to do in London.

Rod’s early research consisted largely of consultancy driven outputs, which saw him compile numerous reviews, panel reports or workshop reports, reports from the field and administrative assessments. Writing was a production process and he became (or always was) highly project focused, eclectic in interests, and disciplined in working to deadlines. The topics on which he then wrote centred mainly on the development of administrative training and competencies. He was young, enthusiastic and optimistic – concerned about the prospects for public administration into the future. Analytically, they were conventional descriptions of public administrative practices, using explanations of legal-institutional arrangements (structure, functions, and processes). His approach was decidedly old-style institutionalism; based on external observation, descriptive in intent; with a soupçon of behavioural political science. He soon chose behaviouralism and organizational theory – as preferable to administrative history or administrative science – as his analytical framework. His output was directed largely to a practitioner audience.
of professional administrators. At this point in his career, the old institutionalist approach was largely unproblematic to him, even though he would later describe his more recent work as ‘totally alien compared to what I did back then’.

Encouraged to develop a speciality, he explored the impact of the European Community on local government. Rhodes’ first scholarly contributions in 1971–72 were prosaic short commentary pieces or book reviews on mundane aspects of local government in Britain; most of these scribblings were far from memorable. They had titles such as ‘Into Europe’, and ‘European Local Government’ or ‘Europe and the Town Hall’ and appeared in professional local government journals or municipal newsletters. One short pamphlet on the impact on local governments of Britain joining the European Economic Community sold some 15,000 copies to local officials. This type of output continued throughout the early-mid 1970s when he began to talk about the ‘new politics’ of local government. He also compiled a few official reports for various boards on civil service training. His first edited pamphlet (1977) on *Training in the Civil Service* for the Joint University Council for Social and Public Administration did not trouble the compiler of the bestseller lists.

In 1979, Rhodes won his first SSRC grant to explore central-local relations. His first scholarly books appeared in 1979 on *Public Administration and Policy Analysis*, and in 1981, *Control and Power in Central-Local Government Relations*, books he himself describes as the work of a novitiate. Only in Chapter 5 of *Control and Power*, with the first discussion of networks, can we begin to hear his voice, and ‘interpretation’ did not make an appearance. But by then he was regularly publishing about 15 to 20 pieces a year consisting of articles, chapters, professional papers and review articles. Significantly, he had published nearly 200 items on local administration before he first published a paper on policy networks in 1985, entitled: ‘Power Dependence, Policy Communities and Intergovernmental Networks’, in *Public Administration Bulletin* No. 49.

Thus far, local government both interested him and motivated him. It sparked an interest in multi-disciplinary approaches to public policy problems. But he was also interested in combining or contrasting different approaches to the study of administration (the rival ‘traditions’ – a term he was using to describe literatures in late 1970s) and to some extent experimenting with different ‘paradigms’ (if not in those early days rival methodologies).

These initial forays into municipal government, central-local power relations, and policy-making, clearly indicate an early interest in some of the subjects that would inform his career and to which he would keep returning, often from different vantage points. Even at this early stage he was concerned about what happened ‘beyond’ the corridors of Whitehall; how did government ‘organize’ itself to deliver policies to communities and real people; how do public administrators in various contexts ‘understand’ their world and ‘interact’ with other levels of government and with players outside government; and how do devolved structures impact on the actual outputs of policy for the end-consumers (anticipating to some extent the perspectives of the ‘street-level bureaucracy’ theorists).

Although he retained a lifelong interest in these enduring topics and themes, the mature Rhodes refused to be confined by these conventional furrows. Rather, the trajectory of his scholarly career reflects a series of intellectual journeys and forays. With an inquiring mind and consuming passion, he has shifted position and theoretical approaches at key junctures. These shifts often resulted in significant departures from his previous body of work, not so much as a repudiation of his earlier scholarship but clearly signalling he was moving on to new territory.
Even in these years there is evidence he was interested in the nature of research itself as an intellectual exercise, and in contributing new research agendas to existing knowledge. His first text, *Public Administration and Policy Analysis* (1979) explicitly contrasted American and British administrative theories and teaching curricula, an exercise which painted Britain in a poor light. He dabbled with different organizational theories looking for rival explanations; and was an avid reviewer of books that advanced new explanations or posed contending models of behaviour (*Self’s Administrative Theories and Politics* 1972; *Wildavsky’s Art and Craft of Policy Analysis* 1979 or *Hood and Dunsire’s Bureaumetrics* 1981). These encouraged him to believe not only that there were alternative explanations but that a researcher had a responsibility to do more than merely report developments on the ground; they should seek to create convincing explanations of patterns of behaviour.

His teaching responsibilities and increasing research focus on intergovernmental relations in both Britain and the European Community gradually drew him to discover the power dependence literature. He began to focus on explanations of policy-making and decisional outcomes rather than administrative institutions. These theories of nuanced power exchanges and co-dependence were used to investigate inter-jurisdictional relationships, especially those between central and local governments (see, for example, *Rhodes 1981*). Such sub-central organizations operated in a complex power interchange (involving inter- and intra-power relations). Policy outcomes emerged iteratively from these inter-dependencies which were based on exchanges between participants, resource dependencies, goals, rules, gaming strategies, coalitions, discretion and appreciative systems. Political architectures may superficially appear hierarchic and command-based, but in practice the various participants were far less ‘steerable’. Each brought their own set of attributes, their own capacities to influence outcomes; each exercised a certain degree of discretion or even autonomy over the things they administered or handled. Power dependence was a contingent game-based explanation of policy behaviour, although there emerged some controversies over what drove these relations and what lay at their core.

**THE SHOCK OF THE PROFESSIONAL**

Most careers have turning points and the massive culture shock of Essex was one. Rod moved to Essex to establish a public administration degree. Essex, of all the British departments, adopted the American approach to political science; competitive, focused, publish or perish. It included a cadre of talent: as well as Rod, Bob Goodin, Bob Jessop, Ernesto Laclau and David Marsh were all lecturers together in the early 1980s. Rod had to establish a new degree programme. That succeeded; but he did not in the eyes of his peers because he did not publish enough. He had two books but needed more. When the SSRC gave him a research fellowship in 1984 that allowed him to be relieved from teaching for a year, Essex told him he did not need the distractions of a room on campus. So he went home to work and, to his surprise, really enjoyed it. Since then, he has always written and worked from home when he could.

The years of the research fellowship, 1984–85, were productive. He not only put together a collection of his articles, both old ones and those especially written and published for the occasion, to apply successfully for a PhD by publication, but he completed *The National World of Local Government* (1986) and the core of *Beyond Westminster and Whitehall* (1988), the first book that, in his opinion, was a real contribution, rather than synthesizing the views of others. He recalled a comment by George Jones, professor at the LSE, on his
earlier books. ‘We know what others say, what does Rod Rhodes say?’ For the first time he thought these books were really his, that they were expressing Rod’s own voice. His inspirations at the time were what he described as theoretically informed case studies, the work of Michel Crozier (1964, 1976) and Philip Selznick (1949).

Rod eventually won promotion and was the Head of Department at Essex for just under two years before moving to York. Essex was an easy department to admire but a hard one to work in. At York, as Head of Department, he was responsible for improving its performance in the national Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), a process not without its difficulties. Then he developed and drafted the bid for the Whitehall project. Both the present authors attended the workshop that initiated that bid, so from this stage we are in a sense both players and collaborators, particularly as Rod joined us in our interests in comparative administration.

After exploring central-local relations through the lens of power dependence, Rhodes began asking what particular powers or policy instruments were important in explaining where discretion lay and what explained the variability in public outcomes at the community level. Was legal authority or statutory powers the main determinant? Were organizational resources the crucial variable? Or, as he began to discover in *Beyond Westminster and Whitehall* (1988), was it the interplay of three forces: authority, profession and money, that was the key to explaining the essence of networks? He sought to balance the flow of monetary resources through the system passing from hand to hand with the deployment of legal constraints and professional resources. By one interpretation, following the ‘money tree’ became (for a while) his conduit – it was important to document how resources were passed on, handed down, controlled, divided up and disseminated through the system of government. And in particular he asked ‘where’ in the devolved web of government (and community) structures were resources hoarded, marshalled, barnacled, clustered, and where and how was discretion exercised. Indeed, a careful reading of *Beyond Westminster* suggests resource politics was the crucial variant explaining and giving rise to the existence of policy networks (and their distinctive politics) that would be seen as the lifeblood of the body politic. Other organizing principles associated with devolved power structures were explored (such as regional or territorial structures or professional cultures or economic producer structures) but ultimately these exercised their powers through the control of resources locally. He had also (from the mid 1970s) begun documenting local government finances in a more systematic way, initially to illustrate the battleground of central-local ‘political management’, but increasingly to indicate the dimensions of devolved discretion.

So, local government budgets and financing in the UK could go from loose coupling arrangements to resource constraints, resource squeezes and insipid centralization. But this was not the whole story. Local policy participants and sectoral actors could resist central control and undermine central directives. These actors operating at various cluster points or nodal localities became the pro-active constellation of policy networks, formed and maintained to exercise discretion. It was not merely a question of power dependence; this was the new narrative of the ‘differentiated polity’. Moreover, the differentiated polity concept was presented as a major critique of conventional political science representations of the political system (the fixation with unitary state models, national integration, hierarchy, command, and formal institutions). Suddenly, the world was made up of fragmented sub-governments, self-organizing, autonomous, self-governing but interdependent, recalcitrant and difficult to-steer, marked by specialization, and at times dominated by key coalitions or professions. The world of policy networks was a source of continuity and
order in a disorganized world, but these characteristics in turn rested in confidence and trust. Politics was about negotiation and shared decision making, and the network state was predictably fragmented and complex, but nevertheless real.

Although Rod had been discussing networks since 1976 he was using the term loosely and not with the theoretical emphasis of his later works. The first occasion he used the idea was in a 1976 consultancy report for the Layfield Inquiry into Local Government Finance, *Intergovernmental Relations in the European Community*, Rod referred to ‘the management of complex networks of inter-governmental relations’ (Hull and Rhodes 1977, p. 172), and the different rounds of political management necessary for implementation in inter-governmental relations as opposed to formulation.

Gradually, Rhodes began to see policy networks not merely as a constraint on central prerogatives but as a much more organic and vibrant alternative explanation of political life and policy organization (and the political system more broadly). He still sometimes approached his analysis as a case of limitations on the unilateralism of central governments (as when he graphically wrote: ‘helpless with, and hopeless without, policy networks, the centre seeks to avoid being a stranger in a strange land without becoming a prisoner of the very means of assimilation’ (Rhodes *Beyond Westminster* 1988, p. 370). But his drift was rapidly moving away from this problematic or characterization. His terminology soon shifted from talking of ‘sub-central governments’ as a concrete entity to loosely structured differentiated policy networks (communities of organizations) and issue networks. Although some earlier scholars and contemporaries (such as Heclo 1978; Richardson 1979; Benson 1982; Wright 1987; Jordan 1990) were working on similar issues, Rhodes was engaged in original theorizing rather than using derivative approaches and commenting on the insights of others. There was, however, initially some unhelpful confusion of terminologies, with different scholars using similar terms to mean different conceptualizations.

Policy networks became so ubiquitous in Rhodes’ depiction of the political system that a senior British colleague, Colin Talbot, quipped at an IPAA National Conference that Rhodes was someone who saw networks everywhere, in everything, through everything, and across everything (despite the fact that he wrote that ‘to claim that the concept of policy networks is an important tool is not to claim that it is the only tool’ 1988, p. 371). But in his new intellectual field, Rhodes was suddenly far less concerned about the future prospects for public administration and more interested in the ‘limits’ to public administration and in a re-conceptualization of the necessary practices those in public service would be required to exercise – his frame of reference was gradually mutating into ‘networked governance’. He would later refer to this body of work as part of the ‘first wave of governance’ (2011) where up to five separate strands of the international literature could be discerned (the second wave concerned meta-governance, the third wave introduced decentred accounts). His article in *Political Studies* (1996) and his book *Understanding Governance* (1997) remain, if citations are any guide, the cornerstones of his reputation on networks.

One variant (or consequence) of the differentiated policy model (in the anglo-governance school, the term used by Mike Marinetto (2003) for the claims made by Rhodes and others about the loss of power at the centre) was that the central state was being ‘hollowed out’ (the ‘weakness at the centre’ arguments), with central governments losing decisional power along several dimensions (to supra-state structures such as the European Union; by increased resort to privatization; through marketization of services; and limiting public service discretion under new public management), thus leading to a transformation of
governance away from hierarchic control to autonomous devolved network. Although this Anglo-European ‘take’ on hollowing out had some relevance in other developed nations, it was hard to test the hypothesis that hollowing out was weakening the centre (Rhodes and Dunleavy 1995; Weller et al. 1997). Moreover, central governments (and for that matter sub-national governments) could cede power and/or withdraw from some traditional policy levers but not necessarily lose their influence (for example, swapping direct delivery for regulatory control and monitoring). It was not a zero-sum game. Hollowing out (even if it occurred more generally) was not necessarily an indication of reduced government influence, it was more a British assessment of the changing nature of government and the changing ways influence was exercised (and around the same time there was also a separate US debate along similar lines). Although the evidence was a little inconclusive in relation to the conclusions of his 1994 article on the decline of central power, Rod persisted in exploring how Westminster systems responded to hollowing out tendencies in many of his later collaborative projects, arguing it acted as a stimulus for a return to bureaucracy.

Another theoretical consequence was that accountability was not confined to conventional notions of ministerial responsibility and traditional public service hierarchies. Rather, accountabilities in networked governance were now shared, diffuse, interdependent, reliant on the degree of communication and often exposed only if evaluations of policy outcomes were undertaken and made public. Accountability tended to be indicated negatively according to the degree of instability or levels of protest and dissatisfaction in a given sector. But stability did not necessarily imply accountability; it could be evidence of complacency, familiarity and shared self-interests within the network. At one end of the spectrum policy networks could be self-responsible (governing themselves with some public interest intent or motivation) but at the other end networks could produce ‘private government’ rather than public accountability.

When policy networks led to networked governance, the discourse suddenly shifted to trust relations and the importance of diplomacy. After the edited book with David Marsh on Policy Networks in British Government (1992), Rhodes increasingly began to discuss the differentiated polity model as network governance – or ‘governing without government’ via self-organizing networks (Rhodes 1997). According to Rhodes (1996, p. 17), ‘focusing on governance dissolves the distinction between state and civil society’ and the notion of the state all but disappears or more precisely ‘the state becomes a collection of interorganizational networks made up of governmental and societal actors’. His main analytical puzzle at this time was: if political systems are not hierarchic, then how do they work in practice? He was also responding to the challenge of the New Right Thatcher experiment within British government which was using strong central power to destabilize and break up networks. Central power may not be as impotent as his Beyond Westminster book had implied if dedicated governments could impose their wills over network arrangements.

Some of the later initiatives were almost happenstance. While Rhodes wanted to develop his notion of the differentiated polity, arguing against the notion of a strong central British government, Patrick Dunleavy wanted to shift the debate away from the power of prime ministers. The term ‘the core executive’ surfaced at the Political Studies Association annual conference at the University of Aberdeen in 1987 where the collaboration between Rod and Patrick Dunleavy began. It led to Dunleavy et al. (1990) and their edited collection on Prime Minister, Cabinet and Core Executive (1995). The outcome was a different, if still contested, way of interpreting the activities of the centre of government. For a decade
the term ‘core executive’ became ubiquitous, primarily as an antidote to the old contrast between prime ministerial and cabinet government but also as a new means of analysing the segmented government at the centre of an apparently unified system of government.

The Whitehall Programme, funded by the (now) Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), comprised 23 projects costing (at 1995 prices) £2.1 million. Research began in March 1995 and was to dominate the rest of the decade and beyond. Rod put together the bid and was then appointed director of the programme. He had thought that York had agreed to let him stand down as Head of Department, so he could direct the project full time. When that did not happen, he moved to Newcastle. For six years Rhodes managed to show that Whitehall was not an impermeable as many had thought. Civil servants were prepared to talk about their workings and about the ways of the core executive. The body of work that emerged from the project, and the direct and comparative understanding of the core executives that is now available, owes much to the project, and to the preparedness of Rhodes to ask for the access that most had assumed would be denied (Rhodes 2000).

Whitehall opened up another line of research. From the beginning one of the project’s objectives was to explore the comparative dimension, to understand how different Whitehall might be. Rod followed the Kipling challenge: ‘What can they know of England who only England know?’ to seek insights across both Commonwealth and European countries. In so doing he developed both the concepts of the cores executives (Weller et al. 1997; Rhodes et al. 2000). Later, simultaneously with his work with Bevir, he utilized the ideas of traditions and narratives in comparative studies of the civil services (Rhodes and Weller 2001; Bevir et al. 2003), of Westminster legacies (Rhodes and Weller 2005), and of the concept of Westminster itself (Rhodes et al. 2009).

EPIPHANY: THE SWITCH TO INTERPRETATION AND ETHNOGRAPHY
Rhodes found constructivism. It was his epiphany. The causes of the conversion were many. Principally, Rhodes developed a close working relationship with Mark Bevir when the two of them were together at Newcastle. Bevir added an agency-oriented interpretation of the history of ideas – especially the salience and influence of ideas over time – explored through the decentred lens of beliefs, traditions and dilemmas. Beliefs were understandings and ideas held by actors; traditions were living and adaptable sets of linked beliefs that informed practice and were handed down through the generations; and dilemmas were challenges or key debates that could potentially reconfigure beliefs and eventually traditions.

Rhodes also began to read historians and about various ways to construct historical interpretations of events or facts. He read idealist historians such as R.G. Collingwood (1965, 1993) and Michael Oakeshott (1962, 1983) who spoke of the creation of historical knowledge, moral legacies, explanatory traditions, and the impact of historical experiences. He began to re-explore existentialist arguments concerning volition and things not being overly determined by external conditions. He surprisingly read Marshall Berman’s All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity (1982) on the influences of modernity in the city and on how individuals shape and understand the public realm. He also read Roland Barthes’ article ‘The Discourse of History’ (1981; also 1993) with its emphasis on the constructed nature of historical facts and the uses of realism as rhetorical device.

Rhodes became fascinated with these interpretivist or decentred approaches to knowledge and their possible application to governance and public administration. He now
rejected the presumably ‘centred’ approaches based on reified institutions, known facts or objectified evidence and positivistic analysis. He moved away from simple ‘models’ after spending much of his career working with model-based approaches to political science; and moved away from the conventional concepts political scientists had long used to capture their disciplinary field. Most importantly to his next wave of research projects, he sought to understand how various actors constructed their own world and created their own versions of governance. He did not expect actors necessarily to agree or share interpretations, but nor did he expect total contradiction or bizarre randomness. Rather, he expected to find nuanced interpretations with a degree of coherence but with different actors creating important different emphases and perhaps acting upon them. Often traditions and belief legacies could be significant in understanding how political or bureaucratic or network actors dealt with present-day uncertainties or challenges to their positions.

To some readers and critics, this new intellectual phase Rhodes had embarked upon in exploring these interpretivist dimensions was a complete departure from his earlier ‘sensible’ work on public administration and policy networks. Some considered he (and Bevir) had thrown the baby out with the bathwater, being too agency-oriented and in rejecting structures, the primacy of institutions, and material conditions. In a conciliatory moment, Rhodes would concede that traditions are ‘soft structures’ embedding the beliefs and practices that people inherit and which influence their everyday actions. Their phrase ‘situated agency’ seeks to capture the idea of agents deploying local reasoning against the background of inherited traditions. To some others (as well as himself), the transformation was a logical extension of his earlier mid-career research, but one that placed more emphasis on the particular construction of meanings and the understanding of recurring phenomena. While the new idealist interpretive approach was a coherent theoretical construct (at the level of ideas), it was another matter to test or demonstrate it in ways that have yet to be widely accepted as persuasive – a point Rod stubbornly refuses to concede. The researcher’s interpretation of the actor’s interpretive constructs is itself a constructed process! But perhaps these are early days. Bevir and Rhodes returned to defend their approach against a legion of critics in a number of rejoinders that culminated in The State as Cultural Practice (2010), where again the approach has evolved and is embellished.

By that stage too his eye was wandering. For three months each year he would come to Griffith University in Brisbane, enjoying the weather, Brisbane’s winter being much warmer and sunnier than Newcastle’s summer, and the wine rather better and, we would like to think of course, the company as congenial and intellectual! In 2003, he decided to move to Australia on a permanent basis, first to the chair of political science at the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University, then 14 months as director of the School, and thence to the chair of politics at the University of Tasmania.

Rhodes was not just interested in theory. He sought to explore how the ideas worked in real working environments. He had edited a comparative book on senior public servants with Weller in 2001 (Rhodes and Weller 2001). Each country study included biographies that sought to use the situated agency approach. In 2002 he had also begun his research on life within government. Building on the links and reputation of the Whitehall project, his challenge was to get inside the heads of key political actors to discover their construction of their ‘real world’. He began to read anthropology and ethnographic studies, searching for techniques to discover meanings and discourses. He started to conduct ethnographic observations of the ‘court politics’ around prime ministers. Some of the observations were taken from quasi-primary sources (journalists,
CONTESTING TRADITIONS AND BLURRING GENRES

biographers, autobiographical accounts), with others taken from media coverage and quotes from the main protagonists. As an ethnographer, the techniques of listening, watching, recording behaviour traits, shadowing ministers, sitting in meetings, being there in the back rooms of ministerial offices were all grist to his new mill. It was all about ‘being there’. His edited book on ethnographic methods emerging from a Utrecht workshop, Observing Government Elites: Up Close and Personal (2007), helped formulate these ideas and sketch out the range of possibilities and likely insights for political science that could be unearthed. Most importantly, the actors need to ‘tell’ their own story (their voice) in their own time and act out their behaviours according to their particular understandings, motivations and calculations. The project Everyday Life in British Government (2011) emerged from exploring this set of ethnographic approaches. Rhodes shadowed three ministers and three permanent heads for set periods observing their daily interactions and explanations of events, their reflections, casual observations, and observing their routines, while still couched against the backdrop of an interpretivist investigation. In time, like Beyond Westminster, this latest book could become one of the classic texts of not just British political science but of political science internationally.

AN EVER-MOVING CONSTELLATION

Rod’s career is epitomized by movement, from subject to subject, from theory to theory, from one place to another. He has held positions at eight universities, and never slowed down. He is not afraid of controversy. He fought at school over prefects’ powers, at Power Petroleum over fair treatment, at Oxford over rules, at Birmingham, Strathclyde, Essex, York and the Australian National University. And this list does not include the back-chatting he offered to the Jamaican soldier with a rifle in his hands. That’s a lot of controversy for a man who is irrepressibly determined but not habitually adversarial. Most of the time, Rod is of the ‘can-do’ persuasion but the endless reorganizational reforms of his resident universities can bring on bouts of cynicism, such as ‘loyalty is a one-way street, from professors to management’. Many will have their own ideas on his work and how evolving interests have shaped his career. There is much scope for interpretation, of course. How can he best be described: a man of principle unprepared to back down, or simply a cantankerous Yorkshireman (if that is not a tautology). That part of his life history we will leave to his interpretive biographer.

We are sure he would like to be particularly remembered for his contribution to Public Administration and through it to the discipline. He kept the journal afloat when the Royal Institute collapsed, and took it to new heights and readership as an international journal. And yet, beyond that he will want more. There will always remain the echo of Alan Clark’s tribute to his father: ‘He will be remembered only for his writings and his contribution to scholarship’. If that happens to Rod, and it should for decades ahead, we can imagine Rod’s smile of satisfaction as he raises a glass of good, single-grape Australian red.

REFERENCES


