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‘Stretched but not snapped’: A response to Russell & Serban on Retiring the ‘Westminster Model’

This article engages with Meg Russell and Ruxandra Serban’s (2020) argument that the Westminster model is ‘a concept stretched beyond repair’ that deserves ‘to be retired’. We examine the logic, theory and methods that led to such a powerful, potent and provocative argument. We suggest their approach may have inadvertently ‘muddied’ an already muddled concept. We assess the implications of ‘muddying’ for their conclusion that the Westminster model is, in essence, a dead concept in need of a decent funeral. We suggest the concept is ‘stretched but not snapped’ by developing a simple four-perspective broadening of the analytical lens. This approach aids understanding about *what* the concept covers, *how* it is operationalised and *why* it remains useful in comparative research.

Keywords: Westminster model; democracy; comparative politics; concepts; interpretivism, institutionalism

‘The muddle of the ‘Westminster Model’ reflects many institutional, cultural and socio-political shifts but does the approach adopted by Meg Russell and Ruxandra Serban (hereafter ‘R&S’) further muddy the concept rather than clarifying *what* the term covers and *why* it matters? Their narrative about ‘a concept stretched beyond repair’ and conclusion that ‘it is time for the ‘Westminster model’ to be retired’ poses a powerful, potent and provocative challenge that we want to meet.

The aim of this article is to stress-test the internal logic and reliability of this thesis. We step-back to reflect on the intellectual framework used to come to this conclusion. We re-contextualise the argument against a set of broader perspectives. We also rely on the tools and insights of conceptual political analysis but arrive at a different conclusion: The ‘Westminster model’ was never designed or intended to act as a positivist concept facilitating ‘scientific’ research. The ‘muddled’ qualities that R&S identify reflect the fact that it *is*, and always *has been*, a looser ‘organising perspective’ or ‘sensitising concept’ that draws attention to several themes and institutional characteristics.

In short, we suggest that R&S hold the notion of the ‘Westminster model’ up to (and against) a standard of conceptual precision that it was never intended or designed to fulfil. Viewed from this perspective it was always ‘destined to disappoint’. The risk of engaging in such academic debates is that it overlooks the relevance of the concept, in the governing traditions and everyday practices of practitioners. This point is critical.

What R&S provide is a text-based analysis which, they suggest, reveals the ‘muddled’ mechanics of the Westminster model to such an extent that the concept should be ‘retired’ from the lexicon of political analysis. Few scholars would disagree that the Westminster model is and always has been something of a ‘fuzzy concept’ and the argument that it has become ‘over-stretched’ (Sartori 1984) has been made before (see Matthews 2011). We interrogate the new evidence that R&S offer to justify their conclusion that the concept is now ‘beyond repair’. We suggest that when assessed from a broader perspective, the Westminster model is ‘stretched but not snapped’ (Barber 2014).

Our core contention is that R&S’s argument is ‘over-stretched’. The evidence they provide demands that we ask to what extent did their epistemological and methodological approach muddy an already a muddy concept? To develop this ‘stretched-not-snapped’ position, we provide an account of R&S’s research and conclusions; and argue that the *conceptual*, *institutional*, *comparative* and *interpretive* perspectives add value to any reconsideration of the Westminster model. Finally, we seek to establish a more balanced and nuanced debate about ‘managing’ the unavoidable messiness of the Westminster model.

The Muddle of the Westminster Model

‘The term ‘Westminster model’ appears often in both the academic and practitioner literatures. It will be familiar to many specialists in comparative politics, public administration and law’. R&S (2020: 1) ask in the opening line of their article:

But what precisely does it mean, and is there consistency in its application? If put under the microscope, can any clear meaning actually be discerned? This article suggests that *while ostensibly serving as a ‘model’ in the comparative literature, the term instead risks inducing muddle and unclear thinking* [emphasis added].

The aim of this section is to provide a brief account of the theory, methods, data that support R&S’s suggestion that the Westminster model had become stretched ‘beyond repair’.

R&S approach the analysis of the Westminster model through a positivist lens which utilises Giovanni Sartori’s (1970) well-known work on the use of concepts in the social and political sciences. At the heart of this approach is a focus on ‘conceptual stretching’ and ‘conceptual travelling’ derived from an awareness of the potential trade-off between ‘extension’ and ‘intension’. Fuzzy concepts are bad concepts. Seeking salvation for concepts means, according to this Sartorian approach, ‘[F]irst, collect a representative set of

definitions; second, extract their characteristics; and third, construct matrices that organize such characteristics meaningfully' (2009 [1984]: 121). 'Hence the key is 'reconstructing a concept *from its literature*' (Sartori 2009 [1984]: 121, italics in original). R&S (2020: 5) 'take our cue from this suggestion'.

As a result, R&S undertake an extensive review of books, articles and university reading lists which, setting aside questions about the criteria for selecting their data, led to them identifying 239 relevant texts (see R&S Table 1). These texts were then assessed against three questions: Was the Westminster model explicitly defined? What attributes were associated with the model by these authors? To which countries was the model applied?

This desk-based approach discovered that only 38 (or 16%) of the texts reviewed offered an *explicit and full* definition. A further 40 (17%) offered a partial definition. Finally, 90 (38%) had an implicit definition based on common attributes. As the basis for an article on the 'muddle of the Westminster model', a finding that 71% of relevant texts did include at least some form of definition, could be seen as a problem. This problem is compounded by the inconvenient fact that Lijphart's comparative work provides a common root text. R&S (2020: 8) tackle this challenge head-on by exploring the 'diversity of attributes' found within each of the 168 texts 'following Sartori, to investigate the 'intension' of the term'. The results of their second-stage review are set out in R&S Table 2. Contrary to R&S's core thesis, the main definitional features of the Westminster model appear relatively clear, consistent and understood (discussed below). Some core characteristics, such as executive dominance or adversarial culture are as the authors suggest difficult 'to define or measure precisely' (R&S 2020: 9) but the evidence also suggests that this has not prevented detailed analysis from being undertaken (e.g. Tsebelis 2009; Curtin 2014; Kenny and Casey 2021). Even R&S (2020: 9) find it necessary to concede that '[D]espite the imperfect nature of the categories, the table provides some clear indications of attributes most commonly associated with the model' [emphasis added].

We might expect an argument about the 'muddle of the Westminster model' and 'a concept stretched beyond repair', which calls for comparative scholars to 'drop this term', to find more muddle. Undeterred, R&S (2020: 12) stick to their positivist position: 'But whether they [the list of common attributes] describe a "model" with real comparative application remains distinctly open to doubt'.

Turning to the countries most commonly discussed as examples of the Westminster model, the extent of 'muddle' is again overstated (see R&S Table 3). The analysis reveals a relatively tight comparative field that reflects a widely acknowledged colonial heritage. To make this point is not to deny the existence of long-recognised patterns and processes of 'majoritarian modification' (e.g. Norris 2001; Flinders 2005, 2009; Gamble 2006; Bevir 2008). Nor do we deny Lijphart's early (1984: 19) admission that '[I]n nearly all respects, democracy in New Zealand is... a better example of the Westminster model, than British democracy'. But we do claim the continuing existence and influence of the '*family resemblances*' underpinning Westminster. (see below). Paradoxically, R&S draw attention to this family. By focusing on observable, measurable characteristics – on operational variables – R&S underplay both the ideational or cultural relevance of the Westminster model. They also misrepresent the intellectual dexterity of the comparative political science community. The next section develops our 'stretched not snapped' position by demonstrating this dexterity; by exploring the institutional, comparative and interpretive organising perspectives. .

'Muddled' or 'Muddying' Concepts?

A Conceptual Perspective

This sub-section makes three main arguments: (i) it is possible to argue the Westminster model is not a concept; (ii) if it is a concept, then it is 'an essentially contested concept'; and therefore (iii) the 'family resemblance' thesis demands reconsideration. We suggest that that Westminster model is best understood not as a concept but as an 'organising perspective' (Greenleaf 1993). As Andrew Gamble (1990: 405) explains:

[Organising perspectives] provide a framework for analysis, a map of how things relate, a set of research questions. *Such perspectives are not normally testable or falsifiable*, yet it is hard to imagine how the study of politics could proceed very far without them ... Organising perspectives have to be distinguished from theories which present distinct hypotheses that may in principle be falsified [emphasis added].

Gamble (1990: 406) goes on to note that ‘an organising perspective will always be implicit in the way the research is framed and conclusions are drawn’. He notes, as do R&S, the influence of Mackintosh’s *The Government and Politics of Britain* (1970) as an important source on the Westminster model’s core characteristics. The core insight that Gamble offers is the manner in which the Westminster model was itself imbued with a particular Whig interpretation of British history – i.e. a commitment to flexibility, pragmatism, and ‘the good chap theory of government’ (Hennessy 1995: 57, 64). Our point being that the Westminster model did not originate within academe. It was not intended to be a neat, precise, specific idea suitable for scientific analysis. It possesses a ‘void for vagueness’ (see Cooter 1994) which inevitably invites argument and means that ‘[f]or works following a more positivist tradition in political science this seems problematic’ (R&S 2020: 4).

We suggest that it is the ‘positivist tradition in political science’ that is more a problem than the Westminster model because it seeks to impose such a narrow, quantifiable and foundational interpretation on the study of mankind (see the section on the interpretive perspective below). For R&S, and in comparative politics more generally, Sartori’s work on concepts has been hugely influential. So it is important to recognise that he was promoting a more positivist approach at a specific point in the evolution of political science. It was ‘an’ approach but it was often promoted as ‘the’ approach. Its political and procrustean qualities have been subject to swingeing critique (see Crick 1959; Mills 1959; see also Almond 1990). We explore different epistemologies below and give examples of the concepts usefulness in comparative interpretive research.

The purpose of setting out this disciplinary history is to highlight that, by putting the Westminster model ‘under the microscope’ and identifying ‘precisely’ what it means, R&S are judging it against an evidential level that it is destined to never reach. Arguably *any* ‘common currency concept’ (‘the state’, ‘democracy’, ‘citizenship’, etc.) would fail if judged against such restrictive criteria. Therefore, *if* the Westminster model is to be defined in conceptual terms, then it is the work of W. B. Gallie (1956) on ‘essentially contested concepts’ that provides the most fitting intellectual reference point. ‘An essentially contested concept...is one that is so permeated and surrounded by values that reasonable men (sic)’ ‘may argue interminably without ever reaching agreement on the true meaning and implications of the concept’ (Birch 1993: 8). Put simply, an essentially contested concept is an idea or organising perspective (Gamble 1990) that has no clear, unambiguous meaning. Any definitions will be of little universal help as they will be contested by those who draw different boundaries around the concept. Several scholars have accused Gallie of naively promoting conceptual relativism (Collier, Hidalgo and Maciuceanu (2006). However, in many ways his argument was not that concepts could not be studied empirically but simply that the conclusions arising from any analysis would inevitably reflect the author’s organising perspective.

This brings us to this sub-section’s third and final argument and R&S’s rejection of the ‘family resemblance thesis’ (see Goertz 2006: 36) in which blurred boundaries are of less importance than the presence of common attributes. The findings of R&S are a product of their method which focused on ‘key attributes observed’ (see Table 4, p.14) in selected books, articles and ‘university reading lists’ (2020:6). That means key cultural traditions and historical beliefs and practices are not captured because they are not easily ‘testable or falsifiable ... yet it is hard to imagine how the study of politics could proceed far without them.’ Rhodes, Wanna and Weller (2009: 23) offer primary research to develop a broader approach to the ‘family resemblance’ argument:

Where we find some local identification with Westminster precepts, these countries we suggest appear as a grouping of ‘most similar’ nations, related by history, belief systems, and inclination. They form a loose family of governments, not clones of one another. Westminster was, and remains, useful shorthand to identify their origins and some of their basic characteristics. We consider it unnecessary to ‘box’ countries. Instead, we prefer to analyse the family of ideas.

Given that Rhodes, Wanna and Weller’s book concludes with a section entitled ‘Beware the Search for Precision’ it might possibly have formed more of a cautionary intellectual reference point. But our point is

that their threshold level for defining (and measuring) ‘the reasonable expectations for a useful political science term’ (R&S 2020: 2) is defined by a certain formalism and deductive logic that we suggest may miss far more than it captures. To develop this point, the next sub-section adopts an institutional perspective.

An Institutional Perspective

It should be of no surprise that the UK is ‘almost universally mentioned’ as the country where the term ‘Westminster model’ is said to apply (R&S: 12) because the original geographical coordinates of political Westminster were located in the UK’s capital. The origins of the model are rooted firmly in the historical-political context of Britain, and the ‘descriptors’ of a distinctive British ‘institutionalised arrangement’ of representative and responsible government inform the original model. R&S (2020: 2, 7, 12) are, of course, aware of these spatial and historical sources. It therefore comes as something of a surprise to find that the UK, seemingly by default, should be subject to R&S’s (2020: 18) blanket verdict that ‘it is time for the ‘Westminster model’ to be retired’. The ‘conceptual confusion and real-world change’ (R&S 2020: 17) which are seen to have stretched the model ‘beyond recognition’ elsewhere are automatically assumed to have afflicted the concept’s core territory as well.

Indisputably, there has been change since the inception of the model in the UK and it has itself fuelled almost constant argument. But it is too large an intellectual leap to suggest the Westminster model should be discarded. This section offers three arguments against the approach and conclusion of R&S. First, the Westminster model’s origins lie within an idealised and normative view of legitimate political power and has never been a static notion. Second, it continues to provide not only a dominant narrative and common vocabulary but also the foundation against which counter concepts are forged. Finally, the historically analysis British politics reveals a relatively successful process of conceptual evolution and re-modelling.

There is a basic agreement, as R&S (2020: 2, 12) note, that the origins of the term, if not its actual designation, are to be found in the historical-political context of nineteenth century Britain (see Judge, 1993). What the Westminster model sketched was a convergence between the prescriptions of a liberal view of the constitution and the practice of liberal government. In a profound sense, it was an iterative model tracking episodic changes in, for example, the configuration of political institutions, inter-institutional dependencies, and state interactions with civil society during the latter part of that century.

By the end of that period, as the model became seemingly ossified in seminal academic writings, it was not an exact descriptor. It resembled more of an ‘idealised view’ (Birch 1964: 74; Mackintosh 1970: 31): a view that conflated liberal theories of representation with a Diceyan view of liberal government (see Judge 2014: 111). Its core ‘comprised ... four distinct but interrelated doctrines’: a theory of democratic representation; the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty; the accountability of ministers to parliament; and the legal principles of the rule of law (Birch 1964: 65). Although often conceived simply as an empirical description of governing practice, in fact the Westminster model was infused with normative theories of representation and accountability, as well as legal theories of the sources of legislative supremacy, and constitutional theories of the interactions of political institutions. In sum, as an organising perspective in the UK, it ‘amounted to a theory of legitimate power’ (Birch 1964: 65).

The continuing salience of this frame, and its clarity of ‘meaning’ for UK state institutions, is evident in contemporary official descriptors of UK governance. The *Cabinet Manual* (Cabinet Office 2011: 2–4) and the *Ministerial Code* (Cabinet Office 2019: 1–3), for example, in listing the core principles that Ministers ‘should be governed by’, draw heavily upon the distinctive ‘institutionalised arrangement’ subsumed within the Westminster model. The UK parliament, on its official website (UK Parliament 2020), attests to the continuing centrality of the principles identified above by Birch. It is unequivocal in proclaiming that ‘parliamentary sovereignty’ in the 21st century remains ‘the most important part of the UK Constitution’. It remains a core constitutional feature. Consequently, developments that are thought to threaten the integrity of parliamentary sovereignty (i.e. devolution, EU membership, the *Human Rights Act 1998*, establishment of a UK Supreme Court, etc.) are explicitly framed and interpreted by parliament – despite the constitutional contortions needed – as working *within* rather than beyond the principle of parliamentary sovereignty.

Moreover, the Westminster model ‘remains the dominant narrative’ among central actors in Whitehall and Westminster (Rhodes 2011: 306). As the work of Mark Bevir (2010: 125), Patrick Diamond (2014: 61) Dave Richards (2008: 199) and Alastair Stark (2010: 2–12, 2011: 1151–3) – to mention just a few leading scholars – has revealed, the concept that R&S call to be ‘jettisoned’ continues to define, shape and legitimise the behaviour of political actors in Whitehall and Westminster. In which case, as Tant (2011: 17) concludes, ‘the importance of the [Westminster model] lies in relation to how actors understand the British political system, rather than the accuracy of the description it offers’.

The Westminster model has also, perversely perhaps, provided an analytical root for the subsequent development of alternative models of conceptualising governance (‘policy communities’, ‘networks’, ‘(multi-level) governance’, ‘the differentiated polity’, ‘asymmetric power model’, etc.) in that their shared starting premise was that they provided alternative and more accurate counter-concepts (e.g. Bevir 2010: 82; Bevir and Rhodes 2003: 198–9; Marsh 2012: 46–8; Rhodes 1988). Even among those analysts most intent on demonstrating that the modern practices of UK governance are far removed from an idealised Westminster model, there is a recognition of the model’s continuing salience as a theory of legitimate power. Its standing is reflected in the ubiquity of assertions such as the model is a ‘legitimizing tradition’, ‘legitimizing tool’, ‘legitimizing framework’, and ‘legitimizing mythology’ (e.g. Rhodes 2011: 306; Diamond 2014: 43; Flinders 2010: 25; Hall 2011: 12; Richards 2008: 199; Richards and Smith 2016: 512).

It is important to acknowledge that R&S were mainly seeking to make an argument about the contemporary value of the Westminster model in *comparative* political science. However, this section is suggesting that in making this argument they miss fundamental insights relevant to comparative analysis. Thus, geographical coordinates, historical-political roots, and the configuration of British state institutions and institutional interactions are evidence of something akin to an iterative model where *changes* in political practices led to the evolution and recalibration of the model.

Thus, from its mid-19th century origins, the Westminster model’s four defining doctrines identified by Birch developed to encompass notions of a professionalised, non-partisan bureaucracy (associated with models of ‘Whitehall’), and of ‘meta-constitutional orientation of power-hoarding’ (associated with models of majoritarian democracy). R&S (2020: 9, 18) come close to acknowledging a process of iteration, by referring to ‘Lijphart’s *version* of the model’. Nonetheless, they continue to seek an *essentialist* set of common attributes ascribed to a ‘complete’ meaning of ‘*the* model’ (R&S 2020: 8). Indeed, some of the ‘conceptual confusion’ discerned by R&S may arise from failing to specify which version of the Westminster model is being analysed.

Lijphart (1984: 5), for example, noted a distinction to be drawn between ‘the British version of the Westminster model’, as the ‘original’ and narrow model focused upon ‘British parliamentary and governmental institutions’, and his more widely focused majoritarian model (with the term ‘Westminster model’, appended in parenthesis, after the term majoritarian model (1984: xiii, 5). Lijphart initially identified nine characteristics of the Westminster model that ‘together make the model thoroughly majoritarian’ (1984: 9). Yet, this was a model with notable ‘add-ons’ from the core characteristics identified earlier by Birch (1964), and later by Gamble (1990) and Rhodes *et al.* (2009).

In the decades after publishing *Democracies*, Lijphart (1999, 2012) proceeded to provide iterations of ‘the Westminster model’ – to reflect more accurately ‘changes in British politics’ (Lijphart 2012: 20). In this process, the defining institutional elements of the first Lijphart model were recalibrated: with some dropped, some refined and some added (2012: 9–29). While Lijphart (2012: 20) maintained that such modification did not constitute a ‘basic shift from the Westminster model’ the process of modification that he undertakes might be conceived as the analytical equivalent of iterative conceptual (re)modelling. R&S, in acknowledging ‘Lijphart’s *version* of the model’ might have been advised to have investigated how the UK has provided iterated *versions* of ‘*the* Westminster model’ and how the model itself has evolved. Moreover, the ‘precision’ attributed by R&S (2020: 17) to Lijphart’s modelling of Westminster misses his diachronic adaptations and reformulations. Equally, it obscures the partial institutional modifications and deviations acknowledged by Lijphart (1984:5; 2012:10,20) when comparing the UK and those other states that ‘closely approximated’ to the Westminster model. While Lijphart (2012: 20, 26, 29) acknowledges

flexibility – in approximations, deviations, modifications and ‘various other qualifications’ – needed to compare states with ‘predominantly Westminster-style institutions’, R&S appear committed to their search for comparative analysis founded on ‘precise attributes’ (2020: 1) and ‘precise terms’ (2020: 2).

A Comparative Perspective

Writing from a comparative perspective, the sheer prevalence of recent analyses that utilise the concept of the ‘Westminster model’ suggests that not all scholars find the term problematic. Adopting the same methodological approach (i.e. a databases-based search of keywords such as, e.g., ‘Westminster model’, or ‘Westminster system’) for the most recent period not covered by R&S (i.e. January 2017–January 2021), yields a rich seam of comparative scholarship on ‘Westminster traits’ such as (*inter alia*) bicameralism, legislative practice, cabinet governments, pluri-constitutionalism, intelligence oversight, etc. (e.g. Collier and Raney 2018; Fleming 2019; Helms 2020; O’Brien 2019; Wincott *et al.* 2020; Defty 2020). Moreover, as Julian Bernauer and Adrian Vatter (2019) have illustrated, the concept of the ‘Westminster model’ has guided sampling strategies in both small-N and medium/large-N comparative studies. With this comparative body of work in mind it is possible to advance three main arguments *against* the core conclusion made by R&S. First, they fail to distinguish between theoretical and empirical concepts. Second, they adopt a narrow sampling strategy. Finally, they do not acknowledge that ‘conceptual stretching’ is (and to some extent inevitably) at the heart of any comparative endeavour.

Taking these arguments in turn, R&S (2020: 5) set out the requirements for concepts in political science. This opening part of their article adopted a Sartorian approach with its emphasis on taxonomical hierarchy (for a discussion see Collier and Mahon 1993: 145) while dismissing the more expansive and flexible ‘family resemblance’ approach that assumes valid cases will share ‘a set of properties’ while ‘not all cases share them all’ However, in comparative politics ‘concepts’ are not necessarily bound to a theoretical connotation or a collection of abstract properties. There are also ‘empirical concepts’ equipped with observable attributes and some theoretical meaning (see Sartori 1984).

When it comes to concept formation in comparative political science the more fundamental insight highlights the role and value of ‘ideal types’ or ‘polar types’. ‘The advantage of the ideal type is that it captures the full richness of a type’. As Matthijs Bogaards eloquently explains (2000: 397–398) ‘[E]mpirical phenomena will never fully correspond to it, *nor should they be expected to do so*’. The polar type is another possibility. Polar types come in pairs, as they mark the extremes along a continuum. Real world cases will fall somewhere in between, in greater or lesser proximity to one of the poles [emphasis added]. Ideal types are almost by definition crafted as ‘pure’ concepts, just as polar types (the most obvious of which being Lijphart’s consociational versus majoritarian democracies) are designed to be extreme, not to reflect reality, but as heuristics that facilitate the analysis of complexity (for a discussion see Swedberg 2018 or Palonen 2018: 7). Our suggestion is simply that the logic-building processes through which comparativists construct conceptual frameworks are flexible enough to cope with complexity. It is therefore *symptomatic* rather than *problematic* if certain features of the ideal type may be absent or even ‘borrowed’ from their opposite incarnation.

The same logic of constructing theoretically maximalist ‘extrema’ to compare empirical variety can be found elsewhere in comparative politics (e.g. Gerring and Thacker 2008; Bernauer and Vatter 2019). R&S’s epistemological and methodological approach would be unlikely to capture the ‘full richness of type’ – to paraphrase Bogaards (above) – irrespective of the focus of analysis because its contours are too narrow and rigid. If there is an epistemological and methodological gap to fill, then it is about greater transparency and precision when distinguishing between theoretical and empirical concepts (see Swedberg 2018).

This focus on conceptual-types flows into the second argument and the implicit suggestion in R&S’s approach that there is but one sampling strategy in comparative politics. R&S (2020: 2) outline the origins of the ‘Westminster model’ which, at one time, served as a ‘convenient label’ to denote the ‘English’ constitution (Bagehot (2001 [1867])). What R&S (2020: 2) criticize is that the ‘Westminster model’ started to live outside its original heartland. It became increasingly used ‘[...] in a comparative context to describe countries influenced by the British system’. The significant confusion about its definition and its ‘over-

extension' to ever-new cases, lead R&S (2020) to claim that the 'Westminster model' is falsely used to select cases for comparative analyses. Eventually, such a sampling strategy feeds 'flawed descriptive and causal inferences' (R&S 2020: 4).

However, there are different rationalities underpinning case selection in comparative political studies (for a discussion see Seawright and Gerring 2008). So, the 'Westminster model' is not only used as an *ex ante* 'purposive' sampling strategy in which countries with 'Westminster legacies' (Patapan *et al.* 2005) are put together (see also the section on the 'interpretive perspective'; and Rhodes *et al.* 2009: 230; Boswell *et al.* 2019: chapter 4). A distinction needs to be drawn between small-N (qualitative) and medium-/large-N (quantitative) research designs. In the former, cases may be selected on joint colonial heritage, although such studies are generally focused on a single specific (institutional) trait. Examples include Derek O'Brien's (2019) work on bicameralism in small states, Cheryl Collier and Tracy Raney's (2018) comparative study of parliamentary sexism and sexual harassment, Thomas Fleming's (2019) analysis of partisan dealignment and committee powers, Florence So's (2018) exploration of leadership turnover in opposition parties, or Ludger Helm's (2020) scholarship on 'heir apparent' prime ministers in Westminster democracies. Although such small-N comparative analyses can only claim limited generalization beyond the set of selected cases they are highly valuable since, as a 'most likely case' of (former) 'Westminster models'-design, they offer unique evidence of how 'transplanted' (or colonially-imposed) 'role models' (see Vatter *et al.* 2020) '[...] may produce different results and evolve in distinctive ways' (Altman 2008: 483).

In major medium-/large-N studies, the 'Westminster model' is not used as a sampling strategy on its own. Rather, broader categories such as e.g., OECD countries (Roller 2005) or consolidated democracies with a minimum population size (Lijphart 1999, 2012) are employed. Then countries that share the 'Westminster' heritage can be sub-selected from the full sample to identify and investigate certain commonalities. Through this approach, a 'Westminster' cluster may result as an *ex post* empirical result rather than constituting an *ex ante* subset of cases.

What becomes obvious, then, is how medium-/large-N studies may guide and refine theoretical samples of (former) members of the 'Westminster family' (Eichbaum and Shaw 2007: 613) anew. Using 'running examples' (Bernauer and Vatter 2019: 10) does, '[...] enrich the quantitative-comparative analyses presented with some qualitative illustrations on the origins, dynamics and consequences of empirical patterns of democracy'. Depending on the (institutional) trait that is of interest, the 'Westminster model' is thus not an arbitrary, but indeed a valuable 'purposive' sampling strategy. To critique comparative scholarship for utilising the Westminster model as a 'convenient cloak to imply that single-country studies have comparative application' as R&S suggest (2020: 18) risks painting an inaccurate picture of the existing research base. This narrow view also fails to recognise that not only generalization but also describing and analysing complex specificity in context (Geertz 1973) is a valuable and valued goal in comparative studies (see Boswell *et al.* 2019, and the 'interpretive' section below).

This point brings us to this section's third and final argument and our suggestion that R&S's approach does not recognize that 'conceptual stretching' is at the heart of comparative work. Or to put the same point slightly differently, the boundary between 'conceptual travelling' and 'conceptual stretching' is opaque. So, whenever a concept 'travels' to new terrain in all but a tiny fraction of cases there is likely to be some form of 'stretching'. In fact, 'conceptual stretching' and conceptual flexibility are at the heart of comparative research. R&S, in contrast, proffer a fixed view of what a concept in comparative politics can or should provide.

Instead, we argue that concepts with a real comparative potential cannot have prescribed, essential elements just as they cannot be fixed in time. Otherwise, comparativists would not be able to make sense of an increasingly complex world. We confront '[T]he challenge of dealing conceptually with a great diversity of post-authoritarian regimes' (Collier and Levitsky 1997: 430). This diversity is especially true for empirical cases around the 'democratic universe', 'patterns of democracy' or 'democracy with adjectives' (see Lijphart 1999, 2012) or highly divergent 'levels of power diffusion' (Bernauer and Vatter 2019). Hence, to serve the comparative goal, concepts must be flexible (on this see Vatter *et al.* 2020). If serious conceptual concerns have arisen (e.g. intermingling of ideal and empirical types, 'over-stretching', etc.) or if misguided sampling strategies have fed flawed inferences then comparative scholars have been willing to engage in open

conceptual debate. In fact, consociationalism - i.e. the majoritarian Westminster model's polar type - is a striking example of how the community has come to terms with fundamental disagreements on both the concept's core features and its merits for the comparative enterprise. For example, Arend Lijphart and Ian Lustick have engaged in an epic fight about alleged 'logical, theoretical, and empirical' defects (Lustick 1997: 88; see also Barry 1975). Later, other comparativists (e.g. Matthijs Bogaards 2000; Soeren Keil and Allison McCulloch (2021) joined in. For more than half a century, consociationalism has been well and alive and continues to inspire scholars of comparative politics and beyond (see Bogaards *et al.* 2019), *because it has prompted criticism and debate*. Today, scholars even go as far as dropping essential cornerstones altogether (e.g., consociationalism's socio-political 'pillarization' (see Freiburghaus and Vatter 2019) to make it 'fit' rather than forcing it to 'retire' (R&S 2020: 1, 18). The evolution of comparative political sciences has been shaped by 'great punctuations' that destroy faith in coherent theories and concepts just to see the subfield reconstruct itself around new assumptions (see Blyth 2006). We are confident the scholarly community will similarly 'self-regulate' the Westminster model as a valuable concept in a broad analytical toolkit.

An Interpretive Perspective

An interpretive perspective offers a viable alternative comparative research strategy to those concerned with variables, models and generalisation (e.g. Boswell *et al.* 2019; Rhodes *et al.* 2009; Weller *et al.* 2021). Interpretive approaches also capture the role and relevance of the beliefs and practitioners of practitioners. At its simplest, if people believe it to be true the consequences are real, so they act 'as if' there is a Westminster model. The Westminster tradition continues to shape beliefs and practices (see Rhodes 2011) and the aim of this sub-section is to develop this argument.

R&S (2020: 4, 16) adopt a naturalist perspective or the 'positivist tradition'. Explicitly, they follow Giovanni Sartori on concept formation. The case against Sartori's approach is put forcibly by Bevir and Kedar (2008: 504) who argue that Sartori treats concepts as 'social objects as if they were akin to physical ones'. His is an example of 'strong essentialism' because he requires a commonality of attributes for a concept so that 'when a concept is applied to new cases, then, if those cases do not share the core features that are shared by previous cases, the validity of the concept diminishes'. Finally, for Sartori concepts are 'tools over which the social scientist should seek perfect control' (for a more extended discussion see Bevir and Kedar 2008: 509–10).

By contrast, an interpretive approach focuses on 'meanings, contingency, the situatedness of the scholar and the dialogical principle'. Bevir and Kedar (2008: 508, 514) argue that such 'anti-naturalist premises are the most appropriate for social science'. They conclude that the positivist tradition of Sartori is another example of the 'discredited naturalism' pervading 'the unreflective practice of many social scientists'. This criticism flows-over into R&S's (2020: 16) discussion of 'family resemblances' and especially their argument that,

In strict social science terms Table 4 ... demonstrates that the concept does not even meet the formal, albeit loose, requirements of family resemblance – in terms of a minimum number of clearly definable features being shared.

Their table is a list of the attributes of the Westminster system. Two points are immediately apparent. The phrase 'in strict social science terms' means they espouse the naturalist tradition, and the list of attributes is an exercise in 'weak essentialism' (Bever and Kedar 2008: 508). Paradoxically, although R&S recognise the messy diversity they proceed to reject it for not meeting their predilection for strong essentialism.

To tease-apart this criticism, it is helpful to distinguish between *tight* and *loose* notions of 'family'. As with real life, some families are tightly cohesive in the traditional sense of a nuclear family (two-up, two-down, two-sexes) whereas other families are less cohesive and function more like a loosely coupled network. Clearly, R&S are using 'family' in the more cohesive sense. However, Wittgenstein used the phrase 'family resemblance', 'to convey a sense of indeterminate plurality, not common membership'. So, his 'looser sense of a 'family' is clearly anti-essentialist' (Bever and Kedar 2008: 513–14; Wittgenstein 2009: §§68–69). R&S

shy away from the loose notion of family because they want concepts that can be used to generate general, causal explanations.

R&S (2020: 4) devote one paragraph to the interpretive approach to the Westminster model describing it as 'a set of beliefs and a shared inheritance' before moving on quickly by noting that 'for works following a more positivist tradition in political science this seems problematic'. Our point is simply that it might be the narrowness of their approach that is a problem.

Bevir and Rhodes (2003), for example, look at how ideas are constituted (and reconstituted) through human action against the backdrop of inherited traditions. Their focus is on meaning and its historically contingent nature; on complex specificity in context. So, they focus on the Westminster family in 'the natural language sense – of individuals sharing a common ancestor – rather than in formal social science terms' (R&S 2020: 16).

It is precisely that common ancestry that Rhodes, Wanna and Weller (2009: 230) take as their rationale for comparing Westminster. They explore 'a loose family of governments', which are related by history, belief systems, and inclination. They analyse 'the family of ideas'. They argue that 'if the test of Westminster is whether any country ... fits a prescribed set of institutional characteristics, ... the critics have a point, though a trivial one'. Such a test rests on essentialism and 'assumes a historical standard against which comparison can be made. They miss the point' (Rhodes *et al.* 2009: 222).

Comparative interpretive research is different as it explores complex specificity in context, not generalisations (see Boswell *et al.* 2019 for a more detailed discussion). It seeks to raise new questions by 'shaking the bag'; and edification or 'new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking about' politics and government (Rorty 1980: 360). Interpretive research provides detailed studies of social and political dramas and of the performative dynamics through which institutional relationships will inevitably play out. Their commitment to 'complex specificity' means that naturalist political scientists often write off the value of interpretive research as idiographic. Critics claim that it is not possible to deduce laws and predict outcomes from fieldwork; that is, it is not possible to generalise. Of course, it does not seek to make statistical generalisations and produce 'laws', but it does make general statements. Boswell *et al.* (2019: 28–30) prefer the phrase 'plausible conjectures' to either 'generalisations' or 'general statements' because the phrase better communicates the provisional nature of knowledge.

Plausible conjectures are to interpretivists what generalisations are to naturalists. They are general statements that are plausible because they rest on good reasons and the reasons are good because they are inferred from relevant information (see Boudon 1993). What interpretivists cannot do based on this data is make generalisations and propound laws. The aim is for 'small facts to speak to large issues' (Geertz 1993: 23). In a similar vein, Burawoy (1998: 5) suggests the task is to extract 'the general from the unique, to move from the "micro" to the "macro"'. Interpretive research can uncover and deliver plausible conjectures that speak to large issues. Variables, models and generalisation are not the only game in town.

This brings us to a fourth and final critique: the Westminster model is not just an academic notion living in our theories and research seminars (textbooks and student reading lists). It exists in a world of practice: the notion of the Westminster model is alive and well in the everyday practices of civil servants and ministerial departments (Rhodes 2011). Inherited Westminster beliefs inform today's practices. So, the claim that the expression 'Westminster model' 'perpetuates a false impression among practitioners that a meaningful "family" of political systems exists' might err on the side of overstatement. In the conclusions to *Comparing Westminster*, Rhodes *et al.* (2009: 222) point out that:

While academics may bemoan the use of the term, in one form or another it continues to thrive. It is used by prime ministers and leaders of the opposition; by frustrated back benchers and senior public servants; by judges and constitutional lawyers. References often occur in commissions of inquiry and in newspaper editorials. If they all continue to use the term and regard it as useful, as part of the political dialogue, then the issue for us is not whether they are right or wrong, but why they do so. It is of minor concern whether the term is still used fruitfully by other academics.

In sum, jettisoning of the Westminster model is premature. For interpretivists, the concept offers theoretical purchase and analytical leverage to those wishing to understand the past, present and future of democracy in many parts of the world. If the naturalist approach does not offer such purchase then it is arguably a reflection of the limits of that approach, not on the Westminster model. The interpretive approach, which views Westminster as an inherited tradition, not a strict model with fixed characteristics, does provide that purchase and power by helping scholars explain not only the ways in which the tradition has evolved but also the everyday beliefs and practices of politicians and public servants.

Conclusions: Stretched but not Snapped

‘[W]hile the “Westminster model” may once have had a meaning (or meanings), a combination of conceptual confusion among authors and real-world change have seen it stretched beyond recognition’. R&S (2020: 17) conclude ‘By now the term has gone well beyond individual cases of what Sartori referred to as “individual ambiguity” to achieve a damaging state of “collective ambiguity” in the literature’. We would, of course, agree that a dead concept deserves a decent funeral but we have sought to question the claims and evidence on which R&S make their terminal diagnosis. We have suggested their approach risks further muddying the concept rather than clarifying *what* the term encapsulates, *how* it is utilised and *why* it still matters for comparative research.

The four discrete but interwoven conceptual, institutional, comparative and interpretive perspectives have each questioned the contribution of R&S’s approach and conclusion while also revealing the Westminster model’s continuing relevance. ‘Stretched but not snapped’ rather than R&S’s ‘stretched beyond repair’ provides, we suggest, a far more accurate, subtle, and sophisticated phrase for managing the muddle of the Westminster model.

Our critique of R&S’s approach can be summarised in the suggestion that the ‘Westminster model’ was never designed or intended to act as a positivist concept facilitating ‘scientific’ research. The ‘muddled’ qualities that R&S identify reflect the fact that it *is*, and always *has been*, an ‘organising perspective’ or ‘sensitising concept’ that draws attention to several themes and institutional characteristics. It is in ‘managing the muddle’ – a challenge that the comparative section suggested scholars were more than capable of doing – that political science is required to demonstrate its creative intellectual qualities.

This emphasis on creativity stands in stark contrast to the schema that R&S adopt. Our fear is that an essentialist approach served only to muddy the waters. R&S’s theory and method might be interpreted as setting an intellectual trap that the Westminster model was always going to fall into by nature of its fuzzy qualities. The main aim of our scholarship over the years has been to expose and critique the inner logic and constraining shadow of ‘the Westminster model’. Through either interpretive insights, or at the very least a more pluralistic approach to theory and methods, we offer a more rounded account of the concept and its potential for comparative research.

The opening decades of the twenty-first century have been tumultuous. Populism and pandemics, technological shifts and population flows all point towards an increasingly ‘liquid world’ (Bauman 2011) in which the capacity of concepts forged within more stable times to provide intellectual anchorage and shared understandings will almost certainly diminish. The tension between acknowledging the existence of complexity while longing for the certainty and clarity provided by some overarching unitary truth will inevitably increase in ways which place new challenges at the door of political science. Viewed from this perspective, one of the core contributions of R&S’s may well have less to do with ‘muddying’ or ‘muddling’ and far more to do with the debate they have initiated on what we expect from our concepts.

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