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The asymmetric power model 20 years on

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It is over 20 years since the publication of the *Asymmetric Power Model* (APM). In the ensuing period, Britain has faced multiple challenges: the increasing fragmentation of public services; austerity politics; devolution; and, most recently, coronavirus disease and Brexit. It is this backdrop which provides the context to this article. First, it addresses how the literature has subsequently evolved. It then examines what has changed over the last two decades while also emphasizing what remains the same. Here, we highlight issues regarding both increased inequality and instability, focusing particularly on tension emerging from a de-centralizing-recentralizing approach to governance. The article concludes by offering a revised APM as a means of understanding British politics moving forward.

Keywords: asymmetric power model; British political tradition; Westminster model; UK Governance; Whitehall; devolution.

1. Introduction

It is over 20 years since *Unequal Plurality: Towards an Asymmetric Power Model of British Politics* (Marsh et al. 2003) was published. As Diamond and Newman (2024a: 646) observe, the intervening period has been marked by both increasing political instability and rising inequality. Many of the key tenets round which current day politics operate have come under intense scrutiny. The July 2024 election of a Stammer-led Labour Government provides a prescient moment to revisit the

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Asymmetric Power Model (APM) and evaluate the critique it provides of both the British Political Tradition (BPT) and Westminster Model (WM) through a contemporary lens to make sense of the current dynamics and trends in UK politics.

Much has changed, particularly after 2010, but in our view much remains the same. There is change, but it is constrained by the continued role of the two main features of the original APM: structured inequality, particularly, but not exclusively, economic inequality; and the durability of the British Political Tradition. There has then been a clear path-dependency, but not a path-determinacy.

Two aspects of change seem to us especially important. The first highlights a weakness with the original APM, which this article addresses. The BPT remains a powerful narrative, underpinned by a centralizing dynamic, but is undermined by growing evidence of its limitations. Over the last two decades, there are numerous examples of policy failure, which challenge one of the key legitimizing tenets of the BPT—that 'Government know best'. The second aspect of change involves a critical appraisal of one of the most notable dynamics of change to have emerged, that of devolution and decentralization. Here, the pattern of reform has been, at best, ad hoc, shaped by the sharp, controlling instincts of Westminster, rather than informed by a coherent and consistent vision of subsidiarity. The net effect is of a bowdlerized version of devolution—trapped between a push-pull decentralizing and recentralizing power dynamic—which has led to an increasingly fragmented and incoherent governance landscape. We argue this approach to reform challenges the notion that the Westminster Government has been an adept 'metagovernor'.

Below, we set out in detail what has changed and what remains the same, emphasizing four main themes a revised APM offers to the way we conceptualize British politics:

- Firstly, one of the key critiques made by the original APM, but which received insufficient attention, is the extent to which the extant UK governance literature was essentially politicist, in that it glossed over the important link between political, social, and economic structures and processes.
- Relatedly, the original APM identified the importance of structured inequality in shaping British political institutions, processes and, indeed personnel and called for more research on this dynamic. At its core, this inequality is economic, but it is inscribed in inequalities based on gender and ethnicity, as well as class.
- Thirdly, the original APM highlighted the role of the BPT, as the ideational dimension of centralization, but we neglected to stress the obvious contradiction between the BPT's emphasis on 'Government knows best' and the mounting evidence of increased failings in the UK's political performance over recent decades.

- Finally, the current literature tends to portray the shift from government to governance since the late 1970s as a rational response to problems, mostly involving a conscious decision to move away from the hierarchical and bureaucratic social democratic state towards a complex, marketized, and disaggregated one. Yet, this has materialized as an ad hoc and incremental reorganization culminating not in the 'rational' disaggregation of governance with central government operating as a 'strategic meta-governor', but, rather, the fragmentation of governance without strategic direction.

The article first briefly examines the evolution in the governance literature over the last two decades to establish the context underpinning the contribution this revised article makes. We focus on the two key themes of instability and inequality. We then examine the continuities and changes in the British polity during this period with a particular emphasis on three major challenges—devolution, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, and Brexit—each of which reveal the on-going salience of the APM. Finally, we present a revised version of the APM, presenting a contemporary conceptual framing of UK politics to illustrate why, over the last two decades, inequality and instability have increasingly come to the fore.

2. The evolving governance literature

Over two decades have passed since the APM was developed in the context of two countervailing approaches in the literature. Initially, a literature emerged analysing the perceived disaggregation of British government. From the late 1970s, its focus was on characterizing the British state as increasingly hollowed out; the growing confluence of processes of privatization, agencification, contracting out, Europeanization, and more broadly globalization saw power shifting downwards, sideways, and upwards from the core of the British state (Rhodes 1994). At a conceptual level, these accounts, notably including Rhodes 'differentiated polity model' (1994, 1997) [DPM] argued hierarchical government was increasingly being replaced by fragmented governance and a loss of capacity at the centre with the central state being something that steered rather than rowed (Osborne and Gaebler 1992). Rhodes posited (1994: 149):

> The combination of fragmentation and accountability points to another meaning for the phrase 'hollowing out' of the state: it…refers to a decline in central capability. Fragmentation constrains the centre's administrative ability to coordinate and plan. Diminished accountability constrains the centre's ability to exercise political control. In sum current trends erode the centre's capacity to steer the system—its capacity for governance.

The hollowing-out narrative formed part of a wider 'society-centric' governance literature emphasizing the loss of nation-state sovereignty, state capacity and fragmentation. Governing was increasingly characterized by: '…institutional differentiation and pluralization' (Rhodes 1997: 217) and a shift to 'governing without government' (Rosenau 1992).

A critique later emerged challenging the neglect of 'political power' which sought to 'bring the state back in' (see Smith 1999; Marsh et al. 2001, 2003; Evans 2003; Holliday 2000; Jessop 2007; Goetz 2008). It placed greater emphasis on the structural position of both the state and its cognate actors' command over a unique set of powers and resources—constitutional, legal, fiscal, regulatory, administrative, informational etc.—that distinguished it from other societal actors (see Marsh et al. 2003; Bell and Hindmoor 2009).

The 'state-centric' approach, which included the APM, acknowledged the shift from hierarchical government to networked governance, culminating in a more cluttered, disjointed and variegated policy landscape. Crucially though, it argued that the State, more often than not, retained a dominant, structural position within the evolving networked governance landscape and acted in a strategically selective manner to ensure: '…exchanges are most often asymmetric' (Marsh et al. 2003: 208). The APM was notable for the way it offered an elitist conception of power based on a British political tradition involving: '…limited democracy and strong, centralized, executive power and this set of ideas and institutions continues to influence the British political system (Marsh et al. 2003: 312-3).

The debate between society-centric and state-centric approaches evolved into discussions round a meta-governance narrative, focusing on the ways in which different levels of a fragmented polity relate to each other (see e.g. Bell and Hindmoor 2009; Bevir and Rhodes 2010; Matthews 2013; Peters 2015; Howlett and Ramesh 2016; Wood 2019; Newman et al. 2024). It sought to understand how power had been ceded and delegated through the operation of: '…interdependent but operationally autonomous actors' (Bailey and Wood 2017: 968), but in the context of an overarching strategic authority, that of a 'metagovernor'. This approach retained the notion of hierarchy, alongside a sense that agencies further down the delivery chain claimed some degree of independence and self-regulation. It emphasized the range of steering and co-ordinating mechanisms, tools and strategies employed by the central state, alongside the state's capacity to learn and adapt as a rational, metagovenor to deliver policy in an increasingly complex and fragmented policy arena.

2.1 Instability and inequality

A common thread throughout our own contributions to the UK governance literature over the last two decades has been to question the extent to which the

processes of fragmentation have *ipso facto*, led to ever greater pluralism. Instead, we aver it has contributed to an increasingly incoherent mode of heterarchical governance (see e.g. Marsh 2008; Richards 2008; Smith 2009; Richards and Smith 2015; Marsh and Akram 2015; Hall et al. 2018; Richards et al. 2023; Diamond et al. 2024b). Whitehall has always reflected a highly departmentalized governance system limiting the capacity for joined up and strategic government. Fragmentation has accelerated this dynamic over recent decades leading to instability. Crucially, we maintain UK politics continues to be characterized by considerable asymmetries both in terms of power resources at the centre of government and increasing inequality, drawn from the inequitable influence of various groups and a skewed distribution of resources. We explore these two key dynamics in turn.

2.1.1 *Instability.* Over the last 20 years, the British state has been subjected to almost perpetual, ad hoc reform, characterized by Diamond et al. (2024b) as 'hyperactive incrementalism'. The scale and variety of change has created a landscape of complexity that is challenging to map. New Public Management [NPM] and more latterly New Public Governance [NPG], but also Brexit and devolution have shifted the contours of the state and changed its architecture. We argue the net result has been that of instability, short-termism and persistent policy shortcomings which challenges the notion that the Westminster Government operates in a rational and strategic manner.

Instead, it has been drawn into a continuous cycle of decentralization and recentralization (Richards et al. 2023; Ward, Ward and Kerr 2024). This cycle stems from tensions over a contradictory statecraft approach: on the one hand a state-centric commitment to sustaining the BPT and the Westminster model, whilst on the other hand, rolling out a range of NPM-informed, de-centralizing and de-politicizing reform strategies. The outcome is one of instability and incoherence (see Richards et al. 2023). Early on, Smith (1999: 254) framed this issue in terms of: 'The structures of government have changed, and the value system governing those structures need to change with them'. In the intervening years the value system, shaped by the BPT, has not meaningfully adapted and Smith's critique remains as pertinent now as when first made. It provides the main thread through which much of our analysis of what has changed is grounded.

There is a further element to this dynamic, which reflects the somewhat unique, historical development of the British state and the absence of a written constitution. A notable feature of the British political system is that jurisdictions are rarely clearly defined or legal protected but are, more often, arbitrary and contingent. They vary across both time and space; so, for instance, the powers of the Greater Manchester Authority are very different to those of Scotland or South Yorkshire and what responsibilities lie where can change with the whims of central

government actors. As Shaw and Tewdwer-Jones (2017: 211) observe: '…the ongoing process of rescaling at the sub-national state level falls well short of being a coherent, clearly thought-out and permanent transfer of power to a uniformed scale of governance'.

Paradoxically, given the market drivers underpinning much of NPM's decentralizing reforms, elements of the governance literature invoke parallels with Marxist conceptions of the state, with: '… meta-governance as the involvement of the state in strategically organizing the context and ground rules for governance (Gjaltema et al. 2020: 1760). The UK case combines a fragmented and incoherent system of policy delivery (where the borders of service delivery across functions do not align either with geographical or governmental boundaries) and a centre that lacks the strategic capacity to oversee and organize the local level (Newman and Kenny 2023; Richards et al. 2023). Many local service providers self-organize, but operate within a strict framework of contract, regulation and law set by central government. As Innes (2023: 219) reports in the case of education policy, according to both the National Audit Office [NAO] and the Public Accounts Committee [PAC]: '…the DfE has yet to achieve the informational and administrative capacity or effective metagovernance across the system as a whole'. As we see below, this is a pattern repeated across other policy domains and connects to a related issue of structural inequality within the UK governance system.

2.1.2 *Inequality.* Much of the literature assumes that the process of governance disaggregation is the rational outcome of neo-liberalism and NPM. It involves a conscious, rational, often linear set of reforms affecting a shift from a hierarchical, bureaucratic social democratic settlement towards a complex, marketized and disaggregated state. Governance was a result of intention and strategy. Innes (2023: 127) observes: 'Outsourcing, privatization and delegated governance to firms or firm-like agencies are core neoliberal strategies rooted in neoclassical theory. By re-engineering the state, they were supposed to drive the political economy closer towards…the efficient market horizon'. Contra this view, the consequence of this approach, rather than delivering market efficiency, has led to a notable change over the last few decades in rising inequality across the UK. The evidence to support this claim is sizeable. The Resolution Foundation's (2023) *The Economy 2030 Inquiry* report sets out the size and scale of this dynamic. As a snapshot, Fig. 1 presents a powerful illustration of inequality in the UK relative to other Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.

In a similar vein, Dorling (2023, see also Brewer and Wernham 2022; Newman et al. 2024) highlights the extent to which Britain has become one of the most unequal countries in Europe with one in six families in financial hardship.[1] Indeed,

[1]Figures taken from 2022.

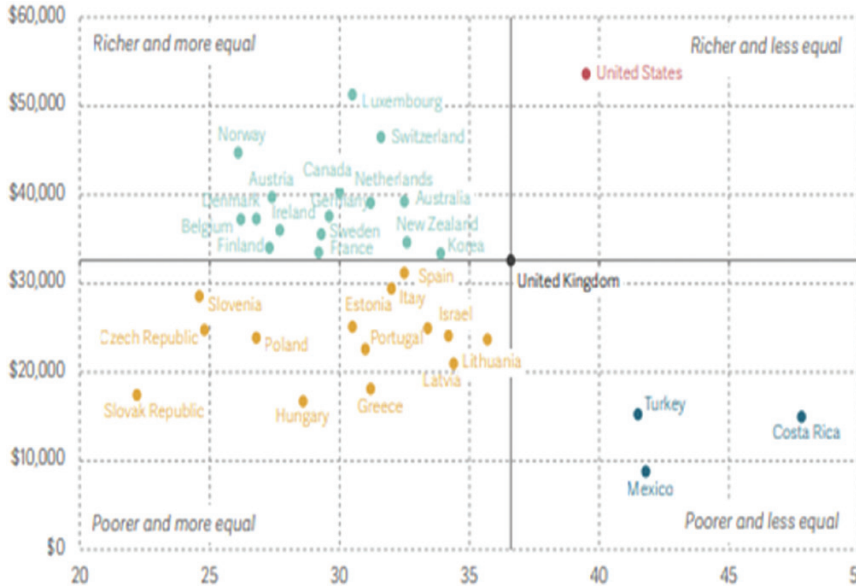

Figure 1 Gini coefficient and average household disposable income: OECD Countries, 2019. *Notes*: Income is equivalized and PPP adjusted. *Source*: *OECD, Income Distribution Database.*

certain policies such as the limit on the number of children who can receive child benefit, alongside wider cuts in welfare benefits over the last two decades, notably since 2010, has seen money redistributed from the poor to the well-off (Dorling 2023: 64). The incoherence and failure of policies around welfare, health, employment, housing, and education cumulatively reflect a continuing pattern of social disadvantage for the poorer and excluded sections of society. Moreover, in the context of the Westminster system, there have been few veto points which have been able to prevent severe cuts to services.

These patterns are also reflected across gender and race with systematic inequalities being reproduced in the economic and social system (see Sanders and Gains 2024; Hussain 2024). Women are disproportionately represented in lower income positions, on average earn less than men and are under-represented in politics. As an Institute for Fiscal Studies/Deaton review (2023) highlighted:

> Labour market disadvantage in terms of unemployment, occupational attainment and pay varies substantially. Rates of unemployment faced by Black groups are particularly high—more than double those of the White majority, and the gaps are even larger among young people. There are also differences by sex: while women tend to have slightly lower

> unemployment rates than men, Pakistani women have unemployment rates twice those of Pakistani men and over three times those of White majority women.

Hussain (2024) reveals how the nature of intersectionality among race, class, and gender creates a double (or triple) bind that sees certain sections of the population subject to multiple discriminations and disadvantages and this is reinforced through processes of political engagement.

Inequality affects political outcomes and the Westminster system, alongside the British political tradition, reflect institutional, and cultural structures that produce and reproduce inequality. The system by its very nature is elitist with limited, meaningful real participation in the policy process by voters. Over the last two decades, the principle remains, despite growing evidence to the contrary, that 'the man [*sic*] in Whitehall knows best'. Indeed, it is more than a cliché that in Britain voters are subjects and not citizens. The first past the post electoral system means that the limited political influence that does exist through voting is often concentrated heavily on pivotal voters in marginal seats. The 2024 election saw the most skewed outcome between the national vote share and seat allocation. The Labour Party secured only 33.7% of the popular vote, but which translated into 411 seats and a working majority of 172 (Institute for Government 2024b). As Curtice (2024) observes: '…never before has a party been able to form a majority government on so low a share of the vote… the most disproportional electoral outcome in British electoral history'.

Westminster's majoritarian and adversarial system ensures there is modest incentives for the development of consensual policy making which includes a wide range of voters. Patel (2023: 5) demonstrates that political engagement and access is significantly unequal. His evidence reveals that those on higher income levels are more likely to participate in politics and have access to decision makers. Consequently: '…policy is more responsive to the preferences of those at the top of the income distribution compared to those in the middle and the bottom. This is one reason to explain why income inequality has grown and remains high in this country'. It can lead to profound and skewed policy outcomes. Marmot (2020) reveals the ways in which health inequalities have increased resulting in sharply contrasting differences in life expectancies between the rich and the poor. More prosaically, almost every town in Britain has local authorities putting more resources into street cleaning and maintenance in wealthier communities, than poorer areas of towns and cities. The well-off are more politically active and so politicians are more likely to respond.

It is also the case, as Warner et al. (2024) highlight in this special issue, that the UK has considerable spatial inequalities that are both political and economic. Economic activity is highly disproportionate; for instance GDP per head is £59,855

in London compared to £27,692 in Yorkshire and £24,575 in the North East. This economic inequality is reinforced by political power which, despite devolution to English city regions, continues to be concentrated in London, with local and regional government highly dependent on Whitehall for funding (Warner et al. 2024.)

As many analysts of business politics have demonstrated overtime (see Miliband 1969; Poulantzas 1968; Lindblom 1977; Culpepper 2010), business has structural power in terms of anticipated reaction (i.e. not acting because of fear of the business reaction). Recent examples include the structural constraint in the case of the market reaction to the Liz Truss/Kwasi Kwarteng October 2022 'fiscal event' or the decision in 2024 by Stammer's Labour Government, not to revoke the removal of the cap on bankers' bonuses.

We had hoped our original article would have acted as a corrective to an issue we identified that directly relates to structured inequality, but which has disappointingly not been sufficiently addressed:

> Far too much work on British politics focuses exclusively on agents and often appears to assume that the playing field on which they compete is even. In contrast, we would argue that to conceptualize British politics more adequately, one needs to start with an appreciation that it is not an even playing field and that there are enduring slopes and gullies which favour some interests over others. (Marsh, Richards and Smith 2003: 310)

Indeed, we would elaborate by arguing elements of the literature on UK governance and British politics reflect a politicist approach which understates the crucial relationship between political and economic structures and processes. To illustrate the point: political biography and journalism, unsurprisingly, tends to adopt an overly agency-informed approach to explain outcomes, rather than a more nuanced narrative accommodating the importance of structures (see e.g. Shipman 2017; Cole and Heale 2022; Seldon and Newell 2023; Riley-Smith 2023); similarly, parliamentary and constitutional studies often employ an overly narrow approach to understanding power relations. Its analysis tends to be framed round how the UK Parliamentary system might be incrementally improved, without critically questioning the wider context of power in the British state (see King 2009; Flinders and Kelso 2011, Russell and Gover 2017, Norton 2020, Hazell and Foot 2022, Institute for Government 2024a). Elsewhere, elements of the literature on governance concentrate on the processes of administrative change and political interactions, seeing the fragmentation of the state as leading to a pluralization of the policy process (Jordan and Greenan 2012; Rhodes and Bevir 2016; Cairney; et al. 2019; Birrell et al. 2023). In so doing, it fails to problematize the state by eliding over the multiple asymmetries of power that exist within the political system.

The various dimensions to structured inequality have magnified over the last two decades, as has instability arising from tensions stemming from a decentralization-recentralization approach to governance. It is these themes, we examine below, as we survey both change and continuity in UK governance since the APM was originally published, but with a particular emphasis on the Coalition (2010–15) and the subsequent Conservative Administration (2015–24).

3. The changing patterns of UK governance

The last two decades have seen the further disaggregation of the state and increasing complexity in the governing process. A range of incremental, rolling reforms by 'hyper-active' ministers has generated new public governance mechanisms being layered on top of the existing Westminster model and the earlier New Public Management reforms of the 1980s (Diamond et al. 2024b).

The Coalition and subsequent Conservative Administrations built on previous Blair/Brown Labour Governments' approach to variegated forms of public service delivery, notably through the expanded use of private providers. For example, the 2012 Health Act sought to increase the use of private contractors in the health service (see Elliott et al. 2022). The use of the third sector became an important part of the framework for delivering public services. Austerity driven reform intended to generate greater efficiencies in the delivery of public goods, often led to a diminution of both public services and their real estate, as various services divested functions, while shunting problems and costs elsewhere (Hood and Dixon 2015; Solar and Smith 2021; Richards et al., 2024). An Institute for Government (2023a: 7) report noted this has led to 'crumbling' public services with, illustratively, NHS waiting lists at a record high, school infrastructure collapsing, a number of local authorities being declared bankrupt and the prison service in crisis:

> Cuts to local government funding at the start of the 2010s have forced local authorities to make their own cuts in response—usually falling on unprotected responsibilities…Even adult social care has become more closely rationed. Fragility has become a defining characteristic of today's public services.

Austerity produced some innovative forms of governance at the local level, but crucial to our framing is how it also complexified delivery. Different authorities created improvised and often temporary delivery networks, based on short-term, uncertain, and reduced funding levels (Solar and Smith 2022; Diamond et al. 2024b). Local bodies including health, housing, prisons, and policing were forced into a range of complicated, ad hoc arrangements to ensure a continuation of services within the context of severe cuts. The nature of these arrangements varied

across localities, further complexifying the local governance landscape (Clifford and Morphet 2022).

These changes occurred in the context of changing relationships at the centre of government. Key features include: an increasing reliance on a target culture as a tool for disciplining the fragmented state; the diminution of the central role of civil servants in policy making; and an increase in the role of politically appointed special advisors as the key relationships for ministers—and in particular the Prime Minister—in decision making (Diamond et al. 2016).

Whitehall continues to be organized round functional departments unsuited to the complex and integrated nature of many of the problems modern societies face (see Richards and Smith 2016). Two incongruent systems—disaggregated service delivery operating in conjunction with a centralized accountability model—have hampered the process of decision making and delivery. Past approaches in which ministers decided and departments implemented were not unproblematic, but at least offered a level of coherence and rationality. The shift to a mode in which ministers decide and local bodies implement, but without discretion, has produced sub-optimal outcomes and an incoherency both in delivery and accountability (Richards et al. 2023).

Crucial to this issue is the extent to which the literature on metagovernance overstates the role of the state as a single, monolithic strategic actor. In the UK, despite the highly concentrated nature of the political system and central government's asymmetric command of resources, the latter has consistently failed to act in a single, coherent and joined-up manner. It has been lacking in strategic oversight, reflecting an inability to 'steer' an increasingly fragmented and incoherent policy arena. This has been most apparent at the moments in which the greatest challenges have emerged—most notably Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. Both, in different ways, reveal a lack of strategic capacity [as well as the absence of meaningful planning] at the centre, compounded by an overly complex and fragmented governance landscape.

The argument we set out in the original APM, where we stressed the role of the BPT as the ideational dimension of centralization is of relevance here. At the time, we failed to clearly tease out an obvious, yet crucial point, borne out both by Brexit and COVID; the clear tension between the BPT's notion that 'Government knows best' and the shortcomings in the UK's political performance. Both events, alongside other smaller-scale examples, directly challenge this key BPT ideational assertion.

One dimension to this critique, again revealed by the evidence from recent waves of reform, is the degree of incompatibility between New Public Governance [NPG] and the Westminster model of government. The more NPG has been embedded, the more the contradictions and the implications for policy have revealed themesleves. Through depleting the central bureaucracy, ministers

have reduced their ability for direct, strategic control, instead relying on the principal-agent ontology original forged by NPM. The Johnson Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the scale of the issue.

3.1 The Johnson government's response to COVID-19

The evidence to the COVID-19 inquiry complements accounts elsewhere (see Calvert and Arbuthnott 2021; Seldon and Newell 2023; Warner et al., 2023) highlighting a dysfunctional centre. Lowlights included the Cabinet Office and Number 10 being overwhelmed, poor communication systems, outdated software, and insufficient joining-up of policy decisions overlaying a Byzantium system of governance. Innes (2023: 379), invoking parallels with Hayek's 'road to serfdom', frames the wider context; the market's inability to effectively regulate itself in the way neo-liberals purported it would, which has led to systemic, state intervention to resolve market failure.

The incoherence that has flowed from a combination of centralism, fragmentation, and hollowing out of the public sphere has most clearly, and tragically, been illustrated by the Johnson Government's COVID response. In terms of incoherence, the policy network[s] underpinning the COVID response (see Fig. 2) consisted of a convoluted and fragmented set of organizations. Evidence to the COVID inquiry highlights not just the complexity of the system, but that decision making was cumbersome, slow, and often contradictory.

From an APM perspective, there are several important observations. First, while the network was extremely complex, decision-making powers were located almost exclusively in Whitehall and highly dependent on the political leadership of the Prime Minister. There was limited emphasis on either networked or autonomous decision making, either at the territorial or regional level (indeed the then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, admitted that he did not see the need to consult with the leaders of Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland). Second, a mindset that 'Government knows best' shaped the decision by the Johnson Government to ignore local NHS and health care capacity—and existing knowledge, experience and data-resources—in its approaching to the Test and Trace programme (Richards et al. 2023). Instead, the Government opted to centralize the whole process, adopting an NPM-informed approach involving private contractors for the implementation of the programme. The subsequent cost and ineffectiveness of this choice meant Test and Trace rapidly failed to keep pace with the developing pandemic (Diamond and Laffin 2022).

COVID policy also reflected structural inequalities. The Office for National Statistics (2021) reveals that people in the most deprived areas of the country were more than twice as likely to die from the pandemic. As we noted above, women and people of colour were disproportionately affected by policy and ultimately

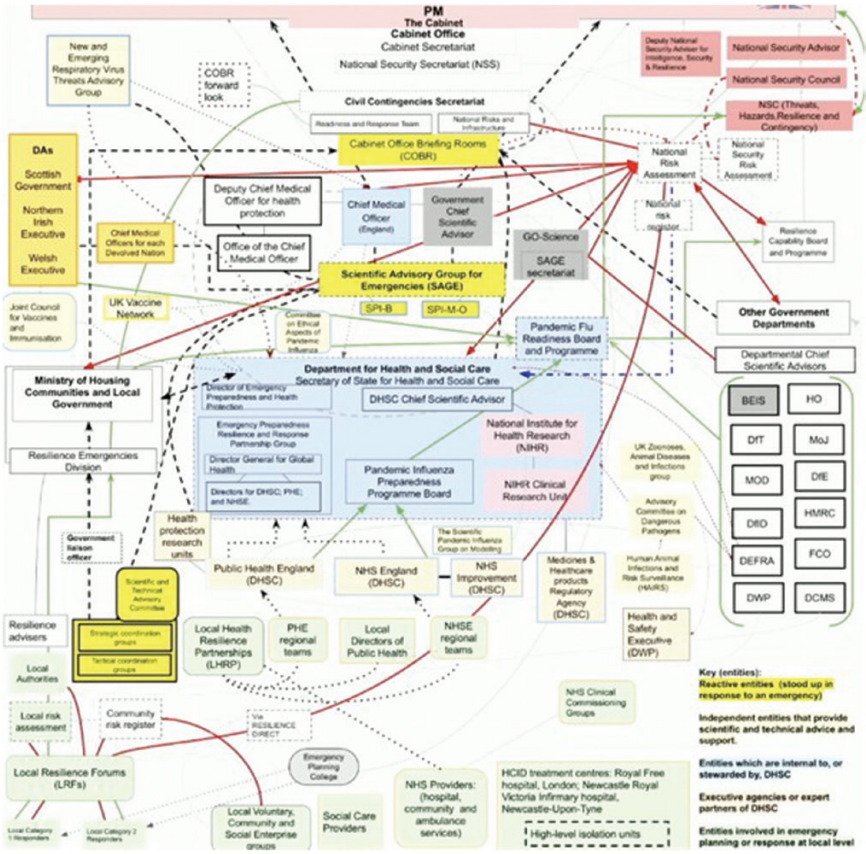

Figure 2 COVID response structures in the UK and England. *Source*: *UK Covid-19 Inquiry* (2024).

the virus. This inequality was built into all levels of the process. Women had less representation in decision-making processes, were less likely to front media presentations, and unconscious bias meant that procured PPE equipment was suited to men rather than women, despite the majority of health and care sector workers being women. In addition, women and ethnic minorities were disproportionately affected in terms of the impact of COVID on working from home and the absence of childcare and sick pay provision (Fawcett Society 2020).

What elements of the governance literature overlooks is the way in which institutionalized inequalities bias decision making and policy outcomes made at the centre of government in ways that reinforce existing imbalances of power and wealth (see Lowndes 2020; Waylen 2021; Akram 2023). In her evidence to the UK Covid-19 (2023) inquiry, the former Cabinet Office official Helen MacNamara's provides a powerful illustration of a systematic, institutional bias against women in the decision-making process:

> There was a disproportionate amount of attention given to more male pursuits in terms of the impact of restrictions and then the lessening of the same (football, hunting, shooting and fishing). There was a lack of guidance for women who might be pregnant or were pregnant and what those who were key workers should do (this was particularly significant in education and the NHS given the demographics of their workforces). The restrictions around birth and pregnancy care seemed unnecessarily restrictive and were comparatively slow to adapt.

The COVID inquiry highlights a patriarchal culture embedded in the Cabinet Office. Again, Helen MacNamara observes:

> The dominant culture was macho and heroic. Neither are the preserve of men (women can be macho and heroic too) but the culture was problematic because it meant debate and discussion was limited, junior people were talked over and it felt that everything was contaminated by ego.

A view the then Prime Minister Johnson later acknowledged in his own evidence to the same inquiry, while conceding the need for greater gender balance: 'Too many meetings were male dominated' (UK Covid-19 2023).

Finally, while recognizing the extraordinary challenges the pandemic presented to the incumbent government, questions arise over the Johnson Government's inappropriate use of networks to address the acute shortfall in PPE. In the first place, this topic sensitizes us to the abject failure in planning and preparation, raising further questions over the strategic capabilities of Whitehall. As the PAC (2023: 4) observed, this led the Department for Health and Social Care to solicit:

> …offers to provide PPE with no tendering process and received multiple offers from companies without any track record of delivering PPE and/or with varying track records and longevity. The Department then had insufficient time and resources to reflect properly on each offer, and under pressure caused by the sudden need for PPE, chose to accept very high levels of risk.

The net result of this high-risk strategy was that key actors with links to the incumbent government were afforded advantageous access through a 'high priority lane' in the awarding of PPE contracts (Morphet 2021; Calvert and Arbuthnott 2021; PAC 2023). A lack of due diligence, transparency, and the exclusive nature of this network led the PAC (2023:5) to conclude there were: '…serious defects in government's stewardship of public money'.

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic powerfully depicts most of the key features of the APM. Structured inequality was deeply embedded in shaping the

government's response and, as crucially, at times tragically, affecting outcomes for the population at large. A top-down approach to governance, informed by a 'government knows best' mentality, saw the overlooking of local knowledge and expertise, instead relying on private, unproven and often inadequate delivery mechanisms, developed in part, through inter-personal networks directly linked to the governing party. It revealed sizeable governance failings that challenge the notion of the Westminster Government as an effective and strategic meta-governor.

4. Decentralization, re-centralization, and the contingency of devolution and Brexit

The last two decades have seen the increasing emergence of a counter-veiling interplay between a power-hoarding centre, as characterized by the APM and an increasingly disparate and fragmented, delivery landscape. The contingency of a re-centralization—de-centralization dynamic has most clearly played out in the context of both territorial and regional devolutionary reform and the Westminster-skewed nature of Brexit. The question this raises is the extent to which, given the inherent contradictions involved, such a dynamic is sustainable or, put another way, can the centre hold? We explore this theme below.

4.1 Decentralization

Where power has been relinquished by the centre, for example in the devolutionary process first instigated by the Blair Labour Government, it has been driven not by any meaningful commitment by Westminster's governing class to the principle of subsidiarity or new localism. Instead, the centre has ceded power in response to pressures for reform aimed first at shoring up challenges to the wider Union and in turn, consolidating core executive power and control (Richards and Smith 2016). To properly understand the unique form of UK devolution requires us to take seriously the relationship between both the ideational and material realms. The devolutionary reforms pursued by all governments since 1997 have been shaped by the centralizing instincts of control associated with the British Political Tradition.

The devolutionary and decentralization processes set in train by the New Labour Government rhetorically appealed to pluralism in dispersing power to the sub-national level (see Blair 1996: 262). In practice, it created new centres of authority at both the territorial and local government levels, but with the principle of Parliamentary Sovereignty remaining an absolute. This mode of reform, while speaking the language of 'inter-dependent relationships', was one in which the centre sought to both control the process and retain an asymmetric set of resources, particularly financial.

The period under the Coalition Government (2010–15) saw something of a lull in the devolutionary/decentralization agenda. Much of its political capital was directed towards the pursuit of a highly centrally driven, austerity agenda. The subsequent Conservative Governments (2015–24) oversaw major changes in the structure of British politics through two countervailing forces. First, the process of devolution to city regions. There has long been a consensus amongst political parties that the UK is overly centralized and the need for more meaningful devolution in England. After 2015, this materialized, notably in Greater Manchester and the West Midlands, as progenitors alongside London, of an evolving metro-mayors model.

Nevertheless, there are issues in the way in which devolved authorities are defined and controlled by Whitehall. The powers of the new authorities are the consequence of an ad hoc process of negotiation, with Whitehall ultimately determining any powers at the local level. The approach between 2015 and 2024 involved the increasing use of competitive funding pots. In practice, funding became increasingly arbitrary, short term, and subject to decision making at the central level (Richards et al. 2023). Crucially, the powers of devolved authorities are neither stable, nor statutorily protected. As Newman and Kenny (2023) point out, Whitehall can continually reform the powers at local level and introduce new accountability mechanisms, new targets, or even new directives. More importantly, local government is on a multi-track reform pathway, which the Stammer Government has committed to complete by claiming it will: '…deepen devolution settlements for existing Combined Authorities. We will also widen devolution to more areas, encouraging local authorities to come together and take on new powers' (Labour Party 2024: 39). It is an approach which remains predicated on central government for resources and lacking in meaningful fiscal devolution.

Of particular relevance to our framing is the Johnson Government's flagship policy on levelling-up to address regional inequality (HM Government 2022). It fell short in offering a coherent, system-wide strategy to address the problem of over-centralization and the skewing of political and economic power in London and the South-East. As Diamond et al. (2023: 361) observe, reform proposals operated within rather than challenging the BPT, highlighting:

> …the contradiction between the limited approach to reform of central government as against sweeping proposals for change beyond Whitehall in sub-regional governance. That asymmetric approach is justified by concerns that wholesale reform of central government would lead inevitably to a loss of impetus. [*It*]…ignores the question of the deep ministerial reluctance to reform the Westminster model given the extensive centralised power flowing from it.

More generally, the 2015–24 devolutionary process failed to provide effective mechanisms for delivering significant policy change. Newman et al. (2023) conclude, the process of bidding for funds meant that short-termism was inherent in the system with funding often competitive, centrally controlled and time limited. This highlights how the current devolution process is asymmetric on two dimensions. First, devolution is distributed unevenly with some regions left out of the process or commanding significantly variable powers. Second, central government strongly frames the options and actions of local actors (see also Diamond et al. 2024b). Significantly, the extent of national control over local government prevents devolved bodies from sufficiently developing relationships at the local level, forging local accountability or responding to local needs. Such issues are compounded by the squeezing of budgets undermining local capacity for delivery (Newman and Gilbert 2022: 14).

From the perspective of the APM, devolution is limited, in terms of the redistribution of power from the centre and is effectively another governance mechanism (which may be useful in terms of blame shifting). This inherent weakness is illustrated by the fact that much of the effectiveness of the newly devolved institutions depends on the soft power of metro-mayors like Andy Burnham, Sadiq Khan, and Ben Houchen, rather than the meaningful transfer of resources and with it, accountability in the formal of legal and tax raising powers.

4.2 Brexit

The BPT has shaped the Brexit process and subsequent settlement which culminated in the recentralization of power to Westminster and Whitehall (see Hall et al., 2018; Diamond et al., 2019). This can be evidenced first in the closed settlement negotiated by a narrow set of elite actors drawn almost exclusively from the core executive (Bale 2023; Seldon and Newell 2023). Brexit involved limited consultation with other devolved tiers of UK government, resulting in a narrowly formulated settlement (Keating 2022). As Glencross (2023: 998) observes:

> Sovereignty was to flow back to Westminster from Brussels and that was the end of the story in essence. Tony Blair's devolution revolution, which gave rise to devolved legislatures in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, was not factored into the political or economic equation of how to leave the EU.

The net effect has been, in principle, the re-constitution of Parliamentary Sovereignty, but which in practise has translated in the consolidation of a power-hoarding approach based on Westminster executive sovereignty. The mantra of the Brexit campaign—'take back control'–went little beyond vague claims to

reassert Parliamentary sovereignty. There was certainly no attempt to rethink the nature of the UK's limited, democratic settlement.

Ideationally, Brexiteers appealed to a form of 'democratic nostalgia' (Weale 2016: 352): 'A desire to turn the clock back' to a lost golden age of Parliament, invoking a Halcyon-like view of the Westminster model. In material terms, this was translated in the narrowest of ways: '…the strengthening of executive control' (Weale 2018: 6). Indeed, Gamble (2021: 255) goes further:

> It is sometimes said that Brexiters are champions of parliamentary sovereignty, but that is incorrect. Some are but others are champions of state sovereignty and the pre-democratic power of the executive which the American colonists rebelled against. This is the doctrine of the Crown-in-Parliament which seeks the full exercise of prerogative powers, the heart of the Westminster model.

Formally, Brexit created the political space for the reassertion of the Westminster model with powers being predominantly re-centred to Whitehall, rather than a more de-centralizing approach involving devolved or local levels. Additionally, amongst the Conservative Party Right there is a view that there should be little restraint on the powers of the executive. Brexit saw calls for the reassertion of a hard sovereignty, where the ability of the courts or the European Convention on Human Rights to limit the actions of British government needed to be ended. This was illustrated by the 2023 Rwanda Bill. The Sunak Government sought to reassert Parliamentary Sovereignty by changing the law to reverse a ruling by the Supreme Court, whilst disapplying elements of the Human Rights Acts to prevent further legal challenge (Institute for Government 2023b). From this perspective, we can extend the Gamble argument to argue:

> Over the last two decades, the more the processes of governance have fragmented and the less able the UK has been to determine its policy direction internationally, the more Westminster's governing class has sought to take back control and reassert a strong, if mythical, conception of Sovereignty.

This is closely aligned with a wider process we identify as de-constitutionalization, a dynamic that sits comfortably within the British Political Tradition.

4.3 Brexit, de-constitutionalization, and the British Political Tradition

The post-Brexit settlement has seen an acceleration in the process of what is often referred to as 'democratic backsliding' (James 2023). In the context of this article, we develop this notion more specifically as that of 'de-constitutionalization'

informed by a harder conception of sovereignty. The Johnson Government driven by the 'populist' Conservative Right's notion of Parliamentary Sovereignty and legitimized by an eighty-seat majority secured at the 2019 election, normatively located all political power in Parliament. This world view combined with the scale of concentrated power at the centre of the Westminster system of government led to a rapid erosion of traditionally accepted constitutional precepts that framed UK decision making (Seldon and Newell 2023).

Ideationally, the British constitution is reproduced and is reconstituted through the everyday actions of the political and official elite (Hennessy 1996; Richards and Smith 2004; Bogdanor 2019). The lack of a written constitution means that it is sustained through the performative actions of those involved in its recreation, senior Whitehall officials and ministers. From the point of view of asymmetric power, this means that the role of citizens (or subjects) is largely excluded from the process of constitutional reproduction.

These performances take place within a particular institutional context that is heavily shaped by the ideas associated with the British Political Tradition and materially expressed through the characteristics of the Westminster Model. The rules of the game for this institutional context operate and are predicated on a 'good chaps theory of government' (Blick and Hennessy 2019). Here, the governing class, imbued with a particular set of social characteristics, should be trusted to maintain good governance. An approach that neatly dovetails with the BPT notion that 'Government knows best'. Yet the point at which good chaps go rogue, affords the opportunity for a debasing of the rules of government. Such an eventuality played out after 2019 under Boris Johnson, a period framed as 'chaotic', 'dysfunctional', and: '…the worst No. 10 operation since the modern office was created in December 1916' (Seldon and Newell, 2023: 482).

Asymmetries in the political system have been reinforced by an explicit process of what we label de-constitutionalization that occurred largely during the Johnson administration. It saw the flexibility of the constitution over-stretched purely for political purposes. As Sanders (2023) notes, Johnson persistently violated the constitution. He illegally prorogued Parliament, frequently lied in the chamber, ignored the advice of his ethics advisor and the Committee on Standards in Public Life, violated the rules on appointments to the House of Lords and interfered in the role of the Electoral Commission.

The key argument here is not that 'Johnson did this', but that the rules of the game, shaped by the BPT, with such limited veto points, afforded him the opportunity to act in a particular manner, unchecked for an extended period. His actions should not be read off as one of personal preferences, but instead understood as the manifestation of a populist appeal, whereby the strong leader can bypass constitutional constraints and norms, to legitimize unconstitutional actions through a direct appeal to the people (Weale 2018). Again, there are parallels with the

passage of Sunak's 2024 Safety of Rwanda Act, where Parliamentary Sovereignty and the dominance of the Executive was asserted over all other elements of the constitution. As Lord Frost noted: 'I didn't foresee several KCs describing parliamentary sovereignty, the most fundamental doctrine of our constitution, as just an "assumption" and suggesting the courts could take it upon themselves to overturn it' (quoted from Elliot 2023).

Both the Johnson and post-Johnson period of Conservative government saw attempts to use Parliamentary Sovereignty to reassert the dominance of the executive. The idea of a functioning, yet unwritten constitution having the capacity to constrain politicians, has under-estimated the highly political approach by the then governing Conservative Party. It attempted to shape established rules beyond acceptable bounds through a desire to reassert, indivisible and uncontested sovereignty. In many ways, frustration with the difficulties of governing led to calls for power to be pulled back to the centre, to take back control, by undermining the constraints on Parliament. At a wider level, this is seen in the withdrawal from the European Union and the growing opposition to other international organizations such the European Court of Human Rights. At a more micro-policy level, examples include policy interference to prevent local authorities imposing 20 mph speed limits or Ulta-Low Emissions Zones. Hence, the Conservative period in government (2010–24), did not contradict the British political tradition, but was instead a continuation of the Thatcherite project of politicizing policy decisions and concentrating power in the executive (Smith 2015). This on-going process of politicization (illustrated most clearly by Brexit) means that decision making is not consensual, but is increasingly majoritarian and integrated almost universally into all areas of the policy process.

5. Conclusion: the revised APM

We conclude by arguing that the evidence above makes a compelling case for the need for a revised APM. Our adaptation of the original APM seeks to account for several elements of both continuity and change which have taken place over the last 20 years. In terms of change, the most obvious has been the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. Membership of the EU was a key theme of the original 'hollowing-out' narrative. As discussed above, the post-Brexit settlement to emerge is one narrowly framed through the prism of restoring powers to central government and restoring Parliament Sovereignty, rather than a more pluralistic approach informed by the principle of subsidiarity.

Unlike Rhodes's DPM, the key features of the original APM model have more than endured the test of time and in many ways have been fortified. Of note is the extent to which inequality has increased overtime, so reinforcing structured inequality. Elsewhere, central government has attempted to shore up its power

and authority over an increasingly disjointed and fragmented policy terrain. It has sought to steer [intervene] more and more to sustain control over an incoherent governance landscape. What we identify as a decentralization–recentralization approach. This has materialized in a way that is far removed from the notion of a meta-governor acting in a strategically selective manner.

The contradictions underpinning this dynamic are becoming ever more apparent. They relate to an argument which we originally understated regarding a key ideational theme of the BPT—that 'government knows best'. The evidence over the last two decades makes this notion harder to sustain, despite it being a core legitimizing tenet of the Westminster Model. It also leads to a wider set of questions regarding whether the centre can hold in the face of inherent tensions and growing pressure for more pluralistic and devolved approaches to power. The obvious counter to this argument is the extent to which the BPT as an ideational framework sustaining the Westminster Model is an archetypal example of path dependency; its resilience and adaptability demonstrated by its longevity. Will a Stammer Labour Government offer a distinct break from the past? Its 2024 manifesto was titled 'Change', but critics reading-off the commitments contained within might suggest 'continuity' may prove to be a more apposite label.

We conclude then by folding these characteristics into our revised APM which we offer as a means of understanding British politics, both now and moving forward.

1. British society continues to be marked by the asymmetric distribution of resources which affect the institutions and process of British politics. Crucially, over the last 20 years, inequality has increased, which in turn has magnified the asymmetries in operation.
2. The UK's governing institutions and processes are underpinned by a British Political Tradition that emphasizes a top-down view of democracy, sustained by the idea that the 'government knows best'. This tradition has reinforced weak constitutionalism, whereby the Westminster Government has been effectively able to change 'constitutional' rules to serve political interests leading to a process of deconstitutionalization under the guise of the reassertion of Sovereignty.
3. Governance continues to be best characterized by exchange relations between various actors, but it is still the case that such exchanges are most often asymmetric. This flows from the structured position of the core executive which commands greater access to a unique set of resources—financial, bureaucratic, legal, etc. Yet, the capacity of the core executive to sustain this asymmetry faces a range of challenges.
4. The core executive remains segmented and its ability to operate in a joined-up or unified manner is becoming more challenging. NPM-driven reforms have

resulted in the 'hollowing out' of both local and central capacity, with a weaker centre seeking to manage an increasingly fragmented service delivery landscape.

5. This challenges the assumption that the core executive, as a 'meta-governor', acts in a rational and strategically selective manner. Often, this is not the case with the core executive's approach to governance characterized as the chaotic and arbitrary distribution of responsibilities and powers contributing to an increasingly incoherent state.
6. This is most clearly borne out in the growth of two countervailing dynamics—greater concentration and politicization of decision making accompanied by growing decentralization and the fragmentation of policy delivery.
7. The tension between decentralization and recentralization has become increasingly embedded over the last two decades, but notably intensified post-Brexit. The latter has seen a 'power-hoarding' response by the core executive under the auspices of reclaiming Parliamentary Sovereignty. At the same time, decentralization has continued through the roll-out of devolution to sustain legitimacy in the Westminster system, the consequences for which have exacerbated incoherence.
8. Crucially, the more the processes of governance have fragmented and the less able the UK has been to determine its policy direction internationally, the more Westminster's governing class has sought to centralize control and reassert a strong, if mythical, conception of Sovereignty.
9. This returns us to the view that the central ideational tenet sustaining the Westminster Model—'that Government know best'—is under ever greater strain as the failings in UK governing performance become more prominent.

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