**Introduction**

When BJPIR was launched twenty-five years ago, a broadly held view was that the UK had a stable political system – organised round the fabled Westminster model (WM) – though it was one not without its critics. Today, any discussion of British politics is incomplete without some reference to crisis – be it constitutional, political, social or economic. Indeed, it is a key theme throughout the contributions in this special issue. In this context, we frame crisis in this article as stemming from the failure of political leaders over time to adapt political and economic institutions to the changing domestic and international context (see Richards et al., 2014). The resulting loss of governing capacity, in terms of economic development and public service delivery, has led to a growing distrust in the political system (Richards and Smith, 2015). In our view, the seeds of the current crisis extend well beyond the last twenty-five years, but, during that period, they have come increasingly to the fore. Central to the present malaise woven throughout British politics is an intensification of the contradiction between a nineteenth century political system and the demands of a modern economy and polity. Governments have come to power committed to significant governance changes, but without exception such commitments have been short-lived and/or ineffective, thus further embedding the contradictions of the British state (see Richards et al., 2019).

The crisis besetting the UK has four key drivers: the cumulative impact of austerity on public services; the post-Brexit readjustment shock; the contradictions of neo-liberalism, alongside New Public Management (NPM) informed reforms to the state; and the crisis in the Conservative Party. All these factors have some role in the current crisis. Here though, we contend that the antecedents have much deeper roots that lie in the underlying structures of the British state and its system of government which, in their modern guise, have increasingly led to incoherence in governance processes and outcomes.

For this special issue, our approach takes seriously the guidance set out in the founding editorial of BJPIR:

The analysis of contemporary British politics should…be sensitive to the importance of ‘time’ or ‘history’. For a discipline which partly grew out of the study of the past, one of the most disturbing aspects of British political science over the last twenty years is the extent to which it is now confined to the present (The Editors, 1999: 3).

We emphasise the importance of understanding the historical underpinnings of the current crisis. Our central argument is that British government has operated in the context of a *mythical* constitution and a British Political Tradition (BPT) which have served not as a blueprint for good governance, but as a ‘legitimising myth’ for the continuation of an elitist approach to politics and policymaking (see Richards and Smith, 2004; Marsh and Hall, 2007; Hall, 2011; Richards and Smith, 2015; Marsh, Richards and Smith, 2024). What is increasingly clear is that the gap between myth and reality has become untenable, with the actuality of governing in the 21st century drifting away from a nineteenth century model of government that has long since ceased to be fit for purpose. The net result is incoherence.

We argue that crisis is endemic in British government because, as Anderson (1964) and Nairn (1977a) argued over half a century ago, the British state, sustained in part by regressive nationalism, has failed to modernise away from essentially aristocratic forms of government. It contains a set of deeply embedded structural problems that successive governments have failed to address. Where reform has occurred, devolution being one such example, it has been both partial and incremental, effectively grafting change on to a flawed system in a process of ‘institutional layering’ (Thelen, 2009). This has created a paradox: reforms have tended to run counter to, or undermine, the key principles of the WM and the BPT, but without proactively replacing it. This has exacerbated the very contradictions in the governance process that reform sought to address. The most notable example of this tendency is the incompatibility between a centralising mindset, informed by the ‘government knows best’ attitude among Westminster’s governing class, and the emergence of a fragmented governance landscape over the last forty years, largely because of NPM-informed reforms. It has resulted in an increasingly dysfunctional approach to public administration, as successive governments have sought to manage the resulting unintended consequences created by near constant muddling through (Warner et al., 2023). This ‘chaotic fragmentation’ in turn has led to an ‘explosion of control requirements’ as politicians and civil servants continue to prioritise central control, despite having reduced the number of effective levers at their disposal (Innes, 2023: 170-171). This is not the story of Westminster and Whitehall acting effectively as a ‘strategic metagovernor’, but rather involves the UK lurching towards becoming an *incoherent state* (Richards et al., 2023).

The article begins by exploring the origins of the crisis in the historical roots of both the WM and the British constitution. We then set-out how successive governments have dealt with governance weaknesses through incremental, rather than a system-wide approach to reform. We then provide an assessment of the dimensions to and scale of the current crisis, before suggesting that only fundamental changes to the nature of UK governance have any real possibility of resolving deep, structural problems.

**Elite Constructs in British Politics: The Constitution, the Westminster Model and the British Political Tradition**

The British constitution can be understood as the culmination of a series of events across the nineteenth century which became embodied in a set of rules conceptualized and explicated by a range of elite writers. From this perspective, the modern constitution should be regarded as an elite bargain codified by a set of influential political commentators – notably Bagehot (1893), Dicey (2007), Jennings (1959), Low (1904) and Laski (1951). A distinctive aspect of the British constitution is the degree to which it is established not by law or formal statute, but by the understandings of actors whose interpretations of the constitution constitute the rules of government (Smith, 2024). King (2009) regards this as unproblematic: ‘It was left to a limited number of writers on the constitution to define for the British, over a long period of years, what their uncodified constitution was and what it meant’. In contrast, Hennessy (1996), himself not ill-disposed to defending the Whiggish tradition, offers a more cautionary view, arguing that the British constitution is made up on the ‘back of an envelope’. He argued that in practice, interpretations were left to the most senior civil servant of the day, the Cabinet Secretary. Philip Ziegler more caustically suggests the Constitution: ‘…has worked on an extremely fluid basis of instantly invented precedents’ (cf. Hennessy, 1996: 46).

Over time, adaptations to the constitution have involved elite reinterpretation to ensure core features are maintained, while allowing for the accommodation of social pressures for reform from below. In this sense, political elites have been adept at pursuing a form of Whiggish adaptation reflected in the capacity of British political institutions to incorporate limited, moderate changes (Butterfield, 1931; Tivey, 1988). Concessions were made because of internal and external pressure to ensure the continuity of the system and to prevent radical breaks which would democratise the system in a transformative way. Proponents characterised this as a form of British exceptionalism; an organic approach emphasising order and continuity through incremental adaptation. The contrast they wished to draw is with the dislocated, disordered, often revolutionary pathways experienced elsewhere (Oakeshott, 1962; Birch, 1964; Greenleaf, 1987). Norton (2012: 123) offers a standard defence of this form of British exceptionalism: ‘Britain is the exemplar of the empirical approach. Its neighbours in Western Europe, not least Italy and France, exemplify the rationalist approach’. In our view, this complacency regarding the supposed superiority of the British political system is a major part of the problem. But it is a complacency which is increasingly difficult to defend.

Importantly, the constitution and relatedly the WM are underpinned by an absolutist conception of sovereignty (see Dicey, 2007 [1915]: 30). The emphasis on the role of the Crown-in-Parliament meant that Parliament effectively became the embodiment of absolute monarchical power. As the authority of the monarch declined, power did not shift to the people, but to Parliament. Crucially then, the principle of Parliamentary Sovereignty assumed that power flowed from above, rather than being ceded from below, with the British people as subjects not citizens. They are subject to elite rule, predicated on the principle of the Crown-in-Parliament, equating in a modern setting to Executive dominance.

In ideational terms, the principle of absolutist sovereignty, expressed more broadly in the BPT, remains the loadstone of the British constitution, but it is largely mythical. All states and political actors are subject to restraint, but this conception was developed at a time when the British Empire faced few limits on its power. This imperial past also imparts a racialised legacy that permeates the institutions of the state, challenging ‘elite’ normative assumptions grounded in British exceptionalism and lingering analytical blind spots regarding race and racism (Shilliam, 2018; Akram, 2023). Following Brexit, the associated controversy surrounding immigration policy and the current crisis in the Conservative Party, reflect attempts to reassert a romanticised myth of Parliamentary Sovereignty without an adequate appreciation of this inheritance. As we argue below, the Conservatives’ approach, particularly in its latter years in government (2019-24), has not reflected a principled preservation of the UK Constitution. Instead, it has chosen to de-constitutionalise British politics by running roughshod over constitutional norms that were meant to restrain politicians to reassert elite dominance (Marsh et al., 2024). In addition, far from dealing with the crisis of governance or societal grievances, these moves have clearly deepened them.

Of course, there have been attempts at reform, which we briefly examine in the next section. But as we shall see, they have at best been half-hearted, in large part because both politicians and civil servant have continued to adhere to the mantra that ‘Government knows best’ as the vehicle to promote short-term, political interests. Over the next three sections, we look at these various reforms, assessing the space and capacity for transformative change between 1964-2024.

**The Failure to Reform Britain’s Premodern State**

To invoke Tom Nairn (1977b), the British state remains ‘premodern’. Britain has muddled through by relying on a set of premodern traditions and practices – largely a monarchical and aristocratic form of government – which have endured through a capacity to incorporate first the bourgeoisie (nineteenth century) and subsequently the working class (twentieth century) into its existing structures. Popular support for the British state was in part drawn from a regressive form of nationalism bound up in the mythology of its institutions and imperial history.

Anderson (1964) suggests that the foundations of the post-war crisis lay in the failure of the bourgeoisie to establish a modern state, leading to a situation where powerful economic forces confront a weak state, with the UK never establishing the sort of modern, bureaucratic governance that developed in other European powers:

Britain stands revealed as a sclerosed, archaic society, trapped and burdened by its past successes, now for the first time aware of its lassitude, but as yet unable to overcome it. The symptoms of the decline have been catalogued too frequently and copiously to need repetition here: a torpid economy, a pinched and regressive education, a listless urban environment, a demoralized governing class, a wretched cultural provincialism. All these burdens of the present have their origins in blessings of the past. This past is not merely that of the imperialist era, as so many socialist—and capitalist—critics now repeat. It extends both backwards and forwards far beyond the late 19th century, which, as has been indicated, in the main saw only a final consolidation of the superstructure of modern British society (Anderson, 1964: 26).

To some degree the Anderson critique was widely accepted. At the time, the Profumo scandal and the emergence of an aristocrat as Prime Minister (Alec Douglas Home) shone a light on the increasingly anachronistic aristocratic, elite rule. It provided the backdrop for various attempts at reform throughout the next three decades.

Harold Wilson’s 1964-70 Government committed to modernising the British state and economy, harnessing the ‘white heat of technology’. The reality was somewhat more mundane, with reform rooted in the Whiggish tradition of incremental adaptation, rather than the more radical, Continental rationalist tradition – a pattern set to repeat itself over the ensuing decades.

The hallmark of Wilson’s reform programme was more akin to institutional tinkering. The Fulton Committee (1968) proposed a more modern type of civil service, notably including a new Department of Economic Affairs [DEA]. The latter with its National Economic Plan was intended to drive productivity growth and break the UK out of its boom/bust economic cycle. Both, however, ran into sand.

As Kellner and Crowther Hunt (1980) analysed, the civil service was able to thwart the most radical elements of the Fulton Committee as recommendations for radical change were watered down; a pattern repeated in the Blair years. Similarly, the Treasury undercut the DEA and, not for the first-time, fiscal orthodoxy undermined any idea of economic expansion. There was the additional failure of Labour’s ‘soft’ social democracy. Never able to fully establish a stable, corporatist arrangement with business and the unions, the economy was increasingly disrupted by industrial relations conflicts and growing problems with the balance of payments, sterling and inflation (Middlemas, 1979). Labour’s 1964 manifesto promised *The New Britain*, but the Wilson Government left office overwhelmed by the contradictions of Labourism (Miliband, 1972) having had to make significant cuts in welfare spending (Bale, 2019).

The subsequent Heath Government (1970-74) again promised a modernization of Britain’s economy and reform to Whitehall, but its approach contained commitments both to tradition and to modernisation. Several measures sought to strengthen the centre of government, including a commitment to proper policy analysis and long-term planning. A newly created Central Policy Review Staff was tasked to focus on strategy and horizon scanning. In a precursor to managerialism, Heath introduced new management systems for controlling public spending and ‘super ministries’ intended to resolve the problems of departmental silos. The Conservative administration of 1970-74 was though short-lived, weakened by a series of policy U-turns, escalating economic problems and widespread industrial unrest (Warner, 2023).

 The growing contradictions of the British state were further illustrated by the 1974-79 Labour government which, constrained by continuing economic and industrial relations challenges, found itself cornered into seeking a loan from the IMF. The imposition of ‘Cash Limits’ on spending undermined many of the principles of the Keynesian Welfare State. A powerful, though erroneous (Hay, 1996), critique took hold - spurred on by newly emerging centre-right think tanks like the Centre for Policy Studies and the Institute for Economic Affairs - on the themes of government overload and ungovernability. It was advanced in both the academic literature (King, 1975; Brittan, 1975; Jay, 1977) and by a small, but increasingly prominent set of Conservative politicians – Enoch Powell, Keith Joseph and Nicholas Ridley. In the midst of this ‘first wave crisis’ (Richards et al., 2019), Britain’s pre-modern state limped on with its Constitution, whilst the WM’s and BPT’s governing framework remained almost wholly untouched. Further challenges lay ahead, with closer integration into the European Union, questions about the sustainability of the ‘elective dictatorship’ (Hailsham, 1978) and growing tensions with the Union, particularly in Scotland and Northern Ireland (Mackintosh, 1977).

**Muddling Through: Thatcherism’s New Public Management and New Labour’s Constitutional Tinkering**

The Thatcher/Major Governments (1979-97) and then New Labour (1997-2010) adopted contrasting (and to some degree contradictory) approaches to the question of reforming Britain’s pre-modern state. Thatcherism was presented as a neo-liberal ‘revolution’ concerned with reducing the role of the state, cutting public expenditure and unleashing the market as the mechanism to modernise the UK economy, offload costly nationalised monopolies and discipline the public sector. This neo-liberal inspired project has been characterised, somewhat inaccurately, as a ‘hollowing out’ of the state (Rhodes, 1997).

Throughout this period, various waves of NPM informed reforms were rolled out, but quickly appeared less viable in complex policy areas such as health or education, where quasi-markets did not drive a performance transformation (Hood and Dixon, 2015). From the late 1980s, NPM notably saw the pursuit of arms-length agencies to deliver public services. Subsequently, in the 1990s the creation of separate entities (such as trusts) in health and education followed on the pretext of further promoting competition and increasing the power of citizens as consumers.

Two points are crucial to our argument here. First, despite their claims to be radical reforming administrations, Conservative governments throughout this period left the Constitution largely untouched, committed as they were to the BPT and the mythology surrounding the WM’s system of government, much to the chagrin of some on the New Right (Hoskyns, 2000). The Thatcherite ideology might have emphasised the need for less state intervention in the economy, but, at the same time, it emphasised a strong, rather than responsive, government. The outmoded and unreformed political tradition remained in place.

Second, although Britain’s pre-modern state continued largely intact, despite the advancement of neo-liberalism throughout this period, the imposition of managerialism created a major problem; NPM proved increasingly incompatible with the value system of Westminster and Whitehall (Smith, 2009). If Parliament is sovereign and accountability and responsibility resides with ministers who answer to the House of Commons, how can decisions be made in agencies or by private organisations? If one school performs better than another, who is responsible, the Headteacher or the Secretary of State for Education? As such, as Marsh et al. (2024), Powers (1999) and Innes (2023), among others, have observed, NPM did not lead to the emergence of a differentiated polity (Rhodes, 1997), but instead, the development of new mechanisms of control. The incompatibility of the traditional notion of ministerial responsibility and centralised control with increasingly complex and fragmented governance systems, meant that managers were not left to manage (see Diamond et al., 2024). Ministers operating in an adversarial polity, based on a ‘winner-takes-all’ electoral system, were primarily focussed on *political* outcomes not *policy* outcomes.

The key point here is that the value system of the BPT and the WM embeds central control, but NPM points to decentralisation and marketisation, weakening that control. The paradox is less effective control, paranoia at poor outcomes and attempts to reassert control, further undermining decentralisation. It is an archaic and linear approach to ministerial accountability that does not account for how governance has changed. In relation to the market (commercial confidentiality etc), the levers of control are even fewer and more opaque, but service delivery is ostensibly cheaper, at least in the short term. From this perspective, there is an obvious incompatibility between the BPT/WM and the consequences of NPM. The unforeseen consequence, as we see below, is that the route map of reform pursued by the UK, guided by a pre-modern state navigator but tracking to a set of a market-informed reforms, was a mess, its end destination an increasingly incoherent system of government.

The incoming 1997 Blair Labour Government initially offered hope that it had understood the inherent contradictions between the WM/BPT and NPM, by staking out an alternative approach to resolving the problems of Britian’s pre-modern state. It came to office with significant popular support and an improving economy. An opportunity opened up to significantly weaken the grip of the BPT.

Like Harold Wilson, Blair focussed on modernising Britain by promising a range of constitutional reforms. Indeed, Labour’s period in office saw the only sustained and conscious era of constitutional adaptation in modern British history. It was committed, among other things, to electoral reform, devolution, introducing freedom of information legislation and reform of the House of Lords. Marsh and Hall (2007) chart and explain the fate of this constitutional reform agenda. In each case, the reforms were either not introduced or they were deradicalized (see also Gamble, 2010; Richards et al., 2019).

 Overall, this was a missed opportunity for major constitutional change. New Labour largely opted for the status quo and working within the established traditions of the Party and the core tenets of the WM and BPT (Diamond, 2021). It fell into the trap of adopting an incremental and limited approach to reform, falling well-short when it came to fundamentally addressing the inadequacies of Britain’s pre-modern state.

 To compound these shortcomings, throughout its time in office, New Labour continued to build on, rather than replace, the top-down, managerialist approach to reforming public services (Richards and Smith, 2006). A new wave of NPM emerged in the form of an extensive use of targets, league tables and public-private partnerships. Again, the tensions between NPM and the WM mindset were clear to see, as Blair was concerned to strengthen the centre of government and increase capacity round the Prime Minister. The creation of a Delivery Unit saw the Prime Minister intervene very directly in the detail of policy delivery (Smith et al., 2011). This might have produced some much-needed improvements in standards, but the top-down model neglected to meaningfully empower local actors or embed long-term systemic resilience.

**From a Pre-Modern to an Incoherent State: Austerity, Complexity and De-constitutionalisation**

The combination of the 2008-09 financial crash and the 2010 election of a Conservative-Liberal Democratic Coalition Government committed to austerity, led to an unprecedented squeeze on the public sector (Crawford and Johnson, 2015). The impact of cuts at both central and local levels further reduced the capacity, but intensified the complexity, within the governance processes. The Coalition increasingly relied on third sector organizations and short-term funding for the delivery services. This created a complex pattern of overlapping services, often functioning through personal connections and with increasingly confused lines of accountability (Solar and Smith, 2022). It also launched a new wave of devolution deals, at first under the tagline of the Northern Powerhouse, but which later focused on city-regions. Most commentators initially supported the agenda, while eliding over the extent to which devolution was strictly controlled from Whitehall, or more precisely the Treasury. English devolution was a top-down process, rolled-out in an ad hoc and inconsistent fashion, rather than being informed by the principle of subsidiarity. Different regions were subjected to a range of variegated requirements based on the offer of a complex and changeable set of powers (Richards and Smith, 2016).

The evolution of the metro-mayor model in the form of combined authorities creates a further contradiction to the Westminster system. The problem is that the metro mayors have no formal place in the constitution and their powers are contingent on the whims of the executive. The significance of the metro-mayors model to some degree depends on their effectiveness with soft power. We have already seen metro mayors carving out their roles with unanticipated consequences for central-local relations (Giovannini, 2021). As Newman (2024) illustrates, the government has: ‘…this new unknown beast, which is a load of Labour mayors that have quite a powerful voice and speak quite clearly for parts of the country that have become politically important’. This creates further uncertainty in the system because much of the power of the region is about politically negotiated settlements with local leaders, not the establishment of a clearly defined framework of powers for each layer of government. It is unlikely this process can be reversed. Indeed, the Stammer Labour Government committed to ‘complete the process’ in the lead up to the 2024 General Election. But, the approach is one that remains multi-track and, in so doing, has the potential to compound geographic inequality, in new and unforeseen ways. It further amplifies the British state’s incoherence, with powers varying across region and no clear procedures for establishing appropriate governance mechanisms (Newman et al., 2024; Warner et al., 2024).

 The potential dislocation wrought by the 2016 decision for the UK to leave the European Union led to the most de-stabilising period of Conservative Government with five Prime Ministers coming and going up to and including the 2024 General Election. Of most note was the 80-seat majority commanded by the Johnson Government in 2019, delivered on the back of appeals to ‘Get Brexit Done’ and a Labour Party itself plagued by infighting under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. Brexit presented a window of opportunity to once and for all see much needed wholesale reforms to Britian’s pre-modern state. Instead, what was served up was a backward-looking Eton-mess, informed by what Weale (2016) labels ‘democratic nostalgia’; an approach predicated on an ephemeral desire to fortify the primacy of the WM through the reassertion of a strong notion of sovereignty. It masked what was absent below the surface - a coherent blueprint for post-Brexit Britian, both domestically and internationally. This void predictably led the Government to double down on the UK’s power-hoarding constitutional settlement by pursuing a well-trodden path of muddling through, ad hocery and centralisation (Ward, 2021). Incremental adaptation once again was the only game going on in the Westminster town.

What is revealing is that, despite appeals to reassert Parliamentary Sovereignty, the Johnson administration did not seek to deliver on this through a constitutional process of renewal and reinvigoration. The ‘Take Back Control’ slogan was a highly effective rhetorical device that linked free movement and immigration policy with the grievances of left-behind ‘white working class’ communities, drawing on a ‘racialised melancholia’ attached to Britain’s imperial past (Shilliam, 2018). This is closely associated with Nairn’s depiction of England’s ‘inherently regressive’ nationalism (Wellings and Kenny, 2019) and elite strategies to bind ‘the people’ into a nationalist vision that can then be deployed to legitimate ‘executive centralisation’ (Ward and Ward, 2023). It is unsurprising that the Johnson Government opted to jettison many of the principles it claimed to defend by appealing to national myths.

Our argument here is that the asymmetries in the political system have been reinforced by an explicit process of what we label ‘de-constitutionalisation’ that occurred largely during the Johnson administration. This version of ‘democratic backsliding’ (James, 2023) saw the flexibility of the constitution once again over-stretched purely for political ends (Barnard, 2022). 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 undermined the independence of the Electoral Commission. In addition, there have been an increasing number of occasions through the recent period when ministers have ignored or overruled Civil Service advice, not just in terms of policy which is legitimate, but in cases where the government threatened to break international law in relation to the EU withdrawal agreement (Rutter, 2022). The key point here is that these decisions were not just personal, but a consequence of the asymmetric structures of the British political system. The very flexibility of Britain’s uncodified constitution, reliant as it was on the ‘good chaps [sic] theory of government’ (see Priestly, 1986; cf. Blick and Hennessy, 2019) – itself an elite construct based on the notion that those drawn from a particular social strata would understand and respect the informal rules of the game – ironically created: ‘…the opportunity for one of its own to traduce the very value-set they would have been expected to uphold’ (Marsh et al., 2024: xx).

What we see in the Johnson and post-Johnson Conservative Governments (2019-24) are attempts to use Parliamentary Sovereignty’s mythological status to reassert the dominance of the executive. The idea of a functioning, yet uncodified constitution having the capacity to constrain politicians, has not withstood the highly political approach adopted by the most recent Conservative Governments (2019-24). Executive control of the Parliamentary agenda was regularly used as a tool to stifle debate, drive legislation through and limit the scrutiny function of committees (Dunt, 2023). The recent period has seen repeated attempts to reshape established rules beyond acceptable bounds, justified by appeals to the reassertion of 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’ - paradoxically by undermining, not preserving, the myth of Parliamentary Sovereignty and associated constraints on executive power (Barnard, 2022). The European Union and the growing opposition to other international organisations such the European Court of Human Rights are manifestations of this tendency to blame checks and balances for the bureaucratic inertia of the UK state. Hence, the Conservative project during this period did not contradict the BPT, but was instead a continuation of the Thatcherite project of politicising policy decisions and concentrating power in the executive (Smith, 2015). This on-going process of politicisation (illustrated most clearly by Brexit) meant decision making was not consensual, but instead increasingly majoritarian and integrated almost universally into all areas of the policy process. As a *political* project it drew legitimacy from constitutional conventions and traditions associated with the WM, despite being highly selective regarding – and even dismissive of – any constraints on executive power. But it led to instability, a product of the contradictions of Britain’s pre-modern state.

The consequences of this are most pronounced when reflecting on the process of governance and the evolving topography of public service delivery. What binds the period from the 1980s to the present is the scale of fragmentation driven by NPM, but without central government developing an effective system of metagovernance (Matthews, 2013; Flinders and Huggins, 2021). As research on the Treasury reveals, the centre of government’s capacity to act with strategic authority has been at best sub-optimal (Warner et al., 2021; Richards et al., 2023). Much of the political and economic problems of UK governance stem from the UK’s pre-modern state arrangements that are now widely associated with a lack of strategic capacity, short termism, departmental silos and overly politicised decision making (Diamond et al., 2024). An overly dominant Treasury has too much influence over policy, resulting in decision-making being driven by input cost considerations, rather than longer-term policy outcomes. This short-termist, ‘penny wise pound foolish’ approach to management of the public finances would be familiar to critics of the past (Pollard, 1982).

The scale and variety of change has created a landscape of complexity that is challenging to map. NPM has been augmented in unanticipated ways because of ministerial centralisation (Diamond, 2019) and the development of decentralised and collaborative forms of sub-national governance, broadly characterised by New Public Governance, as actors *beyond* Whitehall adapt to an increasingly incoherent state. The problem is that new funding models have not emerged, and governance processes are now increasingly confused and improvised. Alongside the rapidly changing map of English devolution, this has shifted the contours of the state and changed its architecture. The net result has been instability and persistent policy shortcomings which have eviscerated the capacity of the Westminster Government to ‘steer’ in a rational and strategic manner, despite the governing class clinging to the mythology surrounding its own power.

**Conclusion: The State We’re In**

So, in 2024, what state are we in? The argument threaded throughout this article concerns a reluctance by governments over the last half century to properly address the pressing need for wholesale reform to Britain’s pre-modern state. Instead, the UK has opted to pursue a well-worn reform path drawn from the empiricist tradition, that of incremental adaptation. Westminster’s governing class, fearful of being accused of embracing a rationalist project akin to something drawn from the continental tradition, has yet to set out a coherent vision for the British state in the twenty-first century.

Muddling through only gets you so far. Fifty years on from the contributions by Anderson and later Nairn over the crisis of Britain’s antiquated state, it is now an open question as to whether the UK’s political traditions and governing institutions are fit for purpose (Richards et al., 2014; Warner et al., 2023a). An enduring, but underappreciated attachment to a racialised, imperial past has left Britain ill-equipped to understand the complex causes and consequences of institutionalised racism in British politics (Shilliam, 2018; Akram, 2023). Archaic political institutions remain gendered and exclusive, with significant implications for the policy process and outcomes (Fitzpatrick and Richards, 2019; Lowndes, 2020; Waylen, 2021). Reform has been incremental, exposing the contradictions of a system based on an elitist, centralising political tradition sustained by the legitimising myth of the WM and propped up by an increasingly incoherent governance landscape.

There is now a groundswell of influential opinion recognising the scale of Britian’s governance crisis. From the bureaucratic class, previously anonymous senior civil servants, often recently retired, have morphed from gamekeeper to poacher by calling for the need for reform (Warner et al., 2023b). Elsewhere, think-tanks and other forms of commentariat – Better Government Initiative (2010), the Commission for Smart Government (2021), the Constitution Unit (2023), the Institute for Government (2024) etc. – are increasingly recognising the scale of the problem. Indeed, Government itself can be added to this mix. The 2022 Levelling-Up White Paper set out a surprisingly frank critique of the failings of the UK’s governing institutions, including centralism, short-termism and fragmentation, and successive generations of politicians and civil servants who have repeatedly failed to meaningfully address widening regional socio-economic disparities. Subsequently, very little has changed in terms of the structures of government and past policy errors look set to be repeated (Diamond et al., 2023, 2024). What binds these contributions together is the extent to which their recommendations often double-down on the problem by being partial/limited.

What then of the future? A striking feature of opposition parties on the cusp of power over the last thirty years has been to argue that the UK requires an overhaul of its governing arrangements; an abandonment of the old, elitist, adversarial Westminster politics of top-downism and centralisation captured in Douglas Jay’s ‘the man [sic] in Whitehall knows best’. Yet Richards et al. (2019) demonstrate that, when subsequently elected to office, there has been a backsliding on such reforming rhetoric, as newly elected governments become swiftly enveloped by the reassuring comfort blanket of power provided by WM mythology.

The 2024 Starmer Labour Government is in danger of treading a familiar path. When in opposition, it published *A New Britain: Renewing our Democracy and Rebuilding Our Economy* (Labour Party, 2022) organised round five central missions: constitutional guarantees of greater equality of treatment across all areas of the UK; democratic reinvigoration centred on a more bottom-up approach to power and participation; reform of central government; greater empowerment of towns, cities and regions in England to reinvigorate local government and address the pressing issue of geographic inequality; and further devolution to the devolved territories with an emphasis on enhanced joint-decision-making. Yet, its 2024 manifesto entitled *Change*, proved to be a less ambitious affair, as caution came to the fore and with it backtracking on some of the more prominent features within its proposed reform programme (Labour Party, 2024).

System-wide reform will require (but not be limited to) demystifying archaic processes and traditions that promote an elitist, but short-term, politicised approach. A small ‘c’ conservatism that stifles thinking about holistic reform at the level of the constitution is inadequate. A written constitution that clearly sets out the powers of government and the rights of citizens is non-negotiable if Britian wants to throw-off the shackles of the pre-modern state. A further round of centrally controlled devolution without invoking the principle of subsidiarity and the meaningful transfer of financial responsibility downwards to break the Treasury stranglehold, will again only lead to further ad hocery. A coherent process of devolution would also require developing a proper system of downward, rather than upward facing accountability (Newman et al., 2024). Crucially, the most undemocratic elements associated with the WM, including an unelected upper chamber and a majoritarian voting system that deliberately eschews bottom-up, proportional, deliberative and participatory characteristics in the name of continuity and strong government must go, not simply be further meddled with. The outcome of the 2024 General Election is notable for being: ‘…the most disproportionate electoral outcome in British electoral history’ (Curtice, 2024). Stammer’s Labour Party secured only 33.7% of the national vote yet gained 411 seats and a working majority of 172. The irony here is that meaningful reform will require extensive political capital, on a scale only provided to a newly elected, progressive government with a sizeable majority delivered by a winner takes all system with limited checks and balances. 1997 proved to be a missed opportunity and only time will tell as to whether the Stammer Labour Government will once again see history repeating itself.

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