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THE CENTRE STRIKES BACK:

META-GOVERNANCE, DELEGATION AND THE CORE

EXECUTIVE IN THE UNITED KINGDOM, 2010-2014

A growing literature on 'agencification', 'quangocratization' and the 'autonomization' of the state has highlighted the 'co-ordination dilemma' in contemporary public governance *whereby 'hollowed-out' or 'fill*ed-*in'* governments attempt to exert control over an increasingly complex state. In the run up to the 2010 General Election in the United Kingdom this coordination dilemma was prominent as the capacity of the Cabinet Office to exert control over *arm's*-length bodies, either directly or indirectly, received intense criticism. This article presents the findings of the first detailed research project *to examine the subsequent Coalition Government's* approach to this dilemma. It argues that in relation to the governance of public bodies the role and capacity of the Cabinet Office has been transformed. In mapping this development the article explores the implications of the centre striking back in the context of *'post*-Ne*w Public Management'* reforms.

The structure of the state and the nature of contemporary public governance have changed significantly in recent decades. This is reflected in an extensive literature on (inter alia) 'unraveling', 'unbundling', 'de-coupling', 'quangocratization' and 'autonomization'. In Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Mark's terms the centrifugal pressures associated with New Public Management have shifted the nature of modern governance from its traditional 'layer cake' model to a more complex 'marble cake' configuration in which the contours between the public and private sector are increasingly blurred and organizational boundaries frequently overlap (2004). This shift can be characterized as a 'hub model' of governing in which a small strategic departmental core exists at the centre (or 'hub') of a vast range of arm's-length implementation mechanisms. Whilst often designed to create a leaner, streamlined or 'smarter' state, such reforms have, paradoxically, resulted in an increasingly complex, congested and fragmented public sector that exists beyond the direct control of elected politicians. From 'special operating agencies' in Canada to 'Crown entities' in New Zealand and from 'independent administrative authorities' in France to 'autonomous public organizations' in Thailand the sphere of 'delegated governance' has grown significantly in

recent decades. Such trends pose significant questions about the future of the state, the 'life and death of democracy' and the challenges of polycentric governance, questions which have intensified in an era of global financial crisis where new 'hybrid bodies' and public-private partnerships have further diversified the state in the quest for more efficient and effective governance.

Since the mid-1990s this centrifugal dynamic has formed a central element of an influential narrative concerning the 'hollowing-out' of the state; attempts by politicians and their senior officials to retain or regain their control capacity are therefore commonly couched in the language of 'filling-in'. A rich international literature focused scholarly attention on 'the hollow crown' and 'administering the summit' as part of a broader academic turn towards what would be called 'core executive studies'. It is against this background that this article returns to critiques of the British core executive and focuses on one specific element of that debate – the capacity of the Cabinet Office to oversee and control arm's-length bodies (specifically non-departmental public bodies or 'NDPBs'). In so doing the article explores the implications of greater centralization and locates this topic within the contours of broader debates concerning a 'post-New Public Management' paradigm with its central idea that governments around the world have attempted to reduce fragmentation and increase control over arm's-length bodies through increased coordination and central capacity (Christensen 2012). Drawing upon original research in the UK, this article makes three core arguments:

> A1. The role and capacity of the Cabinet Office vis-à-vis NDPBs has been significantly enhanced since May 2010.
>
> A2. Those problems and challenges that have traditionally been associated with 'hollowing-out' have now been transferred to mainstream departments of state.
>
> A3. The Coalition Government's reform agenda reveals a failure of meta-governance.

In terms of rigor and originality this article presents the findings of the first detailed research project to analyze and track the Cabinet Office-led 'Public Bodies Reform Agenda' since May 2010. It draws upon over 150 interviews with politicians, civil servants and chairs or chief executives of public bodies (conducted between September 2010 and December 2013). Documentary analysis and observation of internal meetings, workshops and conferences in ministerial departments also delivered fresh insights and data. This research was undertaken with the support of the Cabinet Office and the Public Chairs Forum and the findings were subjected to further analysis, review and reflection through engagement with select committee inquiries in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords.[1]

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[1] Note withheld to ensure author anonymity.

In terms of significance and distinctiveness this article makes a theoretical contribution by locating core executive studies within the broader and related sub-fields of multi-level governance and meta-governance. It integrates these literatures to explore, in detail, the UK Government's response to the increased complexity and confusion widely seen to have arisen from New Public Management (NPM) reforms. Unlike previous work in this area which has tended to utilize quantitative analyses to explore the implications of NPM and post-NPM initiatives (Zafra-Gomes et al 2012), this article maps how central government capacity has been enhanced and traces the consequences of these changes for departments, public bodies and state governance more generally. In order to substantiate these arguments and explore their broader theoretical and comparative relevance this article is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on conceptual and theoretical foundations by exploring the concept of meta-governance before explaining its relationship with the literature on core executive studies. The simple argument is that what might be termed 'the politics of the core executive' are, in fact, empirical manifestations of the broader socio-political challenges of meta-governance (i.e. the two approaches are nested). The second and most substantive section then develops this argument by discussing how the Coalition Government in the UK have since May 2010 attempted to solve what Tam Gash and Gill Rutter (2011) labeled the 'quango conundrum' within the context of debates concerning meta-governance and the capacity of the core executive. The final section then considers the relevance of this research from an international and comparative perspective.

I. META-GOVERNANCE AND CORE EXECUTIVE STUDIES

How do scholars who generally exist very much beyond the state seek to understand the shifting pressures and structures within the state? The answer is that they utilize a range of theories, concepts and techniques - tools of political analysis - in order to examine how the modern state actually operates intus, et in cute (i.e. 'underneath, and in the flesh'). These tools include rational choice theoretic approaches, a variety of institutionalisms, sophisticated quantitative techniques, interpretive approaches and many other theories and methods. The selected tools deployed in this study are the theory of 'meta-governance' and the concept of 'the core executive'. This section offers a brief account of each approach and illustrates their complementarity. It also highlights the relevance of each approach for the empirical focus of this article and reflects upon how the analysis of the Coalition Government's approach to arm's-length bodies might be used to develop or sharpen the analytical traction or leverage of each approach.

If the 'hub-model' of governance (discussed above) is accepted as the dominant emerging model of the state, as many studies of developed and developing countries would suggest,

then how politicians govern 'at a distance' (i.e. indirectly) becomes a – if not the - central question of contemporary statecraft. Indeed, it is exactly this question that leads to the concept of meta-governance and its focus on 'the governance of governance' or – to adopt Scott Lash's (2002) terms – the transition from 'the logic of structures' to 'the logic of flows'. Scholars of meta-governance are therefore concerned with the changing role, capacity and reach of the state in an era of proliferating networks and increasingly de-centered structures. Meta-governance 'points to the mechanisms that public authority and other resourceful actors can use to initiate and stimulate negotiated self-governance among relevant stakeholders and/or to guide them in a certain direction' (Sørensen, Sehested, and Pederson 2011, p.379). Therefore 'learning to meta-govern' Jonathan Davies argues 'would allow political leaders and state managers to harness and derive maximum potential from a world of networks' (Davies 2013, p.5). This emphasis on 'flows' or the challenges of governing in 'a messy and floating world' raises questions about the relationship between hierarchies and networks and markets (Sorensen et al 2011, p.375).

At this point a demarcation can be drawn between the 'interactive' or 'pluricentric' governance school and its emphasis on meta-governance as the 'governance of governance' and the 'state-centric' or 'relational' school with it emphasis on the 'government of governance'. The former school is associated with scholars including Jacob Torfing, Jan Kooiman and Eva Sorensen and views meta-governance as a lens through which to explore how interdependent and semi-autonomous actors can be influenced by state authorities using non-traditional steering mechanisms. The latter school, by contrast, emphasizes the residual and continued role of the state within increasingly complex networks. For scholars, such as Gordon Macleod and Mark Goodwin (1999, p.716), meta-governance is part of an attempt to 'forge and sustain a "successful" political project and scalar fix'. In this vein Dave Marsh (2011, p.44) conceives of meta-governance as 'collibration' – the selective or strategic adjustment of the mix of hierarchies, markets and networks by meta-governors. 'Meta-governance therefore not only indicates a continued role for the state in the regulation of self-regulating networks' Paul Fawcett argues 'but it also casts doubt on the view that the vertical hierarchies of the old social structures of the state have been replaced or subsumed by such networks' (2009, p.37). What both schools of meta-governance share is a focus on structuring the 'rules of the game' and then seeking to enforce those rules through a mixture of control mechanisms or tools. For the interactive school attempts to meta-govern through traditional top-down processes need to be replaced with an emphasis on softer tools of governance, whereas relational or state-centric theorists, such as Stephen Bell and Andrew Hindmoor, emphasize the continued role of hierarchical authority over semi-state and non-state actors.

Such rich intellectual scaffolding arguably demands to be empirically tested through detailed accounts of 'meta-governors' in action. And yet few studies exist that examine specific strategies of 'collibration' in the context of debates concerning the evisceration of the state. Even fewer have mapped how new governments have sought to re-define the relationships between hierarchies, markets and networks on taking power. It is for these reasons that this article's focus on the 'Public Bodies Reform Agenda' in the UK since May 2010 provides such empirical and theoretical potential. In order to realize this potential, however, it is necessary to adopt a complementary and more focused analytical toolkit, one with the capacity to engage with the significant issues that the concept of meta-governance highlights but with a tighter and more focused lens. The buckle in this article between the macro and the micro is usefully furnished in Mark Bevir and Rod Rhodes' (2006 p.74) concern about 'a hollowed-out state, a core executive fumbling to pull rubber levers of control, and a massive proliferation of networks' and the connection this provides to a seam of scholarship on core executive studies.

Reduced down to its simplest form the field of core executive studies focuses attention on the hub (or 'the core') in the 'hub model' of governance (discussed above). It is concerned with 'the centre of central government' and with 'all those organizations and structures that primarily serve to pull together and integrate central government policies, or act as final arbiters within the executive of conflicts between different elements of the government 0machine' (Dunleavy and Rhodes, 1990, p.4). It therefore seeks to examine, at a more detailed and fine-grained level, exactly how ministers and their officials seek to manage those competing and complex pressures illuminated by the theory of meta-governance. Three elements of this seam of scholarship make it a particularly appropriate for this article's focus on the management and control of what are variously termed 'fringe bodies', 'para-statals' or 'hybrids'. Firstly, core executive studies brings with it a certain institutional breadth in the sense that it directs attention to the interplay between state and semi-state actors (between hub and spokes). It also delivers (secondly) a degree of analytical depth due to its rejection of over-simplistic zero-sum conceptualizations of power and the cultivation of a more sophisticated approach to inter-organizational relationships that acknowledges the existence of complex resource-dependencies. Actors therefore possess different resources (money, personnel, legislative authority, electoral legitimacy, expertise, etc.) and power is therefore contingent and relational. This awareness of resource-dependency implicitly rejects overly-simplistic principal-agent accounts and in its place offers a more complex account of bargaining and game-playing in which ministers, departments, regulators, quango-chiefs and all the actors within the delivery landscape seek to engage in a form of modern 'court politics' in which competing claims and justifications are made, drawing upon established narratives,

traditions or institutional logics, in an attempt to either facilitate or block reform of one kind or another (Rhodes 2007, p.1248).

If a focus on narratives and traditions brings us to what Oliver James (2009) labels the 'third wave' of core executive studies by emphasizing an interpretive ontology and broadly anthropological methodology then it also reminds us that the 'first wave' of writing focused on 'the hollowing out' of the state and the 'second wave' on the 'filling-in' of the state. Taken together these three stages have provided a sophisticated account of the day-to-day business of government and of the changing role of ministers. And yet the field is also open to criticism across three analytical levels. At the micro-political level there are actually very few studies that seek to map the changing topography of the core executive (in terms of resources and controls over semi-state institutions) over time. At the mid-range, studies have generally focused on either external pressures on the core executive (notably forms of Europeanization) or internal relationships within the Cabinet (i.e. the relationships between ministers, senior civil servants and special advisers, or between spending and coordinating departments). These are exactly the two 'broad avenues of research' identified by Robert Elgie's synthesis of the field (2011, p.68). But no studies have attempted to examine how the core executive seeks to structure and control the relationships that delivery departments have with the arm's-length bodies they sponsor. This is a critical point that takes us back to the notion of 'managing at a distance' and the theory of meta-governance. As the bulk of public spending and public employment at the national level resides in arm's-length bodies then the capacity of the core executive to steer and control not just ministerial departments but also non-departmental organizational forms becomes central to the business of government (OECD 2002; Verhoest et al 2011).

In the UK, for example, a large number of departments can now be characterized as hub-model departments – the Departments for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Business, Innovation and Skills; Culture, Media and Sport; Transport; Community and Local Government; Justice; Home Office, etc. - in which the vast majority of departmental budgets are actually channeled to and spent by arm's-length bodies. In some instances the size of the core department is actually dwarfed by the size of specific 'quangos'. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, for example, employs 2,457 staff (as of March 2013) whereas the Environment Agency (an NDPB sponsored by the department) employs nearly 12,000 staff. Similarly, the new arm's-length body charged with improving healthcare – NHS England – has a budget in excess of eighty billion pounds (around three quarters of the Department for Health's total annual spend). Given this complex and dense bureaucratic landscape (and thirdly) the absence of any account in the existing literature that explicitly

seeks to define or theorize core executive reform as elements of a larger meta-governance project is surprising. The simple argument being made is that meta-governance and core executive studies have largely existed as 'islands of theorizing' – to adopt Hooghe and Marks (2003) phrase - that actually offer rich complementarities. Indeed, this synergy is made clear in Hooghe and Mark's influential scholarship on 'unraveling the central state' in which they explore the 'co-ordination dilemma' and challenges of steering increasingly complex networks. When viewed from this perspective the theory of meta-governance casts its net wide to try and capture the rules and process through which the totality of multi-level governance operates, whereas the field of core executive studies focuses more narrowly on the capacity of the core to control the periphery.

The question then becomes one of understanding the changing relationship between core and periphery within an increasingly fluid socio-political context. The benefit of examining this question in the British case is that it arguably provides a rather extreme-case of governance failure. Even the most cursory analysis of British administrative history reveals that the control and management of arm's-length bodies has never been a priority for ministers or their departmental officials. The twentieth century ended with the House of Commons describing New Labour's approach to the governance of 'quangos' as 'unambitious, piecemeal and ad hoc', and Peter Hennessy telling the House of Lords that 'we [the UK] are deeply ingrained as a back-of-the-envelope nation, certainly in the organization of the central state' (HC 209: para 59). Since the millennium a host of parliamentary reports (HC 537 2010), official inquires (Cabinet Office 20022 National Audit Office 2004; 2010), think tank reports (IfG 2010), external management consultants (Veredus 2006), scholarly studies (Flinders 2009) and National Audit Office reports (2004; 2010) have all (in their own ways) highlighted five central issues (see Table 1, below).

TABLE 1 Pathologies of Delegated Governance: Evidence up to May 2010

	Pathology	Exemplar Reference
1	Insufficient clarity on the respective roles and responsibilities of arm's-length bodies and their sponsor departments.	National Audit Office. 2004. 'The Corporate Governance of Sponsored Bodies'; National Audit Office. 2010. 'Non-Departmental Public Bodies Performance Reporting to Departments'.
2	Insufficient mechanisms for maintaining productive institutional relationships between arm's-length bodies and their sponsor departments.	HC 537. 2010. 'Smaller Government: Shrinking the Quango State'.
3	Insufficient focus on developing the skills of those involved in operating arm's-length government.	Institute for Government. 2010. 'Read Before Burning'.
4	Insufficient capacity within the Cabinet Office to support sponsor departments	House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution. 2004. 'The Regulatory State:

	(or even maintain basic databases of what arm's-length bodies even exist).	Ensuring its Accountability'; Veredus. 2006. 'Veredus, Right from the Start: Lessons Learned from the Start-up of Non-Departmental Public Bodies'
5	Insufficient focus on sponsorship by departments with official reports finding a large number of public bodies to have assumed 'orphan status'.	Cabinet Office. 2002. 'Alexander Report'; HM Treasury. 2010. 'Reforming Arm's-Length Bodies'.

These issues combine to focus attention back on the notion of meta-governance and the capacity of the core executive to control and co-ordinate that vast sphere of agencies, boards and commissions to which powers and responsibilities are now delegated. The simple argument arising from all the reports and reviews – irrespective of the source – was that the core executive had lost control. The challenge for the next government in the run up to the 2010 General Election in the UK was therefore to recalibrate the relationship between networks and hierarchies, between 'Type I' and 'Type II' bodies, or simply between the core executive, mainstream delivery departments and their arm's-length bodies. The manifestos of all three main political parties therefore included a commitment to reform 'the quango state' but with the benefit of hindsight one of the most instructive interventions in the cross-party attempts to 'get tough on quangos' came in July 2009 with David Cameron's speech 'People Power: Reforming Quangos' which balanced an emphasis on abolition with an emphasis on reform.

> It would be far too simplistic for me to stand here and announce some kind of 'Bonfire of the Quangos'. People have heard that kind of talk many times before, and seen little to show for it. Instead, we need a more sophisticated approach… [P]roper public spending control means proper control of quango spending and proper control of quango spending has to start at the top (emphasis added).

What the research presented in this article reveals is the manner in which that 'more sophisticated approach' involved the selective and strategic recalibration of a number of tools of governance. This has led to a stark shift in the relationship not just between NDPBs and their parent departments but also in the role and capacity of the Cabinet Office which has been substantially strengthened since 2010. This shift is seen to echo the findings of 'post-NPM' theorists who diagnose an increase in central government capacity and departmental coordination as a response to the complexity caused by NPM reforms. By exploring the dynamics of change in the UK this article not only entwines two often separate literatures but also advances understanding of re-centralization initiatives and their implications.

II. COALITION GOVERMMENT AND REFORM

The Coalition Government's intention to address the governance failures outlined in the series of reports discussed above was signaled within days of taking office when the Minister for the

Cabinet Office, Francis Maude, announced a fundamental review of all public bodies (i.e. not just NDPBs). The complete lack of any reliable central lists or registers of arm's-length bodies – irrespective of their specific organizational form – made this a major undertaking. Although excluding some organizational categories (notably executive agencies and health bodies) the 2010 review provided the most comprehensive analysis of public bodies in the UK for several decades (Flinders and Skelcher 2011). It identified 679 NDPBs and 222 other statutory bodies (i.e. non-ministerial departments, public corporations and 'floating bodies') and its recommendations were far-reaching when compared against previous reform agendas. Whereas the Pliatzky Review of 1980 recommended a 12 per cent reduction in the number of NDPBs, the Maude Review targeted over a third of all bodies for abolition or amalgamation (more specifically 159 advisory NDPBs, 78 executive NDPBs, 6 tribunal bodies and 19 'other' bodies (HC 505). The fate of a further 40 bodies remained 'under consideration' (Cabinet Office 2011). A Public Bodies Bill was brought forward as the main vehicle for implementing these measures and although the government was forced to make a number of concessions the Public Bodies Act 2011 received Royal Assent on the 14 December 2011. Twelve months later Public Bodies 2012 (re-published after a three-year gap) reported that more than 130 bodies had been abolished and more than 150 merged into fewer than 70 (an overall reduction of around 220).

In pursuing this agenda the Cabinet Office vastly expanded its influence over arm's-length governance. The research on which this article is based identified five inter-related areas of increased control (see Table 2, below) that characterize the Coalition Government's attempt to 'meta-govern' and alter the dynamics of existing governance.

TABLE 2 The Public Bodies Reform Agenda: Core Executive Re-Collibration

Dimension	Meaning	Evidence
D1. Capacity	The ability to set out and enforce a meta-governance framework.	Significant post-2010 increases in staff within the Cabinet Office (notably within the Public Bodies Team).
D2. Control	The power to dictate levels of discretion and autonomy across a number of issues.	The Coalition Government introduced a new Controls Framework that shifts the balance of power back towards sponsor departments and the core executive.
D3.Context	The ability to stipulate the environment in which actors take decisions.	A number of new requirements have since 2010 emphasized transparency while also underlining the role of the Cabinet Office.
D4. Connectivity	The existence of an emphasis on the management of department-ALB relationships.	The introduction of a range of reforms post-2010 that focus on the issue of sponsorship.
D5. Continuity	The existence of a rolling-evaluation system to entrench specific reform principles.	Triennial reviews, managed by the Cabinet Office, now ensure all NDPBs are subject to ongoing review and reform.

In terms of the first dimension (D1, Table 1, above) the capacity of the Cabinet Office was immediately strengthened in two ways after May 2010. First and foremost the size of the Public Bodies Team was increased from the 1.5 (full-time equivalent) staff it had enjoyed between 2006-2010 to 17 staff by the end of 2010. Furthermore the Public Bodies Team was bolstered by the creation of associated units such as the Commercial Models Team and the Shared Services Team that sit within the Transformation Cluster which is in itself part of the newly constituted Efficiency and Reform Group (nearly 900 staff) in the Cabinet Office (National Audit Office 2013). Secondly, capacity was strengthened in the form of a Minister of State who not only sat in the Cabinet but was also clearly and personally committed to the public bodies reform agenda. The post of Minister for the Cabinet Office is generally not viewed as a senior Government position (indeed, it is often associated with polite demotion) and ministerial tenure is therefore generally brief (from May 1997 to May 2010, for example, twelve individuals held this position with an average tenure of eleven months). Having a stable Minister of State who had a very clear grasp of the issues (and had even been the Shadow Cabinet Office Minister since 2 July 2007) was highlighted as essential to the success and pace of the subsequent reforms. As a senior Cabinet Office official noted,

> The impact of sustained ministerial focus cannot be over-stated. Even though the Public Bodies Reform has officially transferred to Nick Hurd [Minister for Civil Society in the Cabinet Office] Frances [Maude] still keeps a very close interest in the topic and will intervene if necessary. The stability matters for many reasons. Whereas the ministers in other departments may have changed Francis is able to 'lock-in' the new minister due to his knowledge of all the previous negotiations and agreements…its about political and institutional memory. Within the Cabinet Office his knowledge of what all the various policy teams are up to reduces fragmentation [Interview 3 Dec. 2013].

Such capacities gave the Cabinet Office unprecedented ability to monitor and control the public bodies landscape as manifest in the range of new initiatives outlined below.

At the heart of this reform agenda was a focus not on abolition but on increasing control (D2, Table 1, above) in the sense of increasing the capacity of the core executive to dictate levels of discretion and autonomy across a number of dimensions. This was delivered through the immediate implementation (from September 2010, without any prior consultation) of a new internal controls framework for all the NDPBs that were to continue in existence after the initial review. As Table 3 (below) illustrates this covered nine main areas of activity and was designed to introduce 'tough spending controls to tackle unnecessary and poorly coordinated public spending' (Cabinet Office 2012).

TABLE 3 *Controls Framework Reforms*

Area	Scope	Control
Advertising, Marketing and Communications	Advertising and marketing, including digital activity; consultation activities; communication strategy; market research,	Level 1 – as set by departments Level 2 – advertising, marketing or communications of £100k or above.

	events and public relations activities.	
Strategic Supplier Management	Expenditure and dealings with any strategic supplier. In particular, any new expenditure, contract negotiation or extension.	Level 1 – as set by departments Level 2 – £5m for new expenditure; any contract extension or material changes to services valued at over £5m.
Commercial Models	All disposals of business; outsourcing contracts, the creation of any new organization regardless of its organizational form or notional value.	Level 1 – as set by departments Level 2 – £5m for out-sourcing decisions otherwise no lower limit.
ICT	All ICT expenditure (contracts, licenses, pilots, etc.); common infrastructure solutions.	Level 1 – as set by departments Level 2 – ICT Expenditure over £5m (full lifetime costs); £1m on back office reforms; £100K on common infrastructure solutions.
Digital Default	All departmental expenditure on digital services and activity.	Level 1 – as set by departments Level 2 – all digital services (no lower limit.
External Recruitment	Any new permanent recruitment; any new direct temporary recruitment; indirect temporary (agency) staff; inward secondments or loans, extensions to existing recruitment.	Level 1 – as set by departments Level 2 – Departments are required to submit quarterly recruitment forecasts.
Consultancy	Any central governmental consultancy expenditure over £20k.	Level 1 – all consultancy above £20k Level 2 – all consultancy above £20k where contracts are expected to exceed nine months or contracts are expected to be extended beyond nine months.
Redundancy and Compensation	All redundancy schemes.	Level 1 – as set by departments Level 2 – all schemes must be approved by the Cabinet Office.
Property	New leases or renewals; new property acquisitions; all facilities management contra contracts.	Level 1 – Rental expenditure under £100k during the life of the lease. Level 2 – Rental expenditure above£100k during the life of the lease. Approval must be sought for all facilities management contracts regardless of value.

Source. Cabinet Office (April 2013) *Cabinet Office Controls Guidance*.
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cabinet-office-controls-guidance-version-3-1
Notes   1. Level 1 – Departmental authority and sign-off required.
             2. Level 2 – Cabinet Office authority and sign-off required.
             3. Exemptions will be considered but must be considered on a case-by-case basis by the Cabinet Office and H M Treasury

The new controls framework (Table 3, above) is critical to the general 'centre strikes back' narrative offered by this article for at least three reasons. First and foremost, it reflects the increased basic capacity of the Cabinet Office to administer and oversee a multi-dimensional cross-governmental controls system when prior to the 2010 General Election it could not even maintain a basic list of what arm's-length bodies even existed. Second, it reflects an attempt by the Cabinet Office (as well as the Treasury) to impose a 'one-size-fits-all' approach onto a highly diverse NDPB landscape where bodies differ in size, role, remit and governance. Third, although the new controls framework was originally announced in 2010 as a temporary measure it has now been made permanent. 'Tight-tight' as one senior civil servant in the Cabinet Office put it 'is the new permanent', resulting as one NDPB Chair described in 'micro-management by remote control. It's ridiculous' (October 2012). Another senior official (May 2012) even described the imposition of the new controls framework as 'the tourniquet model of governance' (a point we will return to below).

If D2 emphasizes direct control and oversight then D3 (i.e. Context) emphasizes the Coalition Government's attempts to apply indirect control pressures through an emphasis on transparency (i.e. external control pressures). Details of how much officials are paid, every line of government spending above £25k, every contract worth over £10k (plus the actual contract in full) plus other measures, are all monitored by a new Public Sector Transparency Board. At a broader level the introduction of 'Whole of Government Accounts', a consolidated set of financial statements for around 1,500 organizations across the public sector, will provide new levels of transparency, delivering comparable accounts by which to assess government organizations (HM Treasury 2010). Additionally, as part of the 'Clear Line of Sight (Alignment)' project the expenditure of NDPBs is now incorporated into the Estimates and Resource Accounts of sponsoring departments which, in turn, ensures that Permanent Secretaries (as Accounting Officers) pay far more attention to the governance of public bodies (House of Commons Library 2010). Indeed, one element of this tighter relationship (between both the Cabinet Office and departments and between departments and their NDPBs) has been a sustained focus on connectivity (D4, Table 2, above). This basically relates to the nexus or interface between departments and their sponsored bodies where it is necessary to gain an effective balance between autonomy and control. Until the post-2010 Coalition Government a focus on how public bodies were, let alone how they should be, sponsored had effectively formed a governance vacuum at the heart of British government. This was an issue that had been raised several times by the Public Administration Select Committee during 1997-2010 who argued that 'The Cabinet Office should revise its guidance on public bodies as quickly as possible, placing more emphasis on the proper, on-going relationship between departments and the organizations they sponsor' - and which subsequently gained attention from the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition (HC 537 op cit. 2011. paras.71-72). As such one of the most innovative features of the Public Bodies Reform Agenda has involved not only a focus on taking sponsorship seriously in terms of skills and support (see Table 4, below) but also a more subtle attempt to re-position the importance of sponsorship within the culture of the senior civil service. 'The aim has been to not only improve the support and training given to those charged with managing relationships' a senior servant acknowledged (Interview November 2013) 'but more importantly to try and get these sorts of skills and experience recognized as crucial to the effective business of government'.

TABLE 4 Sponsorship Improvement Plan (Oct. 2013)

1.	Cross-Whitehall Sponsorship Network established (meeting monthly and led by the Ministry of Justice) to share examples of best practice and discuss principles of good sponsorship.
2.	Sponsorship Competency Framework developed for all civil servants working in a sponsorship role.

3.	Sponsorship now recognized as a formal professional specialism within the Civil Service
4.	Cross-Government Sponsorship Champion appointed to raise awareness of the specialism, build partnerships between departments and public bodies and promote learning and development.
5.	Training units now hosted on the Civil Service Learning e-platform.
6.	Sponsors Induction Pack developed and all central guidance documentation revised and re-issued.
7.	Document sharing depository and message board established [www.collaborate.gsi.gov.uk]

The final dimension (D5, Continuity) focuses on the legacy of the Public Bodies Reform Agenda and particularly on how a reform momentum based around (1) abolishing unnecessary bodies, (2) retaining control and (3) developing new forms of 'alternative service delivery mechanisms' could be sustained. The Coalition's answer took the form of the introduction of a new cross-governmental system of triennial reviews, once again overseen and regulated by the Cabinet Office. 'These triennial reviews will' the Minister for the Cabinet Office told the House of Commons 'ensure that never again will the quango state be allowed to spiral out of control' (HC 108 2011). In a process that is very close to the previous system of quinquennial reviews - a system discontinued in 2006 – departments are required to regularly consider 'whether a function is required and, if it is, whether it should exist at arm's-length from Government' in order to advance further reform (Maude 2011).

In the first year of the new triennial review process (2011-2012) a large number of relatively small and less politically salient NDPBs were selected for review with larger and more sensitive bodies such as the Environment Agency, Youth Justice Board and Research Councils reviewed in years 2 and 3. Whilst not fully rolled out – with 280 NDPBs exempt from review prior to 2014-16 – triennial reviews have prompted departments to pay closer attention to their public bodies and maintain an emphasis on reform. Although the vast majority have recommended the status quo rather than reform or abolition some changes have taken place. For example, the Office for Disability Issues (known as 'Equality 2025') was recommended for abolition and the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority led to a change in organizational status from NDPB to executive agency. More widely triennials have made a range of recommendations designed to improve the governance arrangements (if not the efficiency) of public bodies. Accordingly, whilst triennials have been subject to a range of criticisms over capacity, proportionality and oversight (Dommett, 2014; NAO, 2014) they have provided a regular mechanism for review with the capacity to deliver future reform.

What this brief focus on triennial reviews, and indeed this whole section, has highlighted is that a distinct shift in the governance of public bodies has taken place since May 2010- the centre has struck back. In Whitehall this shift is frequently spoken of in the language of a transition from a 'loose-loose' relationship with arm's-length bodies (i.e. a 'poor parenting'

model) to a 'tight-tight' relationship. The tightness of the new controls framework takes us back to the description by a senior official of this new relationship between Whitehall and its NDPBs as the application of 'the tourniquet model of governance'. The fact that the official went on to warn of the risks of micromanagement and to recognize that 'we all know what happens if a tourniquet is too tight or is left on for too long – the arm drops off!' provides a rather dramatic metaphor with which to reflect upon the broader implications of these changes and the comparative relevance of this research.

III. LEARNING TO META-GOVERN?

In many ways the 'quango conundrum' provides an almost perfect example of Anthony Downs' 'issue attention cycle' - governments around the world are elected on the basis of commitments to reduce 'the quango state' but once in office are generally far less interested in implementing reform (Flinders et al 1999). Recent research in the UK, however, suggests that across several dimensions the Coalition Government has introduced 'a more sophisticated' (cf. Cameron) and significant reform agenda than might have been expected from previous historical experiences. Reforms have been implemented to address all of the pathologies identified in Table 1 (above) and although the long-term success or implications of these measures are yet to be seen they signal an attempt to bolster the capacity and role of the Cabinet Office. In line with 'Argument 1' (above), after several decades of apparent decline it would appear that the centre has struck back (at least as far as the oversight of NDPBs). The aim of this section, however, is to drill-down further into this conclusion by employing the theory of meta-governance and the field of core executive studies to expose the broader empirical and comparative implications of this central conclusion. Further it examines the implications of this re-centralization and its relevance to the 'post-NPM' paradigm, arguing that concerns over central strategic capacity have not so much been 'solved' as shifted along the chain of delegation from the core executive to mainstream departments. This, as the work of MacCarthaigh (2011) suggests, has significant international and comparative relevance. Indeed, George Frederickson (2005, p.290) concluded his review of the international literature on public sector reform by suggesting that despite the pervasive influence of network discourses the underlying narrative of contemporary governance theory and practice is the search for order. In the case of the governance of public bodies in the UK since May 2010 the Coalition Government has consistently emphasized a narrative of control but not necessarily order. In terms of teasing out the theoretical and empirical relevance of this argument the issue of control leads us back very usefully to the field of core executive studies and the issue of order to the theory of meta-governance.

What is clear from the research presented in this article is that the capacity of the Cabinet Office vis-à-vis public bodies has been significantly strengthened, even transformed, by a Coalition Government which recognized the perils of 'a hollow crown'. Increased staffing, ministerial stability and commitment and the introduction of robust control frameworks have increased both the 'reach' and 'depth' of the Cabinet Office but this has, in turn, led to a new set of governing dilemmas. The first of these relates to the increasing role and demands of the Cabinet Office at a time when mainstream departments are facing significant budget reductions and subsequent staff cuts. In the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, for example, budget reductions during 2010-2012 led to the loss of over 300 core departmental staff and the need to reduce core administrative costs and programme spend by £1,164 million (National Audit Office 2011, p.5; 2012, p.5). In many areas, as the Institute for Government's It Takes Two report of March 2012 makes clear, it is the staffing of departmental sponsorship teams that have often felt the brunt of these cutbacks. Such problems were compounded by the increase in staff mobility as a result of internal reforms and criticisms regarding 'staff churn' were common amongst NDPB chairs. (The chairman of one large executive NDPB complained that in the twelve months after May 2012 he had met five different 'senior sponsors' in his parent department, and in 2013 the Public Administration Committee highlighted reducing internal staff mobility as a key challenge for the future of the civil service). Departmental staff therefore complained that the capacity of the Cabinet Office to play a more strategic and proactive role in the governance of public bodies had increased at exactly the time that departmental capacities to manage their family of arm's-length bodies was waning due to the impact of expenditure reductions. The following quote is representative of a broader frustration.

> You do get a sense at the moment that you have quite a lot of resource in the centre, in both Cabinet Office and Treasury… [and] that more and more is done about ALB control, but [they are] unable to interface with any individual ALB themselves, and unable to interface with any individual sponsor teams…from where we sit, there seems to be a level of people across Government roaming around in a very inefficient manner trying to impose [an] efficiency agenda, rather than having a single point of contact for ALBs which just says, "Over the next three years, do X with Y amount of money or we'll shut you if you don't".

Triennial reviews, in particular, were a specific point of concern as departments generally lacked resources with which to support and oversee these sometimes demanding reviews. As one civil servant commented 'we all do it in our spare time and it's voluntary alongside everything else, which, with hindsight, is a ridiculously stupid way of doing it if you wish to achieve real, serious reform'. In many departments civil servants are struggling to identify resource, leading them to either conduct superficial 'tick box' reviews designed to satisfy Cabinet Office requirements, or to delay reviews (indefinitely). Even departments which have devoted extensive resource such as Defra and the Natural England/Environment Agency

review have commented that 'it hasn't felt over-resourced, you know. If anything it's been quite a struggle to cover the ground with the resources'. These different approaches may reflect different degrees of political impetus and prioritization within departments but for the majority of interviewees a lack of resources was the primary challenge.

> Just seeing the sheer level of people they [other departments] put into these things. It must be lovely, having challenge groups with lawyers, senior people on them, I can't imagine ever getting a group like that to come together. I'd love to be able to, and obviously that's what I'll try and do for our next ones, but having that kind of dedicated resource, they're lucky they can do that'.

Instead of identifying processes of either 'filling-in' or 'hollowing-out' – a binary focus that tends to dominate the existing literature – a distinctive element of this research in the UK is its identification of a simultaneous process of 'filling-in' (the Cabinet Office) and 'hollowing-out' (departments). The problem of the 'hollow crown' has therefore been not so much solved as passed-on down the chain of delegation. This process of administrative transference has been complicated by concerns about the proportionality of new processes. In particular the new controls framework (Table 3, above) as the data and information requests it entailed were viewed as detrimental to allowing bodies to focus on their core tasks. Many of the Cabinet Office's data requests were reported by officials to be 'frankly completely nonsensical', a problem compounded by the perception of disunity conveyed in the comment that 'there are, you know, 15 different bits [of the Cabinet Office] that are always fighting each other all the time'.

> The impact on our scarce resources of dealing with big departments that can't join themselves up.... The amount of data requests we've had to do, providing the same information on slightly different spreadsheets because one part of the centre isn't prepared to use another part of the centre's spreadsheet and wants it in a slightly different format!

NDPB staff expressed similar concerns with repeated complaints about the constant need to 'feed the machine'. 'Why have all that [delegation] and have this heavy hand of 'Big Brother' parent department also trying to govern us?' a senior NDPB official asked. An NDPB Chairman similarly noted,

> It just doesn't make sense and it's wasting an awful lot of precious civil service time which they really ought to spend on their day jobs. Just give us an envelope of money. Tell us how many people we can employ. Tell us what we're accountable for and what we've got to deliver at the end of the year and let us get on with it. If we don't deliver it, sack us. It's that easy!

These findings are supported by the Institute for Government's report It Takes Two of March 2012 that similarly highlighted that 'data requests and new controls from the centre since the advent of the Coalition have become a major source of irritation' (Rutter et al 2012, p.8). In the long run, the report concluded, a 'detailed micro-control regime risks a failure to take full advantage of the potential benefits of arm's-length governance' (Ibid., p.52). Such findings reveal that tightened central control and limited agency autonomy do not necessarily deliver

the form of efficiency and accountability gains often presumed from such reforms (see Christensen and Laegreid 2007; Dubnick, 2014). This finding forces us to step-back from a focus on the core executive and to examine the Coalition's Public Bodies Reform Agenda from the standpoint of meta-governance. What's particularly interesting about this perspective is that it is one that is explicitly recognized by Cabinet Office officials.

> Meta-governance is basically what we do. I was at meeting yesterday themed around 'meta-policy' and whether you call it 'the policy for policy-making' or 'the governance of governance' or 'the strategy for strategy' we are basically doing meta-governance in some way… We create the conditions that make it easier for departments to govern. That might be signing-up the ministers, providing the guidance or facilitating a different mix of service providers. But we are basically 'hands off' – only sometimes 'hands on'.

What the research presented in this article provides is a case study in meta-governance that clearly resonates with the 'state-centric' or 'relational' school of meta-governance (discussed above) as a new government has undertaken a process of what could be termed 'collibration' or the selective/ strategic adjustment that supports the arguments of scholars including Dave Marsh and Paul Fawcett that the vertical hierarchies of the state have not been subsumed or replaced by complex networks. The 'rules of the game' have clearly changed and new tools of governance have been constructed. If anything the 'shadow of hierarchy' – to paraphrase Fritz Sharpf – has grown significantly darker for NDPBs in the UK and this was captured in the description provided by one NDPB chair that his relationship with his sponsor department had 'gone from an arm's-length relationship to more like an arm-lock'.

As already mentioned, this process of reform can be located within 'post-NPM' narratives drawn from a number of countries that emphasize centripetally oriented governance modifications forged around strengthened hierarchical control (see, for example, Dent, 2005; Kinder, 2012). And yet the twist, hook or barb in the results of this research is that once again simplistic and zero-sum assumptions about 'pre', 'current' or 'post-NPM' stages of state development falter against the 'mad empiricism' and 'baroque confusion' that Christopher Hood and Andrew Dunsire (1978) identified in the British context nearly forty years ago.

Put slightly differently, what this research has revealed is that whilst the Coalition Government has emphasized control it has underplayed order in pursuing its reforms. Despite the call from numerous official reports, parliamentary committees, think tanks and academics around the 2010 General Election for a future government to rationalize the complexity of the administrative landscape beyond ministerial departments (of which NDPBs form just one layer) the government rejected calls to undertake a more fundamental re-structuring of the arm's-length body landscape. Hence calls from academics such as Matthew Flinders and independent bodies such as the Institute for Government were ignored. In explaining this

decision the Minister for the Cabinet Office, Frances Maude, rejected demands to rationalize the complete institutional landscape by explaining, 'I'm kind of temperamentally slightly allergic to trying to create a top-down overall scheme of arrangement. It is very complex and confusing, and simplification is desirable but I think not in order to meet the demands of administrative tidiness' (HC 537, Q141). From both a comparative perspective and from the position of theories of meta-governance the British case is therefore distinctive due to the Coalition's attempt to manage complexity in one bureaucratic sphere (i.e. NDPBs) through increased control while at exactly the same time creating an ever more complex patchwork of arm's-length bodies (in the form of ever more creative hybrid bodies, mutualisations, public-private partnerships, etc.) that exist beyond this tighter, more explicit and more formalized controls system. Therefore although the centre may well have 'struck back' in relation to NDPBs serious questions still remain about the Coalition's broader approach to meta-governance.

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