BEING THERE: OBSERVING GOVERNING ELITES

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Edited transcript of a talk given on 13 October 2015

I want to talk about the use of ethnography in political science. Quantitative research is popular in political science. My own university houses the Southampton Statistical Sciences Research Institute (S3RI), among the largest groupings of statisticians in the UK. It is the dominant research idiom in our social science faculty. So, I am in a minority not only because I do qualitative research but also, and worst of all, I do ethnography! What I want to do tonight is to make the case that, though statistical analysis has an important role to play in political science, ethnography also has a major part to play. I will give you ten reasons for its importance and each reason will be accompanied by a story taken from my fieldwork (Rhodes 2011; and Rhodes and Tiernan 2014).

The first point to note is the double absence of ethnography in political science. It is not done by anthropologists because they do not study political science, and it is not done by political scientists because they do not use ethnography as a research tool. In political science, you make a reputation by doing research that people have not done before or, at least, have not done for twenty or more years. So, one of the great virtues of ethnography is its rarity value. A keen eye for what nobody else is doing is one way of getting a reputation, though not necessarily a good or even the best way. Nonetheless, it gets you a reputation! That was not my real reason. When I started doing fieldwork, I found it to be huge fun. Reading in the library is fine, going through official publications in archives is essential, but neither can be described as fun. Ethnography is enormous fun because you watch living people in their everyday lives. It is useful when you want to ask such dumb question as ‘how do things work around here?’

We think we know what the research questions might be from previous studies of organisations. We assume they are similar to the one that we are going into. I would argue

ethnography encourages us to look at each organisation afresh; as a new organisation. Most organisations are interesting because of their unique features. The only way you are going to find out about those features is by leaving the library and the archives behind and heading out into the field. That means immersing yourselves in other people's worlds, and trying to look at another person's world through their eyes. I find it captivating, which is why you are being subjected to this talk tonight.

Tools of the trade

In fieldwork, you go where you are led. You might have a plan on day one, who you want to interview, why you want to interview them, and the meetings you want to attend. But once you become part of the scenery, you are taken everywhere and you have no idea what is going to happen that day. The Minister gives you his or her diary but they do not necessarily follow it. So, there is a hint of adventure about where you are led. There is an enormous challenge in keeping up with what is going on. A silly example: civil servants talk alphabet soup, by which I mean acronyms, endless, endless acronyms. I was observing the private office of a Permanent Secretary and I went off to a meeting. When I came back, I said to the Private Secretary:

'I did not follow half of what was said'.

She asked, 'Why was this so'.

I said, 'they were all talking alphabet soup'.

'Oh', she said, 'didn't I give you the glossary'.

She gave me seven and a half A4 pages of acronyms. The list was given to all civil servants who became new members of the Department. They had not thought to give it to me – I wasn't a member of the Department! After that my life became easier because I could look the names up as I went along.

An important requirement of fieldwork is the notebook and one characteristic of fieldwork notebooks is their creative quality. I started leaving the back of the page blank to make a note of all the things I did not understand during the day. Then, I came into the Department about half an hour before everybody else. I knew the Private Secretary would be in early because he or she wants to get the day organised. We would go through my notes on the back of the page where I had written down everything I had not understood the day before. I have to say, academics are not good at confessing to other academics that they do not understand or did not know something. My fieldwork notebooks are a record of what I did not understand and did not know. So, I am a bit reluctant to let other people see them!

Fieldwork notebooks are important parts of ethnography. Another tool is the interview. Many of my colleagues do interviews and they have almost become a formalised ritual. By this I mean, Ministers will to talk to you for an hour and say nothing of substance. Many of them are good at saying nothing at length, as are many top civil servants. The elite are bright, personable and fluent. I know one Permanent Secretary who would give you an ostensibly entertaining and informative interview. I came out of her office thinking how she was forthcoming and outgoing; it had been a good interview. I was confident there would be gems on the tape. But when I read the transcript, it said almost nothing, though she said her 'nothings' in an entertaining fashion. So, I do not find these 'ritual' interviews helpful; it is hard to get behind the public facade. Permanent Secretaries and Ministers are clever in

interviews because they are doing them all the time, often faced with forensic, even aggressive, interviewers on the BBC or ITV.

But what I did discover was ‘the ethnographic interview’, which is the interview that never ends. I managed to persuade firstly civil servants, then latterly the Ministers, to let me talk to them for two, four, six or eight hours, and get it all on tape. My favourite interview was one that has a lesson for any budding fieldworker. I had an hour with a Permanent Secretary. He was nice but the interview was an inconsequential chat. He said that he had ‘quite enjoyed’ the interview, suggested I came back, and gave me a date. Now when a Permanent Secretary says that, you do not argue, you cancel everything else and you get there five minutes before you are due. When we did meet again, he began by taking his jacket off and lying down on the settee. After about twenty minutes of talking to me, he got up, went to the cabinet and poured himself a glass of whisky. He came back, sat down and started sipping his whisky. He took his shoes off, then his tie. Unworthy thoughts flitted across my mind. In the end, he did four hours with me. What was embarrassing was not his undressing or my unworthy thoughts, but the appalling fact that I had only two C60 tapes. I had brought two spares with me and two spares were not enough to cover the interview. I was angry with myself. After that, I never went out without ample supplies. Things have changed. Now I use a digital recorder with an 8 gig SDHC.

So, you have the fieldwork notebook and the ethnographic interviews as the baseline for what you are going to do next, which is participant observation. I follow these senior figures around, seeing what they do in their day-to-day lives, and having many a conversation with them. I can compare what they tell me in interviews with the way they behave when they go to their various meetings and committees. The two methods provide a wonderful

cross-check on one another in two ways. First, people know you are going to be observing them later so, I suspect, on some occasions they think twice before they say what they were going to say. Then, second, when you are observing them, they will often turn round and comment on what is happening. If it is not in line with what they had told you earlier, they will explain. You can start a conversation about discrepancies. Such encounters improve the accuracy of your data.

Why do ethnography?

Many of my reasons for doing ethnography are blindingly obvious. Most obvious, it is a source of data not available elsewhere. For example, we see Ministers as people who make policies; they make decisions; they govern the country, and you think of them as decisive, taking action, passing legislation. One of my 'discoveries' was that Ministers are in the job for reasons other than making decisions. Sad but true. There are many Ministers in British government. The whips have been heard to comment that the House of Commons is a small talent pool, which means there are Ministers who are not good at the job. Often, the only reason the Minister is any good at all is because he has a good Permanent Secretary showing him the ropes and steering him round the system. I discovered that some Ministers were in it just for the pleasure of being a Minister. One Minister was addicted to doing public presentations. He liked appearing in public because, first, he got the official car and could be chauffeur driven to wherever he wanted to go. I recall on one occasion he left his coat in the car, whether deliberately or not, I do not know. Having got back to his room, he sent his private secretary down to the car to fetch his coat. Ten minutes later, we went back to the car to go to his next meeting. The only reason that I can think of for his behaviour is that he was demonstrating to me that he was a truly important person.

When we got back into the car, we drove off to a grand conference centre. The preparations for the event by civil servants had been meticulous. The Minister got the red carpet he had stipulated with the reception party of the officers of the professional association that was hosting the event. Before his talk, which was televised in the hall, he was taken to a dressing room where he sat in front of the mirror with a pair of scissors making sure his eyebrows would look good on camera. He gave a boring speech because all he did was read the manuscript prepared for him by his civil servants. At first I thought the Minister was both vain and a prat. But you have to abstain from quick judgements. I sat back and pondered, 'what is going on here?' It suddenly struck me that here we had a Minister for whom *the appearance of rule* was what mattered. It was the public appearances and the performance of the role in public which was the most important thing for him. It was the most important part of the conference for his audience. They didn't care what he said. They just wanted him to appear. You have to stand back from the flow of people and events to understand what is happening.

So, you get data and you get access to events you would not normally get access to. You also discover people you would never have thought were important; for example, the diary secretary. She – it is invariably a woman - is often referred to by her colleagues as the dragon behind the desk, and she will act as if she is a dragon to assert her control of the Minister's diary. That control is ceded to her by the Permanent Secretary, by the Principal Private Secretary (PPS) and by the Minister because they all realise there has to be **one** focal point for the diary, otherwise chaos prevails. As one Minister observed, if you upset the diary secretary, it will be three months before you see the Minister again. She has that much power

over what is going on in her arena of responsibility. All she has to do - she does not have to say or do anything else - is say that she is sorry but the Minister is fully booked today.

I discovered that managing the diary was a game because there are three versions of the diary. The version which interested me was the white board in the office where the Minister worked, which everybody who walked in could see. It was a big white board and it had his diary full all day. It was clear what the board was saying – don't ask, I haven't got any space to see anybody. It was not true. The white board would regularly show meetings as lasting half an hour longer than they would in practice to make it look as if the day was full. But those extra half hours gave the Minister the flexibility to do whatever he or she wanted, which would usually be emails or returning phone calls that had been sifted by the PPS.

The PPS is another key individual. They have many specialised skills. For example, there are many ways to end a meeting. The PPS will go into *hovering* mode, which is an art form among civil servants. First, you just stand in the doorway. You do not say anything, just stand in the doorway. This is the unsubtle hint to the Minister that the meeting is over. If the Minister is in full flow, as Ministers often are, then the next step is to enter the room so everybody knows you are physically there. You still do not say anything to the Minister; you just stand there, discreetly of course. At this point, the Minister ought to, and will normally, get the message but some Ministers are so interested in what they are saying that they do not. So, the PPS has to be determined. She will walk over, gently lean over the Minister's shoulder and say quietly, 'your next appointment is waiting Minister'. That is about as directive as it gets. But hovering is an art form and the good PPS can hover in the doorway as silently as a butterfly's wings.

You can only uncover people and their actions by being there and watching them. Nobody would have thought the diary secretary was an important person, but the world becomes chaos unless she controls the Minister's appointments. Ministers, on most days but indisputably every week, have a one-to-one meeting with the diary secretary where they would go through the diary. It will cover personal appointments as well as work. Ministers get toothache, and have in-growing toenails just like the rest of us. The diary secretary even manages their Minister's homes: If a plumber was needed, or an electrician, it would be the diary secretary who would make the appointment. My more feminist inclined colleagues would say what we had here was not a diary secretary but – their word not mine – a 'work-wife'. When, ill-advisedly, I put this description to a diary secretary, I was quickly put in my place. They can be caustic because they deal regularly with people who assume their own importance is such that the Minister will always see them. The diary secretary has to tell them that he will not. They are always polite but you can be sharp and polite at the same time. Ethnography discovers people who are important and actions that are significant.

You also discover voices in the Department that are not normally heard. Another Department had a strategic plan - a wonderful document, beautifully produced, a year and a half in the making, and it was launched at Chelsea Football Club. At the launch, the top brass in the Department had a hard time with the HMUs – heads of management units – because it was the first time that they, the HMUs, had seen the strategic plan. It is worth reflecting on that fact. The launch event was the first time that people central to running the Department had the opportunity see the strategic document. My judgement was that they were not being hostile to the strategic plan. What they were saying to senior managers was if you want to go in that direction, you have chosen the wrong performance indicators. Then, people started to misunderstand one another. The top brass thought that HMUs were using such comments as

an excuse to challenge the goals in the strategic plan. I did not think they were, but by the end of the day everybody was at such cross-purposes that 40 per cent of the HMUs did not turn up for day two. They saw it as pointless, believing there was no real discussion to be had and that senior management were just giving orders. There was no point in being here.

I thought this event was intriguing. I was witnessing voices in the Department giving useful information on how best to achieve what senior management wanted, and nobody was listening. Ethnography identifies such voices. For example, one of the issues confronting consultancy firms is for whom are they conducting their ethnographic research. Is it a management tool for facilitating managerially approved reforms? Their research will identify the silent voices in the organisation. What happens when they report to top management the views of these silent voices? Typically management is irritated because it is information they do not want. Managers think they know their organisation. If they absorb the new information, they will have to change the way they think about the organisation. In fact, anybody who has worked in a large-scale organisation such as a university will know you are lucky if there is a shared view about the university. I feel sure Manchester Business School has a different view of Manchester University to the Arts Faculty or the Music school or whatever. The idea there is a single, unified entity called the university is a misleading idea. A university, like any other organisation, is a contested, contingent and constructed notion.

A government department is just the same. Some government departments are amalgamations of previously separate departments. When I went to DEFRA – the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs – it had within it the old Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF). Those who worked there were still convinced it was MAFF. They had heard of DEFRA because people kept mentioning this acronym, and they were sure it was

important but in reality they were still MAFF! Much of their work was with Europe, due to the Common Agricultural Policy. The focus of rest of the Department was mainly domestic. So, they had a whole area of business where, once they had captured their Minister of State, they could cut out the rest of the Department. And they were good at capturing their Ministers of State.

Another advantage of ethnography is that it disaggregates the organisation; it lets us look inside the black box of government and see how people behave. You will remember Bernard from *Yes Minister*. [1] Bernard is presented as a buffoon and *Yes Minister* misrepresents both his role and his standing. The last term you would use to describe a PPS is buffoon. After the Permanent Secretary, he is probably the most important civil servant in the Department. I did not realise how important until I saw the PPS negotiating with the Directors Generals (DGs). DGs are third-tier civil servants responsible for particular functional divisions. For example, in Education, you would have a director general for primary schools, one for secondary schools, and one for the tertiary sector. I saw the DGs come in and negotiate with the PPS about which papers would go in the Minister's red box to be read overnight. The decision was not taken by the Minister, it was not taken by the Permanent Secretary, it was taken by Bernard. I do not think Bernard was ever cast in that role, either in *Yes Minister* or *Yes Prime Minister*. He is always cowering at the thought of what Sir Humphrey will do to him next, and that is wrong. Sir Humphrey, in real life, would often consult Bernard about what was happening, what was the best course of action, and when he should talk to the Minister. In my version of their world, the Permanent Secretary and PPS roles are often reversed. Now clearly there is a limit. Departments are hierarchies. Bernard is made painfully aware that his career is in the hands of Sir Humphrey. Such coercion exists. But, most of the time, the Permanent Secretary is dependent on the PPS for

information that otherwise would never come to him. If we want to understand how organisations work, we have to get in there and observe. We have to disaggregate the organisation, to get inside the black box, and look at the ways in which particular roles and particular jobs are carried out by individuals.

Ethnography is also good at recovering people's beliefs and practices. Here I have to make a confession. I taught undergraduates British Government and Politics, using Mick Moran's textbook, [2] for at least ten years. Every year I would tell them that ministerial accountability to Parliament was a myth. I firmly believed it. I thought I was being sensible. It was possible that somebody somewhere thought it worked, but I did not and most of my colleagues agreed. When I went into my government Departments, I discovered that at the top of the Department there are large staffs supporting the Minister. Depending on the Department, there are from about 15 – 80 people who are there to support the Minister in his or her daily life. About a 12 to 15 of those people are in a parliamentary section devoted to correspondence with MPs and other parliamentary business. Anything that affects the relationship between the Department and Parliament goes to that particular unit. When the Department receives a parliamentary question (PQ), the parliamentary unit will identify which section of the Department has the relevant information, send the question to that section, and require a reply by (say) three o'clock. The section will find the information and send it to the parliamentary unit, which will draft a reply on behalf of the Minister. That reply will be in the red box for his approval. Almost literally everything stops to answer a PQ.

In other words, the top of the Department behaves as if they are accountable to Parliament and devotes much time and resources in responding to Parliament. I, or any other outsider, might think this a waste of time but our views do not matter. Here we have an

instance of the Thomas theorem – ‘if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences’. The top civil servants believe that ministerial accountability exists, so the internal organisation, procedures and workload of the Department serve that particular belief. For over twenty years I gave my students incorrect information about the beliefs and practices around the relationship between government departments and Parliament.

Ethnography provides texture, depth and nuance in our understanding. My fieldwork provides many examples. In the civil service, there are language games. One of the big language games, when I was observing, was managerialism: can you talk in management speak? Top civil servants are good at talking ‘managerial-ese’, so good that I always considered them multilingual. But they are multilingual always in English! They can talk the classic Westminster Parliament language about accountability. They can talk managerialism. When the veterinary scientist comes in with a report on badger culls in Devon, they can talk veterinary science. They have this facility for switching between all of these different areas of expertise and sounding as if they understand what is going on; and much of the time they do. One of the great skills of the top civil servant is the ability to switch languages and grasp the essentials of an argument. They may not grasp the technical detail supporting the conclusion but they grasp the conclusion. Crucially, they understand what the implications are going to be for the Minister and the rest of the Department. It is an essential skill.

Civil servants also have their own phrases and stories for their work. They refer to the courtier syndrome for excessive toadying to a Minister. They talk of the spotlight syndrome. So, today, when a Minister is interested in subject X, the civil servants in his Department are interested in subject X. Tomorrow, when the Minister becomes interested in subject Y, the

same civil servants will forget about X and be interested only in Y. By ‘being there’ you see these several behaviours and practices associated with being a top civil servant.

I like interviews, at least my kind of ethnographic interviews, because they let the interviewee explain their world. It was E. M. Forster who said: ‘how do I know what I think until I see what I say’. This aphorism applies to many of my interviews because the civil servants and Ministers use them to reflect on how they see the world and on the decisions they have made. Was that decision a sensible one for them to make? They think it might be but they are not sure. They do not talk with me, they talk at me, but mainly they talk to themselves. They are explaining the decision, explaining the way the world is, and reassuring themselves that it was a sensible course of action; that the world is like that.

It is a common feature of interviews. People do not answer your questions. Rather they explain to themselves what their world is like to see if it makes sense when put into words. I am sure that everybody in this audience will have done this at some stage in their life. You are not sure you have it right, you are not sure you understand, and when you tell somebody else about it, it clarifies your own thoughts. I do it all the time with my lectures. For example, after I have written a paper, I am not sure how good, bad or indifferent it is. I try the ideas out as a seminar paper. I stand up in front of an audience and, listening to myself, I think, ‘that isn’t right’. I keep talking. I get to the end of the paper. But I know from saying it out loud that I no longer think my argument is valid. It will not be in the next version. We all do it. Interviews let you in to another person’s thinking about the way they construct their world and how they understand that world.

Ethnography allows you not only to decide what questions you want to ask but, because you are not hypothesis testing, it also allows you to reframe and reframe the questions that you ask. If you do not know how an organisation works, then you have to try to puzzle it out. Puzzles are iterative: you have one stab at the puzzle and you get part of the answer. Then you have another stab at the puzzle and you get another part of the answer. That is the heart of ethnographic research – framing and reframing the research question. I did it almost weekly. I left the Department thinking I understood what happened that week. I read and transcribe my notes over the weekend and invariably find something that is unclear; that I did not understand. I may decide I am going down a dead end street; this avanue is not a useful way of looking at it. I try to look at it another way; that is, I reframe my questions.

Reframing is not only helpful but it is also essential and invaluable. It is how I came up with the notion of the Departmental Court. Earlier, I said that at the top of the Department there are many people supporting the Minister. I just looked on this support as 'resource capacity' for the Minister. Suddenly it dawned on me that all these people dance attendance on the Minister to different degrees; that it was like a king or a queen and their court. These people are there only because of the Minister and, once I had the notion of the court, their court-like behaviour became obvious. You may know the expression from rock music, 'ladies and gentlemen, Elvis Presley has left the building'. Immediately, the tension would dissipate, the atmosphere would change, people started talking to one another and forgot about the concert. Ministers are like that. When Michael Heseltine [3] strolled into the Department, there was a different atmosphere; everybody knew that he had entered the building, just as everybody knew when he had left the building. When he was there, people seemed to work quicker. I am not sure they did but they looked as if they were working quicker: urgency came into everyday life.

The idea of the departmental court came from reflecting on people's actions. I realised what we had here was not just a Permanent Secretary, not just a PPS. Rather they, with everyone else at the top of the Department, were courtiers to the Minister. The analogy works, underpinning beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols. For example, top civil servants clearly are, and understand themselves to be, servants of the Queen's Minister. In constitutional law that is what they are but they understand that in its everyday sense. They know they are important people and most dress accordingly. One example will do: a Permanent Secretary – a member of 'the Court' – accepted an invitation to talk to a school. The principal of the school asked him to dress down for the event because otherwise it would be intimidating for the students. He hummed and hawed about that; whether to comply with the request. He felt he was not going as an individual but as the Permanent Secretary for the (then) Department of Education and Science. In the end, he compromised and instead of wearing his normal black suit he wore a blue one!

Observing the top of the civil service also springs surprises on you. The thing that surprised me beyond everything else was storytelling. If you say storytelling, you immediately think of children, of bedtime, of an activity that is amusing but not serious. In fact, storytelling is deadly serious and it is something that the civil service practices all the time. You will have come across the expression, 'what's the narrative?' That is the current jargon for telling stories. They have been telling one another stories forever and they continue to tell stories. Frequently, the stories are cast around the theme of what did we do last time. A problem crops up, how are you going to deal with it? The first resort is the files; what did we do last time? You look to the institutional memory to see if you can recover information and you tell one another stories based on that memory.

The section of the Department concerned with primary education will have a different bit of institutional memory to that concerned with the tertiary education sector. So, they tell one another different stories. At meetings, they tell stories to see if they will run: is this plausible; is it believable; what will happen if we tell it to the outside; and will the Minister accept it? I have sat there listening to conversations where they are as explicit as I am now about the fact that they are telling stories to one another. It was one of the big surprises for me. I had never thought that one of my conclusions would be that what we are governed by a storytelling elite. I do not think this notion is in many books about British government and politics. But it is one of the elites' major activities and one at which they are skilled. Several bemoan the impact of computers on storytelling. One of the virtues of everything being done by hand was you could red-pen. Your fast-stream civil servant would start writing his stories to pass up the hierarchy and his principal would go through them and red pen them: no, you don't do that, no you shouldn't have said this; it needs to be this way round, and so on. The PPS I was talking to said, although they could do it in Word with tracking and comment boxes, they did not. So, one of the consequences of the arrival of computers has been the death of the red pen in British government, and it is a loss. It is not just that PPS who thinks so. If you read through the lengthy, yet entertaining, diaries of David Blunkett [4], you will see that he gets heated about the lack of writing skills of civil servants. He wants a return to the red-pen culture. If the big surprise was storytelling, the lesser surprise was that even Ministers can be traditionalists.

The last point I wish to make was also a surprise and it concerns the symbolic side of politics: politicians are performers. A good example concerns one female Minister for whom I had a high regard. I sent her a draft chapter for comment. In it, I wrote about her skills as a

performer. I suggested that, metaphorically, she carried a briefcase containing the masks you associate with the theatre – the crying mask, the laughing mask. As circumstances dictated, she would switch between different masks. She was furious because she interpreted my remarks to mean she was inauthentic in her behaviour; that she was, in some sense, faking it. I intended no such implications. Until she reacted so strongly, it had never occurred to me that it could be interpreted in that way. But mask or no mask, she was able to alter her demeanour as needed.

I accompanied her to a meeting about Grand Prix racing that she was attending as the representative of Tony Blair. In the car going to the meeting, she had admitted to a distinct lack of interest in the subject matter but, once in the meeting, she played her role to perfection. The mask was on; she was the Prime Minister's representative. Two hours later she was in the Department where it was 'bring your daughter to work day.' Daughters were brought to see powerful women in work settings to give them apt role models. One girl launched into a criticism of testing in schools, asking why they had to do so many examinations. Testing was not the responsibility of this Minister as she was not Minister of Education. Nonetheless, she engaged with the young woman, took her seriously and was approachable, friendly and understanding. An hour later, she was dealing with a sycophantic business pressure group, and she was regal.

It occurred to me that a Minister who cannot perform in this way is handicapped. You have to be able to play these different parts with a different audience; it is an essential skill. However, it is also a reason we do not trust our politicians. When it is explained to people, as I am explaining it now, they accept the need for it but, when they see it at a distance, they think it is inauthentic. They may think the Minister is lying because he or she behaves in one

way to one audience and in a different way to another audience. People do not like what they see as a contradiction. We should never underestimate the importance of the symbolic, performing side of politics.

Conclusions

I have tried to give you, in an informal way, my reasons for using ethnography to study governing elites. In summary form, the reasons for using ethnography are:

- It is a source of data not available elsewhere.
- It is often the only way to identify key individuals and core processes.
- It identifies ‘voices’ all too often ignored,
- By disaggregating organizations, it leads to an understanding of ‘the black box’ or the internal processes of groups and organizations.
- It recovers the beliefs and practices of actors.
- It gets below and behind the surface of official accounts by providing texture, depth, and nuance, so our stories have richness as well as context.
- It lets interviewees explain the meaning of their actions, providing an authenticity that can only come from the main characters involved in the story.
- It allows us to frame (and reframe, and reframe) research questions in a way that recognises the shared understandings about how things work around here.
- It admits of surprises - of moments of epiphany, serendipity and happenstance - that can open new research agendas.
- It helps us to see and analyse the symbolic, performative aspects of political action.

I am fully aware there are many criticisms of the ethnographic approach, but that is for another occasion. I hope I have communicated to you not only that ethnography is a fun way to do political science but also that it delivers knowledge not provided by other research tools. I have provided a long list of advantages. I believe ethnography is the best way to do political science. That is my problem. However, I hope I have persuaded you that it is an important and valid way of doing political science. I wish more of my colleagues would do it. At the moment the approach is out on a limb. Colleagues find it hard to accept that what anthropology has been going for over a century is also a revealing way of studying political life today.

Notes

1. *Yes Minister* and its sequel *Yes Prime Minister* were a highly popular series of programmes shown on British television between 1980 and 1988. See: Lynn and Jay 1984.

2. Professor Mick Moran, a member of the Manchester Statistical Society, has been for many years Professor of Government in the University of Manchester. See Moran 2011 below

3. Michael Heseltine was a colourful Minister and Deputy Prime Minister in Conservative governments during the years 1979-86 and 1990-97.

4. David Blunkett was a Minister in Labour governments in the years 1997-2004 and again briefly in 2005. He was raised to the peerage in 2015. See Blunkett 2006 below.

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