

Duopoly, Court Politics, and the Danish Core Executive

Introduction

Court politics is a novel way of exploring the workings of, and challenges confronting, governments in the Westminster tradition (see for example Rhodes 2017b; Savoie 2008; 't Hart 2014). However, the value of applying the idea of court politics outside Westminster contexts remains under explored. This article addresses this gap by analysing the court politics of Danish minority coalition governments, focusing on the dilemma posed by the tension between central coordination and ministerial discretion. The article asks two questions. Does the idea of court politics travel beyond its Westminster origins to a parliamentary system of mainly minority and coalition governments? What are the potential dilemmas confronting the executive and its court politics in a minority coalition governmental context?

The empirical foundation of the article are Danish governments which, since 1982, have been coalitions, and apart from one, have enjoyed a minority status (Christiansen and Pedersen 2014). As Damgaard, notes, Denmark may hold 'the postwar record in parliamentary democracies concerning minority governance' (2000: 229).¹ So, Danish governments is a case where minority and coalition governments are the rule rather than the exception. Also, following Lijphart (1999), Denmark is an obvious example of a consensual unitary state with which to compare the classic Westminster, majoritarian unitary state (see also Taagepera, 2000). The Danish executive can be seen, therefore, as a critical case for assessing the analytical value of court politics in analysing minority coalition governments.

The article has six sections. First, we outline our theoretical approach to studying the core executive - court politics. Second, we describe our research method - qualitative elite interviewing.

Third, we provide an institutional description of the executive in Danish government. Fourth, we analyse the interviews, describing the means by which Danish prime ministers (PM) run coalition government. Fifth, we describe the role of the parliament and its effects on the PM's ability to run a minority governments. Finally, we discuss the dilemmas confronting the Danish variant of court politics.

The article is a contribution to the comparative analysis of the court politics of governing elites, a topic rarely explored for the parliamentary systems of either Westminster or Continental Europe. Also, it elaborates on the varieties of court politics. We identify two distinctive features of the Danish core executive:

- A 'duopoly' of the PM and the Minister of Finance (MoF) and their respective permanent secretaries supported by the Coordinating Committee and the Economic Committee.
- The key role of senior civil servants in supporting this duopoly across shifting coalitions.

The article concludes that a duopoly is a distinctive addition to existing forms of court politics and confirms the importance of non-political, bureaucratic actors in the court.

The core executive and court politics

Our starting point is the literature on the core executive. This term refers to all those organisations and procedures which coordinate central government policies, and act as final arbiters of conflict between different parts of the government machine. In brief, the 'core executive' is the heart of the government machine, covering the complex web of institutions, networks and practices surrounding the PM, Cabinet, cabinet committees and their official counterparts, less formalised

ministerial meetings, negotiations, and interdepartmental committees (Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990; Rhodes 2017a). It includes also the central agencies with a coordinating role – chiefly, the PM’s Office (PMO) and the Ministry of Finance.

Actors in the core executive are interdependent. Ministers depend on the PM for support in getting funds from the Ministry of Finance and the PM depends on ministers to deliver the party’s electoral promises. This resource-dependence approach focuses on the distribution of such resources as money, authority and political reputation in the core executive and explores the shifting patterns of dependence between the several actors. The core executive is segmented into overlapping games in which all players have some resources with which to play the game and no one actor is preeminent in all games.

After two decades of core executive studies, Elgie (2011: 71–2) concludes that ‘the language of the study of British central government has been transformed’ by the approach. More significant, Elgie (2011: 73) claims ‘the resource-dependency approach is almost completely dominant’. There is one clear advantage to the approach; it captures the fluidity of executive politics. It concentrates on the questions of what variety of executive politics prevails, and when, how, and why it changed.

This article offers two theoretical developments to the idea of the core executive. First, drawing on the work of Burch and Holliday (1996; 2004), it describes the core executive as a set of interlocking networks. They identified eight tasks focused on the UK Cabinet, including, for example, domestic policy, European Union (EU) policy, legislation, and the civil service and machinery of government. They identified the network supporting each task, noting that some are small and exclusive while others are large and open. The PM is the focal point of these networks; the innermost network linking the set of networks that comprise the core executive. Second, the PM has more central resources to support the

work. These resources increase the power potential of the PM. Such developments suggest that the power of the centre has increased. However, to return to the earlier point about fluidity, the power of the centre fluctuates depending on the personalities of individuals in the court, their resources, and the context in which they are acting. In short, the core executive is a set of interlocking networks; the stage on which actors play their several parts. No one actor prevails. No one pattern of executive politics persists.

The second development to the idea of core executive is to view the inner core of the core executive as the ‘court’. The phrase court politics is clearly analogous to the idea of a royal court. We do not suggest that the PMs are equivalent to monarchs. Obviously, they are not; PMs regularly come and go whereas monarchs abide. We use the term to refer to the internal politics of the political leadership networks at the heart of government. Court politics is the more evocative phrase for capturing the beliefs and practices of political leaders and their courtiers. We prefer it to more prosaic terms such as inner circle or inner cabinet (and for a more detailed discussion see Rhodes 2017b, chapter 7).

The study of court politics is rarely at the heart of academic analyses of present-day government. We did not invent the phrase nor are we the first to use it for either American presidents (Dexter 1977) or the skulduggery of British prime ministers (Rawnsley 2001). The most important example is Savoie’s (2008) analysis of ‘court government’. He defines the court as ‘the PM and a small group of carefully selected courtiers’. It also covers the ‘shift from formal decision-making processes in Cabinet ... to informal processes involving only a handful of actors’. We prefer Cowling’s (1971: 3-4) more expansive definition of ‘High Politics’ as the political leadership network that encompasses politicians, civil servants and political advisers.

Court politics are commonplace but they are more often described than analysed, judged rather than unpacked. The court is the central node for the set of interlocking, interdependent networks that

make up the core executive. It is a key part of the organisational glue holding the centre together but its clout ebbs and flows with that of the PM. Its roles include coordination of policies, managing conflicts and rude surprises, communicating the government's narrative, controlling access to the core of the core executive, and comforting the core of the core executive. We use elite interviews to unpack these several roles and, at least partially, the beliefs and practices of the Danish court politics. We take 't Hart's (2014: 76-81) categories of court politics as our starting point for a systematic analysis of the varieties of court politics. He distinguishes between court politics as think tank, as sanctuary, as arena, and as ritual (see also Elgie 1997). The court as think tank focuses on the collection, interpretation and use of information. The court as sanctuary focuses on psychological, especially, emotional, support for the leader and courtiers. The court as arena is a stage for bargaining and conflict resolution. The court as ritual provides legitimacy for the policies and actions of an informal inner circle. Elements of each of these courts exist in Denmark but none capture the dominant Danish practice, which we call 'duopoly'. This term is analogous with market duopoly in which two firms control the market. For the Danish executive, it refers to the two leading actors (PM and MoF), and their committees, who control policymaking. It is the key component of the organisational glue holding the centre together.

Method: qualitative elite interviewing

We talked to prime ministers, ministers of finance, departmental ministers, party leaders and civil servants in central agencies, to map the court and its several circles of influence. The interviews focused on the beliefs and practices of members of the core executive, which led us to the *duopoly*. Following Hajer's (1996) advice, we gathered information about the Danish case from two experts to get a 'helicopter perspective'. Further, we wrote a formal letter targeted, first, at retired members of cabinet and senior civil servants. At these interviews, we asked the interviewee to recommend us to one or more of their colleagues – 'snowballing'. In total, we interviewed 21 respondents, one whom

we interviewed twice, leading to 22 interviews. Eight retired and 5 permanent secretaries and 7 retired and 1 present members of cabinet accepted our request for an interview. Of the 37 actors approached (excluding the 2 expert interviews), 16 refused or ignored our request for an interview. The respondents accepting the invitation were several past and present civil servants from the inner Danish court, not bit players. Of the 21 respondents, 3 are women and 18 are men.

There were two rounds of interviews. The first round of interviews were in English and conducted by XXXX and XXXX. The second round of interviews were in Danish and conducted by XXXX. They lasted anywhere from one to three hours and the successful interviews resembled conversations. The first-round interviews took place between March-October 2017; the second between March-May 2019. It was conducted to fill in the gaps identified in our analysis of the first round. Also, it enabled us to explore some procedural changes introduced in the summer of 2018. We recorded all the interviews, transcribed them word for word, and translated them (where necessary). We checked all transcripts against the recordings.

As the first step, we subjected all the transcripts to thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006) which provided the first draft of our codebook for use with NVivo. In drawing up the codebook, we were guided also by earlier work on British ministers and civil servants (Rhodes, 2011). When reporting the interviews here, we made minor corrections to the English. We conducted all the interviews on a citation but not for attribution basis. We identify each interview by a number (#) and the interviewee's position: permanent secretary in post (PS); former permanent secretary (FPS), Minister in post (M) and former minister (FM).

The interviews are the heart of this article and they are a source of rich data. However, all methods have their strengths and weaknesses and elite interviews are no exception. The danger with

thematic analysis of elite interviews is that the researcher highlights the vivid quote that dramatizes the point. And we do. However, we provide also a handful of more ordinary supporting quotes. Interviewees can be self-serving to the point of dissembling. Many of the topics of conversation are ‘delicate’ and the hint of a leak to the media has everyone scrambling for deniability. Ministers and civil servants work hard to build and protect their reputations. A picture of the dirty deals done will not be to their taste. Nonetheless, we insist that elite interviews are an essential for understanding the inner workings of government, especially when the beliefs of actors in government and the traditions of their organizations are the main concern. Interviews are our respondents’ accounts of the beliefs and traditions of Danish government. To ensure that our account of the traditions, and our description of the duopoly, were plausible, we cross-checked the interview data whenever possible both with other interviewees and with documentary sources, biographies, autobiographies and memoirs.

The executive in Danish government

Denmark has parliamentary governments that are commonly minority and coalition governments (Damgaard 2000; Christiansen and Pedersen 2014). Danish governments are organized according to the principle of ministerial governance with ministers at the top of the hierarchy. They have the formal authority to decide all matters in the remit of their ministry (Christensen 2006: 999). The ministers as the political heads of their ministries are formally accountable to parliament for all decisions and actions taking in the ministry. Parliament (*Folketing*) has the formal authority to remove ministers from their position. The principle of ministerial governance legally grants great autonomy to the individual ministers of the Danish cabinet. However, the close alignment of the Ministry of Finance (MoF) and the Prime Minister (PM) and his or hers office reduces the policy autonomy legally granted to ministers individually and as cabinet members (see below). So, PMs ‘operate within a loosely organized setting marked by considerable pragmatism’ (Christensen and Jensen 2011: 9).

The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) is comparatively small. There is no Cabinet Office. The PMs' power lies with other institutional means. They have the right to choose the ministers of the government, although often constrained by negotiations with the coalition partners. In addition, PMs chairs the appointment committee of permanent secretaries, which has been interpreted as strengthening the PMs (Nielsen 2017: 398). They can set the agenda for one of the central cabinet committees, the Coordination Committee. They can decide the terms of reference and the delegated powers of the Economics Committee, which acts as the main policy coordinator in Danish government. However, the power to govern is contingent not only on the ability of PMs to manage coalition partners but also the relationship with the supporting parties in parliament (#4 FPS).

The civil service in Denmark is a permanent civil service, recruited and promoted on merit. At first, the civil service resisted any introduction of political appointees'. Danish civil servants argued they were already responsive to the demand for political-tactical advice. This argument commanded agreement from both political and administrative actors in *Slotsholmen* as well as in Parliament.² Political appointed civil servants were introduced comparatively late to the Danish government. Since 1998, the PM and Danish ministers have appointed one or two special advisers (Christiansen and Salomonsen 2018) in sharp contrast to the number of advisers in many Westminster systems (Eichbaum and Shaw 2018). The civil service welcomes the comparatively low number of advisers. As one permanent secretary (PS) pointed out, they '*do not complain*' about the numbers (#5 PS). Given the small number of politically appointed advisers, Danish permanent secretaries provide political-tactical advice about parliamentary strategies for the minority governments (#4 PS), and take part in meetings with parliamentary parties (#6 FPS). In short, they perform a politicized role (Hustedt and Salomonsen 2014), and have become firmly embedded in the '*Slotsholmen* culture'.

There have been changes in the role of some advisers. The first cadre of advisers were

appointed mainly as media advisers. In the second wave, some of the advisers were appointed to provide policy advice (Christiansen and Salomonsen 2018). However, their role in the central coordination of government remains limited (Hustedt and Salomonsen 2017). For example, they are never present in the central government committee meetings for the ministers or the permanent civil servants respectively (#4 FPS; #6 FPS). Central coordination stays with ministers and the bureaucracy, in which the PMO and the MoF plays the most important roles. What the advisers often do is take care of the ministers' relations with the party (#6 FPS). In this way, they insulate the permanent civil service from becoming too involved in party political issues and tasks (Hustedt and Salomonsen 2017).

Coordination: the duopoly

Coalition minority governments require extensive and intensive coordination, both before and during negotiations with the parties in parliament (#5 PS). Therefore, there are several important and long-standing coordinating mechanisms.

First, there is the weekly cabinet meeting on Tuesday morning (#1 PS; #3 FM). The meetings are formal in the sense that the committee provides mainly '*formal approval of things that will be put in front of parliament.*' (#3 FM, and for a similar characterization see Pedersen and Knudsen 2005:162-163). However, a former minister describes the meetings as '*complete theatre*' (#3 FM). Civil servants say the same (#5 PS; #6 FPS; #7 PS). There are no formal minutes of cabinet meetings. (#1 PS; #4 FPS).

Second, coalitions are governed by the coalition agreements made by the governing parties when forming the government. The coalition agreements are steering instruments (#5 PS), both '*setting up a framework*' and creating '*clarity also for the civil servant to know which direction to*

work and then stops a lot of the discussions if the direction has been settled' (#6 FPS). In addition, there is *'strict following up on that [the coalition agreements], coordinated by the Prime Minister's Office and with help from the Ministry of Finance* (#1 PS, line ministry). Agreements vary in their detail and specificity (#6 FPS). However, the instructions to the line ministers are often *'fairly comprehensive.'* (#7 PS).

Third, governments hold a seminar normally twice a year to discuss *'how things are going'* (#5 PS).

Finally, for many years, there have been two main formal coordination forums. First, there is a Coordination Committee (*koordinationsudvalget*), chaired by the PM, which discusses and coordinates *'all the matters of high political impact for the government'*. It enables the PM to be *'informed and in control of some of the bigger initiatives'* (#6 PS). Second, there is an Economic Committee (*økonomiudvalget*), chaired by the MoF, *'taking decisions and discussing matters of economic importance.'* (#1 PS). The two committees are described as *'the pulse of decision making in government.'* (#5 PS).

The MoF is also member of the Coordinating Committee, providing the minister and the ministry with a unique and powerful role in Danish governments. In addition, a handful of ministers from different parties of the coalition are permanent members as well, normally including the party leaders (#4 FPS; #4 PS). These ministers comprise the inner court, as *'an inner core of decision making in government.'* (#7 PS). If you are not a member: *'if you look at the formal work rhythm of the Danish government, a minister with no permanent seat on each of the committees is very much out of the loop. It's two tiered'* (#3 FM). This point is confirmed by a PS pointing out that most ministers are not member of the core committees: *'they would often feel that they are on the periphery'* (#5 PS). These ministers and their ministries becomes involved and take part only when issues from their portfolio are on the agenda (#5 PS).

The formal appointment to a core or nodal committee gives a minister a position in the inner court. However, an experienced PS, who had served ministers on these committees, pointed out that, position and influence diverge. Attending the meetings provides a minister with information and an overview of government policy. However, *'a weak minister, and inexperienced minister, might find that he or she can be squeezed [in] this system'* (#10 PS). Commonly, party leaders attend the Economic Committee with *'key ministers as permanent members* because [the MoF] *wants to make sure that when they had decided something in the Economics Committee, it's impossible politically to change it* (#4 FPS, (#8 FOS).

To help the MoF, and to ensure coordination across the PMO and the Coordination Committee, the PS from the PMO is also present at the meetings in the Economic Committees (#6 PS; (#3 FM). The permanent secretaries from the ministries led by the party leaders, and the PS from the Ministry of Finance, also attend. Such a broad membership means that *'decisions become unclear or subject to different interpretations. In these circumstances, the PS of PMO and of MoF ... 'sort out what was decided and discussed* (#5 PS).

For the two core committees, there are parallel steering committees of permanent civil servants. The PS in the PMO chairs the Coordinating Committee. The PS of the Ministry of Finance chairs the Economic Committee. The role of the steering committees is to prepare for the meetings of the Coordination Committee and the Economic Committee. Interviewees describe them as *'a mirror image of the [economic and coordination] committee meeting itself. So you're basically playing the whole thing, but without ministers'* (#3 FM). The aim is *'to write papers that the ministries agree upon'* (#1 PS), or, if there is no consensus, papers which reflect the different positions of the actors involved (#6 FPS).

The permanent secretaries for the ministers who are permanent members of the nodal committees are also permanent members of the two steering committees. For other ministers on the Economic Committees, their permanent secretaries always attend the steering committees. Permanent secretaries serving ministers who are not permanent members only attend if there are issues to be coordinated from their portfolio. Before those meetings, the line ministries prepare and draft the briefs and the policies to be discussed (#7 PS). However, the Ministry of Finance is often involved (#1 PS). Such coordination is by the permanent civil service who, of course, keep the relevant minister informed. It is described as '*informal*' *coordination*' (#1 PS). It does not involve the political advisers. The various steering committees meet weekly, with rather short agendas. It is unusual to have more than 10 items (#1 PS).

The work of the steering committees is to draft the papers going to the Coordination Committee. The ideal is to get agreement on the papers to be submitted. They do not '*agree necessarily on the recommendations*' ... *but ... make ... a case for discussion*. (#5 PS). Their task is to make it clear what ministers have to decide. The function of the committees is solely coordination and decision-making. It is not a forum for developing new policies or pushing a policy onto the government agenda. According to a permanent secretary '*we will never just have an open discussion on something so loose*.' (#5 PS).

The duopoly

Our account suggests the inner court in the Danish government comprises the ministers, and the permanent secretaries of those ministers, who are formally part of the two central cabinet committees. One point is clear - the political advisers are not key actors. The inner circle comprises the PM and his or her PS, and the MoF and his or her PS. Other ministers are on the periphery (#11

FPS). A former PS in the Ministry of Finance described the work of the Economic Committee as *'a strict set up that ties them in what they can do or can't do'* (#6 FPS). It is difficult to get policies up and running *'if you are not an insider and on the committees'* (#9 FPS).

The Economic Committee was established shortly after the Second World War in 1947. The Coordinating Committee evolved from informal regular meetings among cabinet members to become *'formalized as a permanent cabinet committee'* in 1977 (see Christensen 1985:120). However, both committees became stronger because of the partnership between the (then) MoF and his PS (#4 FPS) after a change in government in 1993. The newly elected PM, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, wanted to strengthen the role of the PM toward the MoF and his ministry (#5 PS). Also, the change was considered essential for imposing stricter budgetary discipline on an economy in disarray.

The PS in the Ministry of Finance and the MoF were prime movers in reforming the Economic Committee. They were supported by the Minister for Economics - the leader of the Radical Liberal Party (*Det Radikale Venstre*) and a junior partner in the coalition. Their aim was to strengthen the economy by granting power to the Economic Committee (and by extension the Ministry of Finance) to control public spending. They wanted to stop ministers who had been told 'no' by the Ministry of Finance appealing to the PM to get a 'yes'. They wanted to end this 'traffic' between the two central ministers (#8 FPM). An extra ambition was better preparation and coordination of policies. They wanted to ensure that all proposals and issues were prepared by the permanent secretaries in the parallel steering committee (#8 PS).

These changes in how governments worked were seen as *'dramatic'* (#8 FPS). According to the (then) PS in the Ministry of Finance, decision making across the coalition government improved because there was now effective coordination of the different ministerial 'world views' (#8 FPS). These administrative preparations *'evolved into very strong central coordination'* (#8 FPS). It

became easier for politicians to decide because they no longer faced *‘five different views on the world from five ... different ministers [with] some arguments ... in one paper, other arguments ... in the other paper’* (#8 FPS). Instead, *there was [now] one story ... and normally we also could unite on the recommendations’* (#8 FPS). The new procedures *‘had a very healthy effect of reducing conflicts between the ministers’* (#8 FPS).

While this system was seen as novel by the permanent secretaries interviewed for this article, historical accounts of the period provide another perspective on the alleged ‘novelty’. Thus, conservative Prime Minister Poul Schlüter (1982 to 1993) was able to coordinate effectively a four-party government through the Coordination committee, which was described as ‘the centre of command’ (Olesen 2018:54). This effective coordination occurred even when, in 1982-4, the MoF was from another party to the PM and aspired to replace the PM. However, the PM and the MoF were able to establish a ‘strong’ relationship characterised by trust, especially in the early years of the government (Olsen 2017: 54 and 567). The key to running the four-party coalition, and to effective financial coordination, from the 1980s onwards, was the intimate collaboration between PM and MoF, and between the PMO and the Ministry of Finance (Olesen and Olesen 2018: 596) through the Coordination committee. Further, the permanent secretaries from the Ministry of Finance and the PMO were present at the committee meetings (Olesen 2018: 54-55), pointing to their already pivotal role for the effectiveness of government coordination in a Danish context. So, the reforms had deeper roots than the new procedures of 1993.

The PM and the PMO with the MoF and the Ministry of Finance constitute the **duopoly** running Danish coalition governments. The nodal and steering committees were supplemented by many informal meetings between those four actors (#6 FPS). They ran government: *these two committees and the two groups of permanent secretaries [is] where the prime minister's office and finance have*

created a machine that has hand-on management of the whole government. ' (4 FPS).

The strong role of the permanent secretaries in the PMO and the Ministry of Finance facilitated by the central position of the two committees led to effective coordination. Historically, there has seldom been the destructive conflict between the PM and the MoF as in Australia and Britain. Such competition is less likely, but not impossible, in the current Danish context. Some conflicts have occurred in the past when the MoF did not enjoy the full support of the PM, leading to internal ministerial fights over the economic policy (see Heinesen 2006; Olesen and Olesen 2018). Ministers recognise that the workings of the duopoly '*comes down to politics and individual*' (#3 FM). However, a former MoF pointed out that '*all the institutions are designed to avoid that. It's simply – it's simply completely in the opposite direction of that*' (#3 FM). As in the Netherlands, the PM and MF typically 'hold the line' against the spending departmental ministers (see Rhodes and van Dorp, forthcoming)

Although the two ministers should be viewed as '*a team*' (#7 PS), the relative standing of the two parties in the duopoly is not fixed. It is *different from government to government, and Prime Minister to Prime Minister. So ... the balance between the two committees is shifting and changing* (#3 FM, #11 FPS; Jensen 2008; Christensen and Jensen 2011:13). Nonetheless, the role of the MoF and the Ministry of Finance was and remains central to the effective working any Danish coalition. Our respondents saw the Economic Committee as the more important of the two committees in recent governments (#4 FPS). However, the Coordination Committee has been described as 'an inner cabinet' (Christensen and Jensen 2011:12). It is important for both coordinating policies across the government, and for 'launching major policy initiatives' (Christensen and Jensen 2011:13). Even here, the Economic Committee is a major and crucial player for ensuring agreements and for 'getting a unified direction' (#9 FPS): *it's not that policy is in the one pocket* (#3 FM). For non-economic policy

issues such as immigration, foreign affairs, security and justice, *'decisions and discussions would be in the Coordination Committee'* (#3 FM). However, where there is *'some kind of fiscal or economy-wide impact ... which is just about everything, [that] would be handled primarily in the Economics Committee* (#3 FM). For many if not most policies *'the Economics Committee is ... where you hammer out deals between the ... coalition parties* (#3 FM).

The importance of the Economic Committee is also clear from our interviewees' description. It is *'the centre of power in Danish government'* ((#3 FM, #9 FPS). It gives the Ministry of Finance, not only the minister but also his or her PS, *'a uniquely strong position in the whole policy-making process'* (#3 FM, #11 FPS). A former minister described it as *'a little bit surprising ... how influential it was'* (#12 FM) but it is where ministers go to get their mandate for their portfolio (#3 FM, #11 FPS).

The ideal decision-making practice in the Economic Committee is consensus. The MoF wins consensus by pressurising coalition partners. The Ministry does not have veto powers. There is no voting on the committee but the Ministry can put *'a tremendous amount of pressure on individuals to get things moving'*. (#3 FM). However, if agreements are not reached, and a decision still needs to be made, then it would be made by the permanent members of the committees. However, *'if it gets really complicated, and that is very, very seldom, you will see it become part of the discussion in the Coordinating Committee'* (#6 FPS). The PM becomes involved, and *'you have a crisis in the coalition'* (#6 FPS). So, *you would see that rarely'* (#6 FPS).

Policy negotiations with parliamentary parties are left to the respective ministers after they have been granted their mandate for the negotiations by the Economic Committee. However, the MoF may take over these negotiations from the line ministers if negotiations *'get sticky, or complicated'* (#3 FM). To perform this central (and centralizing) role in Danish government, the PM and PMO

must grant the MoF much discretion by. It has that discretion. *'There can be no appeal to the Prime Minister of the decisions taken by the Minister of Finance'* (#3 FM). If appeals were allowed *'the whole thing will collapse'* (#3 FM). So, *'the full backing of the Prime Minister'* underpins the authority of the MoF (#3 FM). Similarly, *'the Coordination Committee isn't a court of appeal'* (#5 PS). Some minister do try to appeal: *'stupid ministers have tried, but usually they have gotten nowhere'* (#4 FPS). Indeed, *Prime ministers really avoid challenging him [MoF]. That's also why - for the last 40, almost 50 years now, the finance minister has been from the same party as the prime minister'* (#5 PS). Permanent secretaries involved in the coalition negotiations for a new government sustain this practice by advising strongly for an appointment from the same party. Otherwise, they argue the PM would need a larger PMO (#5 PS).

Again, the PS of the PMO plays a key role in coordinating the two ministries and the committees. He or she is described as *'very, very closely aligned'* with the PS from the Ministry of Finance (#6 FPS). He or she is part of the Ministry of Finance's 'work flow', spending a lot of time in the Ministry, dining with the minister and his or hers PS. He or she will always report to the PM on the decisions made and the obstacles facing the MoF (#3 FM). The PS of the PM is *'physically in the Ministry of Finance for a lot of his time'* (#3 FM). The link is so close that the PS would stay on in the evening and *'they would have dinner together'* (#3 FM). The PM's PS *'took note of the whole conversation, also during dinner, and reported ... what's happening in the Ministry of Finance'* (#3 FM). The end result is that *'the PM would have that briefing constantly'* (#3 FM). To reinforce, the influence of the PM on the MoF, the PS from the PMO is always present in the Economic Committee meetings to ensure that the government's strategy and the political interests of the PM are safeguarded. He will not say much but will observe, when necessary, *'I don't think the prime minister would like this', or 'maybe you should talk with the prime minister before we decide'* (#4 FPS). The system ensures that *'the prime minister's office is represented at all levels'* so *'they know what's*

happening and they are prepared to intervene if things are moving in a direction that they know that the prime minister wouldn't like (#4 FPS).

The PM has good reasons for giving the MoF such discretion. When it is *'the minister of finance who has to take the decision ... to say no, to take the blame* [then the PM] *can focus and use this time on relations to EU, international meetings, the general direction of government. He doesn't have to spend time on nitty-gritty'* (#4 FPS). Of course, this arrangement presupposes a high degree of trust between PM and MoF (#4 FPS).

Because the Ministry of Finance plays such a central role, the PMO has remained small (#5 PS; #7 PS). The Ministry of Finance acts as the Cabinet Office for the PM. A former PS noted: *'Most of Cabinet Office functions are actually taken care of by the Ministry of Finance in Denmark.'* (#6 FPS). Another called it *'an extended secretariat for the prime minister'* (#5 PS; #13 PS), and it explains why there is a duopoly. As one permanent secretary pointed out, this division of roles means the ministry serves as a 'lightning rod' or scapegoat for the PM. In other words, the bigger a role a ministry and minister plays in substantive policymaking, the more it is likely they will get *'dirt on their hands'* (#13 PS). They will be held accountable in a political rather than legal sense, taking some of the 'dirt' away from the PM (#13 PS).

The two cabinet committees have survived many different coalition governments. One experienced top civil servant, now PS, suggested they survived because there was a high degree of trust in Danish government. There was *'a general acknowledgment and experience of its effectiveness in terms of coordination'* (#13 PS) because the system *'has proven itself to work over a long time'* (#4 FPS).

The civil service and duopoly

An essential precondition for the effective working of the duopoly is the permanent civil service. It ensures that, despite their primary loyalty to their minister, the PS in the PMO knows when ministers want to do something which is against, or is not, current government policy. It is an explicit expectation, and has been so from the 1990s onwards (# Expert 1). If a policy is unwise or contradicts government policy, *then I expect to be informed* (#5 PS). However, that results in a dilemma. PS are *'100 per cent loyal to their minister, but they should also be loyal to the government and ... make sure that government policy is followed* (#5 PS). However, it posed a dilemma for some permanent secretaries because their ministers had different expectations. They wanted the exclusive loyalty of their PS and failing to provide cost some PS their job (# Expert 1).

The effectiveness of the system depends on the permanent secretaries ensuring that which needs to be coordinated is coordinated. The practice is *'if we are in doubt, [we ask] is this something ... we would find it appropriate to coordinate'* (#1 PS). The officials would discuss with the minister whether he or she should discuss with the PMO. Informal discussions underpin the more formal procedures. The key point is the central role played by the permanent civil service in general, and by the permanent secretaries in particular, for the effective functioning of the duopoly. The civil service acts as carriers of the tradition of the duopoly across governments. To do so, it is essential the permanent civil service and the permanent secretaries find the system worthwhile. They do, as the accounts provided by the permanent secretaries during the fieldwork strongly and consistently suggest. For example. They claim that the Ministry of Finance's role as *'gatekeeper'* has two advantages (#4 FPS). First, *'it makes sure that economic considerations are given due weight* (#4 FPS). Denmark has a strong economy because it has a strong Minister of Finance. The Budget Act:

Specifies how much money can be spent in the public sector for the next four

years, it's a straightjacket for the political system in the hands of finance. That's very good for the country because it keeps our economy sound. (#4 FPS).

Second, the ministry coordinate the whole of government:

Somebody has to be in charge of that, and in Denmark who is in charge are those who should be in charge - prime minister's office, cabinet office and finance. If we didn't have that kind of centralized management of government work, we would have anarchy (#4 FPS).

Also many interviewees pointed out that the strong informal coordination supplemented the formal coordination; *'there's very strong informal links'* in Danish government, and *'it's very much based on do you know the right people? Do they know you? Do they trust you?'* (#9 FPS). So, cheating on the bargain heightens the dilemma between central control and ministerial initiatives and undermines trust.

Respondents compare the role of the Ministry of Finance favourably to the role of the equivalent ministry in other countries: *'I think the biggest difference was the strong coordination and the acceptance of the Ministry of Finance taking that role'* (#6 FPS). They accept that ministries of finance are strong everywhere. The difference lies in *'the weekly coordinating role preparing all these decisions'* (#6 FPS).

Any explanation of why the duopoly, and role of the Ministry of Finance, are accepted must start with the system for appointing permanent secretaries. Formally, the PM appoints them. He or she chairs the official appointment committee. The PSs of the PM and the MoF will be members of

the committee, confirming their high standing in the inner court (see Nielsen 2017). Although recruitment has been professionalised and now involves recruitment firms, nonetheless the appointment committee decides, not the minister the new PS will serve (#4 FM; #5 FPS).

The appointments committee was introduced in 1977 (Nielsen 2017: 363). In 2013, a procedure was introduced which involved the permanent secretaries of the MoF and the PMO ‘scanning central government for prospective candidates’ (Askim et al. 2018:15). This list of candidates is then given to the committee, and the minister who will work with the new permanent secretary will be a temporary member of the committee. The guidelines introduced in 2013 encourage experience from more than one ministry as well as an agency (Askim et al. 2018:16). Today, the would-be PS will often have experience of ‘the inner court’; that is, of the PMO or the Ministry of Finance. This selection procedure gives the government full political control of appointments to top positions in government. Appointments are controlled ‘*by the core executive with the Ministry of Finance in a pivotal position*’ (#1 Expert). The appointment procedures not only accept the strong role of the duopoly, but also encourage strong informal links across the cohort of permanent secretaries. As a former minister explains, ‘*the Minister of Finance has become very, very powerful ... because all the head of departments, different ministers, they have been in this ministry*’ (#12 FM). Moreover, *if you’ve not been there, then you’re in trouble* because ‘*you cannot, you will not have these networks you have to have*’ (#12 FM). This interpretation is supported by numerical data. Senior civil servants with experience in the MoF make it to their top position 5.2 years before senior civil servants with no previous experience in the MoF (Gram 2017: 60). Indeed, the ministry believes it ‘*create[s] the top managers of the future*’ (Grøn and Salomonsen, forthcoming).

It is a cliché that with great power comes great responsibility and another condition for the success of the court is that it acts with ‘*sufficient humility. They shouldn’t use the huge power that they*

have because of the system to try to decide what's outside their scope (#4 FPS). As a former PS pointed out, the duopoly works best if the MoF accepts that he/she is the number two in the government and *'has no ambitions to be number one'* (#6 FPS).

Parliament and duopoly

Most governments are not only coalition but also minority governments. The supporting parties of the governments in parliament matter for effectiveness of the government and of the PM (#4 FPS) because the stability of the supporting parties is crucial to the strength of the government (Christiansen and Pedersen 2014). Clearly, central coordination of the government machine is the Ministry of Finance's portfolio. The PM is the person responsible for managing the parliamentary coalition. Dichotomies always oversimplify but it is not too misleading to claim that PM manages the coalition and the parties to deliver political support while the MoF manages the government machine to deliver policies. Each partner brings something distinctive and essential to the pairing.

Delivering political support is crucial to the coalition. It is increasingly difficult in the 2010s because the supporting parties are not displaying the loyalty enjoyed by previous governments (Christensen 2006). As noted by Hansen (forthcoming), managing the coalition is more challenging given the increased number of parties in parliament. They are less reliable, and *'they sometimes form majorities with other opposition parties in areas which they're not supposed to'* (#5 PS). Such practices occurred throughout the Lars Løkke Rasmussen Cabinets (2009-2011 and 2015-2019).

It is not only the PM who has to build political support in parliament. Other ministers spend much time managing their relations with Parliament to win support for their policies (#9 FPS). The lack of a majority in parliament means that parliamentarians from opposition parties are invited into

negotiations over new policies before the policies are presented formally to parliament. These negotiations are not confined to parliament or members of the coalition. Rather, members from the non-governmental parties go to meetings in the Ministry to discuss the price of their support. It has always been the case with minority governments that governments and ministers needed strong coordination with Parliament. Nowadays they have to work even harder for that coordination (#11 FPS). And as you might expect, the PS would normally be present during these political negotiations in the ministry (#11 FPS).

Dilemmas of duopoly

We have described the distinctive Danish version of court politics - duopoly. However, the duopoly faces some dilemmas. Here, we focus on the small-d dilemmas found in daily practice (see Boswell et al. 2019). For example, Rhodes (2011) identifies many small-d dilemmas in his study of British government departments. There are the usual tensions. To name but three, they include tensions between groups in the office over their relative status; over budget cuts between the sections of the department; and between the minister's private secretary and the director generals over filtering policy briefs to the minister. Our interviewees talked about three small-d dilemmas without, of course, using that term: trust, political support, and politicisation. Briefly, we revisit each in turn.

Trust

The duopoly of PM and MoF needs much trust. Looked at through Australian and British eyes, trust is a scarce commodity. Denmark has it in plenty. The Danish duopoly is cooperative. The Australian and British duopolies are competitive, and competitive duopolies are unstable. However, interviewees recognise the dangers of competition for the Danish duopoly. They comment it is best if MoF has no ambitions to be number one, and accepts that he or she is number two. Also, the Ministry

of Finance must stay on its own turf. It must not invade the policy portfolios of others. It must stick to the financial and economic strands of new policies. On occasion, the temptation to stray is too great and line ministries resent the intrusion (#PS5.2; #PS13). There is a dilemma between centralised coordination for mainly fiscal control and ministerial discretion for policy initiatives.

The dilemma is dramatized by this line minister:

*[When I first became a Minister] I experienced the Ministry of Finance questioning not only the financial but also the political content [of the ministry's policies]. I reacted immediately by telling the Minister of Finance, that it was my impression that the Ministry of Finance, and the Economic committee were interfering with the financial aspects **and** the political aspects but I expected the political aspects to still be part of my turf as a minister... I asked for a meeting with the Minister of Finance. He and I were accompanied by our permanent secretaries. I told them about my experience, and said if this was the way [the government was supposed to function] then I saw no reason to have a politically appointed minister. Then [the government] would only need departments. I was told it was only the financial, and not the political aspects that the Ministry of Finance was supposed to challenge. Then it went really well for a while – and then I could feel it came crawling back.*

Such criticism of the overweening MoF led to guidelines for the ‘coordination of issues in the permanent governments committees’ (PMO 2018). These procedures accepted there was a need to rebalance the roles of the MoF and the other ministries when preparing briefs for the economic committee. They call for improved the dialogue among those parties to ensure all facets of a policy, not only financial matters, are considered in the papers (#5 PS 2nd interview). The dilemma is not only that the MoF has too prominent a role, but also that civil servants in MoF overrule the experience of line ministers. It is the role of the civil service in the ministry, to act as a filter for what can and cannot be included for the political discussions (#14 M). The guidelines arose from a discussion instigated by

some ministers (#14 M), but also among the permanent secretaries (#5 PS 2nd interview). The word ‘guidelines’ is used deliberately. They are not formal rules; that would jar with the pragmatic practices of Danish central government. Rather the guidelines provide advice on how issues should be prepared (# 3PS 13). They are not radical. What is new is the signal that the line ministries ‘*hold the pen*’ (#5 PS 2nd interview). The guidelines also signal that line ministries have a responsibility to take broader governmental considerations into account when drafting the papers (#PS5.2nd interview). Above all, it is a signal to the MoF to pull its head in. It needs to be more responsive toward the other ministries and ensure it is not only ‘the budget or the economic logic’ which dominates (#5 PS 2nd interview).

Political support

The Danish party system is changing with the rise of populism; for example, the Danish People's Party (DPP) (*Dansk Folkeparti*, DF) had until the recent election in 2019, 37/179 seats in Parliament. It provided political support for different coalition government, as was first case for the governments from 2001-2011, making Danish governments among the first to rely on a populist party for parliamentary support (Hansen forthcoming). The price is the toughest and most controversial immigration laws in the EU. For example, the former party leader, Pia Kjaersgaard claimed that a multi-ethnic Denmark would be a ‘national disaster’.³ In response to criticism of Denmark’s immigration policies by the Swedish government, she retorted:

*If they want to turn Stockholm, Gothenburg or Malmö into a Scandinavian Beirut, with clan wars, honour killings and gang rapes, let them do it. We can always put a barrier on the Øresund Bridge.*⁴

The dilemma of providing political support while responding to the clamour of the new populism creates dilemmas when building political support for the government. Anders Fogh

Rasmussen's government was stable with the DPP as its main coalition partner but stability came with the price tag of a hard-line immigration policy. The 2019 general election saw the DPP lose 21 seats, and a minority government formed only by the Social Democrats. In the following negotiations with the supporting parties, immigration was again a thorny issue. The dilemma does not go away.

Politicisation

In Australia and Britain, politicians demanded responsiveness from civil servants, and there was an increase in the number of political appointments to support ministers. Denmark did not respond in this way. Rather the civil servants opposed political appointments and took on the political role to keep control. For example, they are involved in coalition negotiations and in building parliamentary support for policies. Their central role is most obvious in the support they provide for the duopoly. It creates two tensions. First, they have to balance loyalty to their minister with loyalty to the government as a whole. Second, their consensus building for the *ancien régime* of the duopoly means performing an even more politicized roles when providing tactical political advice in an unstable coalition. Contrary to the experience of other western democracies, the Danish civil service has helped the Danish government contain populist parties and demands. But the dilemma around politicisation is being managed; it has not gone away.

Conclusions

Through the analysis of elite account of the workings of Danish minority coalition governments, we tell a story of centralisation enabled by a duopoly between the PM, the PMO and the MoF and the ministry. The Cabinet is the formal, symbolic closing ceremony. In the beginning, centralisation was a response to economic crisis and failures of coordination. It sought to ensure that

budgets remained within bounds by the ministries, and to establish one centre for the prioritising and coordinating government policies. It was a counterweight to (potential) centrifugal forces across coalition governments. It entailed a small PMO because the Ministry of Finance took on the work normally assigned to either a PMO or a Cabinet Office. It resulted in the duopoly rather than a predominant PM as elsewhere (see Poguntke and Webb 2005; Rhodes and van Dorp, forthcoming). It created a hierarchy in the government with an inner circle of ministers being permanent members of the two cabinet committees. Within that core, there was an even more exclusive circle including the PM, the MoF, and their respective permanent secretaries. The remaining ministers were banished to the periphery with their access to the inner circle restricted. Any access was channelled through the Economic Committee or its steering committee of permanent secretaries. The Ministry of Finance has great powers for coordinating not only the financial and economic components of a policy but also for the policy more broadly. However, in a consensual democracy with minority coalition governments, political support cannot be taken for granted. As noted by Christiansen and Pedersen (2014: 940 and 942), minority coalition governance requires intense coordination at two levels, cabinet and parliament. The Danish duopoly provides for both, as it is the PM's job to deliver political support, manage the coalition and fight elections while the MoF manages the coalition government machine to deliver coordinated policies. They are mutually dependent. At its crudest, no political support, no policies. It is why the PM and MoF are (almost) always from the same party. Each has a distinct and crucial role integral to the survival of the government.

We began this article by pointing out that the focus on the core executive and its court politics drew attention to the variety of executive politics, but not duopoly. We find duopolies elsewhere. In Australia, for a short time, PM Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, who held a portfolio of ministries, were an effective duo (see also Strangio et al 2015 for other examples). He was the 'big picture' leaders (for example on the environment) and she was the 'deal-making poster child' managing the factions within

the party (Gratton 2014: 51). However, this division of labour and the duopoly fell apart. The duo were no longer complementary but competitive, and Gillard replaced Rudd as PM. Similarly, the ‘dual monarchy, each with its own court’ of PM Blair and Chancellor Brown in the UK was competitive (Rawnsley 2001: 20). The rivalry was never resolved until Blair stood down. The outcomes of their competitive narcissism were as many and varied as they were negative. The Danish duopoly is essentially cooperative with each partner having an agreed role and turf. The arrangement is as distinct as it is distinctive. It is collective government in a different guise in which the Cabinet has only a formal, symbolic part to play. We suggest that duopoly is a new category to add to ‘t Hart’s (2014: 76-81) classification of courts.

Having shown that a focus on court politics is a useful analytical tool, the next step is to look at the cause and consequences of the different types of court politics. What consequences for coordination stem from the court as think tank compared to a duopoly? We know that court as sanctuary can become inward-looking, victim of group think with disastrous consequences for coordination. But what of the other types of court. How do they help or frustrate coordination? Also, as noted earlier, minority and coalition governments come in many guises both in Denmark and elsewhere. For example, Christiansen and Pedersen (2014: 943) distinguish between a ‘substantial’ and a ‘formal’ minority government. The former describes governments that ‘lack stable support in parliament’. The latter describes government which enjoys ‘a very stable and explicit support party in parliament’. The government led by Anders Fogh Rasmussen enjoyed stable support but most latter-day coalition governments have lacked that stability. What consequences for the workings of duopolies stem from the different types of coalition? Are there any major differences in their practices? Our interviewees had worked for both substantial and formal minority governments. They reported no major differences in the respective roles of the PM and the MoF, but we did not set out to compare the different types of coalition. The next step is to broaden our canvas to explore the varieties of both courts and coalitions. For example, how does the role of the permanent civil service vary between the different types of

courts and coalitions? What are the effects on courts of politicising the civil service by appointing more political advisers (Pedersen and Knudsen 2005: 164-165)? Also, pragmatism and consensus seeking are defining characteristics of the Danish tradition of Danish government? What are the consequences for court politics of different traditions with, for example, extensive politicisation of the civil service and a predominant prime minister (Pedersen and Knudsen 2005: 159)?

In sum, this article makes three contributions. First, our analysis of the court politics of governing elites enables us to draw comparative lessons. We have shown that the concept of court politics, with its focus on the beliefs and practices of actors in the networks of the core executive, is not limited to majoritarian Westminster governments. It also has analytical grip when applied to consensual parliamentary democracies, where minority coalition governments are the rule rather than the exception.

Second, our qualitative elite interviews provide an up-to-date and original data set that gives us a unique insight into the workings of the Danish core executive; namely, the duopoly.

Finally, we make a novel theoretical contribution because our analysis combines court politics and the networks that comprise the core executive, analysing both the actors and the stage on which they perform. We seek to understand a Faustian world with its blasts of ‘wild treachery and weirdness that not even the hard boys can handle’ (Hunter S. Thompson 2009: 679).

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Notes

¹ Post-1982, the exceptions to being a coalition government were the governments led by Lars Løkke Rasmussen from the social liberal party (*Venstre*) from 2015-2016, and the present government led by the social democrat Mette Frederiksen (2019 to date). The exception to being a minority government was the 1993-4 coalition government led by the social democrat Poul Nyrup Rasmussen.

² Slotsholmen is an island located at the heart of Copenhagen. Since the middle ages it has hosted the most of the institutions of the Danish civil service. 'Slotsholmen' is often used as shorthand for the civil service or the state.

³ 'Pia Kjærsgaards tale om Udlændingepolitik, Årsmødet 1997', 4 October 1997 @:

http://www.danskfolkeparti.dk/Pia_Kjaersgaards_tale_om_Udlændingepolitik_Årsmødet_1997.asp

Last accessed 21 November 2019.

⁴ *The Guardian* 15 May 2011 at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/may/15/will-hutton-populist-right-gaining-europe>. Last accessed 21 November 2019.