Article

Whither the Centre? Tracing Centralisation and Fragmentation in UK Politics

Joseph Ward[1] 🄳**, Bradley Ward[2]
and Peter Kerr[3]**

Abstract

This article explores the question of how to conceptualise the location, capacity and effectiveness of the 'centre' in the UK policymaking process. While the literature on UK governance has historically featured avid disagreements about the power and capacity of central government, we identify a more recent convergence around the idea that the UK government is characterised by persistent centralisation of decision making alongside a fragmentation of policy delivery and frontline capacity. Through a detailed review of UK governance debates, we trace the development of two, seemingly contradictory, schools of thought: the centralisation school and the fragmentation school. We then identify an emerging consensus which recognises a continuous and uneven centripetal–centrifugal dynamic and the concurrence of both centralisation and fragmentation. We contend that changes to the British political context following the 2016 European Union referendum buttress the claim that UK politics is shaped by twin processes of centralisation and fragmentation, reinforcing tensions between a centre that desires power and a range of forces eroding its capacity to deliver. Our overall contention is that the notion of 'power without capacity' effectively captures the contemporary character of the 'centre'.

A long-standing puzzle for students and scholars of UK politics is how to comprehend a governing landscape characterised by the coexistence of a centralised state that persistently hoards power, and a public policy context characterised by complexity, fragmentation and implementation gaps. While for much of the 20th century the field was dominated

[1]The University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK
[2]University of Southampton, Southampton, UK
[3]University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

Corresponding author:
Joseph Ward, The University of Sheffield, Sheffield, S10 2TN, UK.
Email: joseph.ward@sheffield.ac.uk

by the precepts of the Westminster Model (WM) and the recognition that the British state was highly centralised, from the 1970s scholars began to highlight the gap between the WM image and policymaking reality. In tandem with the advent of neoliberalism, such scholarship prompted a new school of thought which contended that the power of central government was becoming increasingly fragmented. Under the banner of 'governance', this school advanced a pluralist interpretation of UK politics emphasising the diffusion of power across multi-levelled structures, both vertically (to supranational/international organisations and local/devolved government) and horizontally (to non-governmental organisations (NGOs), arms-length bodies and private actors; Rhodes, 1997). This perspective became increasingly influential in both the UK and further afield and was described as the 'new orthodoxy' by the 2000s (Marsh, 2011). However, continuity of the central tenets of the British system led many to reject this account. Asymmetries and hierarchies of power, it was countered, continued to characterise a system dominated by the institutions of Westminster and Whitehall, epitomised by the notion that 'government knows best' (Marsh et al., 2003).

Given this divergence in the literature, how should new students and researchers seek to make sense of contemporary UK politics? We offer two contributions on the role of the 'centre' in UK politics to help answer this question. First, we review and compare different models of UK governance to shed light on the development of two, seemingly incompatible, schools of thought – the 'centralisation school' and the 'fragmentation school'. We present a new reading of these debates, highlighting points of convergence initially within the core executive studies literature and, more recently, within debates around 'metagovernance'. This narrative reveals a growing consensus that UK politics is characterised by a centripetal–centrifugal dynamic which creates tensions between a power-hoarding centre and a range of forces gradually eroding its capacity to deliver. Second, through an assessment of recent empirical developments, we introduce the notion of 'power without capacity' to frame these tensions. While the gap between policy intent and policy implementation has long been acknowledged in the literature, we contend that this framing adds weight to the idea that the UK central government retains its thirst for power, yet suffers an increasing inability to deliver many of its key objectives.

Centralisation or Fragmentation of the British State?

In their account of the governance dynamics surrounding COVID-19 and the putative 'levelling-up' programme of the post-2019 Conservative administrations, Richards et al. (2023: 45) argue that these cases illustrate how, in the UK, 'the state is centralised in terms of power but fragmented in relation to public administration and policy delivery'. Similarly, in their analysis of the levelling-up agenda, Newman et al. (2024: 14) list multiple governing problems resulting from the devolution strategies of successive administrations which have worked to reinforce the UK's 'centralised statism' alongside 'fragmentation of local remits and responsibilities'. Elsewhere, Jones and Hameiri's (2022: 17) comparison of the UK's pandemic management to that of South Korea reveals how the British state's outsourcing-dependency has produced policy outcomes which are 'simultaneously hyper-centralised and yet highly fragmented and ineffective'. Likewise, Flinders and Huggins (2021) have contrasted the idea of 'representative and responsible' government – central to the WM – with the increasingly 'complex reality of governance',

creating a 'governance gap' between public expectations of politicians control and growing constraints on their ability to effect change.

A picture of 'incoherence' then, to borrow Richards et al.'s terminology, has emerged across the literature on UK governance. This emerging consensus, we contend, centres on recognition of (1) a continued dominance of central government decision making, (2) the importance of resource dependencies between government and other policy actors and (3) the increasing fragmentation of policy delivery and frontline capacity. In the following sections, we chart the lineage(s) of this view of a centralised but fragmented state, tracing its trajectory from within two distinct and seemingly contradictory schools of thought: the centralisation school and the fragmentation school. While the former insists the balance of power has always gravitated towards the centre, the latter emphasises the increasing diffusion produced by fragmentation and complexity. This divergence long-precluded productive engagement between rival positions. However, as outlined above, over time insights from both schools have combined to reveal how the dual forces of centralisation and fragmentation have exacerbated an evergreen tension between the power to decide policy and the capacity to deliver.

Core Executive Studies

A chronological review of these debates would begin with the WM (see below) as the traditional organising framework for analysing UK politics. However, in tracing the emergence and gradual convergence of the centralisation and fragmentation schools, we begin with scholarship on core executive studies of the 1980s–1990s. This is not to say that the themes of centralisation and fragmentation began with this literature. Recognition of a gap between decision-making intent and policy implementation and outcome, alongside key concepts such as 'policy communities' and 'bounded rationality', were established by scholars in the 1970s (e.g. Richardson and Jordan, 1979; see Cairney, 2012: Ch. 5). Rather, our contention is that the notion of the 'core executive' was crucial to the later demarcation of analyses into the two main schools.

The framework of core executive studies aimed to shed what its proponents saw as the increasingly outdated and inaccurate WM, instead seeking to provide a 'a neutral description of a field of study', adaptable for empirical application in different geographical contexts (Dunleavy and Rhodes, 1990: 4). Initially, the framework adopted a self-consciously broad definition of the core executive due to its recognition of 'resource dependency', the notion that power is not fixed within a particular institution or location – for example, the Cabinet or Prime Minister – but is interdependent and relational, existing in the connections between different elements of the system and 'resource relations' between 'core executive actors' (Elgie, 2011: 66; also Rhodes, 1995). Nevertheless, the field maintained a focus on central government and accordingly defined the core executive as: 'all those organisations and procedures which coordinate central government policies, and act as final arbiters of conflict between different parts of the government machine' (Rhodes, 1995: 12).

Core executive scholars have adapted their definitions over time, accounting for shifts in the composition of the centre. Rhodes initially focused on institutions within the vicinity of the Prime Minister: Cabinet, Cabinet Committees, counterpart official committees as well as coordinating departments (e.g. Cabinet Office, Treasury). However, Smith (1999: 5) reoriented the focus towards central government departments on the grounds that 'they are the core policy-making units', overseen by 'ministers who are key actors within the institutions of the core executive' (also see Smith

et al., 1995). More recently, Dorey (2020) updated the definition to include special advisers and junior ministers, while Dunleavy (2018: 205) included the 'Bank of England' as a key actor within the core executive. Although the appreciation of contingency and change is a merit of this approach, such broad definitions arguably sacrifice some of the initial conceptual clarity.

Although often under-acknowledged in the literature, the emphasis on resource dependency or 'exchange relations' in core executive studies is critical to understanding the divergence between those who, drawing on the WM, would go on to emphasise the persistent role of structural power and inequality within a highly centralised system – the 'centralisation school' – and those accentuating the fragmented character of 'governance' alongside the gradual erosion of central power and the declining utility of the WM – the 'fragmentation school'. As such, the idea of power as relational and contingent simultaneously provided a foundation for both the divergence between the two schools and their subsequent convergence. We chart both these developments over the next three sections.

The Centralisation School: Preserving Governmental Autonomy

The Westminster Model. As the prevailing 'meta-constitutional orientation' of UK politics, the WM combines a range of normative and institutional components to provide a shorthand for how the British system was historically perceived, and supposed, to operate (Flinders, 2010; Gamble, 1990). From the outset, the model was underpinned by a Whig-historical perspective imbued with ideas of organic development which informed the export of Westminster as an institutional blueprint to British colonies.[1] In the UK, the WM was traditionally said to comprise a concentration of executive power in one party, cabinet dominance, a two-party system, a majoritarian electoral system, a unitary and centralised government, interest group pluralism, the concentration of legislative power in the parliament, constitutional flexibility, absence of judicial review and a central bank controlled by the executive (Lijphart, 2012). Despite such a broad range of components, for many years studies of the WM focused narrowly on the balance of power between the Prime Minister and the Cabinet (Dunleavy and Rhodes, 1990). This institutionalist focus has more recently considered the apparent tension between parliamentary sovereignty and executive dominance (Barnard, 2022), with studies also highlighting the subtle means through which parliamentary power is exercised (Russell and Gover, 2017).

Scholars have noted that gradual European accession and New Labour's constitutional reform programme placed pressure on the institutional foundations of the WM (e.g. Flinders, 2010). Although these reforms undoubtedly conflicted with the central pillars of the model (see below), it remains relevant to UK politics for (at least) three reasons. First, constitutional flexibility remains a key component of the UK political system. The idea that political, rather than codified legal, processes and pressures – such as democratic elections and parliamentary conventions – uphold accountability and responsibility in UK politics, remains salient (Wright, 2020). No category of law or source of authority sits above parliament, which is free to govern as it sees fit. Second, and related, the notion of 'representative and responsible government' with leaders trusted to act in the 'national interest', continues to guide the discourse of elites as reflected in official documents such as the Ministerial Code and the Cabinet Manual (Flinders et al., 2022). As Hall (2011: 17) summarised, the WM continues to be a 'a widely believed and promulgated self-image of the institutions and processes of British politics'.

Third, the WM draws attention to the fact that the institutions of the British state have shown a remarkable resilience against root and branch transformation and a proclivity for incremental reform. UK politics still largely operates under a majoritarian system with a strong notion of parliamentary sovereignty, which centralises considerable power in the Prime Minister, who handpicks the executive. The devolution of powers to the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish legislatures presented a clear challenge to this model, prompting claims of 'bi-constitutionalism' and the emergence of alternative visions of sovereignty (Brown Swan and Kenny, 2024; Flinders, 2010; Richards and Smith, 2015). However, the repoliticisation of devolution post-2016 has indicated that processes which cement the power of a narrow Westminster elite persist, epitomised by the UK government's deployment of a Section 35 Order to block Scottish legislation in 2023 (Baldini et al., 2022). Although the model underappreciates the complexity introduced into the system in recent decades, its emphasis on the *concentration of power* ensures it remains the cornerstone of the 'centralisation school'.

The British Political Tradition and the Asymmetric Power Model. Debates around 'resource dependency' and the 'relationality' of power led to the emergence of clear divisions within the core executive scholarship. As one of the pioneers of the core executive framework, Rhodes (1997) built on these insights to articulate the 'differentiated polity model' (DPM), a comprehensive refutation of the WM which contended that, alongside growing evidence of extant and unavoidable implementation gaps, neoliberalism had instigated a vast reduction in the power and authority of the British state, with markets, policy networks and delegated governance replacing centralised control. In response, Marsh et al. (2003: 308) questioned Rhodes' account and combined institutional features of the WM with the concept of resource dependency to argue that relational power operates within a fundamentally asymmetrical system: 'The core executive is segmented, but even so, the key resources in the system lie with the PM and the Chancellor'. The alternative 'Asymmetric Power Model' (APM) argued that an understanding of external networks should not replace a primary focus on the central government and relations between actors *within* it – especially departments and coordinating units – and *between* the centre and external political institutions (see Smith, 1999; Smith et al., 1995).

The APM also emphasised the interplay between structures and ideas. On the former, the APM insisted that UK politics was shaped by patterns of 'structured inequality' in terms of who held key positions in government, and that these inequalities were representative of broader socio-economic inequalities (Marsh et al., 2003: 309–310). On the latter, the framework built on Marsh's earlier work on the prevalence of a singular, elitist British Political Tradition (BPT) (Hall, 2011; Marsh et al., 2001). Drawing from Birch (1964), Marsh argued that dominant ideas about democracy and political practice in the UK convey a limited notion of 'representation' and a conservative notion of 'responsibility', thereby cementing a model of hierarchical, centralised and largely secretive government remarkably resistant to change. This tradition legitimises concentration of executive power in the central government – that is, Whitehall – with even parliament limited in its ability to enforce executive accountability (Barnard, 2022; Hall et al., 2018: 367–368).

The APM and BPT both build on core executive studies' focus on the centre while incorporating the concept of 'resource dependency' to move beyond the rigid, 'zero-sum' conception of power resting within institutions implied by the WM. However, this work sits firmly within the centralisation school as it emphasises how, despite multiple phases

of reform, accommodation rather than replacement of the BPT ensured elements of the core executive retained considerably more power over the policymaking process than other parts of the political system.

The Fragmentation School: Diffusion and Differentiation

From the Differentiated Polity to Decentred Governance. In contrast to the BPT and the WM, Rhodes (1997) extended the idea of resource dependency to articulate the more pluralist DPM. Its central premise was that centralised 'government' control over policy has been displaced by a more fragmented and complex system of 'governance' across multiple networks. The 'hollowing out of the state' initiated by the Thatcher and Major governments, particularly through contracting out and privatisation of public services, significantly altered the character of UK governance. Britain's unitary state became 'differentiated' as power moved upwards, downwards and sideways to multiple institutions and policy actors. The centre was increasingly segmented within this system of 'governance', with central governments finding it difficult to 'steer' and coordinate policy, let alone adopt a more hands-on 'rowing' approach (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993). This led Rhodes (1995: 30–31) to conclude that the government retained power to set the direction of travel for policy but had relinquished much of the capacity to implement it.

Rhodes' (1997: 17) initial iteration of the DPM preserved some role for structural constraints and acknowledged the 'asymmetric' nature of central–local government relations (Marsh et al., 2001: 9). However, as this work progressed in a more interpretivist direction, structural factors were disavowed as 'unhelpfully vague' (Bevir and Rhodes, 2008: 730). Bevir and Rhodes subsequently sought to 'decentre governance' through a 'focus on the social construction of policy networks through the ability of individuals to create meanings'. In refuting the idea of a dominant BPT, they instead emphasised the existence of multiple, discrete *traditions* in UK politics, redirecting focus away from formal institutions which were deemed to be limited by 'modernist empiricism or positivism'. Instead, the focus shifted towards the role of multiple actors and traditions in developing a 'contingent pattern of rule through conflicting actions' (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006: 98). This focus on 'meaning in action' was operationalised through deployment of ethnographic and dilemma-based methods (see Geddes, 2019), which, while retaining elements of core executive studies' framework, were generally more interested in the centrifugal forces drawing power away from the centre.

Multi-Level Governance. Originating in the field of EU studies, the notion of 'multi-level governance' (MLG) became something of a mantra across political science and public policy from the 1990s to 2000s. The term referred to the complex arrangements of cooperation and negotiation between public institutions in the construction and implementation of policy (Hooghe and Marks, 2003). The 'multi-level' aspect referred to the overlapping levels of territorial power at different regional, supranational and international tiers, while 'governance' referred to the horizontal displacement of the policymaking powers of the central government to a broad range of non-state actors, including private businesses and NGOs (Harmes, 2006). The field echoes elements of the DPM, particularly through the emphasis on 'governance' over government, reflecting the observation that national governments have lost a significant degree of control over the policy process, with power dispersed to a multiple range of actors throughout this vast multi-tiered system (see Bache and Flinders, 2004).

As a result, this work challenges 'mono-centric' state-focused perspectives, contending that the 'reallocation of authority upward, downward and sideways' (Hooghe and Marks, 2003: 233) resulted in a system of 'polycentric governance'. This latter term connotes 'many centers of decision making that are formally independent of each other', though functions may overlap in certain cases (Ostrom et al., cited in Ostrom, 2010: 643; see also Bache et al., 2016). However, the divisions which emerged from core executive studies are replicated in the MLG literature. Some scholars emphasise the continued role of structural power, hierarchy and the continued dominance of the centre, as well as the extent to which resource dependency and exchange relationships have grown or developed over time (Marinetto, 2003). Others from the field of public policy, such as Paul Cairney (2022), have built on Rhodes' framework of decentred analysis to highlight how the dispersal of power across multiple centres restricts UK central government actors' ability to fulfil the WM narrative of strong, central government control. In this sense, Cairney et al. (2019) have noted how the influence of MLG has contributed to poly- or 'multi-centric' policy-making representing the 'conventional wisdom' (Cairney, 2022: 52).

This highlights the centrality of MLG scholarship to the 'fragmentation school' in UK politics, particularly through the influence of policy studies. However, it also speaks of a normative divergence between scholars who view devolutionary shifts positively and those who are sceptical. On one hand, plural and decentralised policy networks are said to reflect the heterogeneous preferences of citizens, disperse power to a range of actors, and facilitate flexibility, innovation and experimentation. On the other, MLG obscures lines of accountability and undermines the authority of publicly elected democratic bodies, creating opportunities for 'blame-shifting' (Hood, 2011). This has become particularly pronounced in the UK post-2016, with Brexit, COVID-19 management and the 'Levelling-Up' agenda entrenching such divisions and replacing the outdated normative biases behind the WM with alternative assumptions that central government is opaque and ineffective, and devolved government is the opposite (Morphet, 2021; Richards et al., 2023).

Metagovernance: The Two Schools Converged?

As noted above, implicit within the DPM and MLG literature is the notion that central governments no longer have the capacity to fully implement policy and deliver services and are instead confined to 'steering' policy coordination and implementation. System(s) of governance have become so fragmented and complex that government attempts to steer policymaking must operate at different levels and sometimes over different policy areas concurrently. The concept of 'metagovernance' emerged in response to this context. Broadly defined, metagovernance concerns 'the governance of governance', that is, the means through which the central government coordinates 'ground rules for governance and the regulatory order in and through which governance partners . . . pursue their aims' (Jessop, 2016: 16; also Sørensen and Torfing, 2009).

However, within this literature dispute remains as to the level of purchase the central state has within this complex policymaking landscape. Some reiterate the primacy of the central state and continued asymmetries in policymaking through the notion of 'the shadow of hierarchy' (Bell and Hindmoor, 2009; Warner et al., 2023), while others position the concept within more pluralist forms of networked governance in which the state comprises one (albeit important) actor (Cairney et al., 2019). This spectrum of opinion is mirrored to some extent in the range of mechanisms through which metagovernance is

said to operate. Bailey and Wood (2017) categorise these into 'hands-on' – direct involvement from the central state in maintaining governance structures and networks – and 'hands-off' – indirect involvement through design and political framing. The divisions which emerged in the context of core executive studies debates in the 1990s–2000s, therefore, continue to influence perspectives on metagovernance. Rhodes' (2017: Ch. 12) work, for example, has rejected the (re)prioritisation of the state in much metagovernance scholarship, which he deems inconsistent with an interpretivist methodology of 'decentred analysis'.

However, we contend that the narrowed spectrum of perspectives facilitated by metagovernance scholarship signals the foundations of a convergence between the centralisation and fragmentation schools. While the notion of 'steering rather than rowing' lies at the heart of metagovernance, UK politics scholars have noted how the centre, sometimes referred to as the 'hollow crown' or 'polo-mint hole', seems increasingly incapable not only of delivering policy, but also of coordinating 'at a distance' (Diamond and Laffin, 2022: 213; Dommett and Flinders, 2015: 2). Although at first glance this might suggest further fragmentation, a substantial seam of scholarship has sought to illuminate how the centre has confronted the complexity of coordinating policy by refurbishing 'core executive capacity and capability' (Shaw and Eichbaum, 2014: 608; Ward and Ward, 2023). A pertinent example in the context of austerity is the Cameron government's attempt to strengthen control of an increasingly complex network of non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) by reducing them, as well as increasing the oversight and monitoring powers of both the Cabinet Office and the Treasury (Dommett and Flinders, 2015; Warner et al., 2021). This balance of 'letting go' and 'holding on', or 'hollowing out' and 'filling in' (Matthews, 2013, 2016 see also Warner et al., 2023) speaks of a centripetal–centrifugal dynamic through which central government has sought to maintain or (re) centralise decision-making powers in various ways within a governing landscape that has fragmented over 40+ years, while also dealing with a lack of capacity to coordinate, implement and deliver such decisions. In this context, a picture of a centre seeking to retain and reassert *decision-making power* without *the capacity to implement or deliver* its decisions emerges.

Power Without Capacity? Tracing Centralisation and Fragmentation

At first glance, the centralisation and fragmentation schools appear to have conflicting perspectives on the nature, scope, and evolution of the centre of UK politics. The first stresses that power remains asymmetrical and concentrated within central government, whereas the second claims that the 'hollowing out of the state' has dispersed power among a complex network of actors and institutions, including non-governmental actors and territorial units above and below the nation-state. However, in highlighting their gradual convergence, this review of UK governance literature has sought to articulate how these perspectives have been, and can continue to be, productively synthesised.

Specifically, we identify a tacit convergence around three elements: (1) the continued dominance of central government decision making, (2) the importance of resource dependencies between government and other policy actors and (3) the increasing fragmentation of policy delivery and frontline capacity. We suggest, therefore, that questions about the role, capacity and effectiveness of the centre can be more fruitfully addressed through recognition of a continuous, contingent and uneven centripetal–centrifugal

dynamic between a highly centralised political authority (the power-hoarding centre), and a wider system that remains fragmented due to the various degrees of influence and power held by intersecting hubs and spokes across the political and economic landscape.

We propose that these processes are effectively captured by the notion of 'power without capacity'. At this stage it is important to clarify what we mean by this phrase. First, we are not making any grand claims of originality. As outlined earlier, recent research has used similar terminology (e.g. incoherent state, governance gap, etc.) to describe the dynamics of centralisation and fragmentation across the UK public policy landscape (e.g. Flinders and Huggins, 2021; Richards et al., 2023). Rather, we find it a useful way of conceptualising the contradictory character of the trends identified by these scholars. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that some may judge the phrase to be a contradiction in terms given extensive debates as to whether *power* is *a capacity* and *whether such a capacity must be exercised to constitute power.* Though we do not wish to intervene in these debates, it is important to note that we are referring to 'power' in this instance as the *decision-making power* of the centre and 'capacity' as the ability of the centre to *implement or deliver* policy. Here, Mann's distinction between 'despotic' and 'infrastructural' power is useful in clarifying how the decision-making power of the centre might be refurbished while its capacity to deliver is depleted. Mann (1984: 188–189) defined the former as 'the range of actions the elite is empowered to undertake without routine, institutionalised negotiation with civil society groups', and the latter as 'the capacity of the state to actually penetrate civil society, and to implement logistically political decisions throughout the realm'. By grounding the notion of 'power without capacity' in Mann's framework, we contend that moves to (further) limit negotiation in decision making constitute attempts to enhance the centre's 'despotic power', while examples of the inability to implement policy throughout the system demonstrate declining 'infrastructural power' or state *capacity* (Evemy and Parker, (forthcoming); Richards et al., 2023).

The empirical discussion below depicts this landscape of centralised power and fragmented capacity. To provide a dynamic account of how power shifts across the UK's patchwork of political institutions, we distinguish between processes of centralisation and fragmentation *within central government* – between departments and 'the core of the core' (No. 10 and coordinating units such as the Cabinet Office and Treasury; see Mullens-Burgess, 2020; Smith, 1999) – and *between central government and the political system beyond it* (Ward and Ward, 2023).

The fragmentation of powers since the late 1970s–1980s has significantly weakened the centre's capacity to operationalise its own policies. The Thatcher–Major years were largely characterised by centralised decision making, despite successive hits to the latter's authority reversing some of these trends (Kavanagh and Seldon, 2000). Yet the increasing exposure of the public sector to private forces instigated significant fragmentation, creating opportunities for accumulation through privatisation and new public management in policy delivery. The New Labour governments further diffused power through extensive constitutional reform comprising devolution, Bank of England independence, the Human Rights Act and the extension of judicial review through creation of the Supreme Court. The UK's fraught integration into an expanding EU also saw sovereignty pooled across policy areas, including agriculture, trade, the environment and immigration. In terms of the relationship between the core executive and the wider political system, the creation of new centres of power in the devolved territories presented a significant challenge to the unitary state and parliamentary sovereignty, eventuating in new sources of legislative authority. The proliferation of QUANGOs, NDPBs and other private–public partnerships

constituted a new 'regulatory state' (Moran, 2003). Fragmentation continued under the Coalition through the growth of regional combined authorities and mayoralties, along with new bodies such as Local Enterprise Partnerships.

Emerging scholarship on COVID-19 highlights how the pandemic illuminated the impact of restrictions to public expenditure and the British state's declining capacity to deliver public services. Jones and Hameiri (2022) illustrate how the fragmentation of authority and state capacity instilled by neoliberalism explains the UK's poor record during the pandemic. This is rooted in a system which dispersed 'responsibility across a poorly coordinated, fragmented and decentralised array of public and private entities . . . failing to ensure the provision of concrete state capacities' (Jones and Hameiri, 2022: 9–10; also, Diamond and Laffin, 2022). Similarly, public policy scholars have documented how the pandemic 'ruthlessly exposed' the fragmented and frail state of public service provision, presenting a wider account of how devolution has 'heightened fragmentation' across the UK (Elliott et al., 2022: 100, 104). This lack of capacity is epitomised by the increasing resort to Military Aid to the Civilian Authorities (MACA), which not only increased markedly during the pandemic but has been increasingly called upon since 2022, to break strikes across the public sector, manage immigration and in response to rising conflict within the Metropolitan Police (Brooke-Holland, 2022).

Against this backdrop of increased fragmentation, a complex picture of continued centralisation has also been evident. Examining the 'British policy style', Jeremy Richardson (2018) argues that several shifts in UK policymaking dating back to Thatcher – including the 'austerity turn', the shift towards a more public, confrontational and impositional approach to reform, and the growing power of ministers over civil servants – have contributed to the (re)emergence of a more traditional, hierarchical style of *government* and a stronger centre (also Richards and Smith, 2015). Richardson notes that consultation has become increasingly constrained and stage-managed to minimise deliberation. Although the Thatcher administration(s) instigated reforms which fragmented delivery, internal decision-making power was centralised through the isolation of the Cabinet and the growing influence of Special Advisers (SPADs), while externally, local government autonomy was curtailed. Similarly, New Labour extended the role of the private sector and devolved responsibilities outside the executive through its constitutional reform programme, while simultaneously pursuing a 'paradoxical' process of internal centralisation, with the powers of No. 10 and the Cabinet Office enhanced and the Cabinet once again marginalised (Flinders, 2010). A yet more complex picture emerged under the Cameron governments, as despite the prioritisation of combined authorities and a wider agenda of 'localism', local authorities, QUANGOs and NDPBs suffered extensive cuts through austerity (Lowndes and Gardner, 2016), and the government sought to strengthen the capacity of the Cabinet Office to coordinate and control the spending of government departments and NDPBs (Dommett and Flinders, 2015).

This argument has been echoed in the context of Brexit by scholars who have noted how narratives surrounding the UK's departure from the EU have been used to bolster the BPT. These accounts contest whether the levels of fragmentation highlighted by scholars of MLG and the DPM were ever realised, arguing that the reforms of the Thatcher and New Labour governments accommodated, rather than replaced, the BPT (Hall et al., 2018: 378). The emphasis on repatriation of powers and reasserting parliamentary sovereignty epitomised by the mantra 'take back control' arguably laid the ground for entrenchment of 'the centralising, power-hoarding tendencies associated with the BPT' and encapsulated the governing strategies of the May and Johnson administrations (Richards et al., 2019: 345). Scholars have also noted how Brexit revived central civil service

recruitment to return some of the capacity eroded by austerity and the gradual 'hollowing out' of central government (Ward, 2021), as well as reinvigorating core components of the WM in terms of parliament–executive relations (Baldini et al., 2022). Patrick Diamond (2023) has identified patterns in core executive politics which echo Richardson's account, arguing that the Coalition presided over a shift away from mutual dependence between ministers and civil servants and the emergence of a more conflictual 'them and us' model. Further evidence of this dynamic continues to emerge, as prominent public rifts between ministers and senior civil servants have proliferated in a manner incongruous to traditional notions of 'impartiality' (Thomas, 2023).

While many have noted that the impulse of post-2016 governments has been a centralising one, therefore, the principal targets of this process of centralisation are institutions introduced as part of New Labour's constitutional reforms. Departure from the EU itself constituted a removal of one layer of MLG amidst demands to 'take back control', and the Johnson government's marginalisation of devolved administrations during the Brexit process constituted an attack on another, with the Internal Market Act 2020 marking a particular flashpoint due to the constraints it placed on resource allocation within the devolved administrations. Successive post-2016 Supreme Court interventions have bolstered the political, legal and intellectual case – particularly among those who favoured Brexit – for a recentralisation of powers and a return to the pre-New Labour 'political' constitution in the name of bolstering parliamentary sovereignty (Johnson and Zhu, 2023). The continued prominence of judicial review in day-to-day politics, particularly regarding immigration and home affairs, has spurred hostility towards domestic courts, the Human Rights Act and the European Convention on Human Rights, prompting several pieces of legislation throughout 2022–2023. The Truss government's 'dash for growth' and the broader (re)politicisation of the Bank of England triggered by the 2021–2023 inflationary spike was also underpinned by a narrative of centralisation and reinstating the traditional constitution.

Three points are worth noting from this necessarily broad-brush discussion. First, many of the sites of power subject to challenge by the executive were either created or strengthened by governance reforms since the 1980s. In particular, the institutions established by the New Labour governments have provided new 'sites of possible contention' that have been targeted by both direct and indirect attempts to recentralise power within central government (Ward and Ward, 2023: 1177). Therefore, the reassertion of the centre in the post-2016 context could be read as a partial attempt to return to the *status quo ante*, well within the spirit of the WM and BPT (see Sandford, 2023). Second, the centre's recent attempts to assert its authority over institutions such as the courts and devolved governments have met with limited success due to contestation and resistance from these new sites of power. Indeed, many of these institutions achieved greater public profile during Brexit and the pandemic, demonstrating that fragmentation may have altered public expectations of territorial governance over the long term (Ward and Ward, 2023: 1186–1187). As noted by various metagovernance scholars, therefore, the intensification of contradictory centrifugal–centripetal pressures has created a 'pathological' situation in which the centre struggles to retain 'steering' capacity over policy delivery, yet continues to hold on – and indeed seek to extend – decision-making power (Gaskell et al., 2020). Finally, the potential for contestation across the multi-level system has filtered into the party system. Dual processes of centralisation and fragmentation present various devolution dilemmas for party-political actors. For example, should Scottish Labour seek greater autonomy from the statewide Labour Party, or should they seek to gain more influence at Westminster (Brown Swan and Kenny, 2024)? These questions pertain not only to the devolved administrations

across the UK's four composite nations, but also to local government and regional combined authorities.

Conclusion: Understanding UK Politics Today

The proliferation of crises which have followed the 2016 EU referendum have generated questions about the continued relevance of extant frameworks for analysing UK politics, and even about the merits of the sub-discipline in general. Territorial differentiation is at the fore of these debates, with scholars highlighting how the field was blindsided by the 2016 referendum result at least in-part due to a 'British Politics' tradition that has veiled trends distinctive to England by taking Britain 'unreflectingly as its unit of analysis' (Henderson et al., 2017: 644). Moreover, the re-emergence of intractable political conflict in Northern Ireland has highlighted the significance of unconsciously short-handing *UK* Politics to '*British* Politics', with the failure to consider the implications of Brexit for Northern Ireland exemplifying how the territory is marginalised in Britain in both academic and everyday political discourse (Murphy and Evershed, 2022). The post-2016 period has thus seen calls to treat English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish politics as discrete units of analysis, which are equally shaped by their own distinct political traditions, electoral circumstances and cultural heritages (Henderson and Jones, 2021; Wright, 2020). Furthermore, the exigency of reframing academic disciplines from the perspective of decolonisation raises further questions for the field, particularly in relation to oft-cited categories such as 'white working class' and its association with the Brexit vote (Begum et al., 2021; Shilliam, 2018).

In introducing the notion of 'power without capacity', we hope to draw attention to the tensions which characterise contemporary UK politics. The phrase describes a dual dynamic of centralisation–fragmentation. The centre continually seeks to assert control over policy decisions it is democratically accountable for in a differentiated policy landscape where coordination and delivery is diffused across multiple actors and institutions, undermining central state capacity. This reframing aims to assist new students and researchers of UK politics through its renewed emphasis on evergreen issues in public policy, such as the gap between dominant conceptions of policymaking and actual policy practice, as well as illustrating how recent phenomena, such as the failures of pandemic management, can be explained through the co-existence of a persistent, and potentially resurgent BPT and WM, alongside concomitant processes of fragmentation.

In a context of power without capacity, the constraints which governments face arguably enhance the appeal of two governing strategies. First, in the face of the obstacles to delivering policy we have highlighted, there is a strong incentive for policymakers to *perform* authority and decisiveness – in accordance with the WM – while deprioritising delivery. Drawing on another concept conceived in the late 1970s, this potentially increases the deployment of 'placebo policies' (McConnell, 2020). Faced with strong 'policy traps' – the gap between public expectations and government capacity to address policy problems – politicians are incentivised to adopt policies designed to 'show' citizens and stakeholders that issues are being addressed rather than to actually address them. McConnell (2020) cites New Labour's appointment of 'Drug Tsars' to tackle the complexities of drug misuse as an example, though the Conservative government's 'levelling up agenda' might provide a more recent incarnation (see Coyle and Muhtar, 2023). Second, frustrations arising from persistent centralisation of executive power alongside fragmentation of policy delivery explain contradictory calls for reform that have emerged in the post-Brexit and post-pandemic era. The Labour Party (2022) has proposed sweeping changes, including a commitment to further devolution and an

elected second chamber, seeking to redistribute power away from Westminster and reduce regional inequality. Conversely, the Conservative Party has implemented reforms which have empowered cabinet ministers and streamlined central government. Despite the incentives to pursue either placebo policies or institutional reform, both have limitations, not least because placebos fail when the public sees through them, and substantive reform tends to be deprioritised after electoral success. However, an appreciation of the tensions arising from a centre which hoards decision-making power but lacks the capacity to deliver policy is a prerequisite for assessing the relative merits of any future attempts to reconcile these tensions.

Acknowledgements

Declaration of conflicting interests

Funding

ORCID iD

Joseph Ward https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3605-9931

Note

1. The spread of these political institutions was underpinned by an ideology which deemed colonial territories as inferior based on various forms of racialisation (Akram, 2024).

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Author Biographies

Joseph Ward is an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Sheffield. His work focuses on the relationship between constitutional politics and political economy, with a particular focus on the UK. He has recently published on post-2016 changes in UK governance, as well as the elevation of home affairs across Europe.

Bradley Ward is a Teaching Fellow in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Southampton. His research sits at the interface of progressive politics and governance and policymaking, and he has produced a number of publications on the organisational and ideological evolution of progressive parties as well as post-2016 shifts in UK politics.

Peter Kerr is Associate Professor in Politics in the Department of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Birmingham. He specialises and teaches in the area of British politics, with a particular focus on UK political parties, political leadership and ideology in the UK and changes and continuities in British governance and public policy since 1945.