Part I

“Closed” bureaucratic-democratic regimes

Taylor & Francis
Not for distribution
Policy styles in the United Kingdom

A majoritarian UK vs. devolved consensus democracies?

Paul Cairney

Introduction

One aim of Richardson’s (1982) edited volume Policy Styles in Western Europe was to show the difference between country level reputations and actual policymaking practices. A sole focus on high-profile policymaking – as a small proportion of government business – exaggerates one type of policy style. If we analyse a central government’s policymaking practices as a whole, we find that countries often do not live up to their reputations. Indeed, one description of a policy style is too simple to capture a wide range of its activities, from top-down imposition in some cases to bargaining and routine administration in others. Nor does it capture the context in which its policymaking or ‘standard operating procedures’ take place, including the types of constraints imposed by policy environments that can be found in all political systems. Put simply, if all policymaking is characterised by bounded rationality and takes place in complex systems, policy styles are partly determined by the system and not controlled fully by governments. In such cases, policymakers usually find pragmatic ways to deal with uncertainty and their limited control over other actors and policy outcomes.
For example, the UK is often presented as the archetypal majoritarian system with a top-down governing style, but Jordan and Richardson (1982) found that its consultation practices and tendency towards incrementalism resembled the style of consensus democracies. This argument became more difficult to maintain after the book was published. A period of ‘Thatcherism’ reinforced the UK’s majoritarian image and prompted some debate about a shift towards top-down imposition (Marsh and Rhodes, 1992a, 1992b). More recently, Richardson (2017: 215) himself identified ‘several trends that suggest that the British policy style has shifted towards the impositional end of the policy style spectrum, bringing it more in line with the traditional Westminster model of governing’.

Further, Flinders (2010) describes ‘bi-constitutionality’, in which the UK government created the conditions for devolved governments – in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland – to become closer to consensus democracies while reinforcing majoritarian politics and policymaking in Westminster. Since 1999, devolved governments have developed a reputation for relatively consensual policymaking, and participants describe devolved policy styles in contrast to the style of the UK government (Keating et al., 2009; Cairney, 2008, 2009a, 2011a, 2014). The pragmatic ‘British policy style’ of the late 1970s has allegedly been replaced by a new mix of majoritarian UK and consensus devolved government.

Yet, if we look beyond these policymaking reputations, based on headline-grabbing examples and incomplete testimony from participants, we find a more mixed picture in which all governments face similar drivers towards pragmatic policymaking styles. The UK combines assertive policymaking in a small number of issues with a hands-off style in most other issues. The devolved governments combine consensus building with partisan politics, and Scotland and Wales often appear to oversee mini-Westminsters (Cairney, 2016). This mix of styles often relates more to electoral dynamics and the types of policy issue than the types of system. Or, UK and devolved government differences are often a function of their size and capacity rather than the rhetoric of ‘new politics’, which was such a feature of the push for political reform and devolution in Scotland and Wales (McGarvey and Cairney, 2008; McAllister, 2000; Keating and Cairney, 2006).

Overall, there is some danger that a useful concept to describe different standing operating procedures – policy style – will skew our understanding of policymaking if we focus only on headline-grabbing examples. To prevent misunderstanding, we need to analyse carefully and demonstrate the nature of their policy styles rather than base policymaking reputations on face value and anecdotal analysis. To do so, I first outline the original description of the British policy style to help identify the aspects of this argument that have changed and those that still hold to this day. Second, I identify subsequent UK developments
Policy styles in the United Kingdom

from the Thatcher governments onwards to show that policymaking has changed, but qualify the idea that there has been a binary shift in policy style. Third, I pay close attention to Richardson’s (2017) most recent intervention: why does he identify such a shift in policy styles since his original edited volume in 1982? Fourth, I describe the ways in which devolved government styles could be more consensual, before comparing actual UK and devolved policy styles. Overall, I argue that the UK government often lives up to its majoritarian reputation, but there is often a great difference between its high-profile image and policymaking as a whole. Governments in the UK juggle two policy style stories, to reflect the electoral imperative to project an image of central government competence, and a pragmatic imperative to share responsibility for policymaking in a complex system.

The original policy style argument: key context and principles

The original ‘British policy style’ argument should be understood in relation to the literature on ‘policy communities’, developed by Richardson and Jordan (1979), and linked increasingly to studies of bounded rationality and policymaking contexts. The overall argument can be summed up as follows. First, most policy is processed out of the electoral and parliamentary arena, and the rules of policymaking beyond the public spotlight are different. They are more likely to prompt consensus seeking, bargaining, and pragmatism. Second, there is a widely applicable logic to policy communities, because policymakers can only pay attention to a small proportion of their responsibilities, and rely on many other actors to make and deliver policy. Third, different governments (from a different party, era, or country) can respond to this logic in different ways to develop their own policy styles, but their success is heavily reliant on contexts not of their own making.

One of Richardson and Jordan’s (1979) aims was to shift our focus from the exciting world of plurality elections, which produced single-party government, adversarial politics, and regular changes in government, towards the more humdrum business of government, which took place regardless of high-level ministerial changes (Jordan and Cairney, 2013). In short, actors changed, but their limited ability to control their policymaking environments did not.

Richardson and Jordan engaged initially with the ‘adversary politics thesis’, which had become linked strongly to arguments about the need for electoral reform: plurality elections exaggerate electoral swings, produce rapid changes in single party government, and destabilise the long-term progress that we might associate with the coalition-building and compromise of proportional systems (Finer, 1975). Such an argument is well rehearsed in the UK literature (see Jordan...
and Cairney, 2013). It relates strongly to the ideal-type ‘Westminster model’ that concentrates power in the hands of a small number of government ministers:

- plurality elections exaggerate the wins of single political parties
- one party gains a majority in the House of Commons and creates a government
- the party ‘whips’ its members in key votes to ensure that the government controls parliamentary business
- Secretaries of State control government departments, served by neutral civil servants in a hierarchical structure
- the prime minister controls the membership of cabinet
- the ‘government knows best’ culture reproduces the idea that a small core executive should determine policy, even if its decisions are unpopular.

(Blunkett and Richards, 2011; Richards and Smith, 2002: 3–4; McGarvey and Cairney, 2008: 23; Marsh et al., 2001; Bevir and Rhodes, 1999)

It also relates strongly to comparative politics archetypes. The classic distinction is Lijphart’s (1984, 1999) consensus versus majoritarian democracy (although both archetypes come from political systems with free and fair elections). In a consensus democracy, a proportional electoral system diffuses power among many parties, obliging them to cooperate and compromise with each other to govern. This need for ‘inclusiveness, bargaining and compromise’ helps promote a wider culture of cooperation, which extends to the relationships between policymakers and influencers. For example, governments may be more likely to encourage corporatism or similar forms of routine bargaining. In a majoritarian democracy, there is a ‘winner takes all’ mentality, in which parties compete with each other and feel no need to cooperate, and the party of government encourages a culture of top-down imposition and open competition between interest groups (Lijphart, 1999: 2–3).

In this context, Richardson and Jordan’s (1979: 73–74) initial impact was to shift our attention to images that better sum up the totality of government business, which is:

administered between a myriad of interconnecting, interpenetrating organisations. It is the relationship involved in committees, the policy community of departments and groups, and the practices of co-option and the consensual style, that better account for policy outcomes than do examinations of party stances, of manifestos and parliamentary influence.

According to Jordan and Cairney (2013: 236), the initial aim had not been to challenge the traditional story associated with the Westminster model. Rather,
their empirical work showed consistently that parliament was generally peripheral to the policy process, and that regular changes of government, prompting a cabinet to be populated by a new party, did not produce the major policy impact that people expected; indeed, ‘the traditional model of Cabinet and parliamentary government is a travesty of reality’ (Richardson and Jordan, 1979: 91).

To make this argument, they provide a key distinction between the ‘interesting cases’ most worthy of media attention, which exaggerate ministerial and parliamentary involvement, and ‘normal policymaking’, in which policy communities were central: ‘This distinction between the “high-octane” controversies and “below-the-radar” negotiations became central to a focus on “real” politics and the relationships between groups and governments’ (Jordan and Cairney, 2013: 236–237).

The ‘normal’ or most pervasive policy style takes place out of the spotlight of media, public, and parliamentary attention. In the absence of a need to play adversarial politics, policymakers identify and follow very different rules based on two considerations:

1. **The motive to act.** In an adversarial arena, there is a high incentive to compete with your opponents to maintain an electoral edge. In a bureaucratic arena, there is a higher incentive to seek consensus and bargain to produce policy outcomes that many actors can support.

2. **The need to appear competent but be pragmatic.** In a high profile arena, parties compete to present the strongest image of governing competence, which requires ministers to pretend to be in control of all relevant government business. In a bureaucratic arena, they recognise the limits to their power and seek pragmatic ways to delegate responsibility.

The more enduring contribution from the ‘policy communities’ literature relates to a much wider argument about the limits to policymaking power and the need for policymakers to find pragmatic solutions to those restrictions. The limits to ministerial power relate primarily to two considerations: (1) bounded rationality, and (2) the constraints provided by policymaking environments, or the overall context in which policy takes place (Simon, 1976; Cairney and Weible, 2017). Put simply, policymakers can only pay attention to a tiny proportion of issues for which they are responsible (Baumgartner and Jones, 2009), and their environment consists of a series of factors that limit their control of policy outcomes (Heikkila and Cairney, 2017):

1. **Actors.** The policy environment contains many policymakers and influencers spread across many levels or types of government (or many ‘venues’).

2. **Institutions.** Each venue exhibits distinctive practices because it contains a collection of informal and formal rules that guide behaviour. Formal rules
include constitutions or other laws proscribing conduct. Informal rules are harder to identify but no less important (Ostrom, 2007). Policymakers ‘inherit’ these institutions when they enter office (Rose, 1990).

3 **Networks.** Each venue exhibits relationships between the policymakers with formal responsibility and the actors with informal influence. The latter, described by Jordan et al. (2004) as ‘pressure participants’, include interest groups and businesses but, in multi-level systems, government bodies in one level also become pressure participants in others.

4 **Ideas.** Different government departments, or other national and subnational venues, contain distinct ways of thinking about policy problems, which can determine the attention they receive and the solutions that seem feasible. Ingrained ways of thinking – described variously as core beliefs, paradigms, hegemons, or monopolies of understanding – are often taken for granted in their own venues.

5 **Socioeconomic conditions and events.** Policymakers need to take into account many conditions that often appear to be out of their control, including a political system’s geography, demography, and economy. These conditions also help to create unpredictable events such as environmental or political crises.

To all intents and purposes, Richardson and Jordan (1979) identified the pervasiveness of policy communities in that context of bounded rationality and policymaking environments. To do so, they outlined the logic of policy communities, consultation, and ‘bureaucratic accommodation’ (1) in the UK, while noting (2) that the same abstract argument applied to most political systems in *Policy Styles in Western Europe*.

First, the size and scope of the state is so large that it is always in danger of becoming unmanageable. Britain’s political system in the 1970s was often described specifically as ‘ungovernable’, but we can identify the same argument in any policymaking environment in which huge numbers of actors seek policy influence. Policymakers respond by breaking down the state’s component parts into more manageable policy sectors and sub-sectors, which spreads power and responsibility across government. Second, elected policymakers can only pay attention to a fraction of the issues for which they are formally responsible. They must ignore the rest. Consequently, they delegate policymaking responsibility to other actors such as bureaucrats, often at low levels of government. Third, the bureaucrats in turn rely on specialist organisations. In the UK, civil servants at this level of government – responsible for policy management – are generalists; they do not possess the experience that we would associate with an expert trained to perform one job, and therefore rely on specialists to provide information and advice. Fourth, policymakers
recognise the benefits of consultation: it fosters the ‘ownership’ of policy by affected groups, and allows governments to anticipate implementation problems.

Finally, expert individuals and organisations trade resources for access to, and influence within, government. Some resources relate to their specialist knowledge, and actors can build up a strong reputation by providing high quality and reliable information. Other resources relate to the ways in which they provide advice on behalf of the people they represent, such as a large membership organisation, an important profession, or a high status donor or corporation. If we combine these five points, we can show why most public policy is conducted primarily through small and specialist policy communities that process issues at a level of government not particularly visible to the public, and with minimal senior policymaker involvement.

Jordan and Richardson (1982: 84) applied this argument primarily to the UK. They argued that a ‘rationality deficit’ underpins the general pattern of group-department relations: ‘Authorities with little informational and planning capacity . . . are dependent on the flow of information from their clients . . . [and] thus unable to preserve the distance from them necessary for independent decisions’. As the scope of government expanded and its departments became more specialised, civil servants took on a ‘larger and larger part of the policy making load’ (1982: 86). Given civil servants’ lack of political legitimacy, they were, ‘ill placed to impose and conflict avoidance is likely to result’. Further, given civil servants’ lack of specialised knowledge, their pursuit of process specialist accommodation led to ‘clientelism’. A bargaining relationship developed between groups and civil servants at various levels of government, based on an exchange of information for influence. Policymaking and influencing became intertwined and it was difficult to attribute responsibility for outcomes to specific individuals rather than ‘the joint product of their interaction’ (Rose, 1987: 267–268).

This story of the British policy style, in which scholars reject the argument that we can read off policymaking behaviour from formal institutions to deduce simplistically that policymaking is majoritarian, has been a consistent feature of UK scholarship ever since the policy communities argument was first published (Richardson, 1982; Adam and Kriesi, 2007: 140; Cairney, 2011a, 2011b; Cairney, 2012a: 88–91; Cairney and Widfeldt, 2015; Cairney et al., 2017; Jordan and Cairney, 2013: 240; Kriesi et al., 2006: 357–358; Larsen et al., 2006). Further, the relatively abstract argument about policy communities holds true in most cases because the underlying logic – about the limits to policymaker rationality and the need to delegate – always applies.

Of course, when we move from abstract discussion to concrete cases, we find that different governments respond to this logic in different ways to develop their own policy styles. Policy styles can vary over time, by party of
government, or by political system. However, the policy communities framework still helps us to understand:

1. **The meaning of a difference in policy styles.** Differences relate to the routine ways in which they deal with bounded rationality and accept the limits to their powers. Some policymakers are less accepting of their limits.

2. **The extent to which their success is reliant on context and is of their own making.** A policy style can change, but the policymaking context does not. Therefore, for example, we can often expect a more top-down style to relate to a small part of government activity, or to be temporary if it proves unsuccessful.

3. **How we should analyse policy styles.** We know enough to avoid a sole focus on the most exciting cases, because they exaggerate the frequency of one policy style. Equipped with this knowledge, we may also be sceptical of accounts that only highlight alleged styles or reputations. This scepticism is crucial when we analyse key eras of British government, including a Thatcher-led top-down style and a Blair-led ‘Presidential’ style.

**The UK policy style since Thatcherism: a mix of majoritarianism and pragmatism**

Richardson and Jordan (1979) and Jordan and Richardson (1982) developed and refined their argument in a pre-Thatcher era. From 1979, ‘Thatcherism’ was often described as a new era of Conservative government in which the old policy communities would no longer operate. For example, Marsh and Rhodes (1992a: 8) argue that Thatcher governments described themselves as ‘determined not to waste time on internal arguments over policy making’. Rather than consult widely with interest groups and maintain tripartite relationships with business and unions, they would set the agenda unilaterally, enforce policy in the face of opposition, and diminish the power of their former partners. In other words, while previous governments eschewed the potential to use the tools of majoritarianism, Thatcher governments appeared to embrace them.

The impact of these developments was profound in key policy areas – such as initiating a major reduction in the power of trade unions, and a long-term programme of welfare state and public services reform under the banner of ‘new public management’ – which seemed to be harder and faster than most European countries (Gray, 2000: 283–284; Kjaer, 2004: 35). Examples of state reform included privatisation, such as the sale of nationalised industries and social housing, obligation to use private companies in service delivery, and introduction of charges for public services; the use of quasi-markets in public services; civil service reforms to separate policy-making and delivery functions; and the use of quangos, third, and private sector organisations as an

Yet, in terms of policy style – as an approach to consultation while making and implementing policy – a more mixed picture developed in which there were elements of change and continuity (Cairney, 2002). For example, when looking at the overall picture of group-government relations, Jordan and Richardson’s (1987: 30) interviews led them to be, ‘impressed with the sheer weight of consultation’. Maloney et al. (1994: 23), meanwhile, argue that ‘the practice of consultation has been growing in importance’, and Baggot’s (1995: 489) survey found that over half of respondents perceived ‘no change in the frequency or effectiveness of contacts with ministers and civil servants during the 1980s’ (compare with the contrasting account in Marsh et al., 2001: 190). Kriesi et al.’s (2006: 357–358) comparative empirical study suggests that ‘majoritarian’ does not sum up UK policymaking well, and that the formal power to impose policy from the top down is generally used ‘with a certain informal restraint’ (Adam and Kriesi, 2007: 140). Further, when looking at specific case studies such as health, Burch and Holliday (1996: 233) identify phases of policymaking in which Thatcher-led governments tried to internalise policymaking before allowing the policy process to return to the normal style of consultation. Indeed, meaningful negotiation was more apparent at the ‘subsectoral’ than ‘sectoral’ level (Cavanagh et al., 1995; Jordan et al., 1994: 524; Jordan and Maloney, 1995; Jordan, 2005).

In other words, Thatcher-led governments were more likely to challenge key aspects of the policy communities’ logic, but their impact was limited to some issues or phases of policy development. Indeed, if we revisit the constituent parts of the logic of policy communities, most still apply: the Thatcher government sought to deal with un-governability and bounded rationality by reducing the size and reach of the state and by paying attention to a small number of key issues. Although they often seemed to eschew the benefits of consultation, they either encouraged it in some areas or delegated policy development to civil servants who were more likely to bargain and seek consensus on a routine basis. Consequently, some debates focused on the threat to specific policy communities, or the extent to which the quantity of consultation remained high but the quality dropped, such as when governments set the agenda rigidly before discussion. Some policy communities remained stable for some time, with a small number of participants, low levels of conflict, and a high scope for bargaining (Jordan and Maloney, 1997). Others became threatened by a new Thatcherite agenda and the spread of new policy ideas that threatened the status quo (Marsh and Rhodes, 1992a, 1992b; Richardson, 2000).

Therefore, the Thatcher experience appeared to set a precedent for a two-sided policy style, or the presentation of two different stories about what the UK government was doing and could do. On the one hand, it presented a
majoritarian approach as part of an attempt to establish an image of governing competence. This approach helped governments live up to a simple motto associated with Westminster-style democracy: you know who is responsible and therefore who to hold to account (Duggett, 2009). On the other hand, many of its initiatives seemed to undermine the ability of ministers to govern competently, prompting different policymaking responses.

There was some debate on the extent to which NPM reforms produced a ‘hollowing’ state, in which the controlling capacity of the centre diminished; a ‘lean’ state, in which the removal of peripheral functions helped focus policymaking; or a ‘regulatory’ state, in which the role of central government shifted from policymaking and delivery towards strategic direction and the holding of delivery bodies to account with performance measures and management (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003: 6; Hogwood, 1997; Holliday, 2000; Marinetto, 2003).

However, each account shared a focus on how governments presented their activities. A policy style was one part action and one part story to describe that action (Hay, 2009: 276–277). When competing for elections, parties tell the story of ministers in control. When actually engaged in government, they seek ways to describe more pragmatic responses to policymaking complexity and the delegation of responsibility to policy communities or delivery bodies. Sometimes, both stories collide when ministers devolve decisions to public bodies, with their own means to demonstrate institutional accountability, but also intervene in an ad hoc way to deal with crises (Gains and Stoker, 2009: 11).

Since the Thatcher era, successive governments have sought to maintain this two-sided policy style, which stresses being in control and letting go (‘letting go and holding on’ – Matthews, 2016). Policy studies have tracked how successive governments have contributed to ‘hollowing’, or at least the reduced ability to impose policy from the top down. Key developments from 1997 to 2010, during the Blair-led and Brown-led Labour governments, include further Europeanisation via the ‘social chapter’, granting independence to its central bank (the Bank of England) in 1997 and introducing devolution to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland in 1999. Labour governments also extended privatisation, the use of quasi-markets, and the further outsourcing of policy delivery to third and private sector bodies (Cairney, 2009a: 359).

The Blair-led government was often described in media accounts as ‘Presidential’, to suggest that policymaking could be led by one charismatic leader or a small core executive. Further, ‘sofa government’ implied that such centralised policymaking took place without sufficient formality to ensure proper checks and balances – a charge discussed extensively in the Chilcot Report (2016) on the Iraq War. Yet, academic accounts were more likely to stress the limits to prime ministerial power and the unintended consequences of attempts to centralise policymaking (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003, 2006; Rhodes, 2011). Richards and Smith (2004) describe distinct phases of policymaking that began from
1997, with initiatives to ‘join up’ government via coordinating units, and forms of ‘network governance’ to coordinate efforts by governmental and quasigovernmental bodies. During this period, groups reported a ‘major increase in consultation’ (Marsh et al., 2001: 194).

However, by 2001, frustration with a lack of progress led the Treasury to take responsibility for policy and performance targets linked closely to public expenditure (2006: 106). Such moves to ‘regain control over policy outcomes’ (Richards and Smith, 2006: 343), often without much success (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003) or with major unintended consequences (Hood, 2007), suggest that a top-down policy style often made only a limited appearance and had a limited impact.

Similar concerns were expressed about the Cameron-led Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government from 2010. An ‘age of austerity’ helped Cameron outline a ‘radical programme for a radical government’ (BBC News, 2010) and ‘tough choices’ focusing on reduced spending and welfare state retrenchment, suggesting that ‘an unusually high number of controversial decisions in such a short period of time would seem to reinforce and perhaps even extend the UK’s majoritarian image’ (Cairney, 2012c: 232).

Although it would be wrong to downplay major changes in spending areas such as social security restrictions, it is more difficult to find equivalent changes to the centralisation of policymaking. Instead, Conservative governments have reinforced a reform agenda built on the idea of ‘localism’ and delegation while trying to maintain an image of central control (Matthews, 2016). Indeed, the Coalition government often made a strong rhetorical commitment to reject its predecessor’s centralisation in key areas – such as the National Health Service – and criticise Labour’s ‘top down’ approach (Matthews, 2016: 315). In many cases, ministers appeared to use such decentralisation as a cover for reducing budgets (from ‘targets and money’ to ‘no targets, no money’), intervening in local and agency business on an ad hoc basis (such as subjecting allegedly failing public bodies to ‘special measures’), and bypassing local authorities to establish a closer link between central government and schools (2016: 315–18). In other words, governments continue to let go and hold on (2016: 303). Throughout, they decide how to portray this two-sided style (Hay, 2009): with regard to central control, to emphasise governing competence, or to emphasise localism, co-produced policy, and shared responsibility.

Why does Richardson identify a major shift in UK policy style?

Since this chapter devotes so much effort to qualifying the idea of a majoritarian UK style, it seems only fair to devote specific attention to Richardson’s (2018) account, which identifies an increasing shift from a consensual to impositional
style since his previous edited volume (Richardson, 1982). His reasoning is as follows: First, if we focus on a series of individual governmental eras we fail to see the big picture, in which there has been a major cumulative impact of shifting relations. The relationship between the UK government and the most influential professional, business, and trade union groups has changed markedly since the onset of Thatcherism, and groups such as the British Medical Association do not enjoy the same privileged status as identified in historical studies (Richardson, 2017: 224). Second, there has also been a cumulative impact from government reforms over several decades. Many policies that were once opposed vociferously by certain groups have become normalised over time, including cumulative reforms to public services such as health, education, and housing.

Third, a new era of austerity has allowed governing parties to redefine the policy agenda overall, challenge previously well-established agreements on public funding, and allow key actors such as the Treasury to make decisions almost unilaterally, therefore bypassing policy communities within individual government departments (2017: 223). Policy communities and bargaining may be associated mostly with economic growth and the development or protection of policy. In contrast, austerity and reductions in spending – the tough decisions in which there are vocal opponents and stark winners and losers – are more associated with top-down imposition and the ‘government knows best’ narrative associated with the Westminster model (2017: 225).

Finally, the relationship between ministers and civil servants has changed over three decades. The latter are less central to policymaking today, and therefore less able to form policy communities. Richardson draws on Richards and Smith’s (2016: 499) argument that a ‘symbiotic interdependent partnership’ between ministers and civil servants in the 1970s has been replaced by ‘a more universal command and control relationship that is seen as necessary to meet the demands of modern accountability’. This change began in the wake of Thatcher-led reforms, in which there was a greater split between policymaking departments and delivery agencies, a greater use of politically appointed special advisers for policy advice, and greater use of targets created by ministers for civil servants to follow (2016: 505). Indeed, civil servants are often bypassed completely, such as when ministers privatise service delivery or delegate responsibility to local authorities or semi-independent bodies, such as self-governing schools or hospitals. In these cases, we see a mix of letting go and holding on via performance targets, management, and inspection: ‘Managers are free to manage as long as they do what central government requires’ (2016: 511).

Overall, although there is still a high degree of consultation in government, and consultation remains a key part of the UK government’s culture, the nature and quality of consultation has shifted from an open dialogue to solve problems towards the presentation of policy as a fait accompli followed by consultation on how best to deliver established goals (Richardson, 2018 227).
unintended consequence is that policy communities are no longer a source of information to ward off policy failure: ‘excluding groups from policy-making risks introducing new policies that will simply not work’ (2018: 229).

**Devolution in the UK and the potential for new consensual policy styles**

This mix of policy styles employed by the UK government provides important context for our comparison with devolved government policymaking. In short, we should not compare devolved government styles to a caricature of UK policymaking (Cairney, 2008: 350). This caricature was much in evidence in Scotland and Wales in the 1990s, since a key part of the political reform rhetoric in the run up to devolution was ‘new politics’ in contrast to ‘old Westminster’ (the context for devolution in Northern Ireland was different, relating more to Westminster-supported power-sharing between domestic parties). The Scottish political reform movement’s key venue – the Scottish Constitutional Convention (1995) – called for a style of politics ‘radically different from the rituals of Westminster: more participative, more creative, less needlessly confrontational’, and similar expectations were expressed in Wales (McAllister, 2000; McAllister and Stirbu, 2007).

To a large extent, the new electoral systems were designed to be a key vehicle for political reform. A more proportional system – mixed member proportional, or MMP – reduces the likelihood of a single party majority and increases the chances of coalition government in Scotland and Wales (a power-sharing coalition was a requirement in Northern Ireland – Birrell, 2012). In theory, it would allow Scotland and Wales to operate much more like a consensus democracy in which a spirit of negotiation and bargaining between parties would inform the political culture as a whole. On that latter point, the results were mixed. While Scottish Labour and the Scottish Liberal Democrats formed a majority coalition government with control of the parliamentary arithmetic from 1999 to 2007, the Scottish National Party (SNP) formed a minority government from 2007 to 2011, a majority government from 2011 to 2016, and has since returned to minority government (Cairney, 2016). Although MMP for the Welsh Assembly is less proportional than in Scotland, it has still produced coalition and minority governments, all led by Labour (with a brief majority from 2003 to 2005) (Palmer, 2011: 270). In both assemblies, it is difficult to find a wider spirit of cooperation, particularly during periods of coalition government. Rather, coalitions in both Scotland and Wales have helped to marginalise other parties in parliament, while the coalition parties themselves proved to be awkward partners in government (Cairney, 2011b; Palmer, 2011: 277).
In the group government arena, the Scottish and Welsh systems contained new rules and procedures, many of which were designed to foster greater consensus (see also Keating et al., 2009, regarding the more mixed picture in Northern Ireland). For example, the Scottish Parliament’s standing orders were based on four key principles – power-sharing, accountability, accessibility, and equal opportunities – designed to foster cross-party and executive-parliament cooperation and encourage meaningful consultation beyond the ‘usual suspects’, while the Welsh system outlined a formal duty for the government to consult with ‘partnership councils’ containing representatives from unions and the private and third sectors in the business, union and voluntary sectors (McGarvey and Cairney, 2008: 89–90; Entwistle, 2006). Beyond such measures, expectations for consensus politics were based on a combination of hope and the sense that both countries were small enough to foster policymaking networks based on ‘the usual story of everybody knowing everybody else’ (Keating et al., 2009: 57).

From rhetoric to reality in UK and devolved policy styles

Two key academic sources suggest that there are very different UK versus devolved government policy styles. In both cases, they point to heavily qualified differences. First, Flinders (2010: 12) identifies major differences in policymaking. He argues that the UK Labour government’s constitutional reform agenda did not involve a shift from ‘majoritarian power-hoarding to consensual power-sharing’. Rather, the UK remains majoritarian and the Scottish and Welsh arenas became more like consensus democracies, with more proportional electoral systems proving conducive to power-sharing among parties, and a more corporatist spirit extending to the relationship between the government and interest groups (2010: 177).

Several hundred interviews with a wide range of interest groups, from trade unions, key professional sectors, and the private and third sectors, back up one half of this statement (Keating et al., 2009). The Scottish and Welsh governments formed close and productive relationships with a large number of groups, and most groups expressed high levels of satisfaction with devolved policy styles (Cairney, 2008: 352). Many groups based in Scotland and Wales also contrast their experiences with a more aloof UK government. However, when we compare like with like – devolved groups with their London-based equivalents – we find quite similar experiences. There are some interesting differences, but they are qualified each time. Scottish and Welsh groups report more open access, but often worry that consultation is cosmetic and used to generate a sense of stakeholder ownership (Cairney, 2008: 359). UK groups are more likely to report high profile examples of a total breakdown in relationships, such as
when almost all groups opposed UK government mental health reforms from the late 1990s (Cairney, 2009b). Yet, the same groups describe a sense of normal policymaking in other fields, which often ran in parallel tracks with conflict areas. In other words, the UK government and relevant groups appear able to compartmentalise conflict, to separate a small number of examples of major disagreement from the routine process of bargaining and consensus seeking (Cairney, 2008: 365, 2009b).

Second, Greer and Jarman (2008) identify major differences in attitudes to policy implementation. They highlight a contrast in the use of ‘policy tools’ from 1999 to 2007. The UK government style was ‘top down’, based on its ‘low trust in providers’, emphasis on market mechanisms reinforced by a large number of targets, stringent audit-based procedures, and strong punishments for non-compliance (2008: 172–173). In contrast, the Scottish and Welsh governments formed relationships with their policy partners, based more on ‘a high degree of trust in the professionalism of providers’, with less emphasis on competition and punishment for non-compliance (Greer and Jarman, 2008: 178–183).

This second argument is more difficult to qualify, since the UK and devolved governments do appear to oversee different regimes to ensure policy delivery. Yet, there are three key caveats. First, much of the difference relates to the scale and nature of their respective tasks. The UK government oversees a far larger political system, in which it seems impossible – at least in comparison with Scotland and Wales – to maintain close relationships with the chief executives of delivery bodies. It is also more likely to be responsible for the ‘high politics’ issues characterised by higher salience and disagreement. Second, when Richardson and Jordan (1979) described the purpose of policy styles, they described the payoff of consultation to service delivery: more consultation meant greater ownership among key players, and fewer surprises during implementation. On that score, a difference in delivery styles does not mean routine differences in implementation success (Cairney, 2009a). Indeed, the devolved styles have also had unintended consequences. Early Welsh consultations led governments to overpromise on policy because consultation was so widespread and involved many groups with unrealistic demands (2009a: 364). The Scottish style, meanwhile, has become increasingly hands-off during service delivery, which means that group consultation at the central government level does not bind the hands of local authorities. Instead, groups often have to redirect their lobbying to local levels, in which levels of consensus are often far lower (Cairney, 2013).

Finally, the devolved governments are also facing austerity, which has the potential to change group-government relationships. The development of territorial policy communities from 1999 coincided with a period of immense public expenditure growth, and there was almost no need to make hard choices on spending cuts that produce clear winners and losers. Since the late 2000s, however, this economic context has shifted dramatically, producing tensions
between unions and local authorities, and focusing attention on which sectors (health, education, universities, local government) receive the greatest share of spending (Cairney, 2013)

**Conclusion: majoritarian reputations mask complexity and more humdrum practices**

There have been clear changes to the British policy style since the publication of *Policy Styles in Western Europe* (Richardson, 1982). As Richardson (2017) describes most strongly, the rise of an age of austerity, combined with the cumulative effect of government reforms, has altered the ways in which UK governments make and deliver policy. The nature of consultation is often qualitatively different even if the quantity remains the same. A discussion of a policy blueprint is not the same as a process of deliberation to solve a policy problem. The nature of policy delivery has also shifted. The UK government is now more likely to delegate and monitor external bodies than deliver policy itself, and ministers seem to rely far less on civil servants for policy advice. Consequently, civil servants appear to be less able to form policy community-style relationships with pressure participants.

However, our focus on bounded rationality, policymaking context, and the general logic of policy communities helps us to qualify the nature of such changes. Policymakers have to deal with a huge and unmanageable state by paying attention to a small number of issues and ignoring the rest. This limitation requires them to delegate policymaking responsibility to other bodies. Although they can use performance measures to oversee such actors, the state is too large and complex for them to control. Policymaking and delivery will often seem to emerge from such activities without ministerial knowledge, or despite attempts by ministers to control them. In other words, we should remember to avoid equating a small number of high profile cases of ministerial control with an overall policy style within the UK government. The style of government, and its outcomes, is not entirely in the gift of elected governments. Further, even when we pay disproportionate attention to such cases, we find that the logic of policy communities should be ignored at our peril: examples of policy failure or unintended consequences seem to occur when policymakers fail to consult enough with key actors; they fail to secure high ‘ownership’ of policy and gather enough information to warn them about likely problems.

This broader focus on the policymaking context also suggests that we should not exaggerate the difference in policy styles between the majoritarian UK and more consensus-driven devolved governments. Clearly, there are differences in the ways in which they consult with pressure participants (devolved governments are more able to maintain closer personal networks with key actors)
and deliver policy (devolved governments tend to place more trust in public bodies). However, all elected central governments in the UK try to present an image of governing competence and make pragmatic adjustments to the limitations on their power. They present two stories simultaneously, or adjust them to suit different audiences. One story is of central government control, used to address an electoral imperative in which voters expect elected policymakers to be accountable for their actions. This policy style is relatively top-down. The other is of complex government, where elected policymakers are part of a large system over which they have limited control, and in which they seek pragmatic ways to share policymaking responsibility with as many other actors as possible. This policy style is relatively consensual. While the UK government has a greater need of the top-down story, in reality the respective styles of the UK and devolved governments are not a million miles apart.

Note

1 This chapter is dedicated to Professor Grant Jordan, who died in June 2017. See Cairney (2017) for a fuller account of Grant’s contribution to scholarship and the people who knew him.

References


Policy styles in the United Kingdom