Interpreting Parliament, but how? Towards an interpretive analysis of parliamentary select committees

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Abstract

Research on parliamentary select committees predominantly focuses on the reports committees publish and the recommendations they make to government in order to assess the effectiveness of Parliament in holding government to account. Though this has made a significant contribution to our understanding of scrutiny, in the House of Commons, it arguably neglects the input-side of committee work and particularly what goes into making a committee report in the first place. This paper seeks to address this issue by shifting the analytical focus from outputs (committee reports) to inputs (everyday practices). This theoretical contribution aims to build on Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes’ interpretive analytical framework by supplementing their ideas with the concept of ‘performance’, before then applying it to a parliamentary context. Here, the paper seeks to make an empirical contribution in examining how parliamentary scrutiny is performed by select committees: committee rooms become a main stage; MPs become actors; and briefing papers serve as loose scripts. The key argument proposed is that scrutiny should not always focus on the policy impact of reports, but also how scrutiny is performed in the everyday.

Key words: interpretive parliamentary studies, scrutiny, select committees, practices, performance, parliament

1This paper draws on themes from my current doctoral research entitled: ‘Interpreting Parliamentary Scrutiny: An enquiry concerning everyday practices of parliamentarians in select committees of the House of Commons’, funded through an ESRC grant (reference: ES/J500215/1).
Parliamentary scrutiny by select committees has evolved significantly ever since their present-day structure was introduced in 1979. Academics, commentators and parliamentarians themselves have been keenly interested in their development. The study of these committees, especially in a British context, has often focused on the extent to which their reports are able to influence government policy (Benton and Russell, 2013; Hindmoor, Larkin and Kennon, 2009; Russell and Cowley, 2016) and, consequently, is usually framed around themes of scrutiny impact, effectiveness and influence. This has made an important contribution to the way in which scholars conceive of legislative-executive relationships and, crucially, demonstrated that the House of Commons is not a passive actor in the policy process (as some commentators and scholars assume (for a discussion, see Flinders and Kelso, 2011). Whilst we have come to understand the effects and outcomes of parliamentary scrutiny on policy much better as a result, this focus on output and outcomes has also, arguably, meant that scholars have overlooked the potential impact of the input or process side of select committee scrutiny. This includes, among other things, the way in which the agenda for a report will be framed, the evidence on which committees rely in making recommendations for policy change, and the way in which committees build cross-party agreement for their proposals. Committee reports are the result of a number of preceding inquiry processes, and studying what goes into the making of a committee report in the first place ought to be an important consideration for understanding parliamentary scrutiny. However, to date, the predominant focus remains on institutional relationships between government and Parliament, and the extent to which select committees are able to hold the government to account. In part, the legacy of modernist empiricism explains this focus on institutional dynamics.

In this paper, I reflect on the development of parliamentary studies and propose a more theoretically-explicit, interpretive agenda to studying Parliament, shifting analytical focus from institutions to everyday practices. In order to achieve this, the paper proceeds in three sections. First, I go into a little more detail about the way in which political scientists have approached parliamentary and legislative studies in the UK. In doing so, I identify three traditions in legislative studies (historical, rational choice and sociological) that are broadly underpinned by the legacy of the Westminster model, and a nascent, fourth, interpretive tradition that has begun to change analytical focus. Second, I outline the theoretical and analytical foundations to develop this fourth tradition. This draws on the interpretive tradition approach by Bevir and Rhodes (2003, 2006, 2010). In the third (and final) section, I apply the analytical framework to British select committees. This empirical section illustrates the extent to which scrutiny depends on the way in which parliamentary actors interpret, and subsequently enact, their role. I argue that analysis of scrutiny processes, particularly evidence sessions, can benefit from being viewed as performances of scrutiny. Thus, the committee room becomes a stage, chairs of committees behave as lead actors, committee members act as the supporting cast, committee staff become stage directors and production managers, and briefing papers serve as loose scripts. This distinctive approach to studying select committees hopes to show that scrutiny depends on how it is interpreted and enacted by parliamentary actors in their everyday life. Though this challenges modernist empiricist approaches to parliamentary studies in some respects, it ultimately seeks to complement those studies by offering a different approach to add to our understanding of how committee scrutinise the executive.

1. Traditions in parliamentary studies

The rigour and relevance of current research on Parliament has made significant contributions to explaining parliamentary behaviour and executive-legislative relationships. This section does not attempt to critique the literature, but rather to examine their approach and focus, and identify broad traditions on which the scholarship is based. I identify: historical institutionalist, rational choice, sociological and interpretive traditions. These do not exhaust analytical possibilities, nor are distinctions between them always clear-cut. Some studies overlap and borrow elements from different traditions to form hybrids, whilst many others do not place themselves in any tradition at all. This makes an overview of the scholarship’s intellectual roots more challenging, compounded yet further by the broader heritage on which British political science has been built, namely the Westminster model (WM). This deserves brief
Interpreting Parliament, but how?

Comment before the aforementioned traditions are examined because the legacy of the WM on parliamentary studies (indeed, British politics more generally) has been, and continues to be, significant.

1.1. The Westminster model

Studies of British politics have arguably been pervaded by a dominant organising perspective or ‘British political tradition’, which stresses the centrality of political institutions, continuity in British history, and gradual change of the political system (Gamble, 1990). This has often been linked to the Westminster model. Though not uncontested (see Bevir and Rhodes, 2003, pp.24-31; Rhodes, Wanna and Weller, 2009, pp.1-9), the WM is commonly associated with: an appeal to the sovereignty and primacy of Parliament; the centrality of individual ministerial responsibility to the House of Commons; and, the selection of the executive through a competitive, adversarial electoral system (Lijphart, 2012). The strength of this model is that it places Parliament in a broader constitutional context and, as a result, focuses analysis on institutions, rules, procedures and formal organisations of government and the state. Traditionally, application of the model relies on shared methodological assumptions, which involve: ‘the tools of the lawyer and the historian to explain the constraints on both political behaviour and democratic effectiveness’ (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003, p.27). A great deal of research focuses on the interpretation of documents, texts and parliamentary procedure (for example Blackburn, Kennon and Wheeler-Booth, 2002; Bogdanor, 2003) rather than the interpretations of actors in their day-to-day environment. Though the model has received many challenges, the WM and its assumptions have had a lasting legacy on British parliamentary studies in that the model still serves as a reference point to explain parliamentary behaviour and legislative-executive (Judge, 2014, pp.1-18, pp.107-34).

As indicated earlier, many studies of Parliament overlap and borrow from different intellectual roots, while many more do not engage in theoretical reflection at all (Waylen, 2010, p.354). Perhaps it is the dominance of the Westminster model that explains this. In an attempt to offer a little more coherence, I identify three broad traditions to parliamentary studies that owe some sort of debt to the WM (either directly or indirectly), and a nascent, fourth tradition.

1.2. The historical institutionalist tradition

Historical institutionalism (HI) has obvious roots from the organising principles outlined above, especially in sustaining the importance of historical context. However,
Interpreting Parliament, but how?

HI has developed into a cohesive analytical framework of its own in response to debates over the role of institutions in the 1980s (Hay, 2002, pp.10-3). It is underpinned by a belief that political actors are rule-following satisfiers, fitting their actions to institutional ‘rules of the game’. This means that actors’ preferences are socially and politically constructed by their surroundings, i.e. the institutional setting within which they operate. This is developed in tandem with further analytical concepts, which are summarised in Table 1 (see also Sanders, 2006). Taken together, these concepts have allowed HI to make an important contribution to parliamentary studies, allowing scholars to explain both stability and change in the British political system. It has formed the basis of Faith Armitage’s (2012) research into the House of Commons Speakership elections, for example, and Matthew Flinders’ (2002, 2004) work on executive-legislative relations. However, arguably the most instructive and detailed application of the approach is Alexandra Kelso’s (Kelso, 2009b) study, in which she analyses parliamentary reform at Westminster throughout the twentieth century.

We can make three broad claims about HI. First, and perhaps unremarkably, the focus of the approach is on institutional roles and landscapes. This means that debates about select committees, for example, are usually about reform of their powers to hold the executive to account (Flinders, 2007). It is less often about individual political actors (such as committee chairs, members of staff, etc.) and their specific influence in shaping political outcomes. Second, it indicates that norms and values are inextricably linked to the weight of history, which forms the foundation for explaining stability in British politics. Third, and closely related to the second, analysis focuses on key events and historical processes. Notably, individual perspectives are not usually central to HI analysis, which indicates that these studies may overlook political agency and the consequences of their everyday behaviour on parliamentary politics.

1.3. The rational choice tradition

In contrast to HI, rational choice scholars place political agency at the heart of their approach. However, agency is developed in a very precise fashion, assuming that human

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**Table 1. Key concepts in historical institutionalism**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Path dependency</td>
<td>Future policy choices are informed and constrained by past policy choices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunk costs</td>
<td>Once institutional structures are in place, they facilitate certain kinds of behaviour which would make institutional changes resource intensive and outcomes less certain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical junctures</td>
<td>Exogenous shocks, policy learning or destabilisation of institutional frameworks open possibilities for change (sometimes called ‘windows of opportunity’).</td>
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behaviour is premised on self-interest. As Kaare Strøm (1997, p.158) puts it: ‘[b]esides all their other charming idiosyncracies [sic], legislators are goal-seeking men or women who choose their behaviour to fit the destinations they have in mind’, which is usually presumed to be re-election or promotion. This assumption is extended to all political actors and parliamentary institutions, who are governed by a will to utility maximisation. This assertion forms the bedrock of the rational choice approach to political science. Applied to parliamentary studies, rational choice scholars re-interpret the Westminster model as a model of delegation and accountability (Strøm, Müller and Bergman, 2006). Importantly, this removes the model of historical context and minimises the role played by norms and values that might otherwise shape parliamentary behaviour. Rather, the model is designed to: ‘minimize the efficiency and transparency losses caused by multiple principals and agents observed in other Western democracies’, which, ‘avoids confusion about political responsibility’ (Saalfeld, 2006, p.620). Thus, select committees are seen as useful in providing information to Members of Parliament (MPs) and the public at low cost but, though they have improved government accountability, their utility is left wanting due to a lack of formal powers (pp.635-6).

Though this approach is popular in European and American legislative studies (e.g. Döring, 1995), it has not been widely adopted in a British context (though see Kam, 2009; Norton, 2001) and least of all to the study of select committees. The legacy of the Westminster model may have contributed to this: the focus on historical context, procedures and precedents, unwritten rules (norms and values), and informal policy influence sits uneasily with a rational choice framework that not only simplifies behaviour by political actors to self-interest, but additionally relies on positivist, quantitative analysis. Ingvar Mattson and Kaare Strøm’s (1995, pp.249-307) comparative analysis of 18 parliamentary committees serves as a good example. Here, British committees (which they label as ‘the most deviant case’ (p.260)) are not seen as influential compared to their other cases. This contrasts with other studies, not based on rational choice, that dispute those conclusions (for example, Russell and Cowley, 2016; Russell, Gover and Wollter, 2016). Indeed, in simplifying what are otherwise complex social phenomena, rational choice approaches neglect other causal mechanisms, whether historical context, covered above, or the influence of norms and values, to which we now turn.

1.4. The sociological tradition

This tradition of academic study covers a wide range, which makes it difficult to offer a neat summary here. However, it is possible to identify at least two strands of work within
this broad tradition, namely voting behaviour of MPs, and role theory and socialisation. These are explored in turn.

Turning to the voting behaviour of MPs first, this strand of research has traditionally been inductive and therefore not based on an explicit theoretical model or analytical framework. Examples include Philip Cowley’s (2002, 2005) work on MPs’ voting records, and Philip Cowley and Mark Stuart’s (1997, 2010) development of an Index of Party Unity. This research reveals that political parties are more than voting coalitions; MPs’ values run much deeper and, consequently, behaviour in the House of Commons is arguably based on broader worldviews rather than self-interest alone. Their meticulous analysis is often based on publicly-available voting records, written documents and supplemented with survey data and interviews, making it a mixed-methods endeavour (other studies include Plumb and Marsh, 2013).

A second strand of the literature takes the sociological element further and explores how MPs are socialised into their role. This literature includes work on role theory (Andeweg, 2014), of which Donald Searing’s (1994) study, Westminster’s World, is an important example. Searing looks at the norms and values of politicians at the Palace of Westminster, combining elements of institutionalist and behaviouralist ideas to demonstrate that politicians can and do act purposefully in their own right, of which self-interest is only one of many different causes that MPs pursue (p.6). Other examples in this vein include Anthony King’s (1974) British Members of Parliament and Radice, Vallance and Willis’s (1990) Member of Parliament. In addition to the work on roles, other scholars, such as Michael Rush and Philip Giddings (2011), look at the broader socialisation processes at play and how this informs MPs’ view of their role and thus their behaviour. Notably, these studies, though changing analytical focus away from exclusively institutions to broader norms and values, they are still conducted within the paradigm or organising perspectives of the WM.

1.5. The interpretive tradition

The sociological tradition is taken yet further into a fourth, emergent tradition. They combine traditional parliamentary research topics with innovative methods drawn from anthropological and post-structuralist perspectives. Emma Crewe and Marion Müller (2006, p.7) criticise traditional political science, including other studies in the sociological tradition, as too focused on institutional structures; instead, they argue that the study of politics would benefit from exploring the effects of rituals, ceremonies and symbolism in political behaviour (Abélès, 1988; Rai, 2015a). In addition to their edited
Table 2. Traditions of parliamentary studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tradition</th>
<th>Analytical focus</th>
<th>Contribution to parliamentary studies</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Key Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historical Institutionalism</td>
<td>Role of history in shaping behaviour</td>
<td>Situates continuity and change in historical context</td>
<td>Textual analysis, supplemented with semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>A. Kelso (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rational choice theory</td>
<td>Asserts actors are goal-seeking individuals</td>
<td>Explains behaviour in rational, utility-maximising terms</td>
<td>Quantitative analysis and statistical models</td>
<td>K. Strøm et al. (eds.) (2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociological approaches</td>
<td>Influence of rules, norms and rituals on MPs</td>
<td>Helps us to understand legislative behaviour and roles</td>
<td>Survey data and interviews</td>
<td>D. Searing (1994)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretive tradition</td>
<td>Role of everyday behaviour in politics</td>
<td>Shows us the importance of norms and values in politics</td>
<td>Ethnographic fieldwork, interviews</td>
<td>E. Crewe (2015)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A collection of essays, Emma Crewe (2005, 2015) has conducted extensive research on the Houses of Parliament. Elsewhere, Shirin M. Rai and Rachel E. Johnson (2014) have published a collection of essays in this vein (see also Rai and Reinelt, 2015). These studies have served as an important corrective to predominantly institutionalist approaches, and, indeed, it may be argued that these studies take us away from the legacy of the Westminster model. However, these studies have yet to make significant inroads into the study of parliamentary select committees.

Taken together, these traditions show us the wide range of research that is currently being conducted within the sub-field of British parliamentary studies (summarised in Table 2). Due to brevity of space, this section has only scratched the surface of a wealth of literature. Furthermore, and arguably most important, the scholarship on Parliament is far more nuanced than this review offers. Scholars cannot be divided into these traditions easily (nor, perhaps, would they want to be). Most research does not explicitly fall into any category or tradition because the sub-discipline has not engaged in significant theoretical reflection (rightly or wrongly), instead preferring an inductive method inherited from the Westminster model and modernist empiricism (see also Flinders, 2010, p.308). The remainder of this paper addresses this lack of theory by, first, covering the possibilities offered by interpretive approaches to political science and, second, applying those ideas to parliamentary select committees.
2. Towards interpretive parliamentary studies

I begin with a discussion of the central tenets of the interpretive approach as developed by Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes (2003, 2006, 2010), whose own research has focused predominantly on changing governance practices (see also Bevir, 2010; Rhodes, 2011). From this, I outline an analytical framework for an explicitly interpretive approach to studying Parliament. It is not possible to offer a comprehensive review here (see the edited collections by Turnbull (2016) and Bevir and Rhodes (2015)); rather, the purpose of this section is to provide analytical foundations to build on the emergent interpretive tradition in parliamentary studies.

2.1. Theoretical principles and concepts

Bevir and Rhodes’ approach has its roots in anti-foundationalist philosophy, which ‘asserts that none of our knowledge is certain’ (2010, p.42). Anti-foundationalism suggests that there is, as the name implies, no foundation or essence to reality. In contrast to positivist assumptions that objective meanings are ‘out there’ in the world waiting for us to discover or find them, the interpretive approach takes as its starting point the principle that social (and political) realities are constructed through our experiences of and engagement with what we perceive of the world. This philosophical assumption has clear implications for our understanding of objectivity, facts and truth. In contrast to modernist empiricism, facts are not ‘given’ to us, but ‘shared’ through our collective commitment to certain ideas and rejection of others (this does not imply a relativist stance; see Bevir and Rhodes, 2006, pp.26-30, and Bevir, 1999, pp.78-126). This is important because it centralises the significance of individuals’ interpretations to make sense of their everyday lives, something which also extends to individuals in a political context.

The philosophical principles that underpin the interpretive approach have significant repercussions for political science. Most important, it requires us to take seriously the way in which political actors interpret the world around them, thereby attributing a causal role to ideas and beliefs in political analysis. This is fundamental to Bevir and Rhodes’ approach and arguably becomes the basic unit of analysis to explain political phenomena. To do so, Bevir and Rhodes (2010, p.73) argue that we need to ‘decentre’ interpretations and concepts used by political actors. By this, they mean an analytical focus on ‘the social construction of a practice through the ability of individuals to create and act on meanings’. As scholars, we must ‘unpack a practice as the disparate and contingent beliefs and actions of individuals’, and, in doing so, challenge the idea that
Interpreting Parliament, but how?

Table 3. Bevir and Rhodes’ interpretive approach: concepts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To decentre</td>
<td>To decentre is to unpack practices as the contingent beliefs and actions of individuals, challenging the idea that inexorable or impersonal forces drive politics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situated agency</td>
<td>Individuals are ‘situated’ in wider webs of beliefs (traditions), which will largely shape their beliefs; yet, they retain a capacity for ‘agency’ in that they may respond to traditions, beliefs, practices and dilemmas in novel ways.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs</td>
<td>Beliefs are the basic unit of analysis, in that they are the interpretations of individuals to their surroundings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradition</td>
<td>Traditions are ‘webs of belief’, and form the ideational background in which agents find themselves. Usually, agents will adopt beliefs from traditions as a starting point, but may amend them (usually in response to dilemmas).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dilemma</td>
<td>A dilemma is an idea that stands in contradiction to other beliefs, thereby posing a problem for individuals. Dilemmas may be resolved by either accommodating the new belief in the present web of beliefs, or replacing old beliefs with new beliefs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice</td>
<td>A set of actions that often exhibits a stable pattern across time. Practices are the ways in which beliefs and traditions manifest themselves on an everyday basis.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘inexorable or impersonal forces, norms, or laws define patterns and regularities in politics’. This hinges on an number of further concepts that guide Bevir and Rhodes’ analysis, which are explained in a little more depth here (and summarised in Table 3).

2.1.1. Situated agency

Following their anti-foundationalist principles, Bevir and Rhodes reject the idea that individuals can form and act on beliefs in a vacuum, which means that they ultimately reject the idea of an autonomous subject or self. However, this does not mean that individuals lack the capacity for agency because, as they put it (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010, p.74; Hay, 2011, pp.175-7)):

People have the capacity to adopt beliefs and actions, even novel ones, for reasons of their own, and in so doing they can transform the social background. So, agency is possible, but it always situated in a particular context.

By context, they mean traditions.

2.1.2. Traditions

Traditions are the social context within which agents find themselves; the ‘situation’ in ‘situated agency’. They are webs of beliefs that act as organising perspectives or
Interpreting Parliament, but how?

ideational context for individuals, groups and other political actors. This has strong echoes to concepts of social structure or paradigms. However, Bevir and Rhodes argue that traditions do not fix behaviour; rather, they offer ‘starting points’ to political actors, who are under no obligation to follow in the footsteps of a tradition. Though the flexibility of the concept has been criticised by other scholars (Glynos and Howarth, 2008; McAnulla, 2006; Smith, 2008), Bevir and Rhodes defend the concept by relating traditions to the concept of power (2010, p.76):

Power can refer to the way in which traditions impact on individuals’ beliefs helping to define them, their actions, and the world. Power refers here to the constitutive role played by tradition in giving us our beliefs and actions, and in making our world. An interpretive approach is all about power so conceived, since it explains actions and practices by reference to contingent beliefs formed against the background of traditions.

This means that individuals’ possibilities for action are restricted in that traditions suggest what is acceptable, legitimate or even imaginable within a particular web of beliefs (see also Bevir and Rhodes, 2008a, 2008b).

2.1.3. Dilemmas

Traditions are not static, but change in response to dilemmas (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010, p.79; Bevir, 1999, pp.221-2). Dilemmas come about when a belief puts into question an existing belief or webs of belief. Dilemmas only happen once a situated agent has interpreted something as a dilemma or problem. This implies that dilemmas can come from anywhere: reading a book, personal moral reflection, contrasting experiences of the world, empirical evidence, unintended consequences, shock events, a faux pas, natural and/or manmade disasters, and many others beside (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006, pp.9-11). Conflicts between beliefs play out in different ways in that new beliefs could be: (a) discarded as unconvincing, (b) accommodated within the web of beliefs; or (c) replace an older belief. This could then lead to ripple effects because new beliefs may affect other beliefs within a tradition. This is how, incrementally, slowly and painfully, traditions and practices change over time. Alternatively, the introduction of a single new belief could have such substantive effects that whole traditions are ripped apart. Thus, dilemmas matter because they help us to understand the contingent nature of British politics and the central mechanism to explain political change (for a discussion, see Geddes, 2014).

2.1.4. Practices

Bevir and Rhodes (2010, p.75) argue that practices are part of a macro-level analysis:
A practice is a set of actions, often a set of actions that exhibit a pattern, perhaps even a pattern that remains relatively stable across time. Practices often give us grounds for postulating beliefs, for we can ascribe beliefs to people only in interpreting their actions. Nonetheless, practices cannot explain actions because people act for reasons of their own. People sometimes act on their beliefs about a practice, but, when they do, we still explain their action by reference to their beliefs about the practice, and, of course, these beliefs need not be accurate.

Contrary to beliefs or traditions, Bevir and Rhodes’ concept of practices has, arguably, developed less consistently in that it was not a clearly defined concept in *Interpreting British Governance* (2003) or *Governance Stories* (2006) (in *The State as Cultural Practice* (2010, p.75) the concept is discussed in its own sub-section). The reason is made plain in the quote above: Bevir and Rhodes privilege beliefs over actions (or, at least, maintain a clear divide between the two), which means that it has received less philosophical reflection. This arguably poses questions over the analytical purchase of the interpretive approach. Hendrik Wagenaar (2012), for example, believes that the concept should be central to interpretive approaches because individuals construct meaning not only through interpretation, but through action (which can confirm, alter or discard beliefs) (see also Bevir and Rhodes, 2012; Wagenaar, 2011). This is an important point, and demonstrates that the interpretive approach requires development in places.

Bevir and Rhodes’ interpretive approach, notwithstanding criticisms identified above, has received significant attention in British political science (especially regarding governance and the state (Turnbull, 2016)). It offers a way by which we can inject theoretical ideas into studying the House of Commons. However, as noted in the previous paragraph, their approach requires further refinement, especially in clarifying how their approach can be used in a parliamentary context. It is to this issue that discussion now turns.

2.2. An analytical framework

Bevir and Rhodes offer parliamentary researchers an analytical framework that is philosophically rigorous and theoretically developed. Their decentred approach has clear implications for the way in which we examine the House of Commons. First, it suggests that Parliament is sustained by individual beliefs held by parliamentary actors. Second, individual beliefs and interpretations about Westminster sustain broader (and arguably competing) traditions of parliamentary government in the UK. Third, traditions in Parliament are constantly re-negotiated through dilemmas that actors face, whether technological innovations to represent constituents or the crisis about MPs’ pay and
expenses (Kelso, 2009a; Leston-Bandeira, 2007). And fourth, beliefs and traditions are played out through *everyday practices*, where competing ideas meet, enmesh and clash. Practices are the way by which we can understand the underlying beliefs of parliamentary actors precisely because beliefs manifest themselves in the everyday, through routine (perhaps even mundane) actions; in this way, Parliament can be considered as a set of everyday practices. This is central to an interpretive parliamentary studies and deserves a little more attention (especially in light of the criticisms identified above). In particular, it is useful to link this concept with that of ‘performance’ (in the theatrical sense of the word) because it has been identified by a number of scholars to explain human expression and interaction (Goffman, 1990 [1959]; Hajer, 2009; Turner, 1982). While it is not possible to comprehensively engage with this literature (and the associated debates (Gregson & Rose, 2000)), it is worth drawing on some of the key ideas to help us to explain everyday practices in Parliament.

A performance has a range of elements; here I limit discussion to three: style, space and speech. Erving Goffman (1990 [1959], pp.34-5) identifies two elements of what I term a performance *style*: first, the appearance of the performer (including dress and body language), which indicates the social status of the individual; and, second, the manner adopted by the performer (gestures, tone of voice, etc.). Performers idealise their enactment by trying to remove blemishes to the contrary of their intentions, or in Goffman’s (*ibid.*, p.50) own words: ‘If an individual is to give an expression to ideal standards during his [sic] performance, then he will have to forgo or conceal action which is inconsistent with these standards’. Actions are therefore stylised according to a set of informal codes or cues.³ This requires co-ordination with other participants of the performance (‘performance teams’), who, similarly, follow social codes or etiquettes and suppress their immediate feelings or urges of the contrary in order to allow for a temporarily acceptable social interaction (*ibid.*, pp.83-108).

Practices are additionally affected by *space*. Shirin M. Rai (2015b, p.1183) argues that:

> The backdrop, the stage, the symbols, the entry and exit points shape the kind of politics that is performed, the shifts and struggles that take place – who constructs, reflects, claims and polices the space of politics.

³ This is often a source of criticism for Goffman’s approach, in that it creates a problematic distinction between performance and performer. Other theories, notably Judith Butler (1997, 2006 [1990]), take this into account. This more developed idea of ‘performativity’ has significant purchase and overcomes certain weaknesses in Goffman’s general approach (that he himself later abandoned in favour of frame analysis (Goffman, 1986). Yet, this does not discredit specific insights that he can give us (for a discussion, see Gregson and Rose, 2000).
Space privileges certain types of behaviour, allowing some practices to occur, while others are seen as illegitimate, wrong or inappropriate (for examples of this, see Heurtin, 2003; Puwar, 2010). Goffman identifies both a ‘front stage’ and ‘back stage’: on the front stage (or more simply ‘setting’), performances are enacted, involving the furniture, décor, physical layout, and background items which supply the scenery and provide props for actors (1990 [1959], pp.32-3); at the back stage, preparations take place, props and personal items are stored, dress is adjusted, and where performers can ‘step out of character’ (pp.114-5). Axiomatically, there is a tension here, in that this implies actors can step outside of their social setting or web of beliefs, which, in line with the discussion in the previous sub-section, is not the case. That said, distinguishing between a front stage and a back stage is still helpful because they entail different types of performances, with different expectations, social codes and cues, participants and audiences (Rai, 2015b, p.1184). So, in as much as a back stage exists, it remains a stage.

Spatial arrangements also affect speech, the final element. Some voices, tones of voice or auditory rhythms are encouraged to fill spaces; others are assigned the status of hysterical, chaotic or disruptive and consequently marginalised (Puwar, 2010, p.299). Language, vocabulary, tone of voice – all these things matter to a performance because of the way in which they may sharpen or blur a particular act in a particular setting. As part of Maarten Hajer (2009) analysis, he identifies a range of conceptual tools; elsewhere, Finlayson (2007) and Finlayson and Martin (2008) emphasise the importance of rhetoric. Their insights offer useful resources for analysing parliamentary studies (though further discussion goes beyond this paper’s remit).

The literature on performance helps us to clarify the concept of everyday practices, and gives us, in addition to individual beliefs, three additional tools to analyse and unpack everyday practices, namely (see Table 4): styles, or appearances, manners, routines, and actions that actors adopt; space, or the setting or stage on which actors perform; and speech, or what actors say and how they say it (their scripts and storylines). Taken together with the interpretive framework outlined in the previous sub-section, this gives us a philosophically rigorous approach to examine parliaments and legislatures in an original, distinctive way. To see how this might be the case, the next section offers a case study on performing select committee scrutiny.
3. Interpreting select committee scrutiny

This small case study adopts ethnographic methods in order to operationalise the key analytical concepts mentioned above. This includes: participant and non-participant observation, in which I worked in the House of Commons as research assistant to a select committee for 14 weeks during the 2010 Parliament (keeping a fieldwork diary (FWD)); semi-structured interviews with ten members of select committee staff, ten chairs of select committees, and 23 members of select committees (interviewees have been anonymised with a code (‘S’ for staff, ‘C’ for chair, and ‘M’ for committee member); direct quotes are in italics), as well as countless conversations over fieldwork; and, textual analysis of a variety of documents, including research papers, newspaper articles (both print and online), internal guidance notes, confidential briefing papers, committee reports, correspondence, *Hansard*, magazines and more. Taking together, these three methods inform the following account, in which I, first, situate agents in their context; second, identify beliefs; and third, examine performances of scrutiny.

3.1. Situating select committees

The current system of permanent select committees was established in 1979, though their history stretches far further into the past (Kelso, 2009b). Committees have become an established part of the scrutiny landscape in the House of Commons and undertake a range of activities to scrutinise government, predominantly inquiries. Each committee is supported by usually six permanent members of staff, as well as *ad hoc* specialist advisers (Rogers and Walters, 2015, pp.318–9). However, committees axiomatically rely on MPs, who are expected to regularly attend meetings, participate in private discussions, ask questions in oral evidence to gather information or hold witnesses to account, and evaluate an inquiry’s findings in advance of publishing a report. Membership ranges from between nine to roughly 18 MPs, and reflects the party balance of the House of Commons. Since 2010, chairs have been directly to their position by the House, while committee members have been elected within their party groups (both by secret ballot) (for a discussion, see Russell, 2011). It is in this context that MPs (and staff) interpret and enact their scrutiny role.

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4 This is part of a larger research project (funded through an ESRC grant, reference: ES/J500215/1).
5 Over the 2010 Parliament, a typical committee would usually have five Labour members, five Conservative members, and one member from a third party (often a Liberal Democrat, though not always); in 2015, a typical committee would have six Conservative members, four Labour members and one from a third party.
3.2. Identifying roles: beliefs and practices

Though the concept of ‘scrutiny’ is familiar terrain to parliamentary and legislative scholars, the term itself is not without ambiguity. Most MPs mentioned terms such as ‘accountability’, ‘responsibility’ and ‘answerability’ in their responses in interviews, and often contrast committee scrutiny to debates on the floor of the House. For example (Interview M-38.9.33):

*You’re away from the Punch and Judy crudities of the chamber where the opposition are always wrong, and your side is always right. I mean… we’re veering onto intelligent conversation on committees.*

Another noted that committee work offers ‘a different perspective to the … theatre of accountability in the chamber’ (Interview M-37.9.8). While not surprising in general, it is specific nuances or emphases in MPs’ interpretations that are critical because they affect MPs’ approach to their role both in terms of conduct of questioning and in terms of the focus and aim of their scrutiny work. Some MPs believed that ‘value for money’ (Interview C-39.9.21; Interview C-52.12.14; Interview M-49.11.16) was the most important consideration, while others emphasised the implementation of policy more generally (Interview M-57.13.25; Interview M-57.13.30). One MP’s interpretation (Interview M-47.11.25), who served on two committees, is a good case study. Though she has more interest in one policy over another, it is arguably her interpretation of the focus of scrutiny that serves as the real dividing line between her praise of one committee and her dislike of another. So, the first committee was praised as working as a team and focusing on what is happening and why in policy implementation terms; meanwhile, the second committee is, ‘all about the theory and not about what actually happens to people’. She later added that the committee ignores the ‘nuts and bolts’ and the ‘real questions’:

*There are times that we had [XX] in and you’re asking them practical things about why haven’t you hit this target? What’s the matter? … What’s going on? What are you doing about [XX] and [XX]? And all those real questions that actually matter, it actually involves a bit of research and a bit of work. Whereas they [the other committee] can just go, “Well, what do you think [XX] is going to be this time next year?”. It’s easy, innit? … just pondering, really, what they’re doing.*

The underlying difference between these two committees lies in her interpretation of scrutiny:

*It’s in the implementation that it matters and it’s only by scrutinising, you know, whether what was intended is actually happening or there’s unintended consequences.*
So I think you can dream of great ideas but it’s in practice that you change people’s lives, so I think you need to scrutinise the implementation and development of policies.

Though just one example, it is instructive of other MPs and their approaches. It reinforces the point made in the previous section about the importance of beliefs in explaining approaches to scrutiny. This raises the interesting question as to what MPs’ interpretations mean for their activities of scrutiny. Though Anthony King (1974) p.74 importantly points out that there are ‘as many ways of being an MP as there are MPs’, I believe it is possible to identify commonly adopted performances. Among others, this includes: specialists and advocates, who follow committee-related interests and pursue specific topics as a result; lone wolves, who take their policy interest to a new level and promote this regardless of the remit of an inquiry; local representatives, who persistently raise constituency matters in committee; party ‘helpers’, described as ‘someone who sort of, you know, if the government’s sort of getting in trouble will maybe step in a little bit’ (Interview S-30.7.12); learners, who come to committees not necessarily to scrutinise but for ‘a pleasant hour or so listening to some people talk and learning about things’ (Interview S-32.8.8); and absentees, or members who drop in and out, fail to ask questions, or do not turn up at all. These roles do not exhaust the possibilities of performances, nor is this an attempt to describe a fixed typology of roles. Rather, in tandem with the analytical framework, it suggests various modes of performance based on beliefs that MPs have about their role. It is worth offering specific examples to illustrate the point, by turning to scrutiny on the front stage.

3.3. Scrutiny on the front stage

I want to give two examples of the way in which scrutiny is performed: a session from the Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) and another from the Work and Pensions Committee. Both sessions questioned their ministers on the same morning, but the two performances were very different in setting, speech and style.

On 11 June 2014, Francis Maude, then minister for the Cabinet Office, was asked to give evidence before PASC (PASC, 2014). The evidence session took place in a committee room in the Palace of Westminster and, though scheduled to begin at 9.30am, started at 9.50am. As the main minister that answers to PASC (making it a quasi-departmental, quasi-cross-cutting committee), the session focused not only on one of its inquiries regarding impartiality of the civil service, but additionally on other topics (regarding a late response to a report on the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments (ACOBA) and regarding the delay of the Chilcot Inquiry, something that featured in the news around that time (Graham, 2014; Wintour, 2014)).
Though calm, the session arguably did not go well. Francis Maude’s answers were designed to shut down discussion. Two (of many) examples:

**Q482 Lindsay Roy:** Is it your contention that the main fault for the delay lies within the Civil Service?
**Mr Maude:** No, I would not want to say that. I am not going to apportion blame. All of us should have moved more quickly on this, and I regret that we didn’t.

**Q483 Lindsay Roy:** So what key lessons have you learned from this?
**Mr Maude:** To do things more quickly.

**Q487 Paul Flynn:** Isn’t the likely explanation for the delay that everyone involved – civil servants and politicians – has a vested interest in keeping a watchdog like ACOBA continuing in its futile way without teeth or claws and with no powers to impose its views? Isn’t it that we have got the establishment deciding not to act, sitting on their hands for 21 months to protect their prospects for retirement jobs?
**Mr Maude:** No.

More generally, the body language adopted by the minister, and his actions on occasion (tapping desk, looking around the room, long intakes of breath, etc.), indicate resistance or boredom to answering questions. The session was not helped by the approach or performance style taken by some members. Paul Flynn, in particular, adopted the role of ‘lone wolf’: an ardent anti-war campaigner, his questioning focused on the Chilcot Inquiry beyond the wishes of the chair; further, his questioning was adversarial in tone, and his questions were (i) disguised speeches and (ii) closed (particularly Q497, Q498, and Q499).

By contrast, on the very same day and at the very same time, the Work and Pensions Committee questioned the minister of state for disabled people, Mike Penning, and three civil servants, on the operation of the Employment and Support Allowance and the Work Capability Assessments (Work and Pensions Committee, 2014). This session took place in a very different setting: the Grimond Room of Portcullis House. While the session with Francis Maude above started over 20 minutes behind schedule, this one began on time and lasted much longer. I bring attention to this session because MPs adopted a range of styles, including a ‘specialist’ or expert role (Debbie Abrahams drew on her record in public health research), ‘constituency role’ (Sheila Gilmore identified constituency issues on two occasions), and ‘absentees’ (in that Kwasi Kwarteng, though present, only asked one minor question (Q487)). This session was also party-political, given the news coverage around welfare reforms (and especially regarding the role of Atos, a public service provider (BBC News, 2014)). For example, after Glenda Jackson
describes the need for specialist examiners as part of contractual agreements for a new public service provider to replace Atos, she asks (and then interrupts):

**Q469 Glenda Jackson:** [...] How are you going to ensure – I presume this is going to be a requirement of the new contract – that these promises will, in fact, be met and monitored?

**Mike Penning:** Yes, it will be.

**Q470 Glenda Jackson:** How?

**Mike Penning:** If I can just explain...

**Glenda Jackson:** Good.

**Mike Penning:** I do not speak quite as fast as some of you.

**Q471 Glenda Jackson:** It is not a question of speed of word; it is a question of speed of thought, but please do go on.

**Mike Penning:** It may be, but if you are not willing to listen to the answer, it is a bit difficult.

**Glenda Jackson:** Well let us hear it.

**Chair:** Minister, the floor is yours.

Or more generally regarding welfare reforms:

**Q418 Sheila Gilmore:** I am sure that organisations like Parkinson’s will be very pleased to find that in June 2014, you are now discussing the question of whether these people are in the appropriate place, given that this is a matter that was raised, I think, with you when you first came into office – which is now a matter of some eight or nine months ago – with your predecessor, and with her predecessor.

**Mike Penning:** And the predecessors before the last election as well.

**Sheila Gilmore:** This has been specifically raised and not dealt with over the last few years ...

Unsurprisingly, there are occasions when the government side felt that they needed to give a better hearing, and so some committee members adopted the role of ‘party helper’:

**Q442 Graham Evans:** Can I just give an example to the Minister of a constituent who is paraplegic? The changes that this Government introduced have enabled her to get a job in my constituency working for the public authority, so there are examples other than those the ones my colleagues on this Committee have given, which always seem to give the negative rather than the positive. Some of the changes that have been put forward do help people into work.

And later:

**Q479 Graham Evans:** In the evidence from Atos on Monday, they were saying that Dr Litchfield’s recommendation regarding the introduction of the mental function champions was introduced in January and it had a positive effect. Whoever takes up the contracts in future, will those lessons be learned – that mental function champions can make a positive difference?
Interpreting Parliament, but how?

James Bolton: Yes, absolutely. Mental function champions have been in place since July 2011; as you highlight, Dr Litchfield pointed to the very positive contribution they make, and that will form an integral part of the contract.

Graham Evans: Thank you.

Both examples (PASC and WPC) reveal that that evidence sessions are affected by the way in which different actors interpret the idea of scrutiny and act on these in terms of style and speech, in different settings. Whilst this does not evaluate the effectiveness of committee inquiries and reports, the key point here is to demonstrate how different conceptualisations of scrutiny and its enactment directly affect the way in which scrutiny processes play against one another and affect the overall evidence-gathering process.

Concluding remarks: interpreting scrutiny

This paper’s scope has been wide-ranging in order to make three points. First, it is possible to identify four traditions in the current literature on parliaments and legislatures. Second, in an attempt to inject theoretical reflection, I have sought to identify and summarise an analytical framework to the study of parliaments and legislatures using Bevir and Rhodes’ interpretive approach to British political science. This has, third and finally, been applied (briefly) to illustrate the importance of interpretation. The key point that underpins all three sections is the belief that it is only by understanding parliamentary actors’ multifaceted roles (and how they interpret and enact those roles) that we can better understand parliamentary scrutiny. It helps us to explain what approaches MPs adopt in questioning witnesses and how those sessions affect the subsequent report. Indeed, given that committee reports are the main way in which committees seek to affect government policy, understanding what reports focus on and the evidence they are based is very important. Moreover, the beliefs that underpin MPs’ approaches imply that select committees are not used for scrutiny alone, but to learn about policy, represent constituents, or pursue specialist interests. Thus, overall, the aim of this paper has been to open a debate about the possibilities of using an interpretive research agenda to complement current research done by others, and, most important, to offer novel ways of understanding the role played by parliaments and legislatures in politics.
Interpreting Parliament, but how?

References


Interpreting Parliament, but how?


Interpreting Parliament, but how?


Interpreting Parliament, but how?


