Telling Governance Stories: From Lecturer, to Minister, and Back!

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Leighton Andrews is Professor of Practice in Public Service Leadership and Innovation, Cardiff Business School. He was an elected member of the National Assembly for Wales from 2003-2016, serving as a Minister between 2007 and 2016. In the past, he has been a public affairs practitioner, including service as the BBC’s Head of Public Affairs. His most recent book is Ministering to Education (2014).

Is political science interested in the lived, day-to-day experience of elected politicians, particularly those with executive authority? In his recent book, “How to Run A Government So that Citizens Benefit and Taxpayers Don’t Go Crazy,” his recent book on how to run a government, the former head of Tony Blair’s Delivery Unit, Sir Michael Barber, argues:

Surprisingly asserts that “very few of the books and little of the commentary focus on how to run a government so that it delivers the change it has promised. In fact, there is a gaping hole where this should be” (Barber 2015, xi).

Barber had made the same point in some detail in his previous book, Instruction to Deliver, which narrates the story of his time running the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit, and offers a possible reason—indeed, he may have given a clue—as to why this is the case:

Stubborn persistence, relentless monotony, attention to detail and gloriing in routine are vastly underestimated in the literature on government and political history” (Barber 2007, 111).
I suppose an alternative way of putting this could be that writing about monotony and routine may not help you make the best-seller lists! After all, as Margaret Thatcher’s authorised biographer and former editor of the UK’s Telegraph, Charles Moore, former editor of the UK’s Daily and Sunday Telegraph, confessed on behalf of the journalistic profession: “-

Barber’s point seems to me a valid one; there is a dearth of detailed commentary on what governments—and their political (and bureaucratic) leaders—do in practical ways to deliver change and monitor it (see also Wagenaar 2004). As Rhodes observes: “-

The relationship of the practice of government to real-world challenges and crises is of course taught in schools of public administration and government, business schools, and by contemporary historians. Meanwhile, think tanks such as the Institute for Government in the UK, or the global Centre for Public Impact, are looking at these questions as well. As a practitioner of politics, I was an avid reader of other people’s experiences in Government, drawing on autobiographies, biographies, and political history to understand how others approached the problems they faced in particular circumstances. As an academic, I find myself looking at similar sources but in a more systematic way, looking for generalizable experiences that can inform teaching and scholarship.

I was fortunate as an elected politician and a Minister in the Welsh Government benefit from Michael Barber’s counsel, both in my time as Minister for Education and later as Minister for Public Services. In weeks of my appointment as Education Minister, we ran a day-long seminar in which helped my department clarify its goals. In 2015, as Minister for Public Services, I held a day ‘summit’ for the top 200 public service leaders in Wales: local government leaders and chief executives, health board chairs, board members and chief executives, police chief constables, senior fire officers, university and college leaders, and many others! At that summit, organized for me by the Welsh Government’s leadership
development arm, Academi Wales, we heard from public service leaders with experience in other countries, such as the United States and Australia, and rolled out a set of common values and behaviours for Welsh public services (Academi Wales, 2016). Michael spoke passionately, setting out the principles of what he calls "deliverology".

I spend much of my time at present thinking about the various problem of governance, whether that is such as the governance of a small stateless nation with a young polity such as Wales, the wider challenges of what Ministers—ministers—actually do as departmental and system leaders, or about how political leadership relates to the broader question of public service leadership. I am developing postgraduate teaching courses in these areas. I also have a growing interest in what technological governance—and broader public administration—means in the age of Uber and the ubiquitous algorithm. This builds on my prior practitioner experience as the BBC’s Head of Public Affairs in London in the 1990s, when I was responsible for relations with Westminster and Brussels during the period of law-making on digital television (Andrews 2005).

Many of these areas are actually emergent. Although there is some strong initial work, but the research base on devolved government and governance generally, and on UK devolution in particular, for example on the governance and government of UK devolution—is thin. Lynch in his work on First Ministers in Scotland and Wales, Lynch (Lynch 2006) complained that there was "insufficient evidence" to analyse properly the relevance of theories of governance within the devolved administrations (2006). That still stands today. Michael Barber kindly wrote the foreword to my book Ministering to Education (Andrews 2014), which describes the educational reform agenda that we pursued. At the time of writing in 2017, eighteen years after devolution to Wales, it remains the only...
published book by a former Welsh Minister on their experience in Welsh minister. The study of Ministers is often focused more on the political circumstances leading to the development of policies or decisions rather than on the practice of Ministers or political leaders in governing or leading a system. Political leadership and its development is "under-theorised and under-researched" (Hartley 2010: 146). In his autobiography, Tony Blair reflects that he had never held any ministerial office before becoming Prime Minister—and that he got to grips with the Whitehall machine only over time (2010). As the BBC journalist James Naughtie recorded, "[Blair] is the only Prime Minister of the modern era in Britain to have had to learn the business of government after being elected to lead one" (Naughtie 2004: 32). No one, of course, teaches you how to be a Government Minister. Former Conservative Cabinet Minister Michael Heseltine assessed that available literature on leadership development in politics is valuable and growing. In general, ministers holding office for the first time rely on experience of prior roles, within politics and outside. In my case, my academic training may have helped with framing of arguments. My interest in using speeches to flesh out the bones of policy may have had an academic origin—for politicians, speeches are to policy documents what conference papers are to finished articles. Certainly, my academic training equipped me with the analytical tools to consider and challenge the advice that was given to me as a Minister. Those lessons were valuable throughout; they taught me to be sceptical of authority, of received wisdom, of determinism whether technological or social, and to go back to the original sources when necessary rather than relying on summaries by officials; were valuable throughout. However, I would not want to privilege my academic experience...
over the shrewd political skills developed by colleagues who previously had held political
in local councils, or worked in trade unions, or had run community projects. Even for
gained insight from prior experience of working around with politicians and, from
discussing issues with politicians who were friends and who had served in senior political
corporate environment of the BBC was particularly valuable in developing the patience and
“corridor politics” needed to win support for policy positions amongst ministerial

Practitioners can be sometimes disparaging about “chalk and talk” courses which do
not engage with real-world situations. The role of a professor of practice is relatively new
at Cardiff University, which means there is and space is there to help define that role.
Experience is conspicuously valued. I have found my own experience as a minister to be of
interest to a number of areas of study in the university. I am fortunate also that the university has had taken a practical role both in developing public policy and in testing out
what works in public service innovation. Cardiff University has been, through its
involvement involved in the creation of both the Welsh Government-backed Public Policy
Institute for Wales and of the public service laboratory Y Lab, developed in conjunction
with Nesta (PPIW 2014; Nesta 2015). So As a result, I have been telling “governance
stories” (Bevir and Rhodes 2006) in a variety of departments: In the business school, not
only in relation to the development of courses in public administration, but more widely, in
terms of business relationships to government and politics; in social sciences, particularly in
providing a practitioner perspective on debates in education; and in political science, where
the view from a minister’s office is seen as providing a unique insight, with and the
potential to help analyse policy and delivery issues through a number of different lenses.

<Insert PQ 2 about here>
While experience and testimony is valued in teaching, it isn’t always easy to identify how to translate lived experience as a practitioner into academic writing. My original academic training was as a historian, and I was supervised by a historian, Professor Keith Middlemas. Professor Middlemas, who insisted on the value of reading political biographies to reach rounded conclusions on judgements made by politicians at particular moments, not advocate an uncritical reading: to read them uncritically. He did not advocate an uncritical reading: to read them uncritically: there is, after all, a vast range of evidence on the problems of personal memory as a historical source which raise issues not only of record, methodology, significance, and accuracy, but also of ideology and conscious or unconscious bias.

Is there a problem about the presentation of practical political experience in academic literature? Is it unfair to suggest that academic journals do not find it easy to give space to practitioner testimony, except on an occasional basis? Of course, many practitioners would not want to do the structure-building of references to past authorities and academic debates to contextualize the experience on which they wish to reflect; they may feel that such work marginalizes and limits their professional expertise. They may also feel that their reflections are not as valued in an academic field as they are in the practitioner arena, at least without validation from other academics. Speaking personally, I found it encouraging when distinguished academics in specific fields urged deeper engagement with the lived experience of practitioners, seeking to understand our objectives, motivations and methods. For example, in campaign communication (Scammell 2014) or source strategies within the media or policy-making arenas (Schlesinger 1990). Sometimes, however, it can feel as though your only value in the context of academic publishing is as a case study: and that your experience is useful only for testing theories. It may be that the time is right for reflecting on how experience and testimony is recorded and used in academic
journals and conferences. Insider accounts, participant observation, and what is now called autoethnography may all supply opportunities for greater understanding.

The final area which seems to me in need of further attention by political science is the societal governance of technology. It is arguable that there has been something of a lacuna within the field of political science—and indeed, public administration—see Pollitt (2010)—in relation to the governance of media and technology policy. It is evident that the power of new technologies raises questions that challenge the ability of governments to address new, complex issues. Recent developments in relation to fake news, advertising and data usage have brought the governance of the “big tech” companies—internet intermediaries such as Facebook and Google—into sharp focus, with threats of further regulation in the UK and Europe. The effectiveness of public administration in practice has come under challenge from the practices of companies such as Uber and Volkswagen, whose practices have generated questions relating to algorithmic governance and regulation. These issues are increasingly addressed by scholars, including those within political science. My Cardiff colleague Madeline Carr examines technological governance from an international relations perspective in her book on the making of US internet policy as a measurement of US power. She argues persuasively for the assertion of agency in the governance of technological change.

My own academic background is a melange of what might be called “genre blurring” (Rhodes 2014), drawing on history, media and cultural studies, as much well as practical experience of politics, government, and public administration. In thinking about government, I have great sympathy for the desire of Bevir and Rhodes to stress its “cultural practice” by seeing “the world through the eyes of the manager, top civil servant and politician” (Bevir and Rhodes 2008)—even though comparing several stories can divulge a set of contradictory
responses. But then, as Barack Obama said in one of his last public contributions as U.S. President, “‘democracy is messy’” (Etherington 2016), so why should our governance stories not reflect that? <end slug>

<header>References</header>


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COMP: Pull Quotes

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1 The Welsh Government, established following the creation of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999 after a referendum vote in 1997, is the executive body that delivers devolved policy in Wales. It is made up of ministers—themselves elected politicians—appointed by the first minister, the leader of the largest party. The body is accountable to the National Assembly.

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politicians appointed by the First Minister, the leader of the largest party; they are accountable to the National Assembly.

He reminded an audience at Cardiff Business School earlier this year that the term was originally coined by officials in the UK Treasury as a pejorative term!

The memoirs of the former First Minister of Wales, the late Rhodri Morgan, were subsequently published in September 2017.