

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: University of Sheffield
Unit of Assessment: 21 - Politics and International Studies
Title of case study: Reforming Public Bodies
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Research conducted at the University of Sheffield on the ‘unbundling’ of the state through the use of various forms of arm’s-length bodies (or quangos), undertaken in association with a range of professional and regulatory bodies, has contributed to and informed subsequent governmental and parliamentary reforms. More specifically, research has shaped: core elements of the coalition government’s ‘Public Bodies Reform Agenda’; the <i>Public Bodies Act 2011</i>; reforms within the Cabinet Office; the introduction of triennial reviews; and, a review of the public appointments system. Furthermore, research into the control and management of public bodies has led to the identification of a number of institutional and skills-based gaps being addressed by the coalition government.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>With the support of the Nuffield Foundation (2004-2005), Leverhulme Trust (2005-2006) and the ESRC (2005-2008, 2009-2010, 2012-), Professor Matthew Flinders has examined the increasing fragmentation of the British state and then located this analysis within a comparative and historical perspective. Using a range of theories and approaches, Flinders analysed the inner workings of British government (and governance) in a manner that achieved multiple impacts. As part of this research, Flinders held a Whitehall Fellowship within the Cabinet Office (2005-2006). Not only did this fellowship facilitate access to government datasets and senior officials, but also allowed the creation of high-trust low-cost relationships with a range of practitioner groupings (e.g. Public Chairs Forum, Association of Chief Executives, Cabinet Office), media outlets (notably the BBC) and select committees that not only facilitated diverse impact opportunities, but also served to sustain the research life-cycle. The key conceptual, theoretical and empirical findings of this research are as follows:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Not even ministers or officials actually knew how many arm’s-length bodies (or quangos) actually existed (specifically the focus of R1 below); 2. Many public bodies had assumed an ‘orphan status’ in the sense that relationships with their sponsoring department were almost non-existent (R2); 3. The Cabinet Office, as the core department responsible for the machinery of government, had little capacity to support departments (R1 & R2); 4. The constant imposition of new accountability frameworks (both internally and externally) seldom delivered the intended benefits in terms of increased trust and confidence, but frequently created unintended bureaucratic burdens and inefficiencies (R4); 5. The number of arm’s-length bodies had actually mushroomed in recent years despite government data suggesting the opposite (R1 and R4); 6. Ministers had very little involvement in what were formally ‘ministerial appointments’ and most appointees were unpaid and therefore not overpaid ‘snouts-in-the-trough’ quangocrats, as had been assumed (R3 & R5); 7. If there was a debate to be had about ministerial appointments it was not that ministers had too much power over patronage but actually too little (R5); 8. That the management of public bodies would be a central challenge for the coalition’s ‘Big Society’ initiative (R6). <p>The main book-length output from this research (R1) was awarded the 2008 W.J.M. Mackenzie Prize by the PSA for the Best Book in Political Studies and Flinders’ work on the Big Society was awarded the 2012 Sam Aaronvitch Memorial Prize (R6).</p>

3. References to the research

- R1. Flinders, M. *Delegated Governance and the British State: Walking Without Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). **Winner of the 2008 W J M Mackenzie Prize for the Best Book in Political Science.**
- R2. Flinders, M. 2009 'The politics of patronage in the United Kingdom: shrinking reach and diluted permeation', *Governance*, 22(4), 547-570. doi: [10.1111/j.1468-0491.2009.01453.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0491.2009.01453.x)
- R3. Flinders, M. 2009 'Review Article: Theory and method in the study of delegation: three dominant traditions', *Public Administration*, 87(4), 955-971. doi: [10.1111/j.1467-9299.2009.01783.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2009.01783.x)
- R4. Flinders, M. 2011. 'Daring to be a Daniel: The pathology of politicized accountability in a monitory democracy', *Administration & Society*, 43(5), 595-619. doi: [10.1177/0095399711403899](https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399711403899) This article was the focus of a special debate with response pieces by professors Mel Dubnick and Philip Tetlock that forged a new inter-disciplinary perspective that has underpinned subsequent studies (for example, in contributions in *The Oxford Handbook of Public Accountability*, 2013).
- R5. Flinders, M and Matthews, F. 2012 'Party Patronage in the United Kingdom: A Pendulum of Public Appointments' in Kopecký. P., Mair. P. and Spirova. M. eds. *Party Patronage and Party Government in European Democracies*, Oxford University Press.
- R6. Flinders, M and Moon, D. 2011. 'The Problem of Letting Go: The Big Society, Accountable Governance and the Curse of the Decentralising Minister', *Local Economy*, 26(8), 652-662. DOI: 10.1177/0269094211422187. **Winner of the Sam Aaronovitch Memorial Prize in 2012.**

4. Details of the impact

This policy-relevant research generated a range of demonstrable impacts in terms of both reach and significance. From 2009 onwards the impact of the global financial crisis increased the political salience of this research as governments – within and beyond the UK – looked for new ways of reducing bureaucratic waste and getting value for money. At the 2010 General Election all three of the main political parties included a commitment to reduce and reform the sphere of delegated governance and, as outlined below, Flinders' research was to prove highly influential in setting out an evidence-based reform agenda. In supporting this claim, the senior civil servant responsible for public bodies' reform in the Cabinet Office has acknowledged that research by Flinders **'helped to define the climate in which reform of public bodies became inevitable'** and that his research **'continues to play a decisive role in shaping the future of the Government's policy on public bodies'**. [see S1 below]. The Policy Analyst to the House of Lords Committee on the Constitution, has similarly written that **'Prof. Flinders' impact on the committee's inquiries has gone beyond the mere elucidation of subject matter – his submissions have on occasion shaped the conclusions and even the structures of the committee's own reports.'**[S2].

A direct research–application–impact relationship can be demonstrated through a range of channels. The most influential example was instigated by Flinders' collaboration with the Institute for Government and the production of a report – *Read Before Burning* [S3] – in July 2010, which presented the main research findings (listed in Section 2 above) and argued in favour of wide-ranging review and reform. This report was the focus of a large number of media reports and subsequently formed the main reference point for the Public Administration Select Committee's *Smaller Government: Shrinking the Quango State* [S4] report of January 2011. Flinders' research – either *directly* through his memorandum of evidence to the inquiry, or *indirectly* through his involvement with the Institute for Government's report - was referenced seventeen times in the select committee's final report [S4] and led to specific recommendations that were subsequently accepted in the Government's formal response (paragraph 52) in March 2011. The Chairman of the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, has written of **'the very clear and significant impact that Matthew Flinders has achieved in recent years... If asked for a clear and demonstrable example of the actual impact of his contribution I would point you to the Public Administration Select Committee's report – Smaller Government: Shrinking**

the Quango State – of January 2011...the influence of Prof. Flinders' research and writing is obvious within the text of the final report. Indeed, many of the actual recommendations made by the committee are actually explicitly linked to either his written submission of evidence or to points he made when appearing in front of the committee...It is refreshing to see an academic that is so engaged and visible within Whitehall and Westminster [emphasis in the original]' [S5].

Beyond the direct example given above, the impact of Flinders' research findings were much wider, as evidenced by the fact that the UK Parliament website returns over one-hundred references to Flinders' 'quango-related' research in either select committee reports or House of Commons Research Papers (January 2008 - June 2013). Flinders made a number of research-based recommendations that he fed into policy discussions either through evidence to parliamentary inquiries (see, for example, House of Commons Treasury Select Committee [S6], House of Commons Public Administration Committee [S4], House of Commons Liaison Committee [S7], House of Lords Committee on the Constitution [S8] and through media work (see, for example, *The Times* 11 December 2009, *The Guardian* 31 March 2010, *Yorkshire Post*, 5 November 2010), practitioner magazines (see, for example, *Holyrood*, October 2010; *Public Service Magazine*, February 2012; *The House*, May 2012) or through think-tank working papers between 2008 and 2010 (four practitioner papers were published by the Institute for Government).

Flinders' recommendations included the need to undertake a fundamental review of all public bodies, the need to institute mechanisms for cross-government training and support in relation to sponsorship, the need to enhance the capacity of the Cabinet Office *vis-à-vis* public bodies, the recommendation to establish a Centre of Excellence for Public Appointments in the Cabinet Office.

The on-going impact of this work was recognised in 2010 when Flinders was invited to contribute to the official history of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA) and when the Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service, Sir Gus O'Donnell, used his speech at the 2011 OCPA Annual Conference to state '**Whitehall needs more academics like Professor Flinders...real research written in an accessible language**'. Later in 2011, Flinders was invited by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to contribute to its 'Supporting Democracy Programme' working with the government of Thailand to institute a transparent and merit-based public appointments system. This involved meetings with ministers, regulators and civil society representatives; a lecture to the Senate of Thailand; and a subsequent delegation of Thai Senators and officials visiting the UK to meet the Commissioner for Public Appointments and to learn more about the regulation of public appointments in the UK. As a result of this knowledge-exchange Thailand is now in the process of implementing measures that draw from UK experience.

Flinders' research also contributed to and informed reforms by the coalition government across the areas of research highlighted in section 2. These being: (i) the capacity of the Cabinet Office in relation to agencies and public bodies was immediately increased after May 2010; (ii) the annual document 'Public Bodies' was re-issued using a more complete and comprehensive methodology and typology; (iii) a new set of internal control measures were introduced to tighten the relationship between departments and arm's-length bodies; (iv) new procedures were put in place to control the creation of new agencies, board and commissions; and (v) the public appointments framework was fundamentally reviewed and reformed.

The outcome is a set of reforms that can be demonstrably traced back to a core research foundation including: a fundamental review of all public bodies which drew upon Flinders' initial analysis; a reform process that sought to simplify the complex institutional landscape that Flinders had mapped; the creation of a new and strengthened 'Public Bodies Team' within the Cabinet Office; the publication of *Public Bodies 2012* that includes a revised version of Flinders' 'Russian Doll Model' representing various degrees of delegation through which the 'drift' of functions across a 'spectrum of autonomy' can be shown. Flinders' approach was: promoted by the Institute for Government and referred to by the Cabinet Office in its report on *Public Bodies* published in 2012 (p.70); evident in the creation of a Sponsorship Network across Whitehall (to which Flinders was invited to speak in January 2012 and October 2013); and the creation of a new Centre for

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Excellence on Public Appointments within the Cabinet Office. This research continues to develop momentum with Flinders acting as a keynote speaker (alongside the Head of the Civil Service) to outline the findings and implications of his on-going research for agencies at the International Association of Agency Chief Executives (Dublin, May 2013) and at the Annual Conference of the UK Association of Chief Executives (London, June 2013). His research on public bodies reform is now being developed in the Republic of Ireland in the form of a Public Service Fellowship (held by Dr Muiris Macarthaigh) in the Irish government's Department for Expenditure and Reform. Overall, the depth and breadth of this impact led a senior civil servant from the Cabinet Office to highlight that: **'Underpinning Professor Flinders' work is his impressive and atypical ability to adapt his research and modes of communication to different audiences. I believe this is a critical factor that enables him to play such an important role in contemporary policy-making'** [S1].

The continued reach and significance of Flinders' research for a wide range of user communities within and beyond the UK is evident in the citation of his submissions of evidence by the House of Lords Committee on the Constitution as part of its inquiry into the 'Pre-emption of Parliament', January 2013 (HL 165, 2013) and the Public Administration Select Committee as part of its inquiry into 'The Committee on Standards in Public Life' (HC 516, 2013). The quality and impact of this research has been recognised with the 2012 **Communicator of the Year** award by the Political Studies Association (PSA) and in 2013 with an **ESRC Impact Prize** with the commendation noting that Flinders' research: 'has underpinned government policy and his writing and broadcasting have stimulated major public debates within and beyond the UK'.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1. A letter from a senior Cabinet Office official corroborates the impact of Flinders' research on defining the climate for reform of public bodies.
- S2. A letter from a Policy Analyst for the House of Lords Constitution Committee corroborates the impact of Flinders' research on the scrutiny work of the House of Lords.
- S3. Institute for Government 2010. *Read Before Burning* London: IfG, corroborates Flinders' impact in setting the agenda for the House of Commons' Public Administration Committee's investigation of public bodies with reference to Flinders on pages 9, 19, 22, 25, 45 and 49. <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/read-burning>
- S4. HC 537 *Smaller Government: Shrinking the Quango State*, Public Administration Select Committee, Session 2010-2011 (<http://tinyurl.com/34a2ety>). This corroborates Flinders' impact as he presented written and oral evidence to the Committee and is quoted extensively throughout the report. For example, pages 14, 18, 27, 32, 33, Ev30 – 38
- S5. A letter from the Chair, House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration, corroborates the impact of Flinders' research on the work of the Public Administration Select Committee and other select committee enquiries.
- S6. HC 385 *Office for Budget Responsibility*, Treasury Committee, Session 2010-2011 (<http://tinyurl.com/o7hq9zv>). This corroborates Flinders' impact on the reform of public bodies with specific reference to Flinders pp. 27-31.
- S7. HC 697 *Select Committee Effectiveness, Resources and Powers*, House of Commons Liaison Committee, Session 2012-2013 (<http://tinyurl.com/nfragm9>). This corroborates Flinders' impact on the reform of public bodies as he was invited to present written and oral evidence with specific reference made to his research into the dual role of Select Committees in holding government to account while promoting wider public understanding of politics, pages 9 and 60 Ev 1 – 13.
- S8. HL 61 *The Accountability of Civil Servants*, House of Lords Committee on the Constitution, Session 2012-2013 (<http://tinyurl.com/gal3qb3>) corroborates Flinders' impact as he was invited to provide oral evidence to the Committee.