COVID-19 AND 'THE PUBLIC':

UK GOVERNMENT DISCOURSE AND THE BRITISH POLITICAL TRADITION[1]

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This article presents an original analysis of the UK government's discursive response to COVID-19 across the first six months of the pandemic. Two arguments are made. First, representations of the state/people relationship were vital to the state's storying and selling of its response to this crisis. And, second, despite populist-style inflections, the state/people relationship was typically constructed around a 'government knows best' claim associated with the 'British Political Tradition' (BPT). In making these arguments the article offers three contributions: (i) empirical, via an original thematic analysis of over 120 speeches, statements and documents from the UK government; (ii) analytical, via a new taxonomy of ways in which 'the public' is imagined and represented in political discourse; and, (iii) theoretical, via conceptualisation of the flexible and adaptive discourse of the BPT.

Key words: COVID-19; British Politics; British Political Tradition; Rhetoric; Discourse; Crisis

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Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic arrived in the UK at a moment of historically low trust in government. The virus itself presented an immediate, yet unknown, risk to citizens' health (e.g. Gronvall 2020). Its remedy, which included restrictions on movement, school closures and national 'lockdowns', threatened economic stability and wellbeing (e.g. Pfefferbaum and North 2020). With only 15% of the British public claiming to trust the government always or most of the time (Curtice et al. 2020), hopes for public acquiescence were accompanied by genuine fears of non-compliance with the UK's emergency response. As Jennie Harris, Deputy Chief Medical Officer argued in March 2020, 'Just because a lockdown is imposed doesn't mean that that is the right thing to do. Timing of an intervention is absolutely critical. *Put it in too early, you have a time period [where] people actually get non-compliant—they won't want to keep it going for a long time'* (NBS News 2020, our emphasis).

This 'perfect storm' of challenges overflowed established boundaries between public and private, and the economic and social. It brought to the forefront dominant ideological understandings of administrative and technical rationality, and of the efficacy of bureaucratic authority (and 'experts'), whilst threatening to undermine expectations around the state's competence. As Habermas (1975) famously argued, legitimacy in modern states is not only a matter of citizens' beliefs, or of the state's conforming with established procedures. It relies, too, on the successful management of capitalism's crisis tendencies, including those which upset ecological balance and generate zoonotic transmission of disease. If managed inconsistently, unjustly, or incompetently, COVID-19 risked crystallizing generalised feelings of public distrust toward politics into a crisis of legitimacy. In this context – and in common with other liberal democracies – the government had to achieve multiple ends simultaneously: tackle the crisis and maintain public confidence in the state's continuing capacity to provide healthcare ('protect the NHS'); shore up public faith in medico-scientific expertise ('follow the science'); and, of course, maintain its own authority to instruct and manage public behaviour ('hands, face, space').

Against this background, this article asks three vital and interrelated questions: how did the UK government discursively manage its relationship with the public in the opening months of the COVID-19 pandemic? How was the relationship between government and people articulated? And, what were the implications of specific framings thereof? To answer these questions, we offer an original analysis of the government's political communication across the pandemic's opening six months. Three arguments are made. First, elite constructions of the state-people relationship were vital to political attempts to legitimate, and motivate compliance with, new (and often dramatic) national regulations. Second, heterogeneity was evident within these constructions even within this relatively short period. And, third, despite this heterogeneity, despite the crisis' novelty, and notwithstanding discernibly populist rhetorical flourishes, this relationship was overwhelmingly figured around a distinctive and established set of politico-discursive claims characterised by a 'government knows best' attitude associated with the 'British Political Tradition' (BPT). These arguments, to be clear, make no claim to the distinctiveness of the UK's COVID-19 response. Instead, our focus is on the discursive *framing* of the executive/citizenry relationship within the UK, and the (re)crafting thereof rendered possible by the pandemic.

The article begins by reviewing scholarship on the BPT to situate our argument. A second section introduces the framework methodology underpinning our analysis of official government texts including speeches, articles, press statements, and parliamentary interventions. In the third, analytical, section we show how UK government discourse combined four distinct figurations of 'the people' in the first six months of the pandemic: i) statistical realities; (ii) suffering families; (iii) responsible individuals; and (iv) freedom-loving citizens. We argue that these figurations responded to two related, yet discrete, challenges: the crisis posed by COVID-19, and the challenge of maintaining political legitimacy. In making this argument, the article offers three contributions. First, empirically, it provides an original, detailed empirical analysis of the UK government's discursive response to the pandemic drawing on a substantial corpus of over 77,000 words. Second, analytically, it puts that response into a wider political context developing a new taxonomy of ways in which the state/people relationship is imagined and represented in British political discourse at a time of complex contestation and fragmentation. And, third, theoretically, it shows how the public discourse of the BPT is adapting and evolving, including in relation to the 'populist style' widely associated with contemporary politics.

Speaking of 'the people' in British Politics

A fundamental tension in democratic political culture exists between institutionalised, bureaucratic and rule-bound executive power, and the affective, traditional and romantic concept of 'the people' (Canovan, 1999). Each needs the other, of course. Without a state to name and maintain it there is no 'people'. Yet, without a 'people' the modern democratic state has neither object of government nor authorising ground (e.g. Breuilly, 1982). This is why the 'invention' of the nation bound states and peoples together, specifying for whom the state existed. It is also why democratic political conflict often centres on attempts to expand (or forestall the expansion of) 'the people' (see Lefort 1986; Laclau, 2005). Questions about the nation, what authorises it, and the relationship between state and people, are particularly pronounced in the UK today. They are fundamental to disputes over the Union, regional nationalisms, Britain's relationship to Europe, immigration, and racism. They are fundamental, too, to broader debates over the accountability of government and the nature of contemporary democracy.

It is within this context that we can understand the increasing prominence of efforts to spotlight 'the people' within contemporary political discourse. Such gestures and representations reflect the wider influence of populism both in British politics and more widely. Understood as a process which divides politics into two camps (people and elite) and which advocates for political outcomes reflecting the 'will of the people' (Stavrakakis et al. 2017; Mudde 2007), populism has exerted multiple influences across British politics; from the symbiotic relationship between radical right populists like UKIP and mainstream political parties like the Conservatives (Bale 2018); to a wider influence on left and right wing political organisation (March 2017) and a wider influence on and appeal across class divisions (Tindall 2022). Some, indeed, point to an increasingly 'populist style' (Moffit 2016: 1) within British politics; one that is manipulated by 'canny political actors who can speak effectively in the name of 'the people' to make great political gain' (Moffit 2016: 1). This style is strategic, but more than opportunistic (Atkins and Finlayson 2013). It is an attempt to address real problems for legitimacy in a context in which a limited, narrow, elite-led form of democratic politics, and a more direct appeal to 'the people' are, as Canovan (1999, 10) argues, "a pair of squabbling Siamese twins [sic], inescapably linked". Jeremy Corbyn's 'crowdsourcing' for Prime Minister's Questions (BBC Online 2015), for instance, directly

incorporated citizens' words within Parliamentary debate. Boris Johnson's Facebook-administered 'People's Prime Minister's Questions' (Waterson 2019) offered a related performance of political accessibility beyond the Parliamentary estate's boundaries. When responding in Parliament to Boris Johnson's lockdown-breaking parties, Keir Starmer more recently still, read out letters from the public who *had* abided by national rules, often missing contact with dying loved ones as a consequence of compliance (Guardian 2022).

Rhetorical gestures such as these are not merely, or not only, a kind of 'crafted talk' (see Jacobs and Shapiro 2000): an invocation of 'the people' to mask the public's limited political agency. They also attempt to resolve a fundamental problem of legitimacy characteristic of the British state. This problem – foregrounded in theorisations of the British Political Tradition (BPT) (e.g. Marsh and Hall 2007, 2016; Hall 2011; Diamond and Richards 2012) – is that the British democratic state of the twentieth-century inherited a nineteenth-century conception of politics emphasising strong and decisive rather than participatory governance. Within the confines of the BPT, rulers are thought to know what is best for the nation, and to be accountable through their responsibility for decision-making in an essentially self-regulating system. The input of the people, here, is confined to periodic elections which authorise, in Burkean fashion, representatives rather than delegates. Reform is viewed as external imposition and threat to the system's integrity, the preservation of which is the executive's primary and necessary goal. Simply put, there isn't much space for 'the people' in a BPT view of British politics.

Agreement on its core characteristics notwithstanding, work on the BPT is diverse. One distinction is between celebratory readings, which see the tradition's distinctive features as normatively desirable (Beer 1965; Birch 1964; Greenleaf, 1983a; 1983b; 1987) and contemporary critical readings questioning elitism within British politics (see Marsh and Hall 2007, 2016; Hall 2011; Diamond and Richards 2012). There is also important ontological debate on the balance of structure and agency, and the degree to which the tradition is interpreted and adapted by actors, or shaping of their behaviours, outlooks and habits (compare Bevir and Rhodes 2003 with Diamond and Richards 2012). Scholars working with the concept, moreover, rarely see the BPT as the only, or dominant, factor within British politics. Blunkett and Richards (2011), for instance, trace how the influence of the BPT clashed with alternative conceptions of British politics such as the 'Third Way' during the New Labour years (see also Richards et al. 2019). Ward and Ward (2021), more

recently, discuss the BPT alongside authoritarian neoliberalism to characterise the first 18 months of Johnson's administration as a period of 'executive centralisation'. Work such as this (see also Bruff 2014) notes the ways in which diverse national and supranational governance entities increasingly draw upon coercive and centralised means to deliver political goals through consolidating power at the state's centre, acceding to non-democratic and coercive impulses, and seeking to 'manufacture consent' for public policy.

The key point here is that the BPT is an embedded *idea* of how British government has, can, and should work. It is a conception of politics which exercises ideational force, constitutes political discourses and actions, and indeed "underpins the institutions and processes of British Government" (Marsh and Hall 2016: 126). Hall et al. (2018: 367) describe the essence of this idea as a belief "in the virtue of centralisation of power" such that government can only be effective and efficient when controlled from the centre (principles encapsulated in notions of Parliamentary sovereignty and of the unitary state). "In the BPT", they write, "a 'responsible government' is not a responsive one, but one that acts as the guardian of the national interest and pursues policies that are 'wise', even if policies are not immediately approved by the electorate" (ibid., 367-8). Crucially, as Marsh and Hall (2016), and Diamond and Richards (2012) argue, this idea of how politics should – and does – work is discernible amongst elites across the British political spectrum. The framework therefore represents an ideal lens through which to examine British political rhetoric during a time of (constructed) 'crisis', because of its resonance amongst those *within the system*. That is, the BPT reflects how many of the key actors within British politics understand the system to work, and/or think British politics *should* work.

Despite the longevity of this view of British politics, the BPT idea that 'government knows best' has come under increasing challenge in recent years. Direct democracy measures such as referendums, for example, once disdained as alien to British politics (Birch 1964), have been used with much increasing frequency on issues including voting reform, Scottish independence and, most prominently, membership of the EU. The UK has also witnessed a growing 'anti-political' disdain for deference to state authority (Clarke et al., 2018; also Hay 2007, 2020) and the emergence of new political styles attuned to expectations of a closer relationship between people and political elites. Such disdain was particularly pronounced amidst the 'Partygate' scandal of late 2021 which saw revelations of parties and social gatherings at Downing Street contravening

public health restrictions. And yet, such events should be understood as challenges *of* the BPT, not challenges *for* it, precisely because the BPT overshadows and limits attempts to reform the state (e.g. Blunkett and Richards, 2011). That is to say, 'anti-politics' is exacerbated by traditions of state secrecy and elite defensiveness which clash with a weakening of government control over information, and expectations of political transparency. Consequently, failures (foreign policy, financial, and so on) inspire rejection of 'corrupt' elites, and risk turning specific challenges into instances of a wider, intensifying legitimation crisis. This is, in part, why seemingly counterintuitive appeals for the renewal of centralised, unchecked, authority often follow such challenges.

In short, legitimation crises in the UK unfold as challenges to, and renegotiations of, the BPT, which exists as a prominent conception of British politics amongst its elites. These challenges, crucially, centre on the relationship between 'the people' and 'the state'. And while claims to the formal rights of each are vital here, the relationship itself requires rhetorical and discursive management. With this in mind we now begin our analysis of political discourse precipitated by the worst public health crisis in a century to explore how key actors in the British government (re)articulated the relationship between state and 'the people', as part of the process of maintaining the former's legitimacy.

Constructing the state/people relationship

The remainder of our article offers a discursive analysis of elite constructions of the state/public relationship within British political discourse on COVID-19 throughout the opening six months of the crisis. Our timeframe begins with the pandemic's emergence in government discourse in January 2020, and concludes with the June 2020 termination of the daily press briefings that became central to governmental communication throughout the crisis. Thus, our focus is on a period in which the virus' impact on British social and economic life went from speculative and uncertain to clear and dramatic. This was a period characterised, too, by significant evolution in the government's efforts to arrest the spread of the virus, including the institution and suspension of a first national 'lockdown'.

The corpus of texts was generated directly from the official website of the Prime Minister's office. It includes authored newspaper articles, speeches, press releases, parliamentary and other statements, news items, public letters, and announcements. It is thus not a record of everything government and politicians thought and said, but, rather, of the considered, planned, communications of officialdom to the public. Every text hosted on the website to 23 June 2020 was read for its relevance to the research, and every text referring to the pandemic or its response was included in the corpus for analysis. This generated a total of 121 texts aggregating over 77,200 words. In addition to the Prime Minister's spoken and written words, these include contributions from prominent administration figures including the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove; Business Secretary Alok Sharma; Environment Secretary George Eustice; Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab (who acted as stand-in Prime Minister during Johnson's hospitalisation with the virus); and Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Secretary Oliver Dowden.

The corpus was subjected to a thematic analysis via the 'framework method' (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002). This widely-used qualitative approach (e.g. Law et al 2011; Gale *et al* 2013) involves a 'bottom-up' systematic process of sifting, charting, and sorting research material in order to make sense of, order, and summarise large volumes of data in its own terms (Jones, 2000: 560). Four stages outlined by Gale *et al* (2013: 4-5) were followed here: familiarisation with the documents; coding via a paraphrasing of short sections of text; inductive creation of an analytical framework from the coded material; and, application of this framework to the corpus. The framework method is a useful one for generating a "set of codes organised into categories [creating] … a new structure for the data … that is helpful to summarize/reduce the data in a way that can support answering the research questions" (Gale *et al* 2013: 1).

As the above suggests, our analysis is both inductive and epistemologically interpretivist. It is inductive because the figurations of the public explored below were generated via an immersive reading of the textual material, rather than imposed upon it. It is epistemologically interpretivist because our concern is with the *meaning* of the state/public relationship as produced within elite political discourse, and the implications of particular representations in this context. Because of this, our focus is on mapping heterogeneities within this evolving discourse, rather than evaluating its external accuracy, or attempting to quantify its internal structuration. The completeness of our

analysis is, therefore, a product of our framework's 'fit' with the corpus (see Milliken 1999: 234-235).

As summarised in Table 1, four primary representations of the state/people relationship emerged from our analysis of this discourse: (i) statistical realities; (ii) suffering families; (iii) responsible individuals; and (iv) freedom-loving citizens. Although we highlight variations and evolutions in these below, each was identifiable throughout the period under analysis.

Figuration of the public	Key Characteristics	Example
Statistical realities	- Numerical language - The people is an aggregation of experiences, political responses and outcomes - Government possesses epistemic authority, thinking for the people	"36,793 have now died. That's an increase of 118 fatalities since yesterday"
Suffering families	- Affective descriptions of experience - The people is composed of family members - Government sympathises with, and (at times) experiences, personal suffering speaking 'for' the people.	"I think about what their sons and their daughters must be going through right now. Their brothers and sisters. Their grandchildren. All the loved ones left with their unbearable, long-term, grief"
Responsible individuals	- Coercive commands and consensual appeals to public action - People are individual responsible agents - Government enables and produces good individual decision-making	"You are doing your bit in following this advice to slow the spread of this disease. The more we collectively slow the spread, the more time we give the NHS to prepare, the more lives we will save, the faster we will get through this"
Freedom-loving citizens	- Political ideas and political culture are essentialized and homogenised - People are bearers of rights articulated as freedoms	"I know how difficult this is, how it seems to go against the freedom-loving instincts of the British people"

	- Government recognises and respects individuals' civic expectations	

Table 1: Figurations of the state-people relationship in UK Political Discourse on COVID-19.

Statistical Realities

The first figuration of the people emerges through statistical representations intended to capture the virus's development and impact, exemplified by the tallies of case and fatality rates that came to mark the opening of the government's daily press conferences. This figuration centred on numerical descriptions of the virus' effects upon the aggregated body politic, for example:

> 113,777 people have now been tested for the virus. Of those, 14,543 have tested positive. An increase in the last day of 2,885… And of those who have contracted the virus, 759 have, sadly, died' (Gove 2020a).

A core component of the government's communications strategy, statistical figurations were typical of the "rituals of expectation, speculation and prognostication that surround the public pronouncement of politically salient numbers" (Rose 1991: 673), and, indeed, of the government's embrace of scientism within this pandemic (Jarvis 2021; Kettell and Kerr 2021). Here 'the people' appear through endlessly updated numerical indicators, with the succinctness, and seeming clarity, of such abstractions legitimating government demands for acquiescence to its policy response:

> 708 people have sadly lost their lives as a result of COVID-19: the highest daily total yet recorded**.** And that means that of those hospitalised in the UK, the number who have passed away now totals 4,313. *Those numbers emphasise again the importance of maintaining social distancing measures to halt the spread of the disease'* (Gove 2020b, our emphasis).

This statistical construction of the people positions the government as a source of epistemic authority. Government – supported by scientists and statisticians – has the vantage point, here, at the centre of the crisis, above and looking down on the people, from which public experiences and behaviours can be aggregated and the virus's spread observed, understood, and acted upon. The lack of equivocation about numerical claims contributes to the framing of the government's

response as arising through necessity rather than choice because of the neutrality and transparency connoted by numbers (Fioramonti 2014: 21) such that the indicators 'speak for themselves' (see Jarvis 2021), as it were. The mathematical register, moreover, enables particular specifications of success, with neatly rounded targets repeatedly listed alongside milestones and quantifiable accomplishments, for instance: "we are massively increasing the testing to see whether you have it now. And ramping up daily testing from 5000 a day to 10,000 to 25,000 and then up to 250,000" (Johnson, 2020d).

Notwithstanding (indeed overlooking) the work of devolved and regional administrations, central government here affirms its place as the body best-placed to coordinate the UK's pandemic response, always fully abreast of the threat's scale and distribution. Government, literally, 'knows best', as the BPT would have it, because it, and it alone, has access to, and is informed by, this numerical data. In so doing, the people are constituted in this figuration as an object through their countability, and thus their governability. This provides the executive with epistemic and political authority, inviting people to recognise themselves in the numbers, and to contribute to ostensibly quantifiable responses such as 'flattening the virus's curve'. This numerical construction thus legitimates a circuit of relationships in which government derives legitimacy from its capacity to make the people known to itself. Thus, the essence of the British Political Tradition is affirmed not in spite of the political prioritisation of the people, but because of it.

Suffering Families

The mathematised governance of 'a people' such as that considered above necessarily removes from them the complexities and heterogeneities of everyday life. A second, prominent, figuration within the UK government's Covid discourse therefore worked to restore this via attentiveness to individual suffering and hardship. This is primarily an affective register of communication, emphasising visceral emotions and experiences, particularly in relation to families bereaved by the virus. Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab (2020b), for instance, reflected on the experience of grieving families in the 16 April daily press conference:

> Every time I come to this lectern, and I read out the grim toll of people who have so sadly passed away. I walk away from here, and I think about what their sons and their daughters

must be going through right now. Their brothers and sisters. Their grandchildren. All the loved ones left with their unbearable, long-term, grief.

The Prime Minister, eleven days later, made similar reference to the suffering of directly affected families, adding a wartime reference common in British political rhetoric: "every day I know that this virus brings new sadness and mourning to households across the land and it is still true that this is the biggest single challenge this country has faced since the war" (Johnson 2020j).

This emphasis on public suffering and hardship also took in wider experiences of the pandemic, including recognition of the impact of the government's response. On 16 March, for instance, the Prime Minister reflected on the challenges likely posed by the imminent closure of schools: "I know that these steps will not be easy for parents or teachers. And for many parents, this will be frustrating, and it will make it harder for them to go out to work" (Johnson, 2020c). Raab (2020a), later, reflected in similar vein on the impact of social distancing, suggesting: "I know these restrictions take their toll, day in day out. On people's livelihoods, on people's quality of life, on people's mental health. And I appreciate that it's often the little things that hurt the most". As he subsequently elaborated:

> I appreciate the impact of these measures is considerable on people and businesses across the country. The costs being shouldered. The sacrifices people are making. Being isolated from friends and family. Whole households, cooped up inside, all week long. Parents having difficult conversations with their young children, who just don't understand why they can't visit grandparents or go outside and meet up with friends as they normally do. … *We get it*. We know it's rough going at this time (Raab 2020b, our empahsis).

As these examples indicate, this second figuration centres on the private lives of families. The people as a collective is hardly present here, and the desire to foreground household suffering instead produces a collection of separate units united only by sentiment. Caught up in nationwide events beyond their control, people's experiences and emotions are described for and to them. There is, therefore, a curious mix of populist rhetoric (foregrounding 'the people') conjoined with BPT centralism (speaking for 'the people') here. Claims to 'get it' smooth this combination of elites and public through a performance of shared emotional experience, rather than common interests. And this construction of emotional coherence is amplified in the shift toward collective pronouns: "*We all feel* the profound impact of coronavirus not just on ourselves, but on *our loved*

ones and *our communities*" (Johnson 2020i, our emphasis), and, "It's been a physical strain as *we adapt* to living and working at home while not seeing *our family and our friends* in the usual *way we'd like* to" (Raab 2020c, our emphasis).

The discourse thus contributes to the construction of 'ethos' – the 'character' of the speaker, and therefore the government (e.g. Finlayson, 2013) – and to securing legitimacy for government actions via a 'representative claim' (Saward 2010) on behalf of those whose emotions and experiences it claims to share and understand. In this sense, although the affective register and the rhetorical equivalence of executive and citizens appears intuitively populist, this figuration again accords with the British Political Tradition (BPT) insofar as government communicates instructions to be followed by a people defined primarily in terms of their sentiments: as a collection of units with feelings for their family and friends; as bearers of emotions and needs rather than interests and choices. Government understands those feelings, it shares them, and this concern to protect families with whom its personnel empathise is the source of its legitimacy to act and to solicit sacrifice. The humanising detail and familiarity of everyday mundane actions, as such, is central to, rather than embroidery of, this relationship, facilitating retrospective praise as much as prospective demand: "you have shown the good sense to support those rules overwhelmingly. You have put up with all the hardships of that programme of social distancing. Because you understand that as things stand, and as the experience of every other country has shown, it's the only way to defeat the coronavirus" (Johnson 2020k). It also facilitated more collective constructions of the public centred on shared cultural experiences such as the weekly 'clap for our carers' celebration of frontline workers: "I want to thank, above all, our amazing NHS staff. It was very moving last night to join in that national clap for the NHS" (Johnson 2020h).

Responsible Individuals

A third figuration departed from the two considered above by positioning the people as individuals with capacity, agency and therefore responsibility for contributing to the crisis' successful resolution. This construction did not, however, entail strictly democratic appeals to public participation in policy implementation. Rather it developed the BPT's largely hierarchical conception of the state/people relationship in which individuals are encouraged or exhorted to follow instruction from a government well-positioned to facilitate good decision-making.

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Consider, for instance, the construction of civic responsibility within efforts to secure compliance with new government demands:

> everyone – everyone – must follow the advice to protect themselves and their families, *but also – more importantly – to protect the wider public*. So stay at home for seven days if you think you have the symptoms… Whole household to stay at home for 14 days if one member in that household thinks he/she has the symptoms (Johnson 2020c, our emphasis).

This construction of the public's actions as vital to the stemming of COVID-19's spread was evident, too, with the introduction of wider restrictions on the movement of individuals: "we are giving one simple instruction – you must stay at home. You should not meet friends or relatives who do not live in your home. You may only leave your home for very limited purposes, such as buying food and medicine, exercising once a day and seeking medical attention" (Johnson 2020i). Elsewhere, the forceful, instructional tone of these demands was accompanied by normative appeals, and a de-emphasising of elite/public distinctions, as the Prime Minister put it on 22 March: "*You are doing your bit* in following this advice to slow the spread of this disease. The more we collectively slow the spread, the more time we give the NHS to prepare, the more lives we will save, the faster we will get through this" (Johnson 2020g, our emphasis). Such efforts to encourage – rather than coerce – public compliance dovetailed with gratitude for those who had followed government advice:

> Everyone who didn't visit their mum for Mother's Day but Facetimed them, Skyped them, rang them instead. *Thank you for your restraint* and for what you did. Everyone who was forced to close a pub or a restaurant or a gym or any other business that could have done fantastic businesses on a great day like this. *Thank you for your sacrifice*, I know how tough it must be (Johnson 2020g, our emphasis).

Civil society's response to the virus also drew praise here, with participants in the new national voluntary scheme receiving recognition for their contribution to the national response: "every member of the British public who's volunteering, an incredible response – 600,000 people have volunteered to take part in *a great national effort to protect people* from the consequences of coronavirus – I want to thank you. I want to thank everybody who's working to keep our country going through this epidemic" (Johnson 2020h, our emphasis).

Despite the demotic rhetorical flourishes as in the foregrounding of people's imagined Mother's Days, this appeal to public responsibility is primarily moral in register. It combines, on the one hand, a utilitarian argument that compliance will engender a speedier conclusion to the collective trial. And, on the other, an argument about individual moral responsibility connected to completing one's assigned tasks in service to the nation. In these ways, the responsibility sought is national-cultural rather than political-democratic. It is because of this, indeed, that rule-breakers could be justly - and legitimately - reprimanded for disobedience: "These rules must be observed. So, if people break the rules, the police will issue fines and disperse gatherings" (Johnson 2020i).[2] Indeed, this division between responsible and irresponsible individuals took on particular salience as the Black Lives Matter protests gathered energy following George Floyd's May 2020 killing by police officers in Minneapolis:

> we are in a time of national trial, when *for months this whole country has come together* to fight a deadly plague. After such sacrifice, we cannot now let it get out of control. It is BAME communities who have been at the forefront of the struggle against coronavirus – whether in health care or transport or social care or any of the other essential services that have kept our country going. And it is BAME communities, tragically, that have paid a disproportionate price. So no, *I will not support those who flout the rules* on social distancing, for the obvious reason that we risk a new infection at a critical time and just as we have made huge progress. And no, *I will not support or indulge those who break the law*, or attack the police, or desecrate public monuments. We have a democracy in this country. If you want to change the urban landscape, you can stand for election, or vote for someone who will (Johnson 2020l).

Johnson's final sentence offers succinct and powerful illustration of the British Political Tradition's limited, conservative, notion of accountability. Here, citizen input into political outcomes is restricted to formal, electoral politics, while other forms of engagement - such as public demonstrations - are frowned upon. By 'flouting' rules, those demonstrators have failed to take part in a 'national trial' and are guilty of pulling apart rather than taking responsibility for coming together. An internal risk of infection, they are so beyond the pale that even to consider

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[2] It is precisely this framing which made the rule-breaking of Boris Johnson and others within the UK government so controversial within the Partygate Scandal, with the violation of a basic principle of equity and its laying bare the gap between public and politicians.

their demand is to 'indulge' them. This, as indicated above, highlights the underpinning formulation that public political action ought to be in line with that advocated by the state: it is only legitimate if contributing to the success of the executive's project. As we would expect from the BPT, emphasis is on the government's authority over a public enabled (encouraged or coerced) to freely follow the rules set by government; a subject, subsequently, to praise or to discipline for its (un)willingness to do so.

Freedom-Loving Citizens

The depoliticised discourse of responsibility in our third figuration has an interesting relationship to the fourth, which is underpinned by a nominally more political conception of citizenship. Here, we find members of the public represented as bearers of rights and interests construed, importantly, primarily as freedoms which the government itself must recognise and respect. For example, Michael Gove (2020b) noted on 4 April: "I am conscious more must be done – particularly over the holiday period – to support children at risk and in need"; a theme to which the Prime Minister subsequently returned: "I want to say to all parents whose children are eligible to return to school, I want to assure you it is safe – and there is no need for your kids to miss out on their education" (Johnson 2020n).

Although this figuration of the people intersects with the above constructions centred on familial life and action, the emphasis here is on possession of a right to education that is managed and safeguarded by the government. We find the same formulation in the context of social and economic freedoms: "After a long period of asking you, the British public, to follow very strict and complex rules to bring coronavirus under control, we can now make life easier for people to see more of their friends and family, and to help businesses get back on their feet and people back into jobs" (Johnson 2020o). The legitimacy of government action here lies in its possession of the truth of public interests and wants: "*I know* there are lots of things the public want to hear from our advisors about" (Johnson 2020a, our emphasis); "*I know* that many people – including millions of fit and active people over 70 – may feel, listening to what I have just said, that there is something excessive about these measures" (Johnson 2020b, our emphasis); "*I know* that everyone's strongest instinct is to go and see their mothers in person, to have a meal together, to show them how much you love them" (Johnson 2020f, our emphasis); and, "*I know* there are people very concerned about

their household finances. Uncertain about their jobs … We get it" (Raab 2020b, our emphasis). While such rhetoric again emphasises the speaker's ethos – their sympathy with the natural desires of individuals – its foundation is an essentialised conception of the British public and its 'natural' disposition to be freedom-loving, particularly in relation to economic activity:

> I know how difficult this is, how it seems to go against th*e freedom-loving instincts of the British people.* And I also know how much, right now, workers and business deserve the financial reassurance we are giving them. But we will get through this. We will get through it together, and we will beat this virus (Johnson 2020e, our emphasis).

This is an instance of have-your-cake-and-eat it rhetoric. Amidst criticism from the right of his party that he had abandoned his supposedly libertarian instincts (criticism that would later cohere into the factional Covid Recovery Group of MPs) Johnson appears to affirm a traditionally conservative understanding of national natural rights. But he makes this affirmation only to contain it within an appeal to a 'we' that, together, will 'beat this virus' in so far as the public does what the government tells it to do. That is to say, Johnson adverts to a conception of political responsibility familiar from the BPT in which government's proper role is to recognise natural public needs and desires, while moderating the meeting of these needs as appropriate given its privileged access to a wider view and better information. Government is the pilot, occupying the bridge of the ship of state, and all will be well if everyone fulfils their allotted role. As the Prime Minister argued to the House of Commons on 23 June 2020:

> *My duty, our duty as the Government, is to guide the British people*, balancing our overriding aim of controlling the virus against our natural desire to bring back normal life. We cannot lift all the restrictions at once, so we have to make difficult judgments, and every step is scrupulously weighed against the evidence. Our principle is to trust the British public to use their common sense in the full knowledge of the risks, remembering that the more we open up, the more vigilant we will need to be´ (Johnson 2020p, our emphasis).

There is even room, in this construction, for recognition of public dissatisfaction with the government's response. As the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove (2020b), noted on 4 April:

Inevitably, there has therefore been criticism of some government actions. I recognise that criticism has been designed to challenge the government's performance and improve to our response. Which is why I welcome it. Even as we unite in our efforts to defeat the virus we must also recognise that robust scrutiny is to be welcomed – and is the duty of the media.

Yet, as we might expect, this acknowledgement of problems is contained within a framework of accountability through which the legitimacy of public dissent is to be evaluated. In the Prime Minister's discussion of an easing of the lockdown on 10 June, for instance, we encounter a restatement of this idea of a naturally freedom-loving citizenry as part of an argument which assumes that ultimate responsibility for managing those freedoms lies with the government:

I know that these changes are only incremental and that some of you, many of you, may be hoping and waiting for more. I also know that people will once again find anomalies or apparent anomalies in what people can and cannot do. And as I have said before, I'm afraid that is just inevitable when we are only able to give people a small amount of the freedoms that they usually enjoy (Johnson 2020m)

In this construction, then, the British Political Tradition is affirmed insofar as government actions are shown to be congruent with, and mindful of, a natural English inclination to freedom. Simultaneously that freedom is shown to be made possible by, and reliant on, its containment within boundaries set by the government. Government, in turn, has such authority in so far as it can show that it is steering the ship of state with caution assuming ultimate responsibility for the rights of the people.

Conclusion

Crises, as Colin Hay (1996) has argued, are always discursively constructed and mediated (also Jarvis 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic arrived at a time of increasing fragmentation of British state and society: a slow-moving legitimation crisis for political executives. The political and discursive challenge it posed to the government was to prevent the pandemic from being articulated as a crisis of the state *as such*. And this had to be done in a context in which demotic rhetorical appeals – populist appeals – have become increasingly the norm, often secured by their positioning against traditional government authority. Our principal finding, demonstrated above,

is that confronted with these unprecedented events, the UK government reached for a very familiar, and very traditional, discursive repertoire characteristic of what has been termed 'the British Political Tradition': a repertoire characterised by a 'government knows best' rhetoric in which epistemic and political authority are conjoined. Although expressions of sympathy for the people, and acknowledgements of public agency and freedoms, speak to a more contemporary, familiar, and much-discussed populist style of governance, these were all ultimately contained within executive efforts to reimagine and reassert a traditionally hierarchical understanding of the state/people relationship. Only the state can 'see' the numbers which reveal the truth of what is happening to the people. Only the state can protect the people's natural liberties from harm. The government, fundamentally, remains separate from, not of, the people.

This 'government knows best', business-as-usual, emphasis of the BPT has, unquestionably, come under threat in recent years (see Hall *et al* 2018), most recently through revelations and scandals including Partygate which contributed, ultimately, to the defenestration of Boris Johnson. Such scandals – although beyond the timeframe considered here – highlight the BPT's fundamental weakness by casting the government as cynical elite manipulating rules to their own advantage rather than custodian of the people's best interests. Our analysis of the tradition's resilience throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, however, indicates it is likely premature to use such legitimation crises to write its obituary, not least given the BPT's capacity to absorb competing rhetorics and styles of governance.

In making these arguments, the article's first – empirical – contribution was to detail findings from an original study of governmental framing of the state/people relationship across the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic. In so doing, we drew upon a corpus of over 77,000 words from sources including newspaper articles, speeches, press releases, parliamentary and other statements, news items, public letters, and announcements. Our second, analytical, contribution was to identify a typology of four constructions of the state/people relationship that emerged in this discourse. Although we have highlighted evolutions and changes within each, it is important to note the ease and simultaneity of their cohabitation in the period under analysis, given identifiable thematic (for instance in reflection on hardship, or on responsibility for combatting the virus), and political (for instance in articulations of hierarchy between government and citizens) contiguities between the four figures. Finally, and importantly, we found that while these

discursive constructions of the state/people relationship show some influence of a populist 'style', insofar as government at times aligns itself with 'the people' and demonstrates shared affective orientations, this style is contained by and incorporated within the longstanding BPT. Decision-making power is affirmed as belonging within the executive and as being held there legitimately insofar as it takes paternal responsibility for the nation, which should - naturally - behave as instructed. This is why people appear in this discourse primarily as possessors of individual feelings, or of rights articulated as natural sentiments rather than legal entitlements or political values. Our findings, therefore, demonstrate that the BPT – as an ideological conception of how British politics does and should work – remains powerful in these tumultuous times.

As a first analysis of elite articulations of the state/public relationship in this context, our analysis opens considerable opportunity for future research. Most obviously, comparative work exploring the workings of political discourse on COVID-19 in other states would shed important light on the distinctiveness or otherwise of British political discourse and governance. Analysis of the rhetoric of regional authorities, the formal political opposition, civil society organisations, protest groups and the like within the UK, moreover, would enable exploration of the contestation and adaptability of executive discourse in this period. Comparison with figurations of the state/people relationship in earlier public health crises from cholera to tuberculosis to HIV/AIDS would add vital historical perspective to our analysis. Analysis of figurations of the public in other policy areas – pensions, social care, education, and so forth – would enable exploration of the wider applicability of our framework and of the breadth of the BPT's continuing resonance. Finally, future engagement between discourse analysts and those working in fields such as crisis management and media studies would likely add important interdisciplinary insight to the findings presented above. Such work is, of course, beyond the scope of this intervention. Our hope, though, is that this article offers empirical, analytical and conceptual resources and inspiration for future work on the BPT and beyond.

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