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The fragmentation of public administration: Differentiated and decentered governance in the (dis)United Kingdom

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Abstract

This paper analyzes a UK polity that is characterized by fragmentation, differentiation, and decentered governance which is evident at multiple layers of public policy and administration. The development of devolved governments as well as ongoing debates around regional and local governance have created increasingly fragmented places. The intensification of policies associated with the new public management has fragmented the provision of public services. And the absence of a common approach to professional development has led to growing fragmentation of public service workers from different professions and sectors. We argue that these trends reflect many of the aspects of an advanced or late-stage new public governance. This is ripe territory for further research and demonstrates that UK public administration continues to have much to offer to international scholars. It also raises important questions about what forms of public administration might emerge next.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Once regarded as a model of stability, the United Kingdom has become increasingly fragmented in ways that are reflected in both the academic discipline and practice of public administration. The old verities redolent of "traditional public administration" have crumbled, as successive paradigms, including those of the new public management (NPM) and new public governance (NPG), have challenged longstanding assumptions about the UK state, and

introduced a new fluidity and flexibility to academic discourse as it grapples with the conceptualization of public administration in what is arguably now one of the most complex polities in the western world.

Traditional approaches to public administration have been upended by the shifting politics of the United Kingdom, variegated arrangements for territorial governance, a reconfiguration of public service provision, and the destabilizing of established professional norms and practices. The centrality of Westminster has been challenged by the introduction of devolved government. The traditional left–right spectrum has become blurred, distorted, and perhaps even transcended by devolution and the effects of austerity, Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic. The dominance of the two major UK-wide political parties was challenged in England by the emergence of the Brexit supporting UK Independence Party, which took votes from both Labor and the Conservatives. Meanwhile different parties have been dominant in each of the three devolved nations. There are signs of growing policy divergence across the United Kingdom and the pandemic raised the profile of political leaders in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and English regions increasing public awareness of their ability to pursue distinctive policy agendas. Service delivery has become more diverse and fragmented, with a dispersal of responsibilities for their provision to a complex mosaic of public, private, and voluntary/community agencies. Reflecting and reinforcing these powerful centrifugal forces, the corpus of public-sector professionals has itself been subject to fragmentation, particularly in respect of recruitment, pay, conditions, training, and career development.

As *Public Administration: An International Quarterly*, a journal that originated in the United Kingdom, celebrates its centenary it seems an appropriate juncture to take stock of recent developments in UK public administration theory and practice. This article traces key trends and examines their implications for public administration scholarship and practice. The first section briefly analyzes the historical significance of public administration and its study in the United Kingdom. The paper then describes and seeks to account for the increasing fragmentation of the governance of places, for public service provision and for the profession of public administration. Finally, it considers the significance of this complex, contested, and constantly evolving picture for research, both in terms of the likely future direction of UK public administration and the insights that it might contribute to advancing theory which has relevance beyond the United Kingdom.

2 | THE SIGNIFICANCE OF UK PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Historically, UK public administration has enjoyed a privileged position. Its relationship to imperialism and the legacy of colonialism is, of course, highly problematic, but its influence is undeniable. The principles underpinning the UK approach to public administration were exported across its Empire (Abernathy, 2000; De Gruchy, 2010) and still influence many postindependence states. The term "civil service" originates from the East India Company and much of contemporary professional public administration (including the organizational and institutional arrangements for public service delivery and the management and leadership of public-sector bodies) can be traced back to the Northcote-Trevelyan report of 1854 (O'Toole, 2006). Since the demise of the British Empire, the United Kingdom's influence globally has been largely exercised through "soft power." Though Brexit renders its future role uncertain (Gifkins et al., 2019), the United Kingdom made significant contributions as a postimperialist state in the second half of the twentieth century as a founding signatory of the European Convention on Human Rights (1950) (Simpson, 2004), a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and through its membership of NATO, the Council of Europe, the Commonwealth, the G7/G10/G20/D10 and, from 1973 to 2020, the European Union.

It has frequently been at the forefront of public administration innovations and offshoots, including the NPM and NPG subparadigms, that have been transported around the globe by the IMF and World Bank, as well as academics and management consultants (Pollitt, 2013). This enabled Anglo-American theories and practices of public administration to establish a global hegemony (Gulrajani & Moloney, 2012) and gave UK scholars a box seat from which to observe and contribute to many of the key developments in the discipline. They also benefitted from the United Kingdom's heritage of learned societies (notably the Royal Institute for Public Administration and Public

Administration Committee [PAC] of the Joint University Council [JUC]),[1] strong university departments, demand for training from central and local government, and the strength of the English-speaking publishing industry which is manifested in the number and status of journals birthed in the United Kingdom including, of course, this one. The centenary of *Public Administration: An International Quarterly* marks a timely moment to consider the current status of UK public administration given its roots as the journal of the *Royal Institute of Public Administration* (RIPA) and follows the centenary (in 2018) of the JUC, which is the United Kingdom learned society for public administration and social work (Elliott, 2018). While the RIPA no longer exists, the JUC remains a significant presence and, through its PAC, acts as the voice for UK universities that teach and/or research public administration. In this article, we evaluate and highlight the continuing and potential future value and relevance of UK public administration scholarship and practice to an international audience.

Notwithstanding the historic dominance of UK public administration, some scholars have lamented what they see as the decline of the discipline (Hood, 2011; Rhodes, 1996), particularly in relation to teaching (Chandler, 1991; Elcock, 1991; Greenwood, 1999; Jones, 2012; Miller, 2012). They attribute this to a wide range of causes including the absence of public administration lessons in schools, a bewildering array of differently titled university courses and lack of program accreditation (Jones, 2012); the dominance of business schools (Elcock, 2004; Liddle, 2017); the marketization of UK higher education; a perception that public service is no longer offers attractive careers (Miller, 2012); and UK Government's alleged hostility toward academia, the civil service, and public sector (Carmichael, 2004; Elcock, 2004). These anxieties mirror concerns about whether the United Kingdom remains a credible "great power" (Morris, 2011) and the capacity and capability of the civil service, which has spawned a succession of attempts at "modernization" through managerial and structural changes, agencification, contractualization, consumerism, and new accountability arrangements (Pyper & Burnham, 2011). Reforms have achieved only incremental change (Bovaird & Russell, 2007) and failed to allay concerns about the United Kingdom's ability to respond effectively to major societal challenges (Figueira & Martill, 2020; Richardson & Rittberger, 2020), which have been heightened by the twin challenges of Brexit (Beech, 2020; Dee & Smith, 2017; Gifkins et al., 2019; Jennings & Lodge, 2019; Oliver, 2017) and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite these challenges, there is much to gain from continued study of the UK system. In particular, the UK state has shown significant resilience and flexibility in response to social changes and constitutional debates. The current state of UK public administration is one that presents complex and multilayered forms of fragmentation which represent a form of NPG that is marked by increasingly fragmented places, fragmented providers, and fragmented professionals.

3 | FRAGMENTED PLACES

It has been argued that, despite the illusion of stability, permanence, and central control, fragmentation, including differentiation and decentralization, has been a feature of the UK "unitary" state throughout the last century (Rhodes et al., 2003). The differentiated policy model which Rhodes argued was a replacement for the Whitehall and Westminster model, was ground breaking though not without its critics. For Marsh (2008) and Marsh et al. (2001, 2003), Rhodes had overemphasized the diffuse nature of network power in the United Kingdom, and the extent of "hollowing out" of the state. They concluded that the state continued to be more structurally unequal, closed and elitist than ever. Yet while the core executive and Whitehall Departments can be seen to have retained much power, in a persistently traditional and hierarchical UK policy making system, it has been increasingly challenged and tested, particularly as a consequence of devolution.

The asymmetrical and incremental model of devolution adopted in the first two decades of the current century has heightened fragmentation and the United Kingdom now has four national governments led by five different political parties each of which has distinctive political values and ambitions as well as varying powers and responsibilities (see Table 1). While these governments continue to adhere to common organizational and structural features of

TABLE 1 Comparison of key elements of the political and policy systems across the United Kingdom

	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
Regional territorial arrangements	Government Offices of the Regions, plus City Regions and Greater London Authority	Scottish devolution	Welsh devolution	Northern Ireland devolution
Legislative arrangements at "national" level	UK Parliament	Scottish Parliament	National Assembly for Wales	Northern Ireland Assembly
Election system	First-past-the-post	Additional Member System	Additional Member System	Single Transferable Vote
Executive	UK Government	Scottish Government	Welsh Government	Northern Ireland Executive
Lead minister	Prime Minister	First Minister	First Minister	First Minister and Deputy First Minister
Size of Cabinet	22 Cabinet Ministers	9 Cabinet Secretaries	9 Cabinet Ministers	10 Executive Ministers
Civil Service	UKCS	UKCS	UKCS	NICS (with UKCS covering NIO and UK departments)
Size of civil service	484,880 (Headcount)	22,700 (Headcount)	5812 (Headcount)	23,534 (Headcount)
Government structure	Government departments	Directorates	Directorates	Government departments
Local Government system	Mix of unitary and two-tier, plus city regions, combined authorities and elected mayors.	Unitary	Unitary	Unitary
Number of local authorities	343	32	22	11
Number of elected councillors	c.20,000	1227	1254	462
Local government election system	First-past-the-post (except certain Mayoral positions and for Police and Crime Commissioners which use Supplementary Vote)	Single Transferable Vote	First-past-the-post (except certain Mayoral positions and for Police and Crime Commissioners which use Supplementary Vote)	Single Transferable Vote
Local government associations	LGA	COSLA	WLGA	NILGA

Source: Data compiled from a variety of sources including Cabinet Office (2021), Scottish Government (2021), Welsh Government (2021), NISRA (2021), LGIU (2021a), LGIU (2021b), Welsh Government (2019), and NILGA (2019).

public administration, devolution has created space for significant and increasing policy divergence between the four nations of the United Kingdom (Andrews & Martin, 2010).

Even in the early stages of devolution (1999–2007), when the Labor Party held power in Westminster, Edinburgh, and Cardiff, there were signs that administrative structures, patterns, and processes had begun to evolve and diverge. In the last 15 years, deviation from the Whitehall model has accelerated. Labor has remained dominant in Wales, but lost control of the UK Government (in 2010) and saw its taken-for-granted hegemony in Scotland shattered by the Scottish National Party (SNP) (in 2007). Differences in the powers of the devolved institutions reflect pre-existing arrangements in each of the nations. The existence of a separate Scottish Office with extensive administrative devolution since 1885 meant that the Scottish Executive established in 1999 (renamed "Scottish Government" by the Scotland Act 2012) acquired significantly greater powers than the Welsh Assembly Government. The Scotland Acts of 2012 and 2016 transferred additional responsibilities including a degree of control over taxation and social security. Departing from its Whitehall counterpart in several key respects, the Scottish model represents a form of strategic state (Elliott, 2020) which has, for example, replaced a policy focused approach with one that is outcomes-based (French & Mollinger-Sahba, 2021).

Prior to devolution, the Welsh Office, established in 1964, was both younger and less powerful than its Scottish counterpart, and the Welsh Assembly created in 1999 had no independent executive powers in law until 2007 and was not given primary legislative capacity for a further 4 years. Its growing power was underscored when it was renamed Senedd Cymru (the Welsh Parliament) in 2020.

Northern Ireland has been governed as a "place apart" (to quote Rose, 1971) since the partition of the island of Ireland a century ago. Five decades of devolution gave way to "Direct Rule" via the Northern Ireland Office in 1972, which was in turn superseded by what has been styled "devolution-plus" with an Assembly and Executive from 1999 (Carmichael, 1999; Knox & Carmichael, 2005) and periodic interruptions when the parties have been unable to form a government and Northern Ireland has been governed by ministers working to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, most recently from 2017 to 2020.

Northern Ireland has always had a separate civil service (Carmichael, 1996). Since devolution, Scottish and Welsh Government civil servants work at the direction of Scottish and Welsh ministers but remain part of the UK Civil Service. Their permanent secretaries are members of the management group of the Civil Service, which is answerable to the UK Cabinet Secretary, for their professional conduct. However, there are more civil servants based in Scotland and Wales who work for the UK Government departments (on nondevolved matters) than are employed by the devolved administrations. Five UK Secretaries of State have more civil servants at their disposal than any of the First Ministers of the devolved nations, and the Northern Ireland civil service employs 23,534 staff compared with 22,700 in the Scottish Government and 5812 in the Welsh Government (see Table 1).

The decision to leave the EU heralds a period of additional uncertainty and unpredictability as a complex system of multilevel governance forged over 47 years is dismantled and the UK Government wrestles with devolved governments for control over powers, functions and finances that are "repatriated" from the EU.[2] Meanwhile, fragmentation is being further fuelled by increasingly variegated patterns of local government within each of the four nations of the United Kingdom, producing a growing sense of a differentiated policy as first identified more than 30 years ago (Rhodes, 1988) and added to by many others since (Bevir, 2020; Bevir & Rhodes, 1998; Connolly & Van Der Zwet, 2021; Marsh, 2008; Marsh, 2011; McMillan & Massey, 2001; Pyper, 2015; Pyper, 2020; Rhodes, 1997).

At the dawning of devolution there were concerns that the new governments in Scotland and Wales would undermine local authorities (Cole, 2006) in the way that regional governments in Spain and Belgium had been "centralizers of local government functions and finances" (Jeffery, 2006, 59). In practice, devolution initially "brought little change in the functions of local government" in the United Kingdom (Birrell, 2009, 23), although, more recently there have been examples of centralization including the replacement of a regionally structured police service by Police Scotland in 2013 and the proposed transfer of some social care from Scottish local authorities to a new National Care Service.

The early devolved governments in Scotland and Wales, given their limited policy capacity and experience, saw little benefit in conflict with local authorities which accounted for over a third of devolved national expenditure. In Wales, where there had been only a wafer-thin majority in favor of devolution, ministers also felt they owed a debt to party colleagues in local government whose campaigning had helped secure the result. Central-local relations were therefore initially more harmonious than in England where memories of the way in which UK Government had abolished the metropolitan counties in 1986, hypothecated funding and forcibly replaced two-tier local government with all-purpose unitary authorities throughout much of the country (as well as in pre-devolution Scotland and Wales)[3] remained fresh. Within a decade though, the "central-local partnership" in Wales came under strain due to pressures on funding, ministerial interventions in "failing" local authorities, and repeated calls to reduce the number of local authorities. In Scotland devolution has not significantly changed the nature and challenges facing local government, but there is a sense that devolution has weakened the position of local government in the Scottish polity (McGarvey, 2019) and ongoing austerity politics have adversely affected the working lives of local government staff (Gibb et al., 2020). Reflecting different historical circumstances and a more fragile devolution settlement, local government in Northern Ireland has a less intense relationship with the Executive and its range of powers and responsibilities remain relatively underdeveloped.

In England, rapid de-industrialization in the 1990s was accompanied by a degree of decentralization with a new emphasis on regional planning and the establishment of regional government offices and regional development agencies (Pike et al., 2018). More than three quarters of civil service jobs were outside London, but a disproportionate share of higher grades remained in Westminster. The subsequent dismantling of regional development agencies (Pike et al., 2018) and other nondepartmental public bodies (Flinders & Skelcher, 2012) sent regionalization into reverse. However, the current UK Government has decentralized a limited number of activities to the Midlands and North-East and plans to move thousands of other civil servants out of the capital, though the numbers of personnel and functions involved are small in comparison to the regional architecture of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The New Labor Government (1997–2010) created a Social Exclusion Neighborhood Renewal programme and National Performance Framework and deployed civil servants to promote local regeneration. The Coalition Government (2010–2015) abolished this in favor of an attempt to manage "places" across England by strengthening local leadership including a Mayoral model which owes much to the United States. This led to the evolution of a complex system of city governance (Fenwick & Elcock, 2014; Liddle, 2010) with business-driven local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) and Combined Authorities (CAs) (groupings of neighboring local authorities). Local government activities focusing on economic development and growth were slimmed down, abolished or in many cases absorbed into the activities of LEPs. More recently, a short-lived National Industrial Strategy and associated Local Industrial Strategies have been succeeded by the hitherto ill-defined "Leveling Up" (Connolly et al., 2021) and "Build Back Better" agendas.

4 | FRAGMENTED PROVIDERS

The United Kingdom was an early and enthusiastic adopter of two of the most influential paradigms in contemporary public administration scholarship—the NPM (Hood, 1991; Pollitt, 1995) with its emphasis on managerial and structural reforms, and NPG which envisages public managers working collaboratively with each other and citizens to coproduce, codesign, and codeliver public services and address economic and social challenges (Benington & Moore, 2010; Bovaird, 2004; Osborne, 2010; Rhodes, 1997) and variants on this theme such as the concept of "public value governance" (Bryson et al., 2014).

The manifestations of the NPM and NPG that have emerged in the United Kingdom over the last 40 years can be seen as specific instances of neoliberalism. They signal a decisive rejection of the postwar welfare state in favor of an attempt to create a minimalist state. The Thatcher governments (1979–1990), for example, shrank the state through privatization. The Cameron governments (2010–2016) represent a different and distinctive tweak of the

neoliberal agenda which involved the imposition of austerity on public services in tandem with a massive expansion of the franchise state (Rhodes, 2017). Sandwiched between these Conservative administrations, the "New Labor" governments led by Blair (1997–2007) sought to reform the state by instilling greater competition among schools and hospitals as well as between public- and private-sector providers. Many of these policies inspired by the NPM exacerbated the inherently disaggregated system of public administration in the United Kingdom (Table 1), while attempts to encourage coordination through new forms of governance rooted in collaboration and coproduction proved insufficient to produce the more "joined up," cost-effective services that governments claimed would be the result.

Successive UK Governments (though not the devolved administrations) argued that, in absence of market forces, public services are inevitably wasteful and unresponsive to citizens' needs. The Conservative UK Governments (1979–1997) believed the remedy was a range of NPM-inspired reforms including privatization, outsourcing, and private-sector management practices. State-run industries were transferred into private ownership (Marsh, 1991). More than half of civil servants were transferred to new semiautonomous executive agencies (Butcher, 1995; Carter & Greer, 1993). Two million local authority homes were sold to tenants (Jones & Murie, 2008). Local government and health services were required by law to expose services to compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) (Walsh, 1995; Walsh et al., 1997). A newly created audit commission conducted value-for-money audits and published comparative performance data (McSweeney, 1988). State-funded regeneration projects were handed over to public–private partnerships, and quangos led by ministerial appointees oversaw public services that had previously reported to local politicians (Payne & Skelcher, 1997).

The subsequent Labor (1997–2010), Coalition (2010–2015), and Conservative (2015–present) UK Governments have consolidated and built on this hollowing out of the central and local state (Rhodes 1994). The Labor government (1997–2010) obliged local authorities, the police, and fire services to market test services under its "Best Value" regime (Martin, 2000). Partly as a result of this, and partly because of deep budget cuts in public spending in the decade of austerity overseen by Coalition and Conservative governments from 2010 onwards, large out-sourcing firms strengthened their grip on the delivery of key local services and major government projects. Beefed up inspectorates were tasked with naming and shaming underperforming hospitals and schools (Downe & Martin, 2007), and ministers relied on the private finance initiative (PFI) and public–private partnerships to fund investment in major infrastructure projects.

Studies of the impacts of these policies present a mixed picture. There is evidence that outsourcing reduced costs, but that contractor–client splits had a negative impact on service quality and agility (Elkomy et al., 2019). The preoccupation with efficiency has also led to a limited form of rationality and minimized contingency planning, the results of which were ruthlessly exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic as lean public services struggled to respond to spikes in demand. For example, UK hospitals operate at higher capacity than many of their European counterparts and had to cancel nonemergency procedures during the first year of the pandemic, leading to a huge backlog of operations. There is also evidence that marketization of public services led to a deterioration in staffing levels, pay and conditions, and that cost savings were often offset by the transaction costs involved in contract specification, tendering, monitoring, and compliance processes (Boyne, 1998; Entwistle & Martin, 2005).

Other elements of the United Kingdom's deployment of NPM policies have proved similarly double-edged. External inspections highlight underperformance but do not enable services to improve. Top-down targets reduced hospital waiting times and increased educational attainment (Bevan & Wilson, 2013; Burgess et al., 2013) but were resented by health workers and teachers and proved prone to gaming which has unintended adverse effects (Bevan & Hood, 2006). The PFI provided much needed investment in schools, hospital buildings, and transport infrastructure but represented poor value-for-money for the taxpayer (PACAC, 2018). High-profile failures in the private sector, such as the collapse of the construction giant Carillion in 2018, the failed privatization of the probation service (National Audit Office, 2017a), the Grenfell Tower tragedy, and failures in the Covid-19 test and trace service in England, have all demonstrated how outsourcing is no guarantee of effective public services.

NPM reforms have also exemplified and exacerbated the disaggregation and fragmentation of UK public administration. The top-down imposition of CCT, best value, performance targets, and external inspections, the reliance on private finance and hypothecated funding, and the proliferation of unelected quangos reflect a strong centralizing tendency in the UK public administration. Few senior civil servants have worked in local government and UK ministers often lament the fact that the policy "levers" available to them seem to have so little effect "on the ground." Meanwhile professionals working on the "frontline" complain that national policies seem blind to the delivery challenges and funding constraints they face. NPM reforms have also made it more difficult for local public services to work together to tackle deep-seated economic and social challenges ("wicked issues") which cut across organizational and geographical boundaries. Marketization of services creates a "patchwork quilt" of providers from the private, public, and voluntary sectors blurring lines of accountability. Providers come and go as contracts exchange hands, hindering long-term planning and making it difficult to establish the trust that is needed to secure "joined up" working.

The UK Government's responses to these challenges have reflected many of the structures and practices described in the literature on NPG. The task of stitching together the disaggregated and shifting patterns of local service provision has fallen to multiactor local and regional partnerships charged with coproducing services through collaboration with each other and local communities. However, these partnerships have lacked the funding and formal authority needed to counteract the strong centrifugal forces fostered by existing professional and departmental "silos" which dominate central and local government and the health service.

The UK Government's Local Government Act 2000 introduced local strategic partnerships (LSPs) in England to bring together local government, health, the police, and a range of other service providers in an attempt to establish a common vision for an area and encourage more coordinated delivery of local services. LSPs took responsibility for developing local area agreements with UK Government departments, which specified outcome targets linked to a reward grant if they were achieved. However, LSPs failed to exert significant influence over mainstream public services (Geddes et al., 2007) and were abolished by the Coalition Government in 2010 in favor of business-driven growth agenda that emphasized "localism" and an enhanced role for social and community enterprises in the delivery of local services.

There were short-lived experiments with combined inspections of all local public services in a locality (known as comprehensive area assessments) (Nutley et al., 2012) and pooled budgets designed to empower local partnership (known as the "Total Place" initiative). However, both were jettisoned by the Coalition Government in 2010/2011. The recent devolution of some budgets to combined authorities offers a renewed attempt to encourage coordinated planning and delivery of services in large city regions in England. For example, the West Midlands Combined Authority has responsibility for promoting employability and skills, housing, transport, land use, the police, fire service, and mental health, while its counterpart in Greater Manchester now has responsibility for approximately 60% of the National Health Service (NHS) and social care budget. However, the UK Government retains control of many of the key funding streams, including welfare payments, and seems intent on dictating how localities will deploy the additional resources which it has promised to provide in place of EU programs.

The three other nations of the United Kingdom have placed collaboration, rather than competition, at the heart of public service delivery. The Scottish Government's Christie Commission specified collaboration as a core organizing principle (Christie, 2011) and the Welsh Government has emphasized the importance of "one public service" and placed a statutory duty on public bodies to collaborate. Yet despite their commitment to "joined up" working, local services in the devolved nations have encountered many of the same obstacles as their English counterparts. Scotland and Northern Ireland's Community Planning Partnerships had had only limited success (Audit Scotland, 2018), and the 2015 Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act has, arguably, further fragmented services (Elliott et al., 2019). The Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 created regional partnership boards to coordinate the delivery of health and care services while the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which requires public services boards (PSBs) to produce local well-being assessments and well-being plans, has been hailed as a

piece of "world leading" legislation (Nesom & MacKillop, 2021). However, in practice PSBs have made limited progress.

Perhaps, the most graphic illustration of the obstacles to joined up working has been the failure in all four nations to integrate health and social care (National Audit Office, 2017b) which has disastrous consequences for patients. Prepandemic it led to delayed transfers of care (with patients who no longer required treatment remaining in hospital because of a lack of social care in the community). At the height of the first wave of Covid-19 infections, it proved fatal as hospitals discharged patients into care homes without prior testing, resulting in the virus being passed on to other elderly, vulnerable residents thousands of whom died.

In addition to demonstrating the ineffectiveness of partnerships in overcoming deeply embedded professional and organizational "silos," the multiple overlapping partnership structures that the United Kingdom has created to respond to the challenges of fragmentation highlight some of the problematic features of the NPG. For example, Wales, a country with a population of just three million, currently has more than 30 housing associations, 22 local authorities, 19 public services boards, 7 regional partnership boards, 4 school improvement consortia, and 3 regional skills partnerships. Given that outcomes for citizens depend on the effective coordination between health, housing, education, employment, and other services, these multiple partnerships, each with their own distinct remits and different spatial "footprints," makes little sense. Rather than enabling more "joined up" services, all too often it produces multiple unconnected plans, swallowing up precious senior staff time which can be ill-afforded by cash-strapped organizations, and leading to complaints of "partnership fatigue" (Martin & Guarneros-Meza, 2013; OECD, 2020).

5 | FRAGMENTED PROFESSIONS

Like its places and public services, "the profession" of public administration in the United Kingdom has also seen significant fragmentation in recent decades. It would be wrong to exaggerate the cohesiveness of public administration systems and personnel in other western polities, particularly in view of the common impacts of the decentralization associated with the NPM. However, in the UK administrative traditions, historical developments, the largely uncodified and constantly evolving constitution, and successive modernization drives, have combined to produce a distinctly decentralized and disaggregated system of public administration. This manifests itself both in the policy sphere, where public administrators largely lead distinct, separate existences, and identities across central government (civil servants), local authorities (local government officers), the NHS, and public services more broadly, and by geographical entities (including devolved polities and English regions) (Table 1). Despite the increasingly fragmented nature of place and providers it has been found that notions of professional identity remain important (Clifford, 2020). But individual professions (such as local authority planners) themselves reflect the variegated and disaggregated nature of the state. This disaggregation extends to recruitment, training and development, and different approaches to policy analysis. Even in small public policy communities of Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales a holistic approach to public administration has remained elusive.

UK level data from Office for National Statistics (2020) help to illustrate this. At the end of 2020, the official UK "public administration" category accounted for 1.1 million employees but when those working in the NHS, police, and education are added there were 5.6 million public-sector employees (17.3% of UK employment as a whole). 3.4 million came under "central government" (including 1.8 million in the NHS and 473,000 in the Home Civil Service) and 2.0 million under "local government" (including the police in England and Wales). Public-sector employment of 80.4% was located in England, 10.2% in Scotland, 5.5% in Wales, and 3.8% in Northern Ireland.

The breakdown in Scotland serves to illustrate the disaggregated nature of public administration. Here, the headcount figures are divided, firstly between "devolved" and "reserved" categories, with the former accounting for over 512,000 and the latter over 53,000 employees. The reserved category includes Scotland-based civil servants working for UK Government departments, other UK public-sector workers, and the armed forces (Scottish Government, 2020). Within the "devolved" category, 49.4% of employees work for local authorities, 33.5% for the

NHS, 5.5% for the police and fire services, 4.2% for the civil service based within the Scottish Government, 2.7% for the further education sector, and 1.6% for public corporations. Even in this relatively small nation, aside from some limited efforts in health and social care (Elliott et al., 2020), there has been no serious attempt to adopt a more cohesive structural approach to public administration, via, for example, the creation of a combined cadre of public servants spanning the civil service, local government, and the health service (see Connolly & Pyper, 2020a).

There have been periodic attempts to counteract this centrifugal tendency, particularly in the fields of training and development. The Royal Institute for Public Administration (RIPA) was based upon individual membership and until it ceased to operate in 1992 after 70 years due to financial difficulties offered study programs, training courses, lectures and an interface between academia and public administration practice in central government, local authorities and the health service (Chapman, 1993). Predating the RIPA, the JUC, and its PAC sought via institutional memberships to influence government developments in public and social administration policy and practice, and coordinate the disparate higher education training programs with the requirements of central and local government (Chapman, 2007). A plethora of formally certified and informal, noncertified programs of study emerged across the higher education landscape, including "Higher National" certificates and diplomas (often delivered to public administrators via day-release arrangements), focused short-course professional development initiatives, full degree courses and, more recently, degree apprenticeships. Most of these developments have been based on localized initiatives by higher education institutions, however, and formal coordination of provision between these bodies, the JUC/PAC and government (at all levels) was, and remains, limited.

Alongside these efforts, each of the separate elements of the UK public administration system ran their own recruitment and career development schemes and took their own initiatives in establishing coordinating bodies for the advancement of training and development. In the health service, the historic associations for hospital administrators and officers evolved into the Institute of Health Service Administrators ("Managers" from 1984), which in turn became the Institute of Healthcare Management and then (in 2021) the Institute of Health and Social Care Management, all under the umbrella of the Royal Society of Public Health. The uniformed public services (including police, fire, and rescue) have distinct arrangements for recruitment and career development such as the College of Policing (established in 2010) for the police in England and Wales, and Scottish Police College in Scotland. For local authority staff, each of the four nations of the United Kingdom has their own training and development offering and routes. At various times, the local government sector has provided graduate trainee programs, leadership development and (in England and Wales) a Leadership Academy for local politicians. For several years, the United Kingdom, Scottish, and Welsh Governments funded dedicated improvement and development agencies for local government (the IDeA, the Scottish Improvement Agency, and Syniad). More recently training and development programs have been cut back and absorbed into the (English) Local Government Association, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, and Welsh Local Government Association.

Separate recruitment, career pathways, training, and cultures—between professions and across different parts of the United Kingdom—reinforce "silos" and exacerbate attempts to coordinate service delivery. There is no single guiding force, no national college of public administration to oversee and coordinate the training and development of public service cadres whose professional challenges have so much in common.

Arguably, the civil service, with its largely unified approach to recruitment, has come closest to securing a corporate approach to professional development issues. Following the Fulton Committee's recommendation that training and development should be modernized (Fulton, 1968), a Civil Service College was established in 1970. However, a failure of sustained political commitment, and of leadership from the civil service itself, meant that it failed to carve a role equivalent to the French École Nationale d'Administration (ENA) (Burnham & Pyper, 2008, 203–204; Duggett, 2001, 95; Fry, 1993; Kellner & Crowther-Hunt, 1980; Pyper, 1995). As Connolly and Pyper (2020b) have argued, there has been growing tension between the requirement for unified professional development in policy analysis and strategic management, and enhanced specialized training within civil service staff groupings and departments. From the 1980s onwards, facing increasing pressures to meet financial and performance targets, the Civil Service College began charging government departments for its services, and had to compete in the market for work against external consultancies. In 1999, it lost its distinct identity when it was merged into the Centre for

Management and Policy Studies in the Cabinet Office which was in turn subsumed within a new National School of Government (NSG) in 2005 charged with implementing a "Professional Skills for Government" program (see Burnham & Pyper, 2008, 204; Walker, 2011). The NSG was closed in 2012, leaving the United Kingdom without an institution focused on the learning and development of civil servants—"the odd one out, compared with countries such as Australia, Canada, Germany, France, or New Zealand" (PACAC, 2019a, 11).

Political leaders in Wales have given strong support to the concept of a more cohesive and coordinated public service (see Prosser, 2003) espoused by Rhodri Morgan as First Minister (2000–2009) and his special adviser Mark Drakeford, who is now First Minister. This spawned a number of training and development initiatives, including the establishment of Academi Wales, as a coordinating mechanism for leadership and training developments across the public administration system, and a Master's Graduate Programme for "civil and public servants" (see Farrell & Hicks, 2020). However, the different parts of the public service remain structurally separate, and Wales continues to struggle to overcome the "silo working" that is a feature of all four nations of the United Kingdom.

Following the demise of the NSG, the commissioning of civil service learning (CSL) and development was delegated to a new entity, CSL run by private-sector consultancies (initially Capita, then KPMG). The aim was to minimize in-house provision and maximize the use of external providers, an approach which epitomizes the disaggregation of a core strategic function: the learning, training, and professional development of senior civil servants within the system of public administration. As in-house provision waned, the process of fragmentation, apparent through the long decline of the CSC and the limited roles and responsibilities assigned to its successors, led UK Government departments and agencies to develop their own, ad hoc, arrangements with private-sector consultancies, third-sector bodies including the Institute for Government, and universities. While this had some positive impacts, for example through the development of specialized expertise within emerging units and "academies" (including, from 2017, a Civil Service Leadership Academy for senior officials) throughout the civil service (see Connolly & Pyper, 2020b), gaps in provision remained as separate initiatives emerged in an uncoordinated fashion, with few formal linkages. In 2021, a new operational delivery profession was established within the civil service with the specific responsibility for training senior officials in delivery as opposed to policy. Arguably, the impact of all of this on civil servants' learning has been to engender a more silo-based approach, with opportunities for cross-organizational lessons and shared experiences minimized.

The House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee has been sharply critical of this complex, fragmented, and disaggregated morass. It has recommended a fresh, corporate, strategic, and holistic approach which would allow an expanded and refocused version of the Civil Service Leadership Academy to "… inform co-ordination of provision across Whitehall, eliminate duplication, fill the gaps in provision and develop synergies with the separate provision of departments, professions, and academies" (PACAC, 2019a, 28). The Committee argued that the expanded body should work in conjunction with the National Leadership Centre (NLC), which was established in 2018 to focus on broader public service leadership learning and development. However, while committing itself to the development of the NLC, the UK Government made clear that it considers CSL and development to be the responsibility of individual departments and agencies (PACAC, 2019b). The NLC made only faltering progress in establishing its "flagship program" (involving around 100 senior public service leaders each year) "network of peers," and "research and evaluation hub," before its activities were disrupted by the pandemic.

6 | THE IMPACT OF FRAGMENTATION—THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This article has analyzed the complexities of a decentralized and devolved UK state. It confirms the continued salience and significance of theories of NPM and NPG as ways of both examining and accounting for key developments in public administration. These frameworks have allowed us to describe the causes and consequences of fragmentation in the United Kingdom and to begin to identify some key explanatory variables. We conclude that current theories can be deployed to study the disaggregation, complexity, fragmentation which we find across multiple layers of

the UK state. The theoretical and conceptual lenses, through which the development and current status of public administration might be viewed, are many, varied, and extensive. Our central argument is that public administration in the United Kingdom can be understood with reference to core themes of disaggregation and fragmentation, and, in this context, the ideas associated with the differentiated polity thesis are particularly apposite and useful.

There have always been tensions and paradoxes in the concept of the UK state. It is after all an historical construct formed out of different countries, principalities, and provinces, each with their own histories, cultures, and even legal systems. Particularly in the case of Scotland and England, these differences have persisted over time and have been exacerbated by the devolution process. It is not unique in this respect, of course. However, with a land mass equivalent to New Zealand or the US state of Michigan and a population equivalent to France, the governance complexity and degree of differentiation in the United Kingdom does appear disproportionate and to be increasing.

Another striking feature of the United Kingdom, which means that it perhaps offers valuable lessons for other contexts and for broader theory, is the pace and scale of change and innovation in public administration. Central and local government has been subjected to continual "experimentation" with changes in structure, form and functions. This "hyper-activity" has not been good for staff morale and is perhaps counterproductive for those citizens who rely most on public services. But it does at least provide an interesting and important "testbed" from which scholars can learn, and 20 years of devolution means that it now offers the opportunity for comparing public administration across four nations which share very similar institutions, cultures, and population characteristics but have increasingly divergent political cultures and approaches to public service reform.

The United Kingdom's economic power and geopolitical significance have diminished but our contention is that as a trailblazer of a multitude of often overlapping and contradictory public service reforms it offers practical insights into how—and how not to—govern and that researching these reforms and their consequences can help to advance theories of public administration, management, and governance. Public administration scholarship in the United Kingdom remains vibrant, and the fragmented, differentiated, decentered, disaggregated, and "messy" reality of its system merits attention, because it demonstrates the continuing relevance and importance of public administration as an overarching, "umbrella" concept, within which the successive competing and overlapping theories, such as NPM, NPG, and public value, can be deployed as insightful analytical foci. Ongoing debates, such as that offered by decentered theory, suggest a stateless state and offer new ways to explore narratives, rationalities, and resistance (Bevir, 2020). For international scholars and public administration practitioners, the United Kingdom offers the attractions of a kind of "natural laboratory" featuring multilevel governance, networks, and complex interdependencies. In this context, we believe that there is some justification in arguing in favor of a revisionist perspective, which restates the significance of the public administration paradigm in one of its traditional homes, despite the apparent triumph of its "successors" (NPM, NPG, etc.). We argue that these "successor" concepts should be more appropriately viewed as useful and important adjuncts, located within the broad umbrella spans of the public administration paradigm, and adding to the latter's accommodation of real world systemic fragmentation, disaggregation, and differentiation.

The way in which many of the innovations in public administration theory have been birthed in the United Kingdom and transported across the world are a testament to the ongoing significance of UK scholarship in the field. But what we believe are potentially valuable lessons learnt from the long period of experimentation need to be compared with equally important insights from other contexts, particularly non-western countries where alternative practices of public administration hold sway and other paradigms may be needed. Looking to the future our belief is that while UK public administration scholars have until now been very influential in examining new trends in service delivery, their future contribution to intellectual debates may need to be more firmly located in multisectoral research arenas. There is, we suggest, a need to analyze gaps between statutory and formal legislative jurisdictions and informal governance to explain just how social and public value is added to service delivery from a multitude of state and nonstate actors. And while there is much that can be gained from existing theories and constructs, there remain some unanswered questions which offer a rich set of agendas for future research. Is the asymmetric devolution settlement in the United Kingdom sustainable and what is its long-term significance for public administration? Will a point be reached where the sheer complexity of the fragmented public administration system across and

within the component parts of the United Kingdom becomes a barrier to the efficient and effective delivery of public services and forces a major rethink around organizational and institutional reform? What role does individual personality and agency play? What is the role of politics? How can we engage with different conceptions of power to understand these developments?

So many of the United Kingdom's reforms have taken place without any formal evaluation systems, structures, or practices and this has meant that valuable learning is being lost. Because of this, we still cannot say with any degree of confidence precisely what impact of many the United Kingdom's public administration "experiments" has been. What we can say is with some certainty is that public administration scholarship, and *Public Administration: An International Quarterly*, will continue to play a vital role in advancing theoretical understandings building on UK practice that continues to have an international relevance and appeal.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This article is based solely upon analysis of published secondary data.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The history of the RIPA has been documented extensively (Chapman, 1993; Shelley, 1993; Rhodes, 1995, Rhodes, 1996, Rhodes et al., 1995) and an historical overview of the associated academic journal, *Public Administration: An International Quarterly*, has been developed by Rhodes (2011). Chapman (2007) provides a history of the Public Administration Committee of the Joint University Council and its associated journal, *Public Policy and Administration*. There are also several commentaries on British public administration which explore aspects of the RIPA, PAC, and NSG (see, e.g., Talbot, 2020).

[2] In a formal sense, the UK government has maintained that the powers currently vested with the devolved administrations will remain, with the prospect of additional powers repatriated from Brussels being ascribed in due course. In contrast, the devolved governments contend that any such powers should have been devolved immediately.

[3] In Scotland, from 1996, the 9 regions and 53 districts were replaced with 32 single tier authorities. In Wales, the 8 counties and 37 districts were concurrently replaced with a new structure of 22 single tier authorities.

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