

# Britain's 'favoured response' to crises: a critical review of existing literature on public inquiries

Critch, Nathan

DOI:

[10.1057/s41293-023-00238-x](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-023-00238-x)

License:

Creative Commons: Attribution (CC BY)

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Critch, N 2023, 'Britain's 'favoured response' to crises: a critical review of existing literature on public inquiries', *British Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-023-00238-x>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

## General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

## Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.



# Britain's 'favoured response' to crises: a critical review of existing literature on public inquiries

Nathan Critch<sup>1</sup>

Accepted: 25 July 2023  
© The Author(s) 2023

## Abstract

Public inquiries are a crucial part of British governance but academic reflections on them are fragmented, and existing scholarship is underappreciated within wider debates. In this review, I counteract this underappreciation and fragmentation by comprehensively organizing and critiquing this literature for the first time. I conceptualize inquiries literature as organized around the question of inquiry functionality, with inquiries considered either to provide accountability, or to serve the interests of the state. I then explore three limitations within this literature: (1) it often lacks a clear definition of the public inquiry; (2) both views of inquiry functionality are somewhat unconvincing (the first view takes inquiries at face value, while the latter adopts a problematic conception of state power); (3) the literature has methodological limitations which hamper attempts to generalize effectively about inquiries. This suggests that new research on inquiries should be clear in its definitional and sampling choices, engage with contemporary theoretical literature on the (British) state in order to conceptualize inquiry functionality more convincingly, and engage with primary data and novel methodological approaches over light single-case studies in order to establish a solid evidential basis on which to make general claims.

**Keywords** Public inquiries · Crisis management · Policy learning · British democracy · Meta-governance · Statecraft · Case study research

## Introduction

In the British system of parliamentary democracy, it is assumed that Parliament delivers accountability by acting as the “Grand Inquest of the Nation”, ‘undertaking the very difficult ... task of watching our Ministers or reprehending them, of blaming and calling them daily to account’ (Thomas 1971, p. 14). This speaks to a strong tradition of inquiry in Britain, whereby the executive is held in check

---

✉ Nathan Critch  
NXC576@student.bham.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK



through questioning and various processes of “inquiry”, with Parliament at their centre (Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) 2005, pp. 10–1; Suter 2011, p. 1321; Wraith and Lamb 1971, p. 353; Beer 2011). In more recent times, so-called public inquiries have been a central expression of this continuing tradition (Flinders 2001; PASC 2005; Department for Constitutional Affairs 2004; McEldowney 1997; Roach 2014).

The origin of the modern public inquiry lies in the early twentieth century. Before which ‘Parliament’, rather than an independent body, ‘generally performed the function of conducting investigations into governmental failures and the misconduct of ministers or other public servants’ (Beer 2011, p. 4; Salmon 1966, p. 10). Typically, ‘the Marconi Scandal [is treated] as a progenitor ... to the modern system of public inquiries’ (Blom-Cooper 2017, p. 11; see also Beer 2011, p. 6; Flinders 2001, p. 160). The Marconi scandal undermined purely parliamentary forms of scrutiny, such as the use of select committees of investigation, because, when a select committee of MPs investigated the allegations of government corruption that the scandal centred on, the committee ‘divided on strictly party lines’ (Salmon 1966, p. 11), and was seen to be too politicized to properly investigate the allegations of governmental wrongdoing (Salmon 1966, p. 18; Flinders 2001, p. 160). The scandal therefore stimulated the creation of the public inquiry, a body independent of Parliament, but whose conduct and operation remains consistent with the notion of accountability through “inquest” and questioning (Beer 2011, p. 6).

Since its foundation, the public inquiry has become the ‘favoured mechanism’ for investigating the most high-profile scandals and crises (Jasanoff 2005, p. 218), and has seen frequent usage (Norris and Shephard 2017, p. 9). Inquiries have investigated highly salient, controversial, intractable issues. The Grenfell Tower fire, Britain’s invasion of Iraq, the Hillsborough disaster, and Bloody Sunday, to name only a few examples, have all been subject to public inquiry. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic, the most significant crisis since the Great Recession (Briggs et al. 2021, p. 831–833), is subject to inquiry. Thus, public inquiries have become ‘part of the fabric of public life’ in Britain (Beer 2011, p. ix; PASC 2005, p. 7), such that their initiation has become ‘almost a reflex action at times of dire political emergency’ (Drewry 1975, p. 58). In spite of this, inquiries are often viewed with scepticism. Within media coverage, inquiries are ‘regularly vilified as costly wastes of time that illuminate very little’ (Stark 2019, p. 298; see National Audit Office 2018). The public, likewise, have ‘long questioned the point’ of inquiries (Peplow 2017). This scepticism has bled into academic perceptions of inquiries. Inquiries have attracted ‘limited’ academic scrutiny (Burgess 2011, p. 8), ‘little has been written’ about them (Salter 1989, p. 173), and they are often not treated as research objects in their own right (e.g. Scraton 2013). This risks future research on inquiries, likely to be undertaken in the wake of the ‘mother of all inquiries’: the COVID Inquiry (see Shackleton 2021; Jenkins 2021), being built on sand. This article presents a comprehensive review of the literature on post-crisis public inquiries. In doing so, it organizes existing literature so that others can get a sense of what is out there on public inquiries and highlights limitations within existing research, which it suggests solutions for.



To begin, I organize existing literature on inquiries, which at present has not been subject to concerted review and is disorganized and fragmented (Burgess 2011, p. 8). First, I highlight several of the most prominent sub-literatures that exist within the universe of inquiry scholarship. This, I argue, is a useful way of getting a sense of what is out there on inquiries. However, viewing existing literature as a series of disconnected sub-literatures does little to overcome the fragmentation noted above. As such, I then suggest that a more fruitful way of understanding literature on inquiries is to see it as organized around the question of inquiry functionality. On this, two views exist: inquiries either function to provide accountability, or to serve the narrow interests of the state. I then advance three critiques of existing literature. First, too many works on inquiries lack a clear definition of the public inquiry. Second, both views of inquiry functionality within existing literature are somewhat unconvincing (Elliott and McGuinness 2002, p.14), with the first view discounting self-preservation as a key motivation behind government responses to crises (Bulpitt 1986), and the second offering a conception of state power *vis-à-vis* inquiries that offers 'over-simplistic zero-sum conceptualizations of power' because it does not sufficiently engage with contemporary debates related to the 'hollowing out' of the state (see Dommett and Flinders 2015, p. 4). Third, existing literature is somewhat methodologically limited, eschewing engagement with primary data and mainly adopting a light single-case approach.

I conclude that to move beyond these limitations, first, researchers should offer clearly justified definitions of what they mean by "inquiries". Second, future research would be better advanced through engagement with contemporary theorizations of the state, particularly literature on meta-governance and depoliticization (Dommett and Flinders 2015; Wood and Flinders 2014). Third, future research should move beyond single-case analysis based on secondary sources, should utilize primary data more extensively, and should explore the utility of multi-case analysis and quantitative/experimental approaches. These shifts will allow researchers to avoid talking past one another and using evidence not directly applicable to the inquiries they examine. They will encourage the development of a view of inquiry functionality that adequately accounts for the motivations behind governmental responses to crises and conceptualizes state power in a more nuanced way. Moreover, these shifts will ensure that future research generalizes from a solid evidential basis.

## Organizing existing literature

Existing literature on public inquiries is 'fragmentary' (Burgess 2011, p. 8). Researchers in the field do not typically review existing literature (e.g. Ireton 2018; Warner 2006), while those that do often only acknowledge research produced within their methodological or theoretical paradigm (e.g. Brown 2000). The few reviews with a broader scope have organized literature into a set of different camps, reflecting the divergent interests inquiries attract (e.g. Stark 2019, pp. 398–400). I identify five such camps, which are useful to signpost as a starting point. In doing so, I have attempted to cast the net wide in terms of the literature on inquiries drawn on here, to give the best impression of what is out there possible, I then offer a more



specific, clearly defined definition of the public inquiry, and what we should count as research on public inquiries, below.

### Legal studies

First, a legal studies literature has emerged on inquiries, which focusses on inquiry process (e.g. Beer 2011). Drewry, for example, analyses how the judicial background of inquiry chairs underpins the legitimacy of inquiries (1975). Ireton, meanwhile, discusses the quandaries inquiries have to navigate when determining how “public” they will be (2018). Many legal studies researchers are practitioners as well as academics, thus they have direct experience of participating in inquiries, which they bring to bear on their research (see Blom-Cooper 1993; Sedley 1989; Howe 1999). However, perhaps because of this direct connection, much of the legal studies literature offers a positive, though not uncritical, view of inquiries (although see Blom-Cooper 2017). Indeed, legal studies scholars argue that ‘public inquiries ... have curative properties which cannot be found elsewhere [and which] are going to continue to matter’, and that inquiries ‘offer the public an unlimited opportunity for experiencing direct democracy’ and a chance to help ‘define public issues, in public view’ (Salter 1989, p. 174). This obscures the more problematic aspects of inquiry usage (see Elliott and McGuinness 2002). As well as this, legal studies literature on inquiries is often reliant on the personal experiences of the authors rather than engagement with primary data (Stark 2019, p. 399). Beer’s (2011) edited volume, contrary to this and to its credit, offers a comprehensive overview of inquiry procedure, drawing on multiple cases as well as documentary evidence.

### Sensemaking

Second, because public inquiries represent an attempt to produce the “authoritative account” of particular crises, several scholars understand public inquiries as primarily being “sensemaking” exercises, through which ‘lived experience is [chopped into] meaningful chunks, labell[ed], and connect[ed]’ (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2015, p. 8). Such works focus on the role inquiry reports play in resolving the legitimisation crises the state sporadically faces by ‘re-establish[ing] dominant myths ... [and] offering acceptable interpretations [of] events’ (Brown 2000, p. 48). Inquiries, they argue do not “establish the facts” in a benign way (see PASC 2005, p. 9). Rather, inquiries ‘attempt to present a univocal and coherent view on what are ... readily acknowledged to ... to be complex and uncertain events’ (Brown 2004, p. 96), and this involves privileging certain perspectives and neglecting others. Methodologically, sensemaking research utilizes discourse analysis of inquiry reports and associated archival materials (Gephart 1992; Brown 2000, 2004; Boudes and Laroche 2009)<sup>1</sup>, thus this sub-literature offers insights into an aspect of the public inquiry neglected by other sub-literatures more focussed on inquiry process (such as the legal studies literature).

<sup>1</sup> - Although this has been supplemented with ethnographic data in at least one instance (Gephart et al. 1990).



In terms of limitations, sensemaking literature has a somewhat narrow focus, largely limiting itself to analyses of what inquiry reports say. However, inquiry reports and findings are typically communicated through broader patterns of public discourse. As such, the broader communication (led by government) of inquiry findings is often as significant as what inquiries themselves say (Dwyer et al. 2021, see also Flinders 2001, p. 165; Tomkins 1996), and a focus only on inquiry reports tells us little about this aspect of the “sensemaking” process. Murphy’s research is an exception here (2019), offering a comprehensive analysis of how blame is constructed in post-crisis situations and examining inquiry reports themselves, but also discourses within political speeches, parliamentary debates, and media coverage.

## Policy learning

Third, since inquiries’ ‘primary purpose ... is to prevent reoccurrence’ (PASC 2005, p. 8), several authors assess their policy learning impact (Stark 2019, 2020; Renå and Christensen 2020). Such research has examined the impact of inquiries on NHS governance (Kewell and Beck 2008; Williams and Kevern 2016), policing (Bland et al. 2000; Rowe 2013; Souhami 2013), and energy policy (Rough 2011). This literature often adopts a multi-case approach (e.g. Stanley and Manthorpe 2004). This is significant because, as I argue below, the predominance of a single-case approach within other sub-literatures has hampered attempts to meaningfully generalize about inquiries. This sub-literature has also been the site of experimentation with the application of quasi-experimental methods to the study of inquiries (see Kewell and Beck 2008).

Some of the works within this sub-literature fall into some of the definitional problems discussed in more detail below, in that they examine the impact that a series of “inquiries”, broadly defined, had, without offering a justification of their comparability. Kewell and Beck, for example, examine the impact of inquiries in healthcare, but in their dataset, they include ‘any investigation conducted under statutory instruments’ (2008, p. 376). As they acknowledge, this includes both national-level and local investigations and both pre-emptive and reactive inquiries, which other authors have suggested should be treated as separate phenomena (Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2006).

## Crisis management and blame

Fourth, inquiries have also been considered as tools of crisis management by scholars focussed on post-crisis politics and blame. This more critical conception of inquiries is rooted in the idea that inquiries occur during periods where ‘political conflicts’ are heightened because of the inevitable questions of blame and responsibility that crises raise (Renå and Christensen 2020, p. 43). Thus, ‘crises ... involve a high-stake game of political survival, in which ... accountability and learning rituals pose a serious threat to incumbent politicians’ and during which ‘blame avoidance ... is ... likely to play a central role’ in influencing politician’s decision-making (Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2010, pp. 613–614). Scholars who work within this view argue



that inquiries provide a sense that ‘crisis managers are in control of the situation, [while] forfeit[ing] the need for crisis managers to answer any questions as inquiries have to be able to do their job, and helps to calm things down’ (Resodihardjo 2006, p. 200; 2020, pp. 34–36).

This sub-literature provides a corrective to views of inquiry functionality that take inquiries at face value (i.e. as lesson-learning or fact-finding exercises, see below), by pointing out that serious crises represent threats to the political survival of incumbent politicians. It is reasonable to suggest that inquiries, as state-sanctioned responses to said threats, are not only called for public-minded reasons. It is worth noting, however that some of this research has been produced in edited collections only sometimes strictly about inquiries, or where the inquiry is only a partial focus (see Boin et al. 2008, 2017).

### Events subject to a public inquiry

Finally, inquiries have been examined within research on particular events which have been subject to inquiry. This sub-literature is the hardest to review in a coherent way, as some research on particular events subject to inquiry also adopts a particular theoretical/methodological approach which aligns them with other sub-literatures (e.g. sensemaking, in the case of Brown 2004). Indeed, single-case analysis has been noted to be the predominant methodological approach to the study of inquiries regardless of theoretical approach or research focus (Stark 2019, p. 399). However, there are a set of works that adopt a single-case approach that do not fit easily into any other sub-literature that are worth acknowledging.

Where inquiries are discussed within these kinds of works, the main focus is often on their broad political “legacy” or impact (Scraton 2013). For example, Rolston and Scraton analyse the impact inquiries into British military activities in Northern Ireland during the Troubles have had on reconciliation and the pursuit of peace (2005). These single-case analyses of inquiries, however, ‘have tended to focus on the events described’ by inquiries (Brown 2004, p. 98). As such, inquiries are often only part of the analysis and are discussed alongside other events and institutions pertinent to the case. Scraton, for example, has published extensively on the Hillsborough disaster (Scraton 1999, 2002, 2013). However, the Taylor Inquiry called in response to the disaster is only the focus of their analysis periodically and is discussed alongside other state institutional responses to the disaster (see Scraton 2013). This is not necessarily a limitation of the research per se. Scraton’s stated research focus is broader that the public inquiry into Hillsborough, therefore it is understandable that this is only a partial focus within their research. However, it does mean that works within this sub-literature offer less to researchers interested in inquiries specifically than other sub-literatures more exclusively focussed on inquiries (e.g. sensemaking, legal studies) do.



## Inquiry functionality as a key dividing line

This is a useful way of understanding what is out there on inquiries, but it reinforces the fragmentation of existing literature, rather than looking for common ground or points of contestation between the different sub-literatures which could act as through lines for engagement. As such, a more fruitful approach is to consider existing literature as organized around the question of inquiry functionality. Regardless of methodological or theoretical paradigm, most works on inquiries offer a view of the function of inquiries. Thus the question of inquiry functionality transcends the dividing lines noted above. On this question, two views exist.

On one side, inquiries are largely taken at face value and are seen to perform democratic functions such as providing accountability and lesson learning (Howe 1999). A good example of this view is provided by a contemporary Select Committee investigation, which suggested that 'the public inquiry has become a pivotal part of public life in Britain, and a major instrument of accountability ... a model of robustness, and ... a reflection of [an admirable] political culture' (PASC 2005, p. 7). To the extent that academic research adopts this view, it is qualified. Legal studies research tends to accept inquiry functionality largely at face value. However, because legal scholars tend to have direct experience of inquiry participation, inquiries are also typically viewed as imperfect (see for example, Blom-Cooper 1993; Sedley 1989). Wider policy analysis literature is similar in this respect. Stark, for example, assesses inquiries as lesson-learning exercises, and argues that inquiries sometimes 'fail to facilitate policy reform' (2020, p. 609). However, Stark's focus on lesson learning implies that this is inquiries' intended function, even if they do not always live up to it.

Within existing literature on inquiries, however, a more critical view is more popular. Within this, inquiries function to reinforce the state's 'hegemonic domination' (Brown 2004, p. 96). This view appears in research focussed on state responses to crises (Rolston and Scraton 2005; Scraton 1999, 2013), but is most prominent in discourse analyses of inquiries. Therein, how an inquiry's report 'makes sense of' a crisis does not reflect the truth but is shaped by the state's capacity 'to impose its regime of truth on its citizens' through the inquiry (Rolston and Scraton 2005, p. 550). As a consequence, inquiry narratives ignore 'the social, political and cultural contexts in which disasters occur' (Elliott and McGuinness 2002, p. 20), 'represent [failures] as temporary, or no [failures] at all' (Burton and Carlen 1979, p. 48); and elaborate 'fantasies of [state] omnipotence and control' (Brown 2000, p. 45). Inquiries and their reports are therefore considered 'exercises in [state] power', 'where power is defined as the capacity to extend hegemonic reach by suppressing or overwhelming competing accounts such that one's own interpretation dominates' (Brown 2000, p. 48).

Although most works on inquiries take a view on the question of inquiry functionality, this debate has not been explicitly acknowledged within existing literature (although see Elliott and McGuinness 2002 for an exception). This is problematic because it has meant that many works adopt a view of inquiry functionality unconsciously, whereby a view 'seeps through' into their work (Resodihardjo 2006, p.





200). By acknowledging this issue more explicitly, this can be avoided. However, more significantly, it is possible that, because almost all work on inquiries takes a view on this question, this issue could become a through line for existing literature: that is, a point at which interaction and debate can begin. Thus overcoming the fragmentation that currently plagues existing research.

## A lack of definitional clarity

Having summarized the literature in this way, I now offer three reflections regarding its limitations. The first centres on the fact that research on public inquiries has lacked a ‘clear definition of what a public inquiry is’ (Brown 2004, p. 95). Instead, too often, “public inquiry” is used as a ‘generic term used to describe [a variety of] mechanisms’, rather than clearly demarcating a focus on one institution (Elliott and McGuinness 2002, p. 14). Stark and Yates, for example, define public inquiries ‘as temporary working groups created, mandated and made independent by governments in order to fact-find, hold actors to account or develop policy lessons’ (2021, p. 3). ‘Such an expansive definition’, they note, ‘covers a range of different types of inquiry, from the blue-ribbon commissions ... to more low-key policy-oriented inquiries’ (Stark and Yates 2021, p. 3).

The consequence of this lack of definitional clarity is that research sometimes examines markedly different institutions side-by-side without justification. Stark, for example, examines lesson-learning inquiries, conducting an ‘international comparison of four inquiries in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK’ (2019, p. 398). However, of the four “inquiries” drawn on, one (the Pitt Review) is an independent panel, and one is a Royal Commission (the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission). This potentially creates significant problems because ‘grouping such different [institutions] under a single category ... is intrinsically difficult’ (Salter 1989, p. 173). For cases to be considered part of the same group, the cases must ‘share a common characteristic or condition’ (Stake 2006, p. 4), and it is not clear what this common characteristic is here.

Helpfully, some research has sought to address this issue. Sulitzeanu-Kenan (2006, p. 624; see also 2020), has proposed a definition of public inquiries based on a sevenfold set of concrete observable characteristics. These are, that the body in question is:

1. An *ad hoc* institution: that is, one established for a particular task; once its primary task is concluded, the tribunal is dissolved;
2. Formally external to the executive;
3. Established by the government or a minister;
4. As a result of the appointer’s discretion: that is, not the result of a requirement prescribed by any statute or other rule;
5. For the main task of investigation: a criterion used to distinguish between investigative and advisory functions (Weare 1955, pp. 43–4);
6. Of past event(s);
7. In a public way: that is, it is not only directed inward (to the appointing body) but also outward, to the public, typically during a crisis of confidence between the public and government (Wade and For-



syth 1994, p. 1007), in a way which allows exposure of relevant facts to public scrutiny (Clarke 2000, p. 8). (Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2006, p. 624).

This definition usefully excludes investigative bodies that are fundamentally different from the independent post-crisis inquiries under examination here. Select committees, for example, run within Parliament and are staffed by MPs. They are therefore overtly politicized bodies and would be excluded on several counts. Whereas bodies which are not necessarily referred to as inquiries, but are similar in significant ways (i.e. why they are called, their relationship to the executive, how they proceed) are included as part of the same community of cases. For instance, the definition does not discriminate between statutory and non-statutory inquiries. Statutory inquiries are distinct in that they have the ability to compel the production of documents or witnesses to attend to give evidence (Beer 2011, p. 42). However, in terms of what they are used for and how they proceed, non-statutory and statutory inquiries are fundamentally a part of the same “family” (public inquiries).

This definition has been utilized in several more recent studies (Burgess 2011; Molchadsky 2015; Thomas and Cooper 2020). It has the advantage of giving a clear basis on which a diverse set of cases can be said to be part of the same population, thus avoiding the risk that the validity of conclusions drawn about public inquiries from research wherein markedly different institutions are compared may be compromised.<sup>2</sup> However, it should be noted that while the definition has been taken on across a number of studies (see above), it has not overcome the definitional fragmentation that belies existing literature, and recent studies in this area have proceeded without a clear definition of inquiries (e.g. Stark and Yates 2021), which again raises issues related to case comparability and therefore the validity of inquiry findings. In sum, the definition offered by Sulitzeanu-Kenan has several advantages and clear empirical utility, providing a solid basis on which to begin to research post-crisis public inquiries. However, more generally, regardless of whether this definition fits their purposes or not, researchers who study inquiries should offer a clear definition of their object of analysis in order to undergird the reliability of their conclusions.

## Problematizing views of inquiry functionality

Given the centrality of inquiry functionality within existing literature, assessing existing views on inquiry functionality is another logical point at which to focus critical analysis. Here, I show that both existing views of inquiry functionality

---

<sup>2</sup> I adopt this definition in this piece. This means that while I focus primarily on public inquiries as they pertain to Britain here, I draw on literature from other contexts whose focus is on institutions that fit within this inclusive definition of inquiries. It is also worth noting that I do not distinguish between more historical work on inquiries and contemporary research. This is because the definition Sulitzeanu-Kenan offers suggests that so long as inquiries in question have the characteristics noted above they can be treated as part of the same family even if they were called in different eras. Thus, although there has been a legislative overhaul of inquiries in Britain (*Inquiries Act 2005*), this has not fundamentally changed how inquiries proceed, and has in most cases codified or clarified existing practices (Beer 2011, p. 26). It is therefore legitimate from the perspective adopted here to draw on historical cases alongside more contemporary research.



have problems related to how they conceptualize the state's motivations and how the state exercises power.

From the accountability perspective, inquiries are a highly effective and fundamentally benevolent institution (Elliott and McGuinness 2002), and are part of a longstanding 'tradition of inquiry' which has Parliament at its centre (PASC 2005, p. 10). This view is underpinned by the 'Westminster Model' (WM) of British democracy, which arguably still dominates British Politics, even in the face of attempts to 'at least partially [move] beyond' it (Hayton 2018, p. 368; see Kerr and Kettell 2006, p. 8; or, more recently, Maiguashca and Dean 2020, pp. 60–62). The WM casts British government as an admirable system wherein the centrality of Parliament provides effective scrutiny and engenders a 'responsible' and 'representative' executive (Birch 1964). While some scholarship adopts a more qualified view, inquiries are often still seen to be called for the right reasons, as 'very successful', and as holding 'striking' authority 'in an ... age characterized by public cynicism and mistrust', within the accountability viewpoint (Burgess 2011, p. 8).

While many of these works provide commendable analyses of how inquiries work and their policy impacts, they are thus ultimately predicated on a somewhat uncritical view of British politics and of inquiry usage. There is a danger in taking the British political system at face value in this way because the system's publicly identifiable 'dignified' aspects exist to 'preserve the reverence of the population', and are distinct from the less visible, 'efficient' part of the system, 'which ... works and rules' (Bagehot 1963, p. 61). The problem with the WM is that it confuses these parts, treating the dignified image of the British political system as if it were the reality. As Marsh and Hall point out, far from a model of responsibility and responsiveness, the working, efficient parts of British government are top-down, elitist, and marked by a limited notion of responsibility (2007, 2016; Hall et al. 2018). This fits well with the elite-focussed 'statecraft interpretation' of British politics (Bulpitt 1986, 1996; Hayton 2014; James 2016), which casts state managers as interested in 'crude, subsistence-level objectives', rather than public-minded ideals (Bulpitt 1996, p. 225). Of primary importance is securing re-election, achieving a degree of 'autonomy' from 'domestic and external pressures' (Bulpitt 1986, p. 28), and projecting a 'veneer of competence' (Bulpitt 1996, p. 225). Under this view, state managers may seek to present themselves as public minded, but the public good is not a primary motivation guiding their patterns of behaviour.

The initiation of inquiries is more convincingly explained through this lens. Inquiries are held at government's discretion and occur at 'high stakes' moments of 'political survival' (Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2010, p. 614). Furthermore, there have been many occasions 'where a public inquiry', though in the public interest, 'does not take place' (Sedley 1989, p. 470; see also Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2010, p. 622), suggesting inquiry usage is a strategic choice. Britain's governing class have been relatively up front about this. In response to Select Committee questions about 'what makes a successful inquiry' (PASC 2004, Ev 154-5, Q618-9), Michael Heseltine admits that 'allegations ... made about [government] ministers ... is where you [as a member of the government] start' when assessing inquiry outcomes



(PASC 2004, Ev 155, Q619). This implies that inquiries act as a dignified part of the political system, appearing to deliver accountability while helping government avoid blame. In eliding these 'subsistence-level objectives' when explaining what motivates inquiry initiation (Bulpitt 1996, p. 225), views of inquiries as providing accountability are therefore problematic.

The above indicates that the view that inquiries are tools of the state is more convincing than the view that inquiries deliver accountability. However, while this more critical view represents a step forward, this view's explanations of *how* the state exercises power over inquiries are problematic, often slipping into a vague functionalism (Stark 2019, p. 399). Indeed, scholarship sometimes adopts the view that inquiries reflexively work in the state's interest or reproduce state narratives of crises. This is especially true of discourse analyses of British inquiries, which often use the work of Gephart as a starting point (see for example, Brown 2000). Gephart argues, *qua* Habermas and Offe, that inquiries are a form of 'corporatist governance', which function to 'legitimize the actions and interests of dominant groups' in the face of perpetual legitimation crises (Gephart 1992, p. 116; see Habermas 1973, p. 46; Offe 1984). Case study research has contradicted the claims that inquiries always automatically reproduce state narratives of crises (see Resodihardjo 2006; McLaughlin and Murji 1999). However, more fundamentally, the problem with this theoretical approach is that it '[presupposes] the existence of [administrative systems (i.e. inquiries)] which can perform the functions attributed to [them]' (Clarke 1991, p. 9). It does not offer any explanation of how such systems emerge or how they are utilized to fulfil said functions.

These problems are unsurprising when one examines contemporary conceptions of the (British) state, which have moved beyond the notion that the state has totalizing power which it exercises in a direct way (Marsh et al. 2003; Marsh 2008; Rhodes 2003). Instead, contemporary scholarship has suggested that 'meta-governance' has become a 'central question of contemporary statecraft' (Dommert and Flinders 2015, p. 2). This reflects the shift from government to governance, the hollowing out of the state (Rhodes 2003), and the 'massive proliferation of networks' within political decision-making (Bevir and Rhodes 2006, p. 74). This proliferation of responsibility means that the contemporary British state '[fumbles] to pull ... levers of control' (Bevir and Rhodes 2006, p. 74 see also Burnham 2001), in order 'to initiate and stimulate negotiated self-governance among relevant stake-holders and/or to guide them in a certain direction', rather than exercising power in a direct way over institutions or actors that have no power or agency of their own (Sørensen et al. 2011, p. 379). It is important not to oversimplify these developments. It is not the case, for instance, that the state has necessarily become less powerful in the face of the rise of networked governance (see Bell and Hindmoor 2009; Marsh 2011), nor has decentralization been unidirectional (Dommert and Flinders 2015; Ward and Ward 2022). However, the above suggests that in the contemporary period, the exercise of state power is complex, occurring within a network of wider actors, often through indirect, subtle steering and arms-length control (Burnham 2001, p. 128). At present, literature on inquiries largely elides these theoretical developments. As such, existing views of state power *vis-à-vis* inquiries are unconvincing and out of step with more sophisticated understandings of how the state operates in the contemporary period.



The above suggests that existing conceptions of inquiry functionality would benefit from engagement with contemporary theoretical and conceptual literature specifically related to the (British) state and governance; with the statecraft, depoliticization and (meta-)governance literatures being of particular relevance. Doing this would allow the commendable analytical work that much existing scholarship engages in to be undergirded by a nuanced and robust understanding of the public inquiry's role within contemporary governance.

## Methodological limitations

The above issues with how inquiry functionality is conceptualized within existing literature on inquiries indicate that existing literature struggles to convincingly generalize about inquiries, instead making claims that are 'idealized' and 'extreme' (Elliott and McGuinness 2002, p. 14). Above, I have argued that the "extreme" part of this problem can be addressed with more nuanced engagement with ongoing theoretical debates, but this would still leave existing literature as "idealized": that is, lacking a sufficient empirical grounding. Thus, in the final section of this article, I discuss the dominant methodological approaches within existing inquiries literature, how these have compounded issues around generalization, and some potential avenues out of this methodological cul-de-sac that are already present within existing literature.

Existing literature on inquiries is marked by a tendency to 'eschew primary data [collection] ... in favour of "light" case studies that draw their evidence from secondary sources' (Stark 2019, p. 399). In making this claim, Stark notes that a lack of engagement with primary data leads to the kinds of problems noted above where claims made about how inquiries are controlled by government are 'insinuated rather than properly evidenced' (2019, p. 399).

Less explored by Stark but also of significance are the consequences of the dominance of a single-case approach within existing inquiries literature. This is important because, while many of single-case studies offer rich empirical detail about specific inquiries, only some works limit their aims to providing this detail (e.g. Scraton 2013). Instead, many single-case analyses of inquiries offer more general reflections on inquiries on the basis of the cases they examine (e.g. Brown 2004). However, because the context of specific inquiries varies considerably, it is difficult to demonstrate that insights derived from any one case 'are representative of more general patterns', meaning the predominance of single-case analysis within existing literature hampers attempts to convincingly generalize about inquiries (Burgess 2011, p. 4). For example, some existing works relate inquiry functionality to legitimization crises and government's inability to manage these while ensuring continued accumulation (e.g. Brown 2000). There are cases which sit comfortably within this schema. The Piper Alpha Oil Rig explosion, for instance, jeopardized the legitimacy of deregulation and trade union marginalization, which were key to Thatcherite economic management (see Gamble 1994, p. 5), and threatened the profitability of the oil industry and the growing British financial sector, which invested heavily in oil (Woolfson et al. 1996; Whyte 1999, pp. 183–186). The Inquiry into the explosion,



in turn, was used to re-legitimize self-regulation and limit trade union involvement in safety (HC Deb 12 November 1990 c329, c335). On the other hand, other inquiries have focussed on matters more accurately defined as political scandals (Burgess 2011, p. 4; Greer and McLaughlin 2017), for example, the 1928 Hyde Park Inquiry examined the police's investigation of prominent politician Sir Leo Money's alleged 'offending [of] the public decency' (Clayton 2010, no pagination), the Crichel Down Inquiry examined civil servant's mismanagement of compulsorily purchased land (see Chapman 1987), and there was also an Inquiry into a Minister's alleged leaking of a government budget in 1936 (Porter et al. 1936). Such examples fit less comfortably in the schema noted above, which is treated as if it applies to all inquiries even though it has been elaborated through single-case analysis to a large extent (see Brown 2000, 2004).

Overall, within existing literature, there is a persistent aversion to the collection of primary data (Stark 2019, p. 399), and single-case analysis predominates even though it is marked by limiting factors. Overcoming this therefore requires methodological innovation. Some avenues for the development of primary data have been signposted within existing scholarship. Gibbs and Hall (2007), for example, suggest that the documentary data held within public inquiry websites could have utility for researchers, and "sensemaking" literature on inquiries has demonstrated the value of close analysis of inquiry reports (e.g. Brown 2004). Sulitzeanu-Kenan, meanwhile, has produced a set of experimental (2006), and observational quantitative studies (2007, 2010; Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Holzman-Gazit 2016) on inquiries. Beyond this, both parliamentary debates related to inquiries, and archival documents, seen as 'one of the most reliable' sources of data for those interested in governmental decision-making (see Burnham et al. 2008, p. 212), are largely unexamined, and thus also offer interesting potential avenues for novel research on inquiries.

There have also been recent attempts to move beyond single-case analysis within existing research. Hutchison (2016), for example, engages in an analysis of the Francis Inquiry in order to examine scandals in healthcare; however, the discussion of this case is well contextualized with an examination of other scandals and inquiries in social care, allowing Hutchison to more authoritatively identify the ways in which their case is indicative of wider trends. There have also been several attempts to examine specific issues related to inquiries, such as why they are called (Thomas and Cooper 2020), their terms of reference (Kennedy 2018), or how "public" they are (Ireton 2018), which examine multiple cases thematically, drawing out the commonalities that exist across cases in a way that also generates more convincing generalizable claims. At present, however, these avenues remain unacknowledged and underexplored, and light single-case analysis continues to be the norm in recent work (see, for example, Kenny and Ó Dochartaigh 2021). Given the limitations explored above regarding single-case analysis and generalization, I argue that future research would greatly benefit from making a concerted effort to innovate and engage with the more fruitful, methodologically innovative paths that have been signposted within existing research.



---

## Conclusion

Public inquiries, then, are significant institutions within British governance, and the central role a public inquiry is to play in assessing the British government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to stimulate academic interest in inquiries. At present, however, existing literature is fragmented and disorganized. In signposting the most prominent sub-literatures on public inquiries and organizing the literature around the question of inquiry functionality, this review provides an overview of what is out there on inquiries. Furthermore, the review also highlights a through line to overcome the lack of interaction among existing scholars by pointing out debate on which they all, explicitly or implicitly, have a position.

This review has also highlighted three limitations within existing literature on inquiries that future research ought to pay attention to : (1) literature often lacks a clear definition of the public inquiry; (2) both views of inquiry functionality within existing literature are somewhat unconvincing; and (3) literature has methodological limitations. These issues are not insurmountable, but each requires conscious effort to overcome. A lack of definitional clarity, and the issues this causes, can be overcome by drawing on clearer, more precise definitions already offered within existing research (e.g. Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2006). Existing literature's conceptualizations of inquiry functionality, meanwhile, can be supplemented through engagement with contemporary theoretical debates on the state, particularly literatures on depoliticization and meta-governance, which conceptualize how the British state exercises power in a nuanced, sophisticated way. Finally, ways of moving beyond the methodological limitations of existing literature have already been signposted within existing research. Further progress on these issues will involve creativity and a willingness to move beyond single-case analysis as the only methodological choice available, towards more innovative approaches which engage more deeply with primary data. In doing this, it is hoped that future researchers can engage with the strongest aspects of each of the different fragments of existing literature (e.g. the rich detail of some of the case study work, the methodological innovation of newer work) and that inquiries and the research that focusses on them are finally given the attention that their significance warrants.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Bagehot, W. 1963. *The English Constitution*. London: Collins.
- Beer, J., ed. 2011. *Public Inquiries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bell, S., and A. Hindmoor. 2009. *Rethinking Governance: The Centrality of the State in Modern Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



- Bevir, M., and R. Rhodes. 2006. *Governance Stories*. London: Routledge.
- Birch, A.H. 1964. *Representative and Responsible Government*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Bland, N., J. Miller, and P. Quinton. 2000. *Upping the PACE?: An Evaluation of the Recommendations of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry on Stops and Searches*. Home Office Policing and Reducing Crime Unit (Paper 128).
- Blom-Cooper, L. 1993. Public Inquiries. *Current Legal Problems* 46 (2): 204–220.
- Blom-Cooper, L. 2017. *Public Inquiries: Wrong Route on Bloody Sunday*. Oxford: Hart.
- Boin, A., A. McConnell, and 't Hart, P. 2008. *Governing After Crisis: The Politics of Investigation, Accountability and Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boin, A., P. 't Hart, E. Stern, and B. Sundelius. 2017. *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership under Pressure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boudes, T., and H. Laroche. 2009. Taking Off the Heat: Narrative Sensemaking in Post-Crisis Inquiry Reports. *Organization Studies* 30 (4): 377–396.
- Briggs, D., A. Ellis, A. Lloyd, and L. Telford. 2021. New Hope or Old Futures in Disguise? Neoliberalism, the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Possibility for Social Change. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 40 (9/10): 831–848.
- Brown, A.D. 2000. Making Sense of Inquiry Sensemaking. *Journal of Management Studies* 37 (1): 45–75.
- Brown, A.D. 2004. Authoritative Sensemaking in a Public Inquiry Report. *Organization Studies* 25 (1): 95–112.
- Bulpitt, J. 1986. The Discipline of the New Democracy: Mrs Thatcher's Domestic Statecraft. *Political Studies* 34 (1): 19–39.
- Bulpitt, J. 1996. The European Question. In *The Ideas That Shaped Post-War Britain*, ed. D. Marquand and A. Seldon, 214–256. London: Fontana.
- Burgess, A. 2011. The Changing Character of the Public Inquiries in the (Risk) Regulatory State. *British Politics* 6 (1): 3–29.
- Burnham, P. 2001. New Labour and the Politics of Depoliticization. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 3 (2): 127–149.
- Burnham, P., K.G. Lutz, W. Grant, and Z. Layton-Henry. 2008. *Research Methods in Politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Burton, F., and P. Carlen. 1979. *Official Discourse: On Discourse Analysis, Government Publications, Ideology and the State*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Chapman, R.A. 1987. Crichel Down Revisited. *Public Administration* 65 (3): 339–350.
- Clarke, S. 1991. The State Debate. In *The State Debate*, ed. S. Clarke, 1–69. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Clayton, H.F. 2010. Savidge, (Marjorie) Irene (1905–1985), Factory Worker and Subject of Police Interrogation. In *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. D. Cannadine, M. Curthoys, A May, A. Ingram. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-101236>.
- Department for Constitutional Affairs. 2004. *Effective Inquiries*. CP 12/04.
- Dommett, K., and M. Flinders. 2015. The Centre Strikes Back: Meta-governance, Delegation, and the Core Executive in the United Kingdom, 2010–14. *Public Administration* 93 (1): 1–16.
- Drewry, G. 1975. Judges and Political Inquiries: Harnessing a Myth. *Political Studies* 23 (1): 49–61.
- Dwyer, G., C. Hardy, and S. Maguire. 2021. Post-Inquiry Sensemaking: The Case of the “Black Saturday” Bushfires. *Organization Studies* 42 (4): 637–661.
- Elliott, D., and M. McGuinness. 2002. Public Inquiry: Panacea or Placebo? *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 10 (1): 14–25.
- Flinders, M. 2001. *The Politics of Accountability in the Modern State*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Gamble, A. 1994. *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Gephart, R.P. 1992. Sensemaking, Communicative Distortion and the Logic of Public Inquiry Legitimation. *Industrial Crisis Quarterly* 6 (2): 115–135.
- Gephart, R.P., L. Steier, and T. Lawrence. 1990. Cultural Rationalities in Crisis Sensemaking: A Study of a Public Inquiry into a Major Industrial Accident. *Industrial Crisis Quarterly* 4 (1): 27–48.
- Gibbs, G.R., and C. Hall. 2007. The Research Potential of Testimony from Public Inquiry Websites. *Children & Society* 21 (1): 69–79.
- Greer, C., and E. McLaughlin. 2017. Theorizing Institutional Scandal and the Regulatory State. *Theoretical Criminology* 21 (2): 112–132.
- Habermas, J. 1973. *Legitimation Crisis*. Boston, MA: Beacon.





- Hall, M., D. Marsh, and E. Vines. 2018. A Changing Democracy: Contemporary Challenges to the British Political Tradition. *Policy Studies* 39 (4): 365–382.
- Hayton, R. 2014. Conservative Party Statecraft and the Politics of Coalition. *Parliamentary Affairs* 67 (1): 6–24.
- Hayton, R. 2018. The Impact Agenda and the Study of British Politics. *British Politics* 13 (3): 361–373. HC Deb 12 November 1990 vol 180 cc 329–44: Piper Alpha.
- Howe, G. 1999. The Management of Public Inquiries. *The Political Quarterly* 70 (3): 294–304.
- Hutchison, J.S. 2016. Scandals in Healthcare: Their Impact on Health Policy and Nursing. *Nursing Inquiry* 23 (1): 32–41.
- Inquiries Act 2005*. (c.12). London: Stationary Office. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/12/contents>.
- Ireton, E. 2018. How Public is a Public Inquiry? *Public Law* (April), 277–298.
- James, T.S. 2016. Neo-Statecraft Theory, Historical Institutionalism and Institutional Change. *Government and Opposition* 51 (1): 84–110.
- Jasanoff, S. 2005. Restoring Reason: Causal Narratives and Political Culture. In *Organizational Encounters with Risk*, ed. B. Hutter, and P. Michael, 209–232. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jenkins, S. 2021. Public Inquiries are Institutionally Corrupt, We Should Just Give the Money to Victims, *The Guardian* [online]. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jun/17/public-inquiries-are-institutionally-corrupt-we-should-just-give-the-money-to-victims>.
- Kennedy, G.J. 2018. Public Inquiries’ Terms of Reference: Lessons from the Past—And for the Future. *Manitoba Law Journal* 41 (1): 317–342.
- Kenny, K., and N. Ó Dochartaigh. 2021. Power and Politics in Public Inquiries: Bloody Sunday 1972. *Journal of Political Power* 14 (3): 383–408.
- Kerr, P., and S. Kettell. 2006. In Defence of British Politics: The Past, Present and Future of the Discipline. *British Politics* 1 (1): 3–25.
- Kewell, B., and M. Beck. 2008. NHS Inquiries: A Time Series Analysis. *Public Money and Management* 28 (6): 375–382.
- Maiguashca, B., and J. Dean. 2020. ‘Lovely People but Utterly Deluded’? *British Political Science’s Problem with Corbynism*, *British Politics* 15 (1): 48–68.
- Marsh, D. 2008. Understanding British Government: Analysing Competing Models. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 10 (2): 251–268.
- Marsh, D. 2011. The New Orthodoxy: The Differentiated Polity Model. *Public Administration* 89 (1): 32–48.
- Marsh, D., and M. Hall. 2007. The British Political Tradition: Explaining the Fate of New Labour’s Constitutional Reform Agenda. *British Politics* 2 (3): 215–238.
- Marsh, D., and M. Hall. 2016. The British Political Tradition and the Material-Ideational Debate. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 18 (1): 125–142.
- Marsh, D., D. Richards, and M. Smith. 2003. Unequal Plurality: Towards an Asymmetric Power Model of British Politics. *Government and Opposition* 38 (3): 306–332.
- McEldowney, J. 1997. The Scott Report: Inquiries, Parliamentary Accountability and Government Control in Britain. *Democratization* 4 (4): 135–156.
- McLaughlin, E., and K. Murji. 1999. After the Stephen Lawrence Report. *Critical Social Policy* 19 (3): 371–385.
- Murphy, J. 2019. *The Discursive Construction of Blame: The Language of Public Inquiries*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- National Audit Office. 2018. *Investigation into Government-Funded Inquiries*. HC 836. London: House of Commons.
- Norris, E., and M. Shephard. 2017. *How Public Inquiries Can Lead to Change*. Online: Institute for Government. <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/PublicInquiries%28final%29.pdf>.
- Offe, C. 1984. *Contradictions of the Welfare State*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Peplow, S. 2017. Why People Have Long Questioned the Point of Inquiries, *The Conversation* [online]. Available via <https://theconversation.com/why-people-have-long-questioned-the-point-of-public-inquiries-86648>.
- Porter, S.L., G. Simonds, and R. Oliver. 1936. *Budget Disclosure Inquiry, Report of the Tribunal Appointed under the Tribunals of Inquiry (Evidence) Act, 1921*. Cmd. 5184. London: Stationary Office.



- Public Administration Select Committee (PASC). 2004. *Government by Inquiry: Minutes of Evidence, 11 November. HC606-vii*. London: House of Commons.
- Public Administration Select Committee (PASC). 2005. *Government by Inquiry. Volume I: Report, together with formal minutes and annexes*. HC 51-I. London: Stationary Office.
- Renå, H., and J. Christensen. 2020. Learning from Crisis: The Role of Enquiry Commissions. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 28 (1): 41–49.
- Resodihardjo, S.L. 2006. Wielding a Double-Edged Sword: The Use of Inquiries at Times of Crisis. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 14 (4): 199–206.
- Resodihardjo, S.L. 2020. *Crises, Inquiries and the Politics of Blame*. Cham: Palgrave Pivot.
- Rhodes, R.A.W. 2003. *Understanding Governance: Policy Networks, Governance, Reflexivity and Accountability*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Roach, K. 2014. Public Inquiries as an Attempt to Fill Accountability Gaps Left by Judicial and Legislative Review. In *Critical Debates on Counter-terrorism Judicial Review*, ed. F.F. Davis and F. de Londras, 183–206. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rolston, B., and P. Scraton. 2005. In the Full Glare of English Politics: Ireland, Inquiries and the British State. *British Journal of Criminology* 45 (4): 547–564.
- Rough, E. 2011. Policy Learning Through Public Inquiries? The case of UK nuclear energy policy 1955–61. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* 29 (1): 24–45.
- Rowe, M., ed. 2013P. *Policing beyond Macpherson: Issues in Policing, Race and Society*. Devon: Willan.
- Salmon, Lord. 1966. *Royal Commission on Tribunals of Inquiry. Cmnd. 2121*. London: Stationary Office.
- Salter, L. 1989. The Two Contradictions of Public Inquiries. *Dalhousie Law Journal* 12 (3): 173–196.
- Sandberg, J., and H. Tsoukas. 2015. Making Sense of the Sensemaking Perspective: Its Constituents, Limitations, and Opportunities for Further Development. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour* 36 (S1): 6–32.
- Scraton, P. 1999. Policing with Contempt: The Degrading of Truth and Denial of Justice in the Aftermath of the Hillsborough Disaster. *Journal of Law and Society* 26 (3): 273–297.
- Scraton, P. 2002. “Lost Lives, Hidden Voices”: “Truth” and Controversial Deaths. *Race & Class* 44 (1): 107–118.
- Scraton, P. 2013. The Legacy of Hillsborough: Liberating Truth. *Challenging Power, Race & Class* 55 (2): 1–27.
- Sedley, S. 1989. Public Inquiries: A Cure or a Disease? *The Modern Law Review* 52 (4): 469–479.
- Shackleton, L. 2021. The COVID Inquiry Will Be an Expensive Waste of Everyone's Time, *The Telegraph* [online]. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/authors/l/la-le/len-shackleton/>.
- Sørensen, E., K. Sehested, and A. Peterson. 2011. Emerging Theoretical Understandings of Pluricentric Coordination in Public Governance. *American Review of Public Administration* 41 (4): 375–394.
- Souhami, A. 2013. Understanding Institutional Racism: The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry and the Police Service Reaction. In *Policing Beyond Macpherson*, ed. M. Rowe, 90–111. London: Routledge.
- Stake, R.E. 2006. *Multiple Case Analysis*. London: Guilford.
- Stanley, N., and J. Manthorpe, eds. 2004. *The Age of the Inquiry: Learning and Blaming in Health and Social Care*. London: Routledge.
- Stark, A. 2019. Policy Learning and the Public Inquiry. *Policy Sciences* 52 (3): 397–417.
- Stark, A. 2020. Left on the Shelf: Explaining the Failure of Public Inquiry Recommendations. *Public Administration* 98 (3): 609–624.
- Stark, A., and S. Yates. 2021. Public Inquiries as Procedural Policy Tools. *Policy and Society* 40 (3): 345–361.
- Sulitzeanu-Kenan, R. 2006. If They Get It Right: An Experimental Test of the Effects of the Appointment and Reports of UK Public Inquiries. *Public Administration* 84 (3): 623–653.
- Sulitzeanu-Kenan, R. 2007. Scything the Long Grass: Agenda-Setting Consequences of Appointing Public Inquiries in the UK. *A Longitudinal Analysis, Policy & Politics* 35 (4): 629–650.
- Sulitzeanu-Kenan, R. 2010. Reflection in the Shadow of Blame: When Do Politicians Appoint Commissions of Inquiry? *British Journal of Political Science* 40 (3): 613–634.
- Sulitzeanu-Kenan, R. 2020. Blame Avoidance and Crisis Inquiries. In *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Politics*, ed. W.R. Thompson. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-1591>.
- Sulitzeanu-Kenan, R., and Y. Holzman-Gazit. 2016. Form and Content: Institutional Preferences and Public Opinion in a Crisis Inquiry. *Administration & Society* 48 (1): 3–30.



- Suter, T. 2011. A Very British Institution? *New Law Journal*, Issue 7483: 1321–1322.
- Thomas, P.D.G. 1971. *The House of Commons in the Eighteenth Century*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Thomas, O., and S. Cooper. 2020. Understanding Issue Salience, Social Inequality and the (Non) Appointment of UK Public Inquiries: A New Research Agenda. *Public Money & Management* 40 (6): 457–467.
- Tomkins, A. 1996. *Government Information and Parliament: Misleading by Design or by Default?*, 472–489. Autumn: Public Law.
- Ward, J.W., and B. Ward. 2022. From Brexit to COVID-19: The Johnson Government, Executive Centralisation and Authoritarian Populism, *Political Studies*, OnlineFirst.
- Warner, J. 2006. Inquiry Reports as Active Texts and Their Function in Relation to Professional Practice in Mental Health. *Health, Risk & Society* 8 (3): 223–237.
- Whyte, D. 1999. *Power, Ideology and the Regulation of Safety in the Post-Piper Alpha Offshore Oil Industry*. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis. Liverpool John Moores University. <https://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/5020/1/298002.pdf>.
- Williams, M., and P. Kevern. 2016. The Role and Impact of Recommendations from NHS Inquiries: A Critical Discourse Analysis. *Journal of New Writing in Health and Social Care* 2 (2): 1–11.
- Wood, M., and M. Flinders. 2014. Rethinking Depoliticization: Beyond the Governmental. *Policy & Politics* 42 (2): 151–170.
- Woolfson, C., J. Foster, and M. Beck. 1996. *Paying the Piper: Capital and Labour in Britain's Offshore Oil Industry*. London: Mansell.
- Wraith, R.E., and G.B. Lamb. 1971. *Public Inquiries as an Instrument of Government*. London: Allen & Unwin.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

