

1 Introduction

Democratic governance is defined by the regular rotation of elected leaders. Amidst the churn, the civil service is expected to act as the repository of received wisdom about past policies, including assessments of what works and what doesn't (Richards and Smith 2016). The claim is that to avoid repeating the same mistakes we need to know what happened last time and what the effects were. Institutional memory is thus central to the pragmatic task of governing.

There is a growing body of scholarship that questions whether declining institutional memory allows modern bureaucracies to fulfil this function adequately (Pollitt 2000, 2007, 2008, 2009; Wettenhall 2011; Rhodes and Tiernan 2014; Lindquist and Eichbaum 2016; Stark 2019; Stark and Head 2019). The argument is that a decline in institutional memory has occurred against a background of wider changes in the governance environment, including the advent of new public management (NPM), digital transformation, the influence of ministerial advisers, the twenty-four-hour news cycle and its impact on the increasing pace of government, and changing 'bargains' between political executives and the bureaucracy (Marsh and Rhodes 1992; Rhodes 1997; Hood and Lodge 2006; Marsh 2011). Increasingly, scholars characterise policy change as being steered by networks, with the siloed workings of departments being dragged into more collaborative ways of working across government and in co-production with the private sector and community organisations (Osborne 2009; Alford and O'Flynn 2012; Bartenberger and Sześciło 2016).

In this new environment no single actor or organisation is capable of retaining the full *memory* of a process of which they were simply one part. Rather, *memories* are necessarily dispersed. The key question for both academics and policymakers is, how can institutional memory continue to be captured when it is distributed so widely? If past ways of institutionalising memory are no longer sufficient in the fast and continuous information flows required for modern governance, then we need conceptual tools capable of seeing memory as something more than simply a file stored in a single location.

In this Element, we argue that one of the key reasons why institutional memory has become problematic is that it has been conceptualised in a 'static' manner more in keeping with an older way of doing government. This practice has assumed that knowledge on a given topic is held centrally (by government departments) and can be made explicit for the purpose of archiving. But, if government doesn't work this way then we shouldn't expect it to remember this way either. Policymaking itself is messy and draws on many

kinds of imperfect evidence (see Cairney 2016). Policy memory is equally messy. Instead of static repositories of summative documents holding a singular ‘objective’ memory, in this Element we propose a more ‘dynamic’ people-centred conceptualisation that sees institutional memory as a composite of intersubjective memories open to change. This draws to the fore the role of actors as crucial interpreters of memory, combining the documentary record with their own perspectives to create stories about the past.

What Is Institutional Memory?

The idea that memory is central to the task of governing is hardly new. Lindblom’s (1959) model of ‘muddling through’ highlights that policies tend to be developed incrementally, and in this sense institutional memories are important for enabling ‘tried and tested’ policies from the past to resurface and, with small modifications, be used again. Similarly, there are now well-established theoretical perspectives on historical institutionalism and path dependency which argue that the past constrains the future (Pierson 2000, 2004; Bell 2011; Lowndes and Roberts 2013). The recent emergence of more actor-centred variants of institutionalism foreground the power of agents in creating change through ideas and discourse, giving shape to how individuals in government perceive their work (Schmidt 2008; Bevir and Rhodes 2010; Bell 2011; Hay 2011; Rhodes 2011). This has particular resonance for the study of institutional memory. Whether through the conscious agency of actors, or some more formalised organisational structure, what institutions remember affects the way they frame future tasks.

As this work illustrates, institutional memory has been implicitly central to the study of public administration for decades, but it is only recently that scholars have turned to its explicit study in a systematic way (Pollitt 2000, 2007, 2008, 2009; Wettenhall 2011; Rhodes and Tiernan 2014). This emerging literature has both empirical and normative aims. Empirically scholars have sought to understand and explain the ways policymakers remember the past. The normative claim is that institutional amnesia is a barrier to policy learning. That is, if the past is neglected then governments are destined to repeat failures (see Pollitt 2008; King and Crewe 2013; Stark 2019; Stark and Head 2019). The decline thesis is therefore more than an intellectual enterprise; it seeks to instantiate change to the processes and practices of remembering in order to improve policymaking.

The scholar who has done the most to advance the recent discussion of institutional memory in government is Christopher Pollitt (2000, 2007, 2008, 2009). Pollitt cites a range of both endogenous and exogenous factors as

contributing to the decline of institutional memory. He suggests that high rotation of staff, changes in IT systems which prevent proper archiving, regular organisational restructuring, rewarding management skills above all others, and adopting new management ‘fads’ as they become popular provide a perfect recipe for loss of institutional memory within organisations (Pollitt 2008: 173). According to Pollitt, the managerialist attitudes present in contemporary forms of government that favour constant change have encouraged the kind of ‘contempt for the past’ that underpins failures in record-keeping (Pollitt 2009: 207).

While Pollitt has been the most prolific contributor to academic arguments in favour of restoring institutional memory, he is not alone in lamenting its decline. Wettenhall (2011: 86) similarly identifies the new ways of doing government as enabling the factors that drive institutional memory loss, including cost-cutting drives, record-keeping functions developing a status as ‘non-core’ or unimportant, and frequent reorganising and changes to the workforce and downsizing. Using the case of Australia, Rhodes and Tiernan (2014: 214) suggest that geography has further compounded the problem of diminishing institutional memory, with the move to new Parliament House in 1988 isolating ministers and the prime minister from the public service.

How Is It Different to Policy Learning?

A problem with this conceptualisation of institutional memory is that it is hard to distinguish the concept from policy learning (Bennett and Howlett 1992: 288; for a fuller discussion see Dunlop and Radaelli 2013). Our first conceptual move is thus to differentiate between *learning* and *memory*. Bennett and Howlett (1992: 288) define policy learning very broadly as ‘the general increase in knowledge about policies’. Based on this definition we could perhaps conceive of a continuum from learning to memory with an inflection point where one starts and the other stops. But this is easier to imagine than it is to measure empirically. It also doesn’t acknowledge the forms memories take and the ways memories are contested, suppressed and actively forgotten, as well as the ways in which policy memories and ideas are transferred from elsewhere (Cairney 2009). Equally, there is no definitive point of disjunction between those components of learning and memory that are essentially documentary in nature and those that reside in the experience of individuals. Individuals build shared memories in which documents and their own experience combine to create a story of what happened. These stories are held at the level of organisations, and are given institutional form by the ways they help to shape future action as actors recall these past stories when faced with a new challenge. This helps to explain why the literature has not produced a definitive distinction between

‘organisational memory’ and ‘institutional memory’, with many authors using the terms almost interchangeably. For instance, Pollitt (2009: 202) often uses ‘organisational memory’, defined as ‘consisting of a range of “storage” locations ... the experience and knowledge of the existing staff: what is “in their heads” ... the technical systems, including electronic databases and various kinds of paper records ... The management system ... and the norms and values of the organizational culture’.

The Role of Narrative

To resolve these conceptual shortcomings, we draw on the pioneering work of Linde and Czarniawska. Linde’s (2009: 11) work on institutional memory and narrative foregrounds the role of interpretation by suggesting that memories are ‘representations of the past’. As she puts it, ‘[i]nstitutions certainly make efforts to preserve aspects of their past, to find and retrieve some of these representations of the past, and to use them in the present to influence the future. Let us call it memory’ (Linde 2009: 11). She then differentiates the different ‘modes of remembering’ that are available. ‘[T]here exist a spectrum of modes of remembering within institutions. These range from strategies relying on individual human memory and transmissions from human to human, through archival and computer storage of documents ... to organisational policies and procedures and even physical infrastructure’ (Linde 2009: 11).

Uniting Linde and Pollitt’s approaches to institutional memory are two things. First, an emphasis on knowledge (and hence the close link to studies of policy learning). We can read Linde as viewing memory and learning as inextricably interrelated, operating as an iterative duality. We therefore define memories as the ‘representations of the past’ that actors draw on to *narrate* what has been learned when developing and implementing policy. When these narratives are embedded in *processes* they become ‘institutionalised’. It is this emphasis on *embedded narratives* that distinguishes institutional memory from policy learning and its emphasis on increasing or improving knowledge about policy. Institutional memory may facilitate policy learning but equally, ‘static’ memories may prohibit genuine adaptation and innovation. As a result, while there is an obvious affinity between the two concepts it is imperative that they remain distinct avenues of enquiry. Policy learning has unequivocally positive connotations that are echoed in some conceptualisations of institutional memory (e.g. Pollitt). But, equally, memory (at least in a ‘static’ form) can be said to provide administrative agents with an advantage over political principals.

Second, this work draws attention to the different *forms* that institutional memory takes – residing within people, documents, policies and procedures and

so on. Recognition of the different forms memories take highlights the significance of communication in the processes and practices of remembering. Here, we turn to Czarniawska's work on knowledge, narrative and organisational identity. Drawing on literary theory in particular, Czarniawska (1997: 6) shifts the emphasis from knowledge as something that is 'out there' waiting to be discovered to the forms in which knowledge is cast and the effects this has on institutions: 'The narrative mode of knowing consists in organizing experience with the help of a scheme assuming the intentionality of human action' (Czarniawska 2004: 18). The point, from our perspective, is that memory is more than a collection of facts and figures; it functions as a dramatised story (Boje 1991a, 1991b). It has a plot. It has characters. There are different genres. But all have a narrative arc that operates to sequence key events and decisions which then take shape as stories masquerading as memories. As Czarniawska puts it, "'The company suffered unprecedented losses" and "the general manager was forced to resign" are two events that call for interpretation ... the difference lies in the temporal ordering, and suggested connection between the two' (Czarniawska 1997: 14). In other words, 'some kind of causality may be inferred but it is crucial to see that narrative, unlike science, leaves open the nature of the connection' (Czarniawska 2004: 18).

In relation to our arguments here, the key point is that institutionalising memory – embedding representations of the past in processes – is not something that only occurs after a given policy decision is taken, or a policy implemented, but rather actors are continuously engaged in this dynamic practice. As Czarniawska (1997: 24) highlights, faced with the task of accounting for their actions, actors justify themselves by employing their knowledge of the institution and its past in narrative form to explain why they did what they did. Like Linde, Czarniawska argues that repertoires vary, but the goal – to create a narrative that is as coherent as possible – is similar to all individuals and the institutions they inhabit. Indeed, we might go as far as to claim that it is the appearance of a coherent narrative that constitutes the institution (Bevir and Rhodes 2010; Corbett and Howard 2017). Institutional memory is thus, for Czarniawska, a never-ending form of storytelling in which the key institutional questions are, who are we? what do we do? and how do we typically operate?

Are There 'Better' Memories and If So How Might They Be Captured?

Having established a working conception of institutional memory that emphasises its narrative, storytelling form, it is also necessary to examine its purpose – what is institutional memory for and what impact can it have on an organisation?

Walsh and Ungson (1991) distinguish between several different functions of institutional memory, including learning, impacts on organisational culture, and the entrenchment of existing power bases. Pollitt's thesis emphasises (and laments the decline of) the positive effect of memory on decision-making. Early literature on institutional memory described negative and positive effects of remembering the past. Those emphasising negative effects suggested that memories limit the range of solutions that an institution will consider (March 1972, 2010; Nystrom and Starbuck 1984). Authors emphasising positive effects suggested that memories of past events can result in improved decision-making through better anticipating causal associations (Duncan and Weiss 1979; Schon 1983). For the most part, however, these authors relied on a 'static' conceptualisation of institutional memory. We venture that a more 'dynamic' conceptualisation has the potential to mitigate some of the negatives and accentuate some of the advantages that these scholars identify.

How an institution might improve its memory is intrinsically linked to how memory is defined and whether or not it is in decline. If we follow Pollitt's view that memory is about the archive of accumulated knowledge that is being ignored or deliberately dismantled by managerialism, then the answer involves returning to an older way of doing government that placed a higher value on experience. By placing a higher value on the past as a resource, institutions would reduce staff turnover, and stop regular restructures, changes in IT systems and so on. For those of us who work in an institution where restructuring and IT changes are the norm, this solution has obvious attractions. But, would it improve memory? Or would it simply make it easier to preserve the status quo (a process that involves actively forgetting disruptive but generative innovations)?

By contrast, if institutional memory operates as a form of storytelling that links past policy lessons with present policy problems, it is reasonable to then ask whether it's possible to distinguish between 'true' and 'false' memories in a narrative mode of knowing. Again, we build on Czarniawska, who argues that in a narrative mode, the plausibility of the knowledge claim is determined by the plot. Thus, 'A narrative which says "The top managers resigned and then it rained a whole week" (i.e. a narrative with no plot or an incomprehensible plot) will need some additional elements to make sense of it, even though the two events and their temporal connection may well be true and correct in themselves' (Czarniawska 2004: 18). In which case, a narrative approach to knowledge and memory that emphasises its dynamic nature does not mean abandoning agreed facts or truths, but rather recognises that they cannot speak for themselves. In being spoken, however, they reveal a polyphony of interpretations, subplots and rival accounts. It is these rival accounts that illustrate the dynamic nature of institutional memory.

Our definition, relying as it does on a more dynamic conceptualisation of memory, is sceptical about the need to improve practices of remembering. But, if an institution did want to remember better we would favour increasing the opportunity for actors within an institution to reflect on and narrate the past. We return to this point in Section 6, where we explore a number of issues pertinent for organisations wishing to improve memory retention and use, as well as for scholars researching processes of governance that touch on institutional memory.

Towards a Dynamic View of Memories in Institutional Contexts

Existing work has highlighted the need for governments to rethink memory, not simply as a record of the past but as a vital tool for building the policy future. But, with the exception of Linde and Czarniawska, to date the proposed solutions to the perceived decline in institutional memory largely involve recourse to older ways of doing government. Even if returning to the past were desirable, we argue that it is no longer feasible because of the dispersed nature of contemporary governance (Hendriks 2009; Marsh 2011; Bouckaert 2017). Working across agency boundaries is now ‘essential to the core business of government’ (Carey and Crammond 2015:1020) and ‘the new normal’ (Sullivan 2015: 120–122). To build on Pollitt’s work, we therefore argue that a dynamic conception of institutional memory must include knowledge that is both scattered between organisations and difficult to express. Ontologically, we follow Linde and Czarniawska in a shift away from the recording of objective ‘facts’ on a paper file, and towards an understanding of institutional memories as dynamic ‘live conversations.’ Epistemologically, this means a shift to allow for the construction and interpretation of multiple memories rather than one agreed memory such as that which might be rendered by a set of minutes. To capture this, we need to build a new way of conceptualising institutional memories from the ground up. These shifts are outlined in Table 1.

As we illustrate in our empirical discussion in the sections that follow, current practitioners provide evidence that supports Pollitt’s contentions around a decline in institutional memory, but remain unsure about how the decline can be arrested. Stopping position churn, reinserting public servants into ministerial offices, reinvigorating better record management practices and other decisions would arguably still not enable governments to capture distributed memory. Instead, thinking of memories as ‘living conversations’ spread across a hybrid of actors offers opportunities for breaking down this kind of individualised atomisation of memory, and suggests new avenues for retaining it.

A dynamic conceptualisation thus emphasises how the past is communicated, rather than merely recorded, with the telling of stories playing a central role

Table 1 The Spectrum of Institutional Memories

‘Static’ Institutional Memory	‘Dynamic’ Institutional Memories
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Located in individual departments• Summative – end-of-project evaluation• Focused on the civil service• Takes a material form: paper or digital files	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Whole-of-government memory processes• Formative – an iterative conversation• Held in common across hybrids of actors• Is about people: stored as ‘living’ memory through a combination of fresh perspectives, individual agency and shared stories

(Czarniawska 1997; Linde 2009; Rhodes 2011; Stark 2019). For example, Linde argues that ‘occasions’ (such as staff functions, speeches, etc.) represent environments in which stories about an organisation’s history, purpose and trajectory are rehearsed and internalised. They represent the moments when ‘the process of institutional remembering can be deliberately altered’ (Linde 2009: 222). She suggests that while an institution keeps existing, new stories will be added to the collection of disasters (what not to do), triumphs (what to do) and changes in direction, and new ‘heroes’ will emerge to act as role models for others to follow (Linde 2009: 222).

A more dispersed form of memory does not of course guarantee dynamism. It is theoretically possible for even a widely dispersed memory to remain trapped within locked documentary files, or indeed untold by individuals, and thus held mute in multiple places by dispersed actors. What causes static memory to become dynamic is constant retrieval and re-evaluation through social interaction between actors as they translate static documents into living memories. This reflects the nature of the spectrum outlined in Table 1 as being relatively fluid rather than a stark binary. For example, government reports frequently have a narrative grow around them that becomes embedded as part of the story. As we discuss in our case study on the roll-out of smart meters in Victoria, Australia (Section 3), key documents like the auditor-general’s report remain an integral part of the memory of that policy implementation process and the ‘story’ of failure that is told about it, acting to reinforce the credibility of the story.

This emphasis on storytelling offers an inherently iterative conceptual key for unlocking a more dynamic form of institutional memory. It draws our attention to *actors* as the key disseminators and repositories of memory. A dynamic

approach to institutional memories therefore conceptualises storytelling as a *social* phenomenon that can be exchanged both within and between organisations. It conceives of memories as the intersubjective retelling of events that imbues them with *meaning*. In which case, remembering is not so much about retrieving facts and files, but received traditions: ways of seeing the world and acting in it.

Method and Data

If memories are fundamentally about storytelling, and this way of thinking has empirical salience in highly networked and differentiated policy environments, then evaluating whether current practices and processes of remembering differ from the more static conceptualisation requires a particular approach to collecting and analysing data. In particular, the emphasis on storytelling invokes the main precepts of the discursive turn in the social and policy sciences (Fischer 2003; Schmidt 2008, 2010; Stone 2012). It also moves us away from more traditional variants of historical institutionalism towards more ‘actor-centred’ approaches (e.g. Bell 2011) and what Bevir and Rhodes (2010) term ‘situated agency’ (see Smullen 2010; Elston 2014; Corbett and Howard 2017). The point of this distinction is that by recognising the plurality of actors and their memories, the latter approach offers a more dynamic rendering than the former static view.

Many of Pollitt’s (2008) empirical observations on institutional memory are based on British, Australian and New Zealand cases. Following Pollitt, we draw our case studies from the same jurisdictions, both to hold the Westminster system of government constant (see Rhodes, Wanna and Weller 2009), and to test whether a more dynamic version of institutional memory could mitigate against the declines that Pollitt finds in those jurisdictions. Our aim in presenting these case studies – explored in Sections 2 to 5 – is to illustrate, rather than ‘prove’, that our conceptualisation has empirical purchase (Boswell, Corbett and Rhodes 2019). That is, we aim, building on the work of others, to reorient the field, and so this Element is designed as the first stone rather than the last word.

In each of our four sections our empirical material is similar: for each we drew on a combination of in-depth interviews with key actors and the public record to both reconstruct the process by which the policy in question was made, and probe how memory was captured in each instance. The interviewees in each case study were deliberately chosen in order to ensure both a vertical and horizontal spread. Vertically, we set out to capture the insights of heads of agency *and* the mid-level civil servants undertaking the substantive policy

Table 2 Dataset

Case Study	Dataset	National or Subnational	Collaboration across Government, or between Government and External Actors
Family Violence Action Plan, Tasmania (Australia)	9 interviews and public documents	Subnational	Across government
Smart Meters Victoria (Australia)	11 interviews and public documents	Subnational	Government and external actors
Zero Carbon Homes, United Kingdom	10 interviews, public documents, memoirs	National	Government and external actors
The justice sector, New Zealand	10 interviews and public documents	National	Across government

work. Horizontally, in the two case studies representing hybrid collaborations – in Victoria, Australia and the United Kingdom – we interviewed not just government actors, but also representatives from collaborating organisations to see whether their ‘memories’ of a particular policy process matched or not, and to compare policy learning. Table 2 summarises our approach.

Key Findings

Table 3 captures the ways in which memories were meaningfully operationalised to prevent memory loss across our four policy case studies. These four dynamic forms of institutional memory are explored across Sections 2 to 5, with each section discussing one type of dynamic memory.

The empirical analysis in the sections that follow illustrates how narratives become embedded in institutional processes and practices, with actors combining documentary records and files with their own memories of what happened. What emerges over time are collective stories that frame past events as a success or failure. But, while their embedded nature implies path dependence, we caution that they nevertheless remain open to change as actors reinterpret the degree of success or failure in light of new information and events. It is this ability to recast memories that renders them dynamic.