EXPLORING LEGITIMACY IN MAJOR PUBLIC PROCUREMENT PROJECTS

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**ABSTRACT**

In the UK, major IT public procurement projects regularly fail at significant cost to the taxpayer.  The prevalence of these failures presents scholars with a challenge; to both understand their genesis and to facilitate learning and prevention. Functional approaches have revealed numerous determinants of failure ranging from procurement specifications to risk escalation, but true and definitive causes remain elusive.  However, since failure is not itself an absolute truth, but rather a concept which is reached when support is withdrawn, the survival of a project depends on there being sufficient belief in its legitimacy.  We use critical hermeneutic methods and the conceptual lens of legitimacy to reveal powerful legitimating influences that enable and constrain action, but which are not analysed in the retrospective government inquiries that determine lessons learned.

**INTRODUCTION**

Annually, the U.K. public sector procures around £238bn from the private sector, a third of its total expenditure and manages in excess of 3000 large procurement projects and tens of thousands of smaller projects, totalling hundreds of billions of pounds ([Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2012](#_ENREF_22)). Public sector projects, be they large-scale infrastructure or IT reform projects, are technologically and logistically complex ventures. Concern continues to grow about the frequency and cost of project failures ([Flyvbjerg, 2009](#_ENREF_38); [Merrow, 2011](#_ENREF_74)), a problem that has been challenging governments for decades. Despite numerous reviews, governance structures, and lessons learned inquiries, still public projects are failing at a current rate of two in every three ([Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2012](#_ENREF_22)) and retrospectively commissioned lessons learned inquiries firmly place the blame on procurement processes and project management. In these reports, project failures become project management failures ([Parker, 2002](#_ENREF_89)).

Major public procurements begin at a political ideological level, where a project is legitimated into existence by the macro, context-laden myth and rhetoric that successfully secure resources for that project over others. As approved projects journey from cabinet offices into the ministerial departments tasked with delivery, true costs begin to emerge, and cognition diverges. It is here we begin to see the familiar phenomenon of escalation of commitment. We mark a departure from the deterministic tendency to blame poor procurement and project management for escalating, failing projects, seen in the retrospective analysis by government-commissioned auditors or consultants, that tend to focus on process.  These evaluations of projects that have been deemed failures take place long after legitimacy and belief systems have been dismantled, so the very processes that idealised, framed and maintained the project are not those that are analysed in the search for answers.  Illustrated through the FiReControl case, we show how for example powerful political rhetoric and institutional logics can create legitimacy at multiple levels, combining to create and move the colossal “project machine”, which influences the seemingly rational actions of decision-makers to escalate commitment to a failing course of action. Through this second-order approach we challenge the assumptions of major public procurement projects to shed new light on the lessons learned. We explore the role of legitimacy to provide explanatory power to the theory of escalation of commitment in failed public procurement projects. We contribute to the research and policy agenda by challenging the dominant functionalist approaches of the lessons learned process through two complementary lenses. The first lens is methodological. We call for a move from functionalist public research that elevates rationality in decision-making, to a critical hermeneutic approach that explores context and meaning to provide substantive insights into existing public procurement and project thinking. Secondly, we draw on the theoretical lens of legitimacy to explain the antecedents to escalation of commitment. From this position we illustrate how the legitimating devices that influence decisions and action within projects are not the things which are scrutinised in post-analysis audits and inquiries that powerfully claim to know and disseminate lessons learned. Indeed, we argue that these inquiries themselves are part of the legitimating process, thus will tend to produce “more of the same” process-failure conclusions, and that ever tighter procurement and project management can still result in failure. Without this challenge the public sector will continue on its existing cycle of providing ever tighter project controls through its lessons learned inquiries but projects will still fail, suggesting that the current processes may be necessary but are not sufficient.

We use the initial launch of the UK’s FiReControl case to provide an illustrative example of how threads of legitimacy develop at multiple levels, combining to create and move the colossal “project machine”, which influences the seemingly rational actions of decision-makers to escalate commitment to a failing course of action. Our hermeneutically-analysed extract forms part of a wider study exploring the role of legitimacy and escalation of commitment throughout the full project lifecycle. Given the space limitations of this paper, the case analysis here is exploratory only to highlight how the methodological argument for critical hermeneutics can be applied to challenge the assumptions of major public procurement projects and shed new light on the lessons learned.

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

**Failure in Major Public Procurement Projects**

Failure in public projects can have economic, societal, community and health implications ([Sage, Dainty, & Brookes, 2013](#_ENREF_98)) and can destroy value and add risk to supply chains. There is an acceptance that a range of stakeholders, including procurement through the commissioning process, have a view, and role, on the perceived success or failure of a project ([Turner, Anbari, & Bredillet, 2013](#_ENREF_112)) although the research tends towards narrow, functionalist approaches ([Söderlund, 2011](#_ENREF_103)) building on early studies that identify issues including budget and schedule overruns, lack of clear objectives and scope creep ([Merrow, McDonnell, & Arguden, 1988](#_ENREF_75); [Merrow, Phillips, & Myers, 1981](#_ENREF_76)). The project failure literature has two predominant schools of thought. The first, the Factor School is grounded in descriptive, statistical research of the criteria of project success and failure ([Söderlund, 2011](#_ENREF_103)) and has led to the development of standardised tools and methods to improve project control and efficiency ([Styhre, 2006](#_ENREF_108)). The second school of thought is the Decision School. This school tends to favour interpretative methods ([Söderlund, 2011](#_ENREF_103)) to describe the role of politics and decision-making in projects ([Davis, 1985](#_ENREF_21)) and covers issues of over-optimism ([Lovallo & Kahneman, 2003](#_ENREF_68)) and the reluctance to cancel failing projects ([Green, Welsh, & Dehler, 2003](#_ENREF_50)).

The Decision School, in common with major projects research, has its origins in the early experimental studies of escalation of commitment, a phenomenon where otherwise rational people commit additional resources to a failing course of action ([Fox & Staw, 1979](#_ENREF_41); [Staw, 1976](#_ENREF_105); [Staw & Fox, 1977](#_ENREF_106)). Later escalation research develops an alternative conceptual framework where escalation results from difficult decision dilemmas rather than a behavioural tendency to ‘throw good money after bad’ ([Bowen, 1987](#_ENREF_10)). It has been argued that considering escalation of commitment as persistence beyond an economically defensible level misses the point, as escalation is result of decision rationales which people create for themselves ([Drummond, 1996a](#_ENREF_28)). In the case study analysis of escalation in decision making in the London Stock Exchange’s *Taurus Project*, there is evidence of both decision dilemmas and social psychological factors as motivating factors in escalation ([Drummond, 1996a](#_ENREF_28); [Drummond, 1998](#_ENREF_30)). Studies of the project identify self-interest for escalation through the elevation of individual changes over the greater interests of the project resulting in unmanageable complexity. In addition, superficial levels of due diligence decision making are evidenced where agents carry out roles expected of them without challenge as “attention is riveted upon solving the problem rather than questioning the problem itself” ([Drummond, 1996a, p.124](#_ENREF_28)). Decision dilemmas are compounded through a chain of decisions that establish a dominant myth ([Drummond, 1996b](#_ENREF_29)), created partly through the use of future perfect strategies ([Clegg, Pitsis, Rura-Polley, & Marosszeky, 2002](#_ENREF_18); [Pitsis, Clegg, Marosszeky, & Rura-Polley, 2003](#_ENREF_91)). These fantasised outcomes shape the processes of decision- making including the overestimation of benefits and underestimation of costs ([Atkin, 2012](#_ENREF_3); [Flyvbjerg, 2008](#_ENREF_37); [Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, & Rothengatter, 2003](#_ENREF_39); [Miller & Lessard, 2001](#_ENREF_78)) further embedding the myth. Many technology projects by their nature are new and lack evidence of their results ([Georgiadou, 2003](#_ENREF_44)), thus the myth creates the seductive vision necessary to ensure actors take part without being convinced of the project being practicable in economic, contractual and technical respects ([Kreiner & Winch, 2008](#_ENREF_66)). The departure from traditional research in this area explores macro-level forces where a series of decisions define escalation as the establishment of a dominant myth, which must be destroyed and replaced with a new myth if a failing project is to be terminated ([Drummond, 1996a](#_ENREF_28)). Fundamental to decision makers’ ability to destroy a dominant myth is power as it requires institutionalised norms of behaviour to be overcome ([Drummond, 1996a](#_ENREF_28)). Power is available from the various sources on which to act decisively; audit reports, changes in leadership and monitoring groups.

The wider socio-economic environment contextualises the meaning and legitimatisation of public sector goals and their project outcomes ([Romzek & Dubnick, 1987](#_ENREF_96)) yet is outside the remit of project management ([Sage, et al., 2013](#_ENREF_98)). For major public projects, procurement’s role is leading the tendering, sourcing and contract negotiation phases of a project to ensure regulatory compliance, prudent use of the public purse and third-party delivery of expected outcomes. Despite efforts to reflect impact measures in the procurement process, the downstream project management methodologies isolate projects from the societal context ([Hodgson & Cicmil, 2007](#_ENREF_56), [2008](#_ENREF_57)). The delivery of outcomes is often beyond a technical scope and it can be difficult to develop predefined criteria for outcomes that can be appraised through a procurement contract given their emergent or ambiguous nature ([Tryggestad, Georg, & Hernes, 2010](#_ENREF_111)). Failure goes beyond technical failure. Public projects can meet functional specifications but still fail to increase underpinning goals of productivity, efficiency or modernisation ([Goldfinch, 2007](#_ENREF_45)) and their temporal nature is such that initial assessments of a projects success can change when consequences are revealed with the passing of time ([Huang, Makoju, Newell, & Galliers, 2003](#_ENREF_59)). Despite the ubiquitous nature of project failure and the quantity of research in this area none appears to have been particularly useful in preventing failure ([Goldfinch, 2007](#_ENREF_45)) and organisations fail to draw lessons from previous failures ([Lyytinen & Robey, 1999](#_ENREF_70)). This is in part owing to the reliance on functionalist, instrumental views of projects and organisations ([Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006](#_ENREF_17)). There is a call to shift the research agenda away from the search for ‘better’ theories, and move instead to studies that conceptualise the limits of the procurement and project management processes ([Sage, et al., 2013](#_ENREF_98)), recognising that ever-tighter processes can still result in failure. This requires the stripping away of dominant, conflated and potentially self-fulfilling, deterministic theories of projects to probe the ideology and assumptions of public projects that are often accepted as unproblematic by its advocates ([Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011](#_ENREF_2)). This is important to break the cycle of ‘more of the same’ approaches that typically focus on procurement or project management failures and can create conceptual blindness and obscure the complexities at play.

**Lessons Learned in Major Public Projects**

In addition to internal project controls, major public procurements and projects are subject to the scrutiny of several official overseers including the Major Projects Authority (MPA), the Office of Government Commerce (OGC), the National Audit Office (NAO) and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC). Launched in 2011, the MPA is a partnership between the Cabinet Office the HM Treasury and is tasked with overseeing the management of all central government funded major projects, with lessons learned one of its four pillars of operation ([Cabinet Office, 2013](#_ENREF_15)). The NAO and the PAC are the two key audit institutions. The NAO is a parliamentary rather than a government agency and since devolution in the UK it works alongside Audit Scotland, the Wales Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Audit Office to generate financial savings. The NAO is responsible for the financial auditing of central government accounts and for the production of circa 60 value for money (VFM) audit reports annually on selected issues ([Dunleavy & Britain, 2009](#_ENREF_33)). Each VFM report takes between 6-12months to complete and the NAO costs £73.9 million a year and employs 900 staff ([Dunleavy & Britain, 2009](#_ENREF_33)). The ultimate purveyor of received wisdom in lessons learned for public projects is the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), whose main work is to examine the VFM reports produced by the NAO. PACs are common across the commonwealth countries and their focus is to identify lessons learned and to assess the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of government departments’ spend. Despite their underpinning role in the public sector reform agenda, their role has been criticised as paradoxical ([Jones & Jacobs, 2006](#_ENREF_61)) given that their focus is on managerialism rather than political oversight ([Gray & Jenkins, 1993](#_ENREF_47)). In a similar vein, it has been posited that their role does not examine public accounts *per se*, rather their role is consideration of NAO reports ([McGee, 2002](#_ENREF_73)) and there is often an exclusive concentration on financial probity ([Pelizzo & Stapenhurst, 2007](#_ENREF_90)). The economic positioning of the PAC limits its ability to challenge values, beliefs, behaviours and underpinning assumptions stemming from political rhetoric, which prevents learning in these areas and reduces lessons learned to functional failures. This position is highlighted in the NAO’s publication on lessons learned ([National Audit Office, 2009](#_ENREF_84)) that criticises governments departments for not learning the lessons it presents and for their lack of reflection on performance, yet does not recognise its own performance as part of a two-way learning process.

Project success is measured on the realisation of expected outcomes while project management success measures whether it was on-time, within budget and on-quality ([Young, Young, Jordan, & O'Connor, 2012](#_ENREF_121)). The realisation of expected outcomes is a more important outcome ([Cooke-Davies, 2002](#_ENREF_20)), particularly given the nature of public projects. The evidence from empirical studies suggests only a weak relationship however between project management success and delivery of expected outcomes ([Markus, Axline, Petrie, & Tanis, 2000](#_ENREF_72); [Young, 2006](#_ENREF_119)). The lessons learned cycle of PAC and NAO reports aligns to conventional wisdom to improve procurement controls and focus on tighter project methodologies, both requiring more stakeholder involvement, planning and high quality staff ([Young & Jordan, 2008](#_ENREF_120)). Yet despite these lessons being implemented failure rates persist suggesting that these functionalist areas are inadequate ([Young, et al., 2012](#_ENREF_121)).

**METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES**

Claims of procurement and project management inadequacies in failed projects are common conclusions of government inquiries. Whilst acknowledging the deterministic findings of these conventional lessons learned approaches, the taken-for-granted assumptions implicit in public inquiries and their methods fail to be acknowledged. People interpret institutions, actions and artefacts differently and attach different meaning to them ([Lee, 1991](#_ENREF_67)). From this position the general claims of functionalist public project research and audit analyses fail to acknowledge subjective meaning and confidently assume objectivity and rationality. Traditional public project inquiries marginalise procurement and project roles by reducing them to implementers of control and scope management, and further, the approaches assume rationality, universality, objectivity and value-free decision-making, perpetuating a causal link between failure and process control ([Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006](#_ENREF_17)).

Social sciences cannot claim to be universal or predictive because they are always context-dependent ([Flyvbjerg, 2001](#_ENREF_35)). Rule-based knowledge, as represented through PAC accounts of procurement and project process shortcomings, have their place in understanding project failure and lessons learned but it is regressive to elevate its status to the highest goal of learning ([Flyvbjerg, 2001](#_ENREF_35)) . A model of skill acquisition ([Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986](#_ENREF_27)) highlights the issue as people pass through five distinct stages of learning - novice, competence, proficiency, expertise, and mastery. Rule-based thinking is the most important basis for action in the first three levels. In the latter two, logic-based action is replaced by experience rooted in context and intuition where experts simply perform an act and do not consciously separate the identities of problems from solutions ([Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986](#_ENREF_27)). Rather than increasing skills levels indicating increasingly rational acts, performance reaches its rational peak when skills are acquired to a competent level, thereafter, analytical rationality declines and gives way to expert level arationality ([Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986](#_ENREF_27)). Experts perform optimally with a diminished dependency on specific rules for action ([Brown, 2013](#_ENREF_12)). Intelligent action, which is likely to dominate given the scale and complexity of major public projects, consists of something other than calculated, analytical rationality ([Flyvbjerg, 2001](#_ENREF_35)). The skill acquisition model demonstrates the need to see beyond rational levels of behaviour and recognises the criticality of tacit knowledge ([Collins & Evans, 2007](#_ENREF_19)). The lessons learned approach in public projects predominantly uses rule-governed measures to evaluate rule-governed behaviours that are found only at the lower levels of the learning process. Such inquiry consistently fails to appreciate the tacit skills, values-governed, context-dependent behaviour that is at play in complex projects.

**Phronetic Research**

Therefore, challenging conventional approaches in an effort to understand more about project failure, we argue that a different research approach is needed for analysing public projects that acknowledges rules-based behaviour, logic and rationality whilst promoting the criticality of context and the relevance of the particular. There is a call for a revival of Aristotelian phronesis in organisational research ([Flyvbjerg, 2006](#_ENREF_36); [Griggs & Howarth, 2012](#_ENREF_51)). Phronesis is primarily about peoples’ actions – i.e. what they do and it emphasises the particular context of behaviour over universality and rules. It is concerned with context-specific values, judgement and practical wisdom, attributing at least equal importance to behaviour as to the other two intellectual virtues suggested by Aristotle, episteme (scientific knowledge) and techne (skill) ([Flyvbjerg, 2001](#_ENREF_35)). An emerging dimension of contemporary phroentic research is the incorporation of power to studies of human and organisational behaviour, to enable studies to answer more impact-relevant questions such as ‘where are we going?’; ‘is it desirable?’; and ‘what should be done’? ([Flyvbjerg, 2001](#_ENREF_35)). The introduction of power to the phronetic research agenda adds an additional question of ‘who gains and who loses, and by which mechanism of power?’ ([Flyvbjerg, 2001](#_ENREF_35)).

In light of the frequency and cost of project failures in the public sector ([Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2012](#_ENREF_22)), and importantly the suggestion that lessons learned are not preventing failure ([Goldfinch, 2007](#_ENREF_45)), the questions of ‘where we are going, and is it desirable?’ are depressingly predictable. We call for research that helps to further our understanding of the second two questions – what should be done, and who are winners and losers? We contribute to this debate through exploring how powerful rhetoric created legitimacy in the context of the FiReControl project, and providing explanation for how the power dynamic sustained seemingly rational actions of decision-makers to escalate commitment to a failing course of action.

**Critical Hermeneutic Methods**

To ensure the primacy of context as required in phronetic research ([Flyvbjerg, Landman, & Schram, 2012](#_ENREF_40)) we use a critical hermeneutic methodology to illustrate how different methods can extend our understanding of failed public projects, beyond a functionalist rule-based view of procurement and project control deficiencies. In the limits of this paper, we argue for new phronetic-orientated research agenda to add a deeper understanding of arational behaviour in major public projects. We provide an illustrative example of phronetically-rooted critical hermeneutics methodology that demonstrates how legitimacy was created and maintained in the case of UK’s FiReControl project, and how this contributes to escalation of commitment. Critical hermeneutics is a method particularly suited to public administration research ([Balfour & Mesaros, 1994](#_ENREF_5)) as it understands action as opposing performances driven by ideological-moral views ([Roberge, 2011](#_ENREF_95)). Although case research has been encouraged in the procurement field ([Dubois & Araujo, 2007](#_ENREF_32)), critical hermeneutics is rare.

Hermeneutics is a systematic approach to interpreting the meaning of texts, human action and institutions that can be treated as text ([Diesing, 1991](#_ENREF_23)) to unearth the symbolic meaning ([Ricoeur, 1981](#_ENREF_94)). This is achieved by going beneath the text surface to identify direct, literal meaning and indirect, secondary and figurative meaning ([Ricoeur, 1981](#_ENREF_94)), using language to reveal what, paradoxically, words can never say ([Kinsella, 2006](#_ENREF_63)). Texts have a broad meaning and include; official documents, structures, official and unofficial documents, press coverage, government transcripts of parliamentary debate, specialist press, national project board reports and minutes and parliamentary audit reports. Empirical studies in public technology procurement often rely on self-reported data whether through more traditional management research methods of questionnaires, surveys, and interviews. In comparison, this study uses secondary data sources to provide a real-time context, where there are no ego-defensive issues imposing on participants’ recollections, and where the data is less selective, minimising socially-constructed realities from only the most powerful sources. The method is useful to extend our understanding of failed public projects as it allows a temporal restoration of the past and its social and political context to avoid retrospective constructions of social realities. As FiReControl was well publicised as one of the worst cases of public project failure ([UK Parliament Public Accounts Committee & National Audit Office, 2011](#_ENREF_114)), it would be difficult for participants to look back ‘untarnished’ by this label.

Critical hermeneutics adds a phronetic angle through extending insight about ‘the fix we are in’ ([Kinsella, 2006, p.8](#_ENREF_63)) by exposing hidden meaning and how the socially and politically powerful sources impact behaviour ([Ricoeur, 1981](#_ENREF_94)). The method allows for the analysis to be rooted in the socially and historically conditioned context ([Flyvbjerg, 2001](#_ENREF_35)) to explore the structures of meaning which underlie interactions among organisations, groups and individuals to discover how legitimacy is created, and maintained through the power structures. This study will follow the ‘hermeneutic circle’ ([Gadamer, 1975](#_ENREF_42)), an interpretive cycling between layers or perspectives. The researcher first aims to understand small sections of each text in isolation before it is then re- considered in relation to the whole - its historical and cultural context. Understanding is achieved when there is a consistency between the whole and all its component parts, and vice versa ([Myers, 1994](#_ENREF_82)). This layering, or cycling of evidence limits simplistic, mono-causal conclusions ([Soeffner, 1997](#_ENREF_104)) and is in direct contrast to existing realist levels of interpretations where managers accounts are taken as factual reports ([Lowe, Ellis, & Purchase, 2008](#_ENREF_69))

**LEGITIMACY IN MAJOR PUBLIC PROJECTS**

Fundamental to phronetic, critical hermeneutic research is the specific role that meanings, values, beliefs and feelings play in the understanding of social realities ([Yanow, 2014](#_ENREF_118)). To shed new light onto why support for failing projects is not withdrawn sooner, rather than ask how values, beliefs and feelings can influence escalation in decision making, we ask how these make it difficult to stop project actors from escalating commitment to evidently failing courses of action. To understand more about these decision rationales ([Drummond, 1996a](#_ENREF_28)), especially the role of meaning in the social realities of failing projects, we explore the less well-understood influences of legitimacy and its many variants throughout the project life-cycle enabling or constraining action.

The motivations, strategies and perceptions of legitimacy are multifaceted. While we acknowledge the difficulties of capturing conceptual diversity in a single definition, legitimacy can broadly be defined as a generalised perception that within a socially-constructed set of norms, values and beliefs, particular actions are perceived as desirable, proper or appropriate ([Suchman, 1995](#_ENREF_109)). Emphasising the centrality of values and norms, legitimacy it is the cognitive process by which an entity becomes embedded in norms through taken-for-granted assumptions that effects collective action ([Hannah & Carroll, 1992](#_ENREF_54); [Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005](#_ENREF_110)). Legitimacy has a boundary setting role through limiting what people may or may not do, and it shapes perceptions, determines agendas and informs decisions ([Berger & Luckmann, 1992](#_ENREF_7)).

It has been suggested that legitimacy is essential for the survival of an organisation ([Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975](#_ENREF_25)) since it is difficult to exert influence over others based solely upon the possession and use of power. It leads those connected to it to believe that the entity is appropriate, proper, and just. Because of legitimacy, people feel that they ought to defer to decisions and rules, following them voluntarily out of obligation rather than out of fear of punishment or anticipation of reward ([Tyler, 2006](#_ENREF_113)). Three main sources of legitimacy are; 1) charismatic legitimacy, which occurs when people have faith in the rulers, 2) traditional legitimacy referring to the faith people have in a particular political or social order because it has been there for a long time, and 3) legal-rational legitimacy, where people trust the legality of an entity, and conform to its rules ([Weber, 1978](#_ENREF_116)). We contend that each type exists throughout various stages and domains of a major project, ebbing and flowing depending on complex and changing power relations, which combine to establish levels of authority to influence decisions and to enable or constrain actions.

How well a public procurement project operates and delivers depends largely on whether it is deemed legitimate by the legitimating domains of each project stage, which assess its conformity to a specific standard or model ([Ruef & Scott, 1998](#_ENREF_97)). A completely legitimate organisation is one about which no questions could be raised ([Meyer & Scott, 1983](#_ENREF_77)); this is rarely the case in public projects as they are subject to waxing and waning of threads of legitimacy that when present attract commitment and when absent attract withdrawal. We propose that by exploring legitimacy and devices used to create it, as central concepts and influential mechanisms that keep failing projects moving forward, a broader appreciation of the phenomenon of escalation of commitment can be gained.

We conceptualise legitimacy as a metaphorical rope, twisted from multiple threads until sufficient strength is established to move a major project along its trajectory. Threads of legitimacy are built over time, in and amongst the permanent organisations, supply chains and networks around which the project is built. The prevailing political ideologies for public sector reform construct the first legitimating thread. Public projects are first conceived based on political ideologies in the realm of high politics that shape the behaviours of decision-makers inside government ([Moran, 2001](#_ENREF_79)). Looking even further back than the planning stages, where myths may be seen to begin through future perfect strategising ([Atkin, 2012](#_ENREF_3); [Pitsis, et al., 2003](#_ENREF_91)), we assert that the seeds of legitimacy begin at the political ideological level, where a project is legitimated into existence by the macro, context-laden myth and rhetoric that successfully secure resources for that project over others. Many major public projects have been predicated on the concepts of New Public Management (NPM) and their genesis was legitimated through the rhetoric of continuous improvement ([Hood, 1991](#_ENREF_58)). NPM conceptually represents the move towards a managerial approach to public service delivery ([Hood, 1991](#_ENREF_58)) to improve efficiency and outcomes ([Barzelay, 2001](#_ENREF_6)) and is an international phenomenon across governments ([Hall, Holt, & Purchase, 2003](#_ENREF_53)). To underline the power of rhetoric in establishing legitimacy, it has been suggested that the proposed efficiencies are unproven ([Goldfinch & Wallis, 2010](#_ENREF_46)) and despite the challenge to the applicability and assumptions of NPM ([Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, & Tinkler, 2006](#_ENREF_34); [O'Flynn, 2007](#_ENREF_85); [Osborne, 2010](#_ENREF_87)), there is global convergence towards it and the public records are steeped in ministerial visionary rhetoric expounding such promises ([Pollitt, 2001](#_ENREF_92)).

NPM’s popularity across the globe provides legitimacy for other governments to adopt it despite the lack of evidence-based results ([Goldfinch & Wallis, 2010](#_ENREF_46); [Pollitt, 2001](#_ENREF_92)). The functionalist notions of global convergence lead to the taken-for-granted behaviour of governments who want to be seen by international peers to be doing something under the remit of NPM ([Pollitt, 2001](#_ENREF_92)). The early influences of political rhetoric legitimate approaches and translate talk into exigencies for reform using provocative language and symbolism ([Vatz, 1973](#_ENREF_115)) and creating myths. For example, there is no ‘reality’ in the claims that many of the UK’s public sector projects are in our national interest. The UK fire service regionalisation project, FiReControl was idealised as a critical project towards efficiency and improving national security. HS2 is claimed to bring prosperity to the North and redress London-centricity, and many of the failed IT reform projects in the NHS were predicated on ‘patient choice’. Whilst they each have the rhetoric, all are predicated on increasing efficiency, whether through joined-up working, faster transport or reduced waiting times. There is no proven evidence that the visionary claims can be achieved but ideologically such talk helps to secure resources, and thus begins the legitimating of large-scale reform projects. Political ideology, perceptions and expectations are often not based on empirical evidence but rather upon signals between contextually similar groups who jointly create meanings of current and anticipated events ([Vatz, 1973](#_ENREF_115)). Talk and decisions indicate the way forward, the frames of thinking, they allocate responsibility whether implicitly or explicitly and they affect activity in a direction even if the intended outcome is not completed or delivered. From a phronetic perspective the legitimacy implicit in political rhetoric ([Brunsson, 1989](#_ENREF_13)) can help us to understand who holds the reins of power and how this is deployed, as it is argued that political legitimacy can only be established through rhetorical action ([Krebs & Jackson, 2007](#_ENREF_65)).

As the project emerges as an entity, new threads of legitimacy being laid out can be conceptualised, and subsequently twisted together, thereby strengthening and enhancing belief in the project. Additional threads of legitimacy are established, usually rapidly, from within the new structures and supply chain assembled to deliver the project. New threads of legitimacy develop from multiple influences, such as institutionalism, rhetoric as well as the actual discipline of project management. Each influence constructs and sustains a social reality in which those involved engage in taken for granted rational behaviours, further reinforcing legitimacy. When projects are up and running towards the quest for efficiency and public value they can begin to lose course and there is inevitable departure from the initial political rhetoric that defines early goals and objectives. Organisations and employees engage actively in generating rhetorical institutionalism ([Alvesson, 1993](#_ENREF_1)) at their own operating level to construct the appearance of knowledge or institutional myths in order to provide meaning and legitimacy to organisational practices and beliefs. All the time, the threads are combining, rope-like to strengthen overall belief in the project, its purpose and indeed its very survival. With a rope constructed now of multiple threads, overall project legitimacy is strong, the machine is in motion, set on its path to deliver ‘reforms’.

Though public projects are framed around concepts of public value and efficiency, the nature of planning and management allows goals to be agreed, and in many cases contracts are awarded all before final business case figures are understood. In the design and delivery stages of public projects, variants of institutional legitimacy evolve in key project areas that influence and routinise seemingly rationale behaviour such as rhetorical institutionalism ([Green & Li, 2011](#_ENREF_48)) and institutional logics ([Brown, Ainsworth, & Grant, 2012](#_ENREF_11); [Green, Li, & Nohria, 2009](#_ENREF_49); [Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005](#_ENREF_110)) influencing, in the absence of a final business case, decisions to continue commitment to what is, or may become a failing courses of action. As true costs emerge, and cognition diverges we begin to see the familiar phenomenon of escalation of commitment although they are able to maintain legitimacy, not through delivering efficiency but through taken-for-granted adherence to legitimating activities.

The retrospective analysis of projects through the PAC and NAO, themselves legitimated bodies in the production and dissemination of knowledge that constitutes lessons learned, add another layer of legitimacy but their reviews take place long after project legitimacy and belief systems have been dismantled and the very processes which initiated, framed and maintained the project are not those that are analysed in the functionalist search for answers. We seek to illuminate legitimacy in relation to the phenomena of escalation in decision making - the tendency to commit resources to failing courses of action ([Staw & Ross, 1987](#_ENREF_107)). Using a phronetic, critical hermeneutic four-stage approach, we provide an illustrative example of how these approaches can be used to explore forces and devices which create, maintain and destroy legitimacy during the lifetime of a major public project and the effects on decisions and actions as key junctures. The illustration will focus on identifying legitimating devices employed specifically at the early stages of conceiving reform projects; the political ideology that secures resources for one project over others. In illuminating legitimacy in its various forms, our phronetic intention will be to reveal more about power relations, which when combined with legitimating devices give authority to groups and in so doing influence action or inaction.

**ANALYSIS**

**The UK FiReControl Project - A Critical Hermeneutic Analysis**

Critical, phronetic research is used to make sense of the project organisation through text-analogues, where different stakeholders may have confused, incomplete, cloudy and often contradictory views ([Myers, 1995](#_ENREF_83)), and to give insight on the consequences of power and value ([Flyvbjerg, 2006](#_ENREF_36)). By ‘organisation’ we refer to the temporary project organisation and all its constituents; government departments, public sector employees, suppliers, unions and consultants. Viewing organisations, their stakeholders, structures, symbols and actions as text-analogues in a hermeneutic circle, cycling between the parts and the whole, allows a contextualised, rich picture of the project and decisions to emerge ([Myers, 1994](#_ENREF_82)). As part of a wider study, a full critical hermeneutic enquiry will be conducted of the UK Government’s FiReControl project over its full life-cycle. For illustration purposes in this paper we demonstrate the methodological process and its potential research benefits using a small selection of key texts to ask questions of the political rhetoric and the political industry-review processes which instigate public reform projects. Using a critical hermeneutic method we reveal new understanding of the roots of escalation and ultimate project failure using the conceptual lens of legitimacy.

**Background to the Texts**

In 2000, the UK Government commissioned the consultancy company, Mott MacDonald, to review control rooms and communications across the fire service. Best value and efficiency were the main focus of their resulting report, *The Future of Fire & Rescue Service Control Rooms in England & Wales,* and they concluded that while amalgamation of the 49 control rooms into just nine offered greatest efficiency benefits, implementation barriers would be high and therefore recommended a compromised approach reducing from 49 to 21 sub-regional control centres ([Mott MacDonald, 2000](#_ENREF_80)).

In 2002, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), later known as the Department of Communities and Local Government, (DCLG), commissioned a fire service review chaired by Professor Sir George Bain. Bain’s report, *The Independent Review of the Fire Service,* recommended fire service modernisation through wide-ranging reform also including the rationalisation of control centres ([Bain, 2002](#_ENREF_4)). In response, the government published a white paper, *Our Fire and Rescue Service,* setting out the proposals for reform, its objectives, and the legislative mechanism by which Fire and Rescue Authorities (FRA) would achieve government objectives ([ODPM, 2003](#_ENREF_86)). In 2003 Mott MacDonald were asked to review whether their original conclusions were changed by either the Bain report or the new national requirements for resilience and management of larger-scale incidents that had emerged since the ‘9/11’ terrorist attacks in America.

Amongst other updates, the revised report recommended their original amalgamation to just nine regional control centres, rather than 21 on the basis of modernisation needs in a changed environment ([Mott MacDonald, 2003](#_ENREF_81)) and this was in essence the genesis of the FiReControl project as part of the Government’s Resilience Programme. The project’s aim was to improve the resilience, efficiency and technology of the Fire and Rescue Service by replacing 49 local control rooms with a network of nine, purpose-built, regional control centres using a national computer system and infrastructure to handle calls, mobilise equipment and manage incidents. FiReControl commenced in 2004 and was expected to be complete by October 2009. In 2007, DCLG contracted European Air and Defence Systems (EADS) (now Cassidian) to design, develop and install the computer system underpinning the project. However, the project was subject to delays and costs escalated over its lifetime. DCLG cancelled the project in December 2010 after concluding that it could not be delivered to an acceptable timeframe. At the point the cancellation decision was made, DCLG estimated it had spent £469 million on the project and calculated that completion would take the total project cost to £635 million, more than five times the original estimate of £120 million ([UK Parliament Public Accounts Committee & National Audit Office, 2011](#_ENREF_114)).

**Stage 1: Selection and Initial Reading of the Texts**

To illustrate the critical hermeneutic process we select several media records of political speeches and key contemporary texts (see Table 1). The first reading of the texts centres on language to understand apparent meaning and identify thematic references. Themes reveal political undertones that may be deemed unimportant or go unnoticed in mainstream management research methods ([Prasad & Mir, 2002](#_ENREF_93)). Our initial thesis is that public sector reform projects originate from politically or ideologically legitimating devices at play, which are subsequently strengthened or weakened (depending on power and thus authority) by other sources of legitimacy throughout the project lifecycle. These legitimating forces influence behaviour, decision making and ultimately escalation (and de-escalation) of commitment to a failing course of action from the initial securing of government resources through to procurement, delivery and the final PAC and NAO analyses.

**Table 1:** **Sources Used in Critical Hermeneutic Analysis of FiReControl**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Date** | **Text** |
| 1997 | Televised Interviews with Tony Blair (by Jeremy Paxman and Peter Sissons), as transcribed in Bull (2000) |
| 2000 | The Future of Fire & Rescue Service Control Rooms in England & Wales, Mott MacDonald |
| 2001 | Tony Blair speech on reform of public services (16 July) |
| 2002 | Independent Review of the Fire Service - The Future of the Fire Service: Reducing Risks, Saving Lives, Sir George Bain |
| 2003 | The Future of Fire & Rescue Service Control Rooms in England & Wales (update), Mott MacDonald |
| 2011 | Public Accounts Committee: The failure of the FiReControl project Fiftieth Report of Session 2010–12 |

Our entry point ([Prasad & Mir, 2002](#_ENREF_93)) for the selected text for illustration is the theme of *public sector reform to achieve efficiency*, indicating our initial perspective or hermeneutic horizon ([Gadamer, 1975](#_ENREF_42)) that many public reform projects are predicated and legitimated on efficiency and the NPM agenda, despite a lack of empirical evidence. Content analysis shows that the efficiency theme is mentioned regularly across all initial key texts selected. The Bain Report uses phrases with the word efficiency 116 times over 158 pages (including stemmed words, such as ‘efficient management’), and the 180 page Mott MacDonald report includes 234 uses of the word in phrases, such as in the examples in table 2.

**Table 2:** **Excepts Illustrating Efficiency Agenda**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Bain (2002), The Future of the Fire Service: Reducing Risks, Saving Lives** | |
| P.iv | ‘...increased efficiencies and economies could result’ |
| P.vii | ‘..the most efficient and effective means of meeting the needs of users and the wider community. |
| P.1 | enable it to respond effectively to all the operational demands which may be placed upon it; |
| P.1 | ‘..enable the responsibilities of the Fire Service to be delivered with optimum efficiency and effectiveness’. |
| P.3 | ‘..this opportunity to create a modern and effective Fire Service fit for the 21st century must now be seized..’ |
| P.8 | ‘..respond most effectively and efficiently to the community’s needs..’ |
| P.9 | ‘..we want the Fire Service to be an effective, responsive community service.’ |
| P.40 | ‘Unless it is repealed, the sorts of efficiency improvements we are looking for as a result of a move to the new system will not be realised.’ |
| **Mott MacDonald (2003), The Future of Fire & Rescue Service Control Rooms in England & Wales** | |
| P.S-1 | ‘The report concluded that maximum efficiency could be achieved from a reduction in the number of control rooms.’ |
| P.S-1 | ‘There has been no significant progress made towards securing efficiency and economy in fire service control rooms as a consequence of the Best Value regime.’ |
| P.S-4 | ‘This would secure and maximise the realisable efficiency gains..’ |
| P.4 | ‘..provides the basis for a recommended national strategy for the rationalisation of fire and rescue service control rooms to secure efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery.’ |
| P.16 | ‘Reforming our Public Services: Principles into Practice’17, which defines the principles of quality and efficiency in public services, guaranteed by policy making that is ‘more joined-up and strategic..’ |
| P.39 | ‘..was considered that the next step towards gaining maximum efficiency and effectiveness was through a regional brigade arrangement.’ |
| P.161 | ‘As with all Best Value authorities, fire authorities are expected to collaborate with other public and private sector agencies to improve their efficiency and effectiveness.’ |

The initial reading to understand the texts’ manifest meaning indicates a common focus on the politics of reform bringing about efficiency, improving effectiveness, enabling effective management.

**Stage 2: The Contexts**

The next stage of the hermeneutic process builds up the industrial, political and cultural context of the period under study (2000-2003). For illustration, reviews of press, parliamentary debate and audio ‘texts’ of the era indicate the shifting political landscape of new Labour policies towards their modernisation agenda, including the growing trend for public private partnerships and private financing of public sector projects. The 2002-3 UK fire-fighter dispute was a prominent backdrop to the industry context. In November 2002, the [Fire Brigades Union](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fire_Brigades_Union) (FBU), voted to take [strike action](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strike_action) in an attempt to secure significant increases to fire-fighter salaries. This was the first nationwide fire fighters’ strike in the UK since the 1970s. In addition, the post 9/11 terrorist threat looms large politically and in the general psyche.

**New Labour and Best Value**

Under the first Blair administration of 1997-2001, the Local Government Act (1999) came into force. The act required local authorities, including fire authorities, to undertake Best Value Reviews of their public service provision and to publish Best Value performance plans for their improvement considering the 4Cs – challenge, compare, consult and compete. Best Value aimed to secure continuous improvements in public service delivery by the most economic, efficient and effective means available. Regionalisation was an important tenet in Best Value. Specifically for fire authorities three specific areas were mandated for review; procurement, training, and communications/control. It was within the Best Value remit that the first Mott MacDonald report was conducted, suggesting a reduction in control rooms from 49 to 9, although given the anticipated barriers they recommended reducing just to 21 ([Mott MacDonald, 2000](#_ENREF_80)).

**New Labour and the Public Sector**

Several years into its first administration under Prime Minister, Tony Blair, New Labour’s political agenda was well under way towards public sector reform. The zeitgeist of those years was public-private partnership schemes promoting the involvement of private sector capital and operating methods in the delivery of the public services. During the previous Conservative government Labour, in opposition, had fervently condemned the Conservatives Private Finance Initiative (PFI) as ‘creeping privatisation’. However, by their 2001 re-election the Blair administration was thoroughly committed to PFI as a cornerstone of their public services’ modernisation programme and to promote the UK ’s competitiveness ([H. M. Treasury, 2000](#_ENREF_52)). The Prime Minister claimed that his second term mission was to deliver 'the biggest reform programme in public services for half a century’ ([Blair, 2001](#_ENREF_8)) and PFI was the mechanism of choice. Despite powerful consultancy reports and an ambitious, new political agenda all pressing for change that embraced the ethos of public private partnerships, by 2003 nothing had actually changed in the fire sector. However, two significant events had happened between these years.

**International Terrorism**

The 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on September 11th had a profound global impact and changed public expectation of emergency service response capability. The event significantly affected how the UK emergency services would operate in terms of scale and scope and how prepared they would need to be to respond to catastrophic, multiple and sustained incidents on a scale now envisaged. The 9/11 attacks made the concept of multiple and simultaneous terrorism a reality. This introduced a ‘new philosophy of enduring preparedness for sustained response to unprecedented and unanticipated occurrences’ ([Mott MacDonald, 2003](#_ENREF_81)). A direct UK Government response to 9/11 was the Civil Contingencies Capabilities Programme and specifically for the fire service, the New Dimension programme, which would see the issue of specialist equipment, procedures and support mechanisms to all fire and rescue services so as to improve resilience and preparedness to civil contingencies throughout the UK enabling an efficient, effective and sustained response to large-scale catastrophic incidents wherever they might occur.

**Pay Dispute and Independent Review of the Fire Service**

The second significant event was the long drawn-out pay dispute of UK firefighters from 2002-2004 that led to the first nationwide firefighters' strike in the UK since the 1970s. In addition to the length of the dispute, other factors underline the significance of the pay campaign. As the only major labour dispute to have occurred under a Blair administration, the way the dispute was conducted, particularly by government ministers, demonstrated the Labour government’s approach to public sector reform and to the role of trade unions. The strike was a very bitter affair, aggravated by government threats to send troops and police across picket lines to seize fire engines and by attacks and counterattacks over the implications of modernisation. The Deputy Prime Minster, John Prescott’s announcement that he would bring back 1940s legislation giving him power to decree ﬁreﬁghters’ pay and conditions was seen as incendiary. The pay dispute led to the ODPM ordering an independent review of the fire service chaired by Professor Sir George Bain. The FBU challenged its independence and refused to take part in the review. The topic was heavily debated in Parliament throughout the years 2001-2004 and the Hansard records provide a rich record of the bitter dispute that had even led to ministerial authorisation of MI5 surveillance of strike leaders ([Seifert & Sibley, 2011](#_ENREF_99)). The Bain report ([Bain, 2002](#_ENREF_4)) recommended a raft of reforms that would form one of the keystones of the modernisation of the fire service on the terms of the Blair government.

**The Hermeneutic Circle, Horizons of Interpretation and Fusion of Horizons**

With the contexts established and texts initially read for their apparent meanings and thematic references we begin the hermeneutic circle, cycling between stages, texts or text analogues and the various contexts in which they were produced as we have briefly fore-grounded here for illustration. In so doing, we seek to understand “the parts ...in relation to the whole and the whole from the inner harmony of its parts” ([Palmer, 1969, p.77](#_ENREF_88)) and we begin to reveal relationships which may otherwise have been overlooked. In addition, the researcher’s own prior understanding of the context and worldview represent their horizon of understanding, which add another layer of illumination and interpretation ([Gadamer, 1975](#_ENREF_42)). These horizons do not necessarily imply bias ([Gadamer, 1975](#_ENREF_42)), but can provide alternative interpretations as meaning of social action is constructed and informed by peoples’ networks and traditions they represent ([Smith, 1999](#_ENREF_101)).

In acknowledging this horizon, we identify the researchers’ prejudices brought to the interpretation; One of the researchers spent time as a private sector consultant, project managing FiReControl on behalf of a metropolitan fire service being regionalised, and the other moved from a private sector procurement role to an academic career and has researched, and provided consultancy to, a number of public sector procurement projects. Our horizon of understanding is also informed by our ontological positioning of the research. In the study we take a critical realist perspective to enable a philosophical departure from the dominance of positivist approaches that have striven for a one-best explanation of escalation focusing predominantly on generalisability rather than explanation ([Smyth & Morris, 2007](#_ENREF_102)). Critical realism opens up the possibility of multiple mechanisms at play and acknowledges that several explanations may coexist ([Hodgkinson & Starkey, 2012](#_ENREF_55)); thus, this second-order approach challenges dominant positivist methods, which present a reductionist approach to understanding projects. The prejudices we bring through our ontological position, the selection of texts, the thematic reference entry points of public sector reform for efficiency, and our choice of contexts (fire service pay dispute, terrorism and the politics of New Labour), within which we position our interpretations signal our participation in our own socio-cultural traditions that define our horizon of understanding ([Gadamer, 1975](#_ENREF_42)).

**Stage 3: Closing the Hermeneutic Circle**

The hermeneutic circle is closed by demonstrating links or relationships between the focus of the texts, in relation to specific chosen entry points (for example, our entry point of ‘efficiency’) and the contextual story of the political-social landscape of the time to lead us to a greater, or at least different, understanding ([Mallery, Hurwitz, & Duffy, 1986](#_ENREF_71)). Fundamental to this stage in a phronetic approach is that we do not simply reach a deeper understanding through rule-bound logic and analysis, rather the process is, “intuitive and divinatory” ([Palmer, 1969, p.87](#_ENREF_88)) to enable the taken-for granted assumptions to be exposed.

The critical hermeneutic analysis of the FiReControl case exposes several key contextual issues that help to understand the role of legitimacy and escalation of commitment. The first issue to emerge is the general shifting ideologies of the time; Labour to New Labour, and state-ownership to public-private partnerships. New Labour had a public service modernisation agenda that defined their modernisation as a political party. Labour had undergone a transformation from its old labour ways pre Thatcher/Major administrations and Tony Blair was committed to an agenda that would see public sector reform towards private partnerships come what may ([Shaw, 2003](#_ENREF_100)). It has been posited that politicians desire for enhanced power or status that the occupation of elective office brings leads to the formulation of policies to win elections rather than winning elections to formulate policies ([Downs, 1957](#_ENREF_26)). Thus, vote-losing policies can be abandoned, even if they are heavily-grounded in a party’s ideology or values and can lead to a drift from ideological traditions ([Koelble, 1992](#_ENREF_64)). This ideological drift is manifest in the Labour’s 1997 general election victory at which Blair’s ‘fairness not favours’ line demonstrated the tone of their winning manifesto that contained few commitments to union-related issues. The Blair government opted to shift its ideological position towards a pro-business image, in line with other global social democrat leaders of the post soviet union era, such as Bill Clinton, abandoning policies grounded in old Labour ideologies. To effectively reach wider audiences, new social democratic leaders courted the media and in so doing became effectively autonomous from the trade unions and political activist base of their parties ([Seifert & Sibley, 2011](#_ENREF_99)). Textual evidence from media sources suggest that Blair was publically distancing himself from the unions during that period and was instead pursuing a pro-business image. For example, in two televised interviews from the 1997 British General Election, Jeremy Paxman (JP) and Peter Sissons (PS) question Tony Blair (TB):

*(JP)“Do you still consider yourself a socialist?”*

*(TB)“I do in the sense of the values I don’t share the idea that socialism’s about some fixed economic prescription”.*

*(PS) “If Labour wins on Thursday it’s a fourth victory for Margaret Thatcher, she said she’d bury socialism, you’ve completed that for her, you left all the principal landmarks she created in place” .*

*(TB)“No I wouldn’t agree with that at all. What I think is sensible however is that the Labour Party wants to take the country forward and it is New Labour and we don’t want battles over public versus private sector, bosses versus workers, those are things of the past.”* ([Bull, 2000](#_ENREF_14))

Such texts evidence Blair’s departure from traditional socialist ideology towards his ambition for incorporating private capital, managerial techniques and business practices in the public sector. This new ideology was the political context in which FiReControl was conceived and legitimated as driving efficiency into the sector, yet the PAC report focuses the failure on the procurement and project management. The PFI element of FiReControl was considered one of the most costly legacies of the project owing to the build of nine highly-specified regional control centres, each with 25 year leases, before the IT contracts were even signed ([UK Parliament Public Accounts Committee & National Audit Office, 2011](#_ENREF_114)). However, in the 2011 final analysis of FiReControl as a failed project the PAC report concluded:

*“The Department’s management and oversight of the project was weak. The Department lacked the necessary expertise and experience to deliver the project and was over-reliant on consultants, whose performance was not managed effectively. Tthe Department failed to understand the complexity of the IT system but prioritised building the new control centre. So today we have nine regional white elephants, most of which have stood empty since 2007. For all future projects, the Department should follow proper project and programme management procedures and not take on projects without ensuring it has staff with the right business change, programme management and IT skills”* ([UK Parliament Public Accounts Committee & National Audit Office, 2011](#_ENREF_114)).

Whilst some blame may correctly lie with functional issues in the procurement and project management of FiReControl in relation to timing of contract awards, the drive to use the PFI mechanism formed part of a New Labour agenda and was legitimated and pushed from the highest political level. The cost of the centres reflected their size and specification which was not proportional to existing control rooms even scaled up as regional, resilient facilities. This perhaps suggests further planned reforms for their use, in accordance with John Prescott’s regional government agenda, but any such plans not made explicit to the programme managers. Excerpts from key texts convey the emerging pattern of Blair’s reform agenda, where efficiency is a dominant theme despite a lack of empirical evidence to justify its claims in public sector reform programmes. FiReControl was predicted on an efficiency agenda through the regionalisation and rationalisation of control rooms. The Bain report (2002), set up as an independent review of the fire service supports the new public management ethos for reform and efficiency. The report states ‘we’ are ‘confident’ and ‘believe’ that reforms will bring efficiency, but it lacks empirical evidence as to previous success of public sector reform, and does not provide the specific detail of how this will be achieved:

*“Change is only worthwhile when the benefits exceed the costs. We are confident that, given the scope for reform, the move to a more modern Fire Service will more than pay for itself over time. In addition, we are confident that more lives will be saved, property losses will be reduced, and, most importantly, communities will feel safer as a result. The important message is for everyone to recognise both the need for change and the gains from doing so. Staying where we are is not an option, and we believe that reform will bring greater gains for everyone”* ([Bain, 2002](#_ENREF_4)).

Further, the only specific recommendation in the Bain report in respect of the shared control room element of reform solution was that:

*“All fire authorities which retain separate control rooms should be required to demonstrate to the Audit Commission and the Accounts Commission that their retention is likely to be cost effective against national performance standards. …The point has also been made that a move to a regional structure for the Fire Service, if it is to be coherent with other strands of the government’s regional policy, should follow the establishment of the new structure rather than precede it. If new, directly elected, regional assemblies are created, it would make sense for regional fire authorities to be responsible to them. This is some way off; we therefore conclude that the benefits to be gained from increased cooperation and collaboration should be pursued within the current organisational structure, with amalgamation between authorities if appropriate or by mutual collaboration on a case-by-case basis”* ([Bain, 2002](#_ENREF_4)).

In respect of specific control room efficiency solutions, the first Mott MacDonald report ([Mott MacDonald, 2000](#_ENREF_80)) had concluded that whilst a reduction of control rooms from 46 to nine was optimal, it was nevertheless problematic and unachievable. Barriers to implementation and restrictions on the potential for future joint/shared arrangements encouraged a compromised approach in which optimum efficiency and economy was balanced by a realistic and achievable goal. The report therefore recommended the rationalisation of fire service control rooms from 49 to 21 sub-regional fire controls ([Mott MacDonald, 2000](#_ENREF_80)).

Between 2000 and 2003 the pay dispute and 9/11 terrorist attacks occurred, which we have contextualised in the third stage of this analysis. The Bain report was published in 2002 and, as highlighted above, did not promote regionalisation solutions beyond increased collaboration within current organisational structures. However, what had been considered unachievable in the 2000 Mott MacDonald review of control rooms (that pre-dated the pay dispute and the 9/11 attack by around 12 months) was now considered the only option for reform to achieve efficiency across the fire service, as well showing a response to the new political driver; national security. Mott MacDonald report in their 2003 review:

*“The last two years have seen significant changes to the environment in which fire and rescue services operate. The scale of the changes is significant and has led to an array of new requirements, which the fire and rescue service must meet……This report concludes that the optimum solution to secure efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of fire and rescue service control rooms to meet the requirements of the changed environment is through ‘Vertical Integration’ to form a regional arrangement. It is considered that the most appropriate regional configuration would be one matched to the Government Offices for the Regions. This accords with the government proposals for modernisation of the fire and rescue service as set out in the recent White Paper. A national strategy will be required to deliver Regional control rooms with appropriate statutory authority and funding to ensure a cohesive outcome”* ([Mott MacDonald, 2003](#_ENREF_81)).

Whilst each of the texts selected in our analysis focuses on efficiency, all but the final commissioned report ([Mott MacDonald, 2003](#_ENREF_81)) specify the control room configuration that claims to unequivocally deliver it. Despite there being no evidence base that PFI would drive efficiencies, it was fulfilling wider regional government agendas of senior ministers and was legitimated through political rhetoric and consultancy reports. Though the ‘department’ (DCLG) was blamed for poor management, a non-evidenced PFI solution was not the subject of any PAC inquiry. Here, we have briefly illustrated how oversight texts ‘scrutinise’ the project failure from the Department-down, and not Department-up, thus retaining a functional-level focus and obscuring the role of political ideological influences that frame such reforms from the very outset.

**Stage Four: Conceptual Bridge**

The final stage in the hermeneutic cycle presents a conceptual bridge or rhetorical counterpoint ([Gadamer, 1989](#_ENREF_43)) to the meanings the government and associated government-funded agencies seek to produce in their defence of major public sector change projects. Our conceptual framework focuses on legitimacy in its varied forms to provide a richer explanation for the relationship between the texts and the contexts ([Prasad & Mir, 2002](#_ENREF_93)), throughout the life-cycle of the FiReControl reform project. In our case example of the critical hermeneutic method we specifically illuminate ideology and political rhetoric as legitimating devices that can secure public resources to further political agendas, and escalate commitment even in the absence of evidence. The interpretation of texts illuminates power relations and the party political agendas that the government was trying to protect.

Although various other agendas abounded, such as the FBU’s modernisation package and pay deal, a part of which identified alternative proposals for efficiency savings, in the end the government held greater authority and potential to influence than the union and were more able to further their agenda. The government legitimated the reform of the fire service through emotive rhetoric of efficiency, and latterly of security and resilience. The fire fighter dispute and the terrorist threat were used to justify their new public management and modernisation agendas, both for the party’s changing ideology as well as ministerial ambitions for regional management boards. Through legitimating devices of both ideological rhetoric and the concept of independent reviews, despite equally strong or weak arguments, it was Labour who managed to secure resources to mobilise a national reform project that was not evidence-based in its claims of efficiency or security. In the space of four years, solutions to efficiency varied considerably based on external world events, however, the power to implement reform rested with those who’s authority was greatest to legitimate change; the government. The excerpts illustrate how powerful authoritative rhetoric was used to convey legitimacy to the planned changes or to de-legitimate alternative courses of action.

**CONTRIBUTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

The call for phronetic research asks us to consider four critical questions; 1) So what? 2) What can be done to make a difference? 3) Who gains and who loses, and 4) by which mechanisms of power? ([Flyvbjerg, et al., 2012](#_ENREF_40)). Our illustrative example in the limited scope of this paper opens debates on the policy prescriptions and strategic implications that emerge from the failed FiReControl project and the role of the lessons learned process. The legitimating role of UK public inquiries has long been an area of research, and early research in this area argued that the state does not so much act in the general public interest, rather it deliberately creates or redefines a public interest to protect particular, private interests ([Kemp, O'riordan, & Purdue, 1984](#_ENREF_62)). Thus the need for legitimating becomes translated into a demand for both defining and justifying the authority of the state while at the same time maintaining an ideological agenda.

Our narrative brings to the surface New Labour’s lack of sector-wide democratic negotiation and consultation in the development of far-reaching policies and reform projects. We highlight the ideological framing of the FiReControl project that sought to drive a range of political agendas, which the NAO and PAC reports fail to assess as part of the lessons learned process. The legitimating of FiReControl stemmed from a series of commissioned reports, which despite a lack of empirical evidence, and lack of clarity as to regionalisation being the solution, were presented as expert opinion to inform decision making. It has been posited that experts are often hired not for their advice, but to signal legitimacy for a course of action ([DiMaggio & Powell, 1991](#_ENREF_24)). The hire and re-hire of Mott MacDonald, both positioned as independent expert advice, can alternatively be viewed as a move to legitimate the regionalisation agenda. This enabled a generalised perception to be conveyed that the efficiency gains of FiReControl reform were legitimate – in other words, they were seen as desirable and appropriate within the socially constructed system of values, beliefs and definitions of the decision makers, and thus increased their power to act ([Suchman, 1995](#_ENREF_109)).

The contextualisation of different perspectives, for example the FBU and the Government, illuminates underlying issues and conflicts, which contribute further pressure to escalate commitment to a course of action. The transition from state to market-oriented policies and shifting paradigms of long-standing relations between Labour and the unions reveal the FBU’s uncompromising commitment to traditional socialist ideologies that compete with those of New Labour. This in part, legitimates to the union’s ideologically-loyal members, a reluctance to modernise on anything but its own terms, and not those of New Labour policies and entrenches conflict and ideologically-framed positions of both sides. Macro-level societal attitudes are also evidenced and these were exploited to further enforce the legitimacy of FiReControl. The heightened sense of insecurity post 9/11and increased expectations of the nation towards government preparedness reveals shifts in values and norms in respect of national security and resilience, hitherto, not the role of the fire service.

The problem of legitimacy extends further from parliament, into project delivery once projects are initiated. Throughout the project lifecycle, decisions and actions continue to be legitimated by functional silos of belief systems all influencing seemingly rational, taken-for-granted behaviour. At these later stages, the project has secured robust, multi-sourced legitimacy as commitment continues. Thus, if problems or crises develop within individually legitimated social realities (threads) of the project’s coalition of firms, on their own may be of insufficient potency to de-legitimate nor therefore to influence decision making. Acknowledging the concept of a tipping point, if sufficient numbers of problems occur within the multiple social realities of major projects, there will be multiple crisis of legitimacy. Threads may begin to weaken and our metaphorical rope will begin to unravel and project survival is threatened. Since the project is nothing more than a collection of beliefs of what people say it is, failure is not an absolute truth ([Bovens, 't Hart, & Peters, 2001](#_ENREF_9)), the survival of a project depends on there being sufficient belief in its legitimacy. Success and failure are therefore ultimately social. Whether or not a project is actually going to fail in its ultimate objective of reform, if it reaches its tipping point and experiences multiple crises of legitimacy, it ceases to command social support and fails when support is withdrawn ([Drummond & Hodgson, 2003](#_ENREF_31)). In the retrospective analysis of a failed project, the robust rope of legitimacy that worked to create and maintain the belief system that kept it moving has long since unravelled and the functionalist view of cause and effect prevails.

In the quest for understanding why major reform projects fail, critical hermeneutics can help to reveal these influential relationship tangles, which may otherwise have been overlooked in the functionalist analysis of project failure. Certainly, we posit that the failure points extend far beyond poor procurement and project management. Critical hermeneutics emphasise that social reality is historically constituted. We argue that without such a critical and hermeneutic approach to understanding we cannot know how cultural messages are concealed and revealed, nor how the ambiguity of meaning allows for distortion and domination by particular groups or ideologies ([Roberge, 2011](#_ENREF_95)). Whilst the pursuit of efficiency can remain the guiding purpose of public procurement projects, in the political realm where projects are initially legitimated into existence, the emphasis is on talk and rhetoric emphasising a future state, rather than action and actualised benefit in the here and now ([Pollitt, 2001](#_ENREF_92)). The disconnect between organisational change rhetoric and functionalist accounts are commonly found in organisational studies ([DiMaggio & Powell, 1991](#_ENREF_24)). Our hermeneutically-analysed extract forms part of a wider study exploring the role of legitimacy and escalation of commitment throughout the full project lifecycle. The space constraints of this paper allow only an illustrative example of the hermeneutic technique to reveal ideological meanings transmitted at the outset of projects, and how they can be legitimated and sustained to enable action, thereby progressing with a project through continuous escalations, despite evidence of failure.

Major projects are distinctive features of modernisation combining large financial and human resources with technical innovation in temporary coalitions of firms ([Winch, 2008](#_ENREF_117)). The changing landscape of governance over the past 30 years had led to networked governments, which are subject to competition and market forces heightening the need for legitimacy in decision making around major public projects. The management of major projects presents a special challenge for executive politics and our understanding of government more widely ([Jennings, Lodge, & Wegrich, 2012](#_ENREF_60)). Nevertheless, and despite their societal and economic impact, major infrastructure projects are less well understood by organisation and management theory than the social and economic processes they generally enable ([Winch, 2008](#_ENREF_117)). NPM policies are arguably more symbolic than practice-led and have been criticised as “part of the ritual and myth that helps to preserve the legitimacy of the system of governance”, with “few consequences for performance” ([Christensen & Lægreid, 2003, p7-8](#_ENREF_16)) . Nonetheless, even though most reforms will never be completely successful or achieve their desired outcomes, reforms are not entirely unsuccessful either and do accomplish some effects. While these effects are sometimes unexpected and paradoxical, NPM reforms continue to influence new ways of organizing for the development of alternative service delivery options.

In the case of FiReControl, there was considerable opposition and evidence-based challenge to the project including alternative solutions from the fire and rescue sector itself, where one may assume claims to knowledge are arguably greater than in Whitehall. However, without sufficient authority, individuals and groups cannot exercise sufficient power to legitimate such alternative courses of action. Public project failure at the rate the UK is currently experiencing is not sustainable ([Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2012](#_ENREF_22)). Challenging the taken-for-granted process of government-commissioned ‘independent’ reviews, informing white papers, securing scarce resources to initiate ideologically-shaped reform projects on the grounds of efficiency are not working and should be rethought. To operationalise this concept decision-making processes that would legitimate both the character of a proposed public sector reform and the decision outcome should be subject to democratic scrutiny where the ultimate authority does not lie with ministers and the power to challenge is not singularly within their gift.

In this paper we set out to show how alternative research methods can reveal the influences of legitimacy, which can further our understanding of high—risk, major public procurement projects. Functionalist methods and government lessons learned processes overlook the ideological influences that frame, and sustain, legitimacy, yet it is these impacts that can considerable effect on seemingly rational actors escalating commitment to failing courses of action. If we are to make a difference to public procurement and project failure there is a need to understanding more about why, and by how much they fail, through continued escalation of commitment. Given that the rate of failure is high on political agendas, phronetic research can reveal more of the power and value issues to enable more effective suggestions towards what can be done.

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