

Presidentialization in the United Kingdom  
Prime Ministerial Power and Parliamentary Democracy

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Workshop 7: The Presidentialization of Parliamentary Democracies?

**Abstract**

Prime Ministerial Chief Executives can access theoretical and practical, formal and informal power resources that extend their authority in government. Studies of executive politics in the UK are best served by 'bringing the Prime Minister back in', applying a theory of 'presidentialization' rooted in a centre-periphery model of a semi-pluralist but definitively hierarchical executive. Here, with regard to actors and institutions, power is relational, but also locational in an executive within which the Prime Minister (as both actor and institution) is sited at the apex of the hierarchy.

Invariably subject to intra-executive and executive-legislature relations, Prime Ministerial influence is contingent on transient institutional and personal resource factors. These include electoral strength, political base, success, and a favourable profile, resources in turn determined by parliamentary majority, policy record, backbench and frontbench popularity, party popularity, electoral rating, news media profile, and personalisation, the ever-growing association of political processes with political personalities. To date the 'command premiership' of Tony Blair demonstrates the centrality the Prime Minister can enjoy in British government. The parliamentary executive in Britain exercises considerably more powers to govern than does the presidential executive in the US; should, like Blair, the Prime Minister command considerable authority within the executive, he or she will possess as much executive power and far more legislative authority than does the US President.

'You're either a weak Prime Minister, in which case they'll knock you for that, or if you appear to have a clear sense of direction, and know what you want to do, then you are a

quasi-dictator. And all this President Blair rubbish, it's absolute rubbish.' Tony Blair, *The Observer*, 5 September 1999.

“They have got to know I’m running the show.” Tony Blair, quoted in *The Sunday Times*, 26 April 1988

Even with devolution of power to Scotland and Wales, Britain remains to all extents and purposes a unitary, centralised parliamentary democracy with a majoritarian non-proportional electoral system, a two and a half rather than a multi party system, and a legislature which is effectively unicameral. This non-consensual, non-coalitional, hierarchical political regime produces single party government and provides the executive with considerable power and authority. Majoritarian government is a continuing feature of Britain’s ‘Westminster Model’, and is the key factor in a creeping presidentialization which, within limits, under certain conditions and subject to ebbs and flows, has facilitated the growth of Prime Ministerial power within their party, the legislature and the executive in recent years.

Of course, unlike presidential regimes, Britain’s parliamentary system produces a collegial executive dependent on legislative support to retain office. Outside of general elections, the principal checks and balances on this executive are firstly, the ‘law of anticipated reactions’ prompted by parliamentary discontent in the face of policy failure or impending electoral misfortune, and secondly, self-regulation by the executive. In theory, executive self-regulation is achieved by pluralism within government, and is a product of parliamentary accountability, collective responsibility and departmental autonomy within the Cabinet system. While a team player, the Prime Minister is the ‘captain of the team’, the ‘Chief Executive’ of the government, and as such charged with a degree of direction, oversight, co-ordination and management. Yet, the Prime Minister is much more than a ‘first’ among ‘equals’, and this paper argues that the theoretical and practical, institutional and personal power resources available to a British Prime Ministerial Chief Executive can provide them with more authority and power than a Presidential Chief Executive.

Prime Ministerial powers are theoretical and practical, formal and informal, institutional and non-institutional and the three qualifications for holding the post are:

- membership of the House of Commons;
- leadership of the majority party within the House of Commons;
- command of the confidence of the executive he or she appoints and leads .

As is well known, the Prime Minister is granted formal prerogative powers, which are theoretically unfettered, if definitely practically limited, which include the right to:

- lead the government;

- appoint ministers;
- allocate portfolios;
- dismiss ministers;
- reallocate portfolios;
- regulate government business;
- manage the Cabinet system;
- create Cabinet Committees and appoint particular ministers to them;
- refashion central government;
- generally supervise the machinery of government;
- create peers;
- confer honours; and.
- dissolve Parliament and call a general election

In addition, through additional powers of patronage, the Prime Minister has powers to make any number of public appointments to corporations, public boards and commissions of enquiry, but two additional prerogative powers

- the signing of international treaties
- the use of armed force including the declaration of war

are invariably exercised collegially to some extent. Parliament has no influence over these prerogative powers and scant influence over the decisions that flow from them, being able only to advise and warn before the event and determine their validity retrospectively by giving or withholding assent. In general terms, two types of authoritative but informal powers available to the Prime Minister can be identified:

The power to determine and regulate government activity by being:

- head of the government responsible for its strategic direction and armed with the power of patronage arising from the exercise of the royal prerogatives;
- party leader responsible for party management and discipline; and
- the government's principal media spokesperson, and able to set the government's agenda in the national news media.
- able to manage the agenda of the Cabinet and its principal Committees;
- able to manipulate the Cabinet Committee system;

Through the judicious deployment of these (and other resources) the Prime Minister can lead government provided ministers are willing, or can be coerced, to follow. For reasons discussed later, Prime Ministerial influence ebbs and flows considerably; for example, at her peak, a naturally autocratic Margaret Thatcher exerted more influence than the more emollient John Major, Tony Blair is a more assertive Prime Minister than Jim Callaghan. In general, however, the array of powers and privileges a British Prime Minister possesses allows them to head up one of the most centralised systems of executive government in

Western Europe. Prime Ministerial influence and the capacity to lead being contingent on institutional and personal resource factors such as his or her popularity, political base, success, visibility and profile. These resources are in turn determined by such factors as parliamentary majority; policy record; backbench rating and popularity; frontbench rating and popularity; news media profile and rating; party popularity; public popularity and electoral rating.

Theoretical powers aside, there are a number of models of executive governance which detail the practical influence a parliamentary Chief Executive may or may not have. Laver and Shepsle suggest six models of executive governance: Prime Ministerial, Cabinet, ministerial, bureaucratic, party and legislative <sup>1</sup>, and Dunleavy and Rhodes propose five: Prime Ministerial government, Prime Ministerial clique, Cabinet government, ministerial government, segmented decision making, and bureaucratic co-ordination <sup>2</sup>. Government by Prime Ministerial cliques, a form of 'shared government' where key executive actors and institutions possess power and authority but where the Prime Minister is the key player, retains the most persuasive power and provides the institutional basis for the 'presidentialization' phenomenon. Britain does not have collective government (defined as all executive actors having equal influence on policy making at all times), nor ministerial government, because ministers do not alone have sole responsibility for policy under their jurisdiction.

Presidentialization suggests that although they cannot do everything and have to willingly delegate a number of intra executive responsibilities, Chief Executives are political actors of great consequence, if of varying types, domineering, collegial, consensual, and are able to possess considerable power. The word presidentialization may be as misleading, in a different way, as the term Prime Ministerial government, but the 'potential for influence' of the Prime Minister and his closest, most senior (elected and non-elected) allies has certainly increased over the past twenty five or so years. This process has facilitated the circumscription of less senior members of the government (in Cabinet and certainly outside Cabinet) who are no longer able to influence policy across the range of governmental responsibilities beyond own departmental interests.

Hierarchy in British government is very significant. Cumulative reforms have strengthened the decisional capacity of Cabinet Committees and ad-hoc Ministerial Committees and

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Laver and Kenneth Shepsle, *Cabinet Government and Government Formation in Parliamentary Democracies*, in Laver and Shepsle (eds), Cabinet Ministers and Parliamentary Democracies, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Dunleavy and RAW Rhodes, 'Core Executive Studies in Britain' Public Administration, Vol 68 1990, pp3-28; RAW Rhodes, *From Prime Ministerial Power to Core Executive*, in Rhodes and Dunleavy (eds), Prime Minister, Cabinet and Core Executive, London: Macmillan 1995.

encouraged bilateral policy decisions between the Prime Minister and individual ministers. These have lessened the collective power of Cabinet and enhanced the individual power of the Prime Minister, Downing Street officials and other key members of Cabinet. In Blair's government, as one of Peter Hennessy's well placed civil service sources remarks, 'Tony wants' is the most powerful phrase in Whitehall<sup>3</sup>. Adapting recent 'core executive' studies<sup>4</sup>, the authority of the Prime Minister can be seen to be dependent on an ability to govern through the executive, and we should not lose sight of the fact that a number of *circumstances* and *resources* do provide for the exercise of Prime Ministerial *power*.

As Prime Minister Blair seeks out this power and does so by cultivating a presidential image, making the most of his role as head of the government to lead it, aspiring to what Hennessy terms a 'command premiership'<sup>5</sup>. His centralised leadership of the Labour Party in opposition, 1994-97, is obviously the model for his Premiership: "Blair's impatience with the...Shadow Cabinet meant he relied heavily on his personal aides and some supportive Shadow ministers...They knew his mind and shared his ideas of what needed to be done, Those who were not on message were ruthlessly sidelined"<sup>6</sup>. In office, his authority enhanced by office and its administrative resources, the Prime Minister currently dominates the government. Its key agenda setter, he drives it forward, making most of his considerable popularity among his ministers, parliamentary colleagues, the Labour Party at large, and, not least, large swathes of the electorate.

### **Presidential and Parliamentary Systems: Executive-Legislative Relations in British Government**

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Hennessy quoted in Michael Cockerell, Blair's Thousand Days, BBC 2 Production, 30 January 2000.

<sup>4</sup> RAW Rhodes, 'Introducing the Core Executive' in RAW Rhodes and Patrick Dunleavy (eds), Prime Minister, Cabinet and Core Executive Op Cit. p9. Cf Patrick Dunleavy and RAW Rhodes, 'Core Executive Studies in Britain' Public Administration, Op Cit.; RAW Rhodes, Understanding Governance, Buckingham: Open University Press 1997; Martin J Smith, The Core Executive in Britain, London: Macmillan 1999

<sup>5</sup> Peter Hennessy, The Blair Centre; A Question of Command and Control, London: Public Management Foundation 1999 p1. See also Hennessy, The Importance of Being Tony: Two Years of the Blair Style, London: Guys and St Thomas' Hospital Trust 1999; 'The Blair Style of Government: An Historical Perspective and An Interim Audit', Government and Opposition, Vol 33 1998 pp3-20; and The Hidden Wiring: Unearthing the British Constitution, London: Victor Gollancz 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Dennis Kavanagh and Anthony Seldon, The Powers Behind the Prime Minister: The Hidden Influence of Number Ten, London: Harper Collins 1999 p243. According to one Blair aide: "There was never any intention of having collective Cabinet government if Tony was to have the policies he wanted. As in opposition, he would have a centralised operation" p245

Widespread charges of presidentialization were levied against Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister, and it is certainly true that her efforts to channel her government in her chosen political direction saw significant changes in executive politics. But, where Thatcher blazed the trail, Blair as Prime Minister has followed. This is not just a product of the ambitions of these two individuals and their staff, rather an indication of cumulative, structural changes enacted over time where intra-executive reforms have necessarily followed from the executive's freedom of manoeuvre within Britain's system of parliamentary government.

Presidential and parliamentary regimes are distinguished firstly, by individual and collegial systems of executive government and secondly, by relations of domination, subordination and equality between the executive and legislative branches of government. Obviously, the fusion of the executive and the legislative in parliamentary systems and their separation in presidential systems lies at the heart of the theoretical and practical difference between them. Parliamentary systems within unitary states do not separate powers either horizontally or vertically, relying instead on (weak) formal and (stronger) informal checks and balances. As recognised by Montesquieu and the framers of the US Constitution, the executive's capacity to dominate the legislature allows a majority party to exercise considerable power. The scope of executive government is defined by the formal prerogatives available to presidential and parliamentary chief executives. These differ according to regime, but what Elgie terms the emergence of "more pluralistic conceptualisations of executive politics"<sup>7</sup>, indicates there are "muddy waters of the borderline between parliamentarism and presidentialism", particularly when "what matters most is constitutional practice, which may deviate from constitutional theory"<sup>8</sup>.

Of presidential types we can distinguish strong and weak presidentialism and semi-presidentialism. In regard to parliamentarism, the legislature either empowers or restricts the executive depending on whether a particular parliamentary system has a strong, intermediary, or weak executive. Compared to, say, the Norwegian or Danish system, the British parliamentary system is a particular form of parliamentarism. Here, a weak legislature and a less collegial executive permits a parliamentary Chief Executive to possess powers more in keeping with a presidential counterpart, and so the boundaries between this type of parliamentarism and presidentialism become distinctly blurred. There are differences and similarities between Prime Ministerial and Presidential Chief Executives. The key power resources each require to operate effectively include:

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Elgie, 'Models for Executive Politics: A Framework for the Study of Executive Power Relations in Parliamentary and Semi-Presidential Regimes', Political Studies Vol XLV 1997 217-231 p217

<sup>8</sup> Jan Erik Lane and Svante Errison, The New Institutional Politics: Performance and Outcomes, London: Routledge 1999 p121.

- authority within the executive; and
- control over the legislature.

The US President undoubtedly possesses the first and invariably lacks the second. The British Prime Minister enjoys the second, while having *to some degree* to exercise this powers in concert with other senior members of his executive, and has in recent years taken enormous steps toward acquiring the first. The degree to which these two powers are exercised collegially, semi-collegially, semi-individually or individually in the UK lies at the heart of the notion of presidentialization. Obviously, in terms of presidentialism, the UK clearly does not meet the designated criteria <sup>9</sup>, but, putting to one side constitutional distinctions between presidential and parliamentary regimes, the Prime Minister as a parliamentary Chief Executive does possess a degree of personalised power which marks a shift from a collective to a more individualised form of executive government <sup>10</sup>

In theory, the US President exercises all of the prerogatives of the executive, and the British Prime Minister is obliged to share executive competencies. The US President (following advice from his staff and Cabinet) makes legislative recommendations to Congress, whereas the British Prime Minister (following consultations within the executive and having reached some form of collective agreement) issues legislative instructions to Parliament. The US President is unable to pursue a legislative agenda when the independent Congress declines to support it: Clinton's legislative capacity was undermined when the Republicans took control of Congress in 1994. In contrast, together with his or her Cabinet, the British Prime Minister leads Parliament, provided they have a partisan majority in the House of Commons, and the relative strength and cohesion of their party in Parliament so enhance their capacity to do so. Of course, the greatest legislative defeat of Clinton's Presidency, health care reform in 1993, came when his party controlled both the Senate and the House of Representatives. The US President may enjoy the power to command his executive, but he or she certainly does not possess the ability to lead, let alone command, the US federal legislature (or any state legislature or, indeed, the Supreme Court) irrespective of partisan politics.

The parliamentary executive in Britain enjoys considerably more powers to govern than does the presidential executive in the US. Should, like Tony Blair, the Prime Minister command authority within the executive, he or she will possess more personal executive and legislative powers than the US President. The legislative capacity of the British executive, the key to understanding its powers, is entirely granted by its partisan majority within the legislature. In theory, the Commons is sovereign, but in practice this sovereignty is delegated to the

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<sup>9</sup> Cf Matthew Shugart and John Carey, Presidents and Assemblies: Constitutional design and Electoral Dynamics, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1992; Giovanni Sartori, Comparative Constitutional Engineering: Structures, Incentives and Outcomes, London: Macmillan 1997

<sup>10</sup> Cf Michael Foley, The Rise of the British Presidency, Manchester: Manchester University Press 1993



executive. While the executive is in theory *dependent on* and *accountable to* this parliamentary majority, in practice it is not *the agent* of it. Once a partisan majority exists, particularly a large majority such as the 144 Thatcher possessed in 1983 or the 179 Blair currently enjoys, Parliament does not choose to be *the master* of the executive.

Rather than reinventing the wheel, Blair as Prime Minister is working within the grain of well-established trends. In the UK a belief in limited government combined with a preference for self-governance and indirect administration has been gradually replaced by a system predicated upon greater direction from the governing centre. “[I]n so far as there is a constitutional explanation for this trend toward greater centralisation of powers it is to be found within the underlying commitment to majoritarian popular government”<sup>11</sup>, and the centralised pattern of governance established over the past fifty years that results arises from the “concentration of power within the hands of a government with a firm Commons majority”<sup>12</sup>. Weak legislative checks and balances on the executive further encourage this phenomenon as the very asymmetrically bicameral British legislature is ever more defined by its reactive nature and its actions determined by the executive’s partisan majority. Here, the key resource available to the Prime Minister is their leadership of a unitary, centralised, and disciplined party.

Naturally, government cares little about the legislature’s role as a check and balance on the executive. Prioritising the party’s well being requires its MPs to tow the party line. Such is the partisan nature of British parliamentary politics, political parties are loath to allow backbenchers to speak their minds, and always have been. The majority of Labour MPs follow the lead of the Blair government because they wish to do so, out of a sense of self-interest, partisan interest, agreement with the policy, or a combination of all three. One Downing Street official has claimed: “Basically, in No 10 Downing Street there is a complete contempt for Parliament and that attitude permeates the entire government”<sup>13</sup>. That said, ministers are careful not to alienate their MPs and avoid issues they cannot support. While the ambitious MP will reply ‘how high’, when asked to jump, a great many can find that proverbial straws can and do threaten to break the camel’s back. MPs cannot endlessly be reluctantly dragooned into a voting lobby on promise of reward or threat of punishment; frontbenchers recognise that as valuable a resource as backbench goodwill can be easily eroded by resentment. Winning consent is often as important as applying coercion. This was

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<sup>11</sup> Nevil Johnson, ‘The Constitution’ in Ian Holliday (et al eds), Fundamentals in British Politics, Op Cit.p64

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Peter Osborne, Alastair Campbell: New Labour and the Rise of the Media Class, London: Aurum Press p160.

a lesson Margaret Thatcher failed to heed in 1988-90 when sufficient Conservative MPs forced her out of the leadership <sup>14</sup>.

In the final instance, the Prime Minister's dependence on party within both executive and legislature is everything. John Major observed that "Every leader is leader only with the support of his party" <sup>15</sup>, and Margaret Thatcher acknowledged that a "Prime Minister who knows that his or her Cabinet has withheld its support is fatally weakened" <sup>16</sup>. No Prime Minister enjoys the security of tenure granted the US President because their party can dismiss them at a moment's notice. In contrast, short of impeachment or assassination, the US President is secure in post for their fixed term <sup>17</sup>. In Britain, as well as a resource, the party can therefore also be a constraint, and leaders have to use both the prospect of reward and the threat of punishment, the time honoured carrot and/ or stick, to manage and control it. By these means, a popular, well-resourced Prime Minister, in concert if needs be with certain Cabinet colleagues, can dominate their party. Of course, their party may ultimately come to dominate them. Neither of these happen under the US presidential system, where, once he is elected, while the President's party cannot remove him from office, it is a legislative (if not an executive) constraint, and therefore less a resource in governing.

Party control confers legislative control. Before 1688, the monarch governed through Parliament, but today the government exercises parliamentary sovereignty in legislating its policy agenda, particularly when a disproportional electoral system provides it as in 1997 with 64.5 per cent of Commons seats on 44.5 per cent of the vote on an electoral turn out below 72 per cent. Naturally, the government is unable to ignore Parliament but the British

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<sup>14</sup> Cf Martin J Smith, 'Interpreting the Rise and Fall of Margaret Thatcher: Power Dependence and the Core Executive' and GW Jones 'The Downfall of Margaret Thatcher' in RAW Rhodes and Patrick Dunleavy (eds), Prime Minister, Cabinet and Core Executive Op Cit; Margaret Thatcher, The Downing Street Years, London: Harper Collins 1993. Alan Clark, Diaries, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1993 pp343-370 very nicely captures the Byzantine nature of backbench and Cabinet plotting against an out of touch and increasingly unpopular Prime Minister, her reserves of political capital spent.

<sup>15</sup> John Major, The Autobiography, London: Harper Collins 1999 p626

<sup>16</sup> Margaret Thatcher, The Downing Street Years, p851.

<sup>17</sup> For example, where Clinton weathered the 'Lewinsky storm', he would probably have been forced from office if he were a British Prime Minister. While presidential staffers dealt with accusations and questions raised in the news media and on Capitol Hill, the President avoided public comment on the subject from January to August 1998. In contrast, there would have been no hiding place for a British Prime Minister embroiled in a similar situation. Blair would have been questioned again and again in the House of Commons at Prime Minister's Question Time; something that would have been to Clinton's considerable disadvantage. Just imagine the resulting scenes had House Republicans and unhappy Democrats the chance to question the President in January 1998?

House of Commons, despite its considerable theoretical powers, is a relatively supine institution. Of the three types of legislatures:

- policy making legislatures which modify or reject measures brought forward by the government and can formulate and substitute policies of their own.
- policy-influencing legislatures which modify or reject measures brought forward by the government but cannot formulate and substitute policies of their own,
- legislatures with little or no policy effect which neither modify nor reject measures brought forward by the government nor formulate and substitute policies of their own.

the British Parliament falls into the second category, with perhaps the phrase ‘chooses not to’ replacing ‘cannot’ in the second line. Because its decisions are determined by its partisan majority, Parliament, theoretically free to reject all decisions of the executive, is unwilling, rather than unable, to do so. While still responsible for scrutinising and criticising the decisions of the executive, the legislature is also an arena for public discussion of political issues, able to make recommendations for policies, actions and decisions and providing a forum for executive accountability. However, the Commons majority chooses only to endorse or at best modify proposals laid before them because the capacity to reject proposals is invariably neutered by a partisan straightjacket.

Parliament is used by opposition parties as a means to harry and oppose the government, criticise its policy, publicise its mistakes, and, in the case of the official opposition, showcase itself as the alternative government. But with very rare exceptions, opposition parties have no opportunity to influence or significantly affect legislation. While in *theory* the Commons can reject legislation presented by the executive, in *practice* the executive has de-facto power to enact legislation. Of course, because the executive has still to govern through parliament, it *leads* rather than *commands* the legislature thanks to a ‘law of anticipated reactions’ requiring government to do only that which its majority can be persuaded (or coerced) to support.

Blair’s attitude to Parliament is therefore not new, but part of a long-term, well-established trend: “The shift of power away from Westminster has developed in the past two decades: reflected in growing judicial activism; the expanding influence of the European Union (underpinned by the superiority of European over British laws where they conflict)...and by replacement of the Commons chamber by broadcasting studios as the main political arena”<sup>18</sup>. However, given that the British political system has long championed the interests of the executive, a more significant fact should be added to this list. General elections are now wholly concerned with the selection of *government* rather than *parliament* (indeed, increasingly a choice of alternative *Prime Ministerial Chief Executive*) and, once government has been selected, the primary role of the Commons is to maintain it until the subsequent general election. Once a popular vote (as converted into the number of parliamentary seats given each party) determines the composition of the Commons, its practical (as opposed to

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Riddell, The Times, 18 October 1999

theoretical) power amounts only to the ability to ‘criticise or encourage’ the government it places in office. On the government side of the chamber, we may well add and ‘to admire and cheer’. From this, it may easily be adduced that rather than decide policy and impact seriously on politics, it falls to the House of Commons to discharge the role of ‘interest representation’, able to advise and warn, but practically unwilling, if not theoretically unable, to decide or determine.

Subject to the legislature’s anticipated reaction and the will of the people as definitively expressed at a general election, the executive enjoys power provided by a firm Commons majority. There is nothing new in this; executive dominance has long been a feature of British political life; did not Bagehot note back in 1867 that “the principle of Parliament is obedience to leaders”<sup>19</sup>? The powerful role that devolves on the government is essential to an understanding of British government. The important question is however still begged: Where does power reside in this executive and to what degree is this power exercised collectively or possessed individually. The incremental emergence of a degree of presidentialization in the UK (to which the reforms of the Blair government significantly contribute) is an illustration of alterations in *intra-executive* politics, something building on the foundational opportunities provided by age-old *executive-legislature* politics.

### **Prime Ministerial Power and Executive Politics: Theoretical and Practical, Formal and Informal Resources**

Executive government is to some degree fragmented and internally divided, and theories of the ‘core executive’ focus on “the complex web of institutions, networks and practices surrounding the Prime Minister, Cabinet, Cabinet Committees, and their official counterparts, less formalised ministerial...meetings, bilateral negotiations and inter-departmental committees”<sup>20</sup> (to which we may add the upper echelons of the most important Departments of State such as Downing Street, the Treasury, and the Cabinet Office). Here, a number of core executive accounts suggest that “power does not lie anywhere in the system because it is everywhere....all actors have resources, and outcomes need to be negotiated”<sup>21</sup>.

While RAW Rhodes’ suggests “[i]t is misleading to focus on personality and on the role of the Prime Minister and key ministers. There are many actors with complex interdependencies in the core executive. All control some resources. No one actor can succeed without

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<sup>19</sup> Walter Bagehot, The English Constitution, London: Fontana 1963 ed.

<sup>20</sup> RAW Rhodes, ‘Introducing the Core Executive’ Op Cit p12. This particular quotation is so often quoted it appears to resemble scripture; no one, this author not being exempt, can apparently write on this subject without making an obligatory reference to it.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid* p14

exchanging resources. Power is everywhere”<sup>22</sup>, this prompts the question: do all executive actors really control all resources? Equally? Martin J Smith’s observation that we need “to develop an understanding of how power operates within the core executive”<sup>23</sup>, prompts the additional suggestion that we also need to understand where power is; which actors in what institutions possess it; why; and to what end. Power ‘doesn’t belong’ to one institutional actor or another, but under particular circumstances, ‘more of it’ is found in one such institutional actor at any one particular time. Here, thinking in terms of UK presidentialization is informative.

Obviously, British government is not necessarily as centralised as traditional approaches have it, but it is nowhere near as fragmented or decentralised as some recent studies have suggested. The executive (core or otherwise) is segmented, but not necessarily wholly pluralistic; power resources are not evenly distributed among all players. Certainly, government departments are to some extent free standing institutions. They both complement and fiercely compete one with another, prompting the pressing need for co-ordination of government activities, what is commonly called ‘joined-up government’, but who or what actually does the joining-up? For reasons explored below, under Blair Downing Street together with the Cabinet Office has taken this co-ordination task upon itself. While steering clear of simple notions of Prime Ministerial v Cabinet Government, studies of the UK executive are best served by ‘bringing the Prime Minister back in’. In parliamentary government, personal leadership does matter, even if individual ministers are not simple agents of the Prime Minister’s will and a degree of collective decision-making is provided for in the day to day processes of governance. Presidentialization is part of a pressing need to develop a centre-periphery model of Britain’s executive government, one demonstrating the central role the Prime Ministerial Chief Executive can play, but does not necessarily always plays.

The Prime Minister has no statutory duties, only responsibilities by convention and discretionary powers as of right: In theory, he or she cannot act without the consent of Cabinet and the support of Parliament. In practical terms they are obliged to delegate a number of powers and responsibilities. Executive powers should be collectively exercised, but the wishes of the Prime Minister are invariably to the fore. Of course, because collective government doesn’t just happen, Blair therefore needs the de-facto and de-jure ‘agreement’ of his colleagues to act should he wish to act in a presidential fashion. For a ‘powerful’ Prime Minister, this agreement will be forthcoming. Although departmental ministers do play a significant policy making role their impact on policy under their jurisdiction is subject to the demands and interventions of the Prime Ministerial centre.

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<sup>22</sup> RAW Rhodes ‘Foreword: Transforming Government in Martin J Smith, The Core Executive in Britain, London Macmillan 1999 pxiv.

<sup>23</sup> Martin J Smith, ‘Reconceptualizing the British State: Theoretical and Empirical Challenges to Central Government’ Public Administration Vol 76 1988 pp 45-72

This centre seeks to restrict departmental autonomy (excepting the all-powerful Treasury) by imposing financial<sup>24</sup> and political controls. Ultimately, together with key leading ministers, the Prime Minister is responsible for ‘green-lighting’ all policy initiatives. Obviously, the opportunities for Prime Ministerial influence are greater in certain policy sectors rather than others. For example, Blair was far more able to direct defence and foreign policy in regard to, say, Iraq in 1988 and the Kosovian Crisis of 1999, than he is able to individually direct reforms in education or health policy. That said, contra Laver and Shepsle, policy formation is not just departmental in form or origin. Any major proposal Blair and Downing Street strongly object to (and can avoid), will not come to pass, and ministers who lose out are, in the time honoured way, obliged to ‘shut up or get out’ (or pursue the matter and run the risk of being thrown out)<sup>25</sup>. Of course, Downing Street often sees Cabinet as being simultaneously as much an obstacle as a resource. In resentful retirement Thatcher bemoaned her Cabinet majority as an obstacle rather than a resource in her great and unfinished battle to recast Britain in her chosen image. What she needed, she claimed, was ‘six good men strong and true to help her see the job through’, but rarely could manage to find as many as six<sup>26</sup>.

The Prime Ministerial actor should be distinguished from the Prime Ministerial institution; dependent on personality and circumstances, the actor may be strong or weak, collegial or autocratic. Few Prime Ministers feel presidential, and few Presidents probably feel presidential; political actors being invariably more aware of the constraints they face rather than the resources they enjoy. Here, the power to determine government policy as leader, co-ordinator, or arbitrator is counterbalanced by constraints such as collegiality, time, knowledge, expertise, and the ever-present pressure of events. Often obliged to be as reactive as they are proactive, chief executives cannot do everything and their need to delegate authority and respond to economic, social, political and electoral demands all impact upon their ability to govern. Blair has to work with the grain of the institutions he inherits (and the actors he is surrounded with), reforming where possible at the margin and only later at the centre, aware that not everything he wants can be attempted or achieved.

Placing to one side the key policy-influencing role of the Whitehall bureaucracy, British Cabinet Ministers, in contrast to their American counterparts, have some degree of autonomy.

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<sup>24</sup> Martin J Smith, ‘The Institutions of Central Government’ in Ian Holliday, Andrew Gamble and Geraint Parry (eds), Fundamentals in British Politics, London: Macmillan 1999 p103.

<sup>25</sup> In opposition, “[p]olitical strategy ha[d] been decided in [Blair’s] office, working closely with his aides and with Gordon Brown [Shadow Chancellor]. Policy had not been evolved thorough the Shadow Cabinet or party committees but through his office and his bilateral sessions with Shadow ministers” (Kavanagh and Seldon, The Powers Behind the Prime Minister Op Cit p250). Thus it has been in government.

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Thatcher quoted in the transcript of The Downing Street Years, Blakeway Productions, 1993.

The more senior they are, they more autonomy they enjoy and the greater chance of being a check and balance on the Prime Minister either as members of a Prime Ministerial clique or as authoritative figures in their own right. Mrs Thatcher's abandonment by her parliamentary party and Cabinet in November 1990 places the presidentialization debate in some form of context. But the extent to which the executive remains ultimately collegial is heavily dependent on a variety of contingent factors. Ministers are of varying types: strong, weak; capable, incapable; consensual, decisive; reactive, proactive; active, passive; popular, unpopular; high profile or no-profile. A political typology describing the relationship ministers may have to the Prime Minister embraces the following examples:

- Prime Ministerial Partisans;
- Prime Ministerial Loyalists;
- Could-be Prime Ministerial Critics;
- Prime Ministerial Critics; and
- Indispensable Loyalists/ Could be Critics

Placing to one side the obvious role of partisans and loyalists, political figures ever willing to add weight to a Prime Minister, an example of the fifth category is the current Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown. With but two exceptions all Chancellors of the Exchequer since 1962 have been putative Prime Ministers, alternatives-in-waiting to the incumbent should he or she falter, and Brown is no exception. He is a very powerful minister with a significant degree of independence of the Prime Minister. Thanks to a deal with Blair, he is number two in the government, and has a political base that allows him to place his department and himself at the centre of domestic policy. Indeed, such is the range of these policy interests, it is often suggested that Brown operates in Whitehall as if he is "a French Prime Minister with Blair as a kind of Fifth Republic President"<sup>27</sup>. In contrast to other executive actors, most notably John Prescott, nominally the Deputy Prime Minister, but with little autonomy to be anything other than loyal to Blair, Brown forms an axis with Blair at the heart of the government.

Thanks to his standing in the Labour Party and his indispensability to the government, Brown can constrain Blair's freedom of manoeuvre in regard to economic policy. Indeed, Blair is content to allow Brown and the Treasury a free hand in regard to economic policy. However, while such a course is fraught with political difficulties, Blair retains the option to restrain his Chancellor, but by working with Brown he significantly constrains the freedom of all other executive actors in economic policy matters. For example, the 1997-98 Comprehensive Spending Review setting the government's expenditure priorities for the next three years, "was very much a Prime Minister-Chancellor, Treasury-No10 Policy Unit affair with the affected departments getting very little look in during the crucial last weeks...[during which] the cabinet's public expenditure committee...definitely did not figure as the locus of decision

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Peter Hennessy, The Importance of Being Tony, Op Cit p3

taking”<sup>28</sup>. In allocating spending resources to departments for the three years from 1998, Blair and Brown “just called in ministers and told them what they were getting. There was no appeal”<sup>29</sup>. Should Prime Minister and Chancellor agree on policy, this relationship-type is not a problem. When they disagree, and their differences compound, it can create enormous difficulties for the government.<sup>30</sup>.

While Brown has to be accommodated as an actor deemed indispensable to the government, partisans and loyalists also make their way up the government hierarchy, as do certain party figures likely to offer a possible threat to the leader and/ or who have a parliamentary party base of their own. Loyalty, less so ability, remains the age-old means of political preferment within parliamentary government, but Prime Ministers also often deal with would-be potential opponents by buying them off, circumscribing them by inclusion in government. Leaders do wisely apply the crude but apposite principle enunciated by Lyndon Johnson: keeping potential rivals ‘inside the leadership tent pissing out’, rather than having them ‘outside the tent pissing in’.

It is incumbent upon the Prime Minister to *manage* the executive by *leading* it because, unlike the US President, he or she cannot *command* it. But while it may be the case that “[e]ven with an array of institutional resources and the authority of the office a Prime Minister can achieve nothing on their own”<sup>31</sup>, exactly may be said of a President. Irrespective of regime type, all administrations are collegial to some extent and involve the delegation of power and cooperation. Each actor has to share some degree of power with others, and have their freedom of manoeuvre restricted as a result<sup>32</sup>. But, if no one actor has ultimate influence, some actors have considerably more power and influence than others, and it is into this category Prime Ministers fall.

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<sup>28</sup> Peter Hennessy, The Blair Centre Op Cit p9.

<sup>29</sup> David Lipsey, The Secret Treasury: How Britain’s Economy is Really Run, London: Viking 2000 p165.

<sup>30</sup> Unlike the US Vice Presidency, an office famously not worth a ‘pitcher of warm piss’, Chancellors of the Exchequer carry significant weight. Witness the key fallings out between Thatcher and her Chancellor, Nigel Lawson (and Foreign Secretary, Geoffrey Howe) in 1988-89, which contributed greatly to the erosion of her authority, helping pave the way for her downfall.

<sup>31</sup> Martin J Smith, The Core Executive, Op Cit. p78.

<sup>32</sup> John Major’s inability to manage his Cabinet in regard to Europe in 1992-97 offers a case in point. That said, although the phenomenon of presidentialization makes ministerial veto of Prime Ministerial actions an exception, not the rule, wise Prime Ministers take a self-denying ordinance should they recognise a course of action they favour will create more trouble than it is worth.



## **Inter-Elite Relationships: A Hierarchical-Plural Model of the UK Executive.**

Of course, the weaker the Prime Minister and the more tenuous their hold on their office, the fewer loyalists and partisans they find they have in government. As Thatcher discovered; ‘the Queen is dead, long live the King’ is still a feature of Britain’s political landscape. Because colleagues are simultaneously a ‘necessary resource’ and an ‘unavoidable obstacle’, a Prime Minister’s freedom of manoeuvre is to some extent dependent on the structured framework within which they operate. However, it does not necessarily follow that this framework determines all activities, or decides all outcomes. Instead, they provide the contexts within which actors operate, but actors may decide what activities take place when and so influence the outcomes that follow. Prime Ministers have the power of direction, but also the power of veto; or, more rarely, find themselves under particular circumstances the subject of a veto.

Martin J Smith argues that “all actors within the core executive have resources, and in order to achieve their goals they have to exchange them. The process of exchange occurs through networks and alliances which develop because of mutual dependence. Because no actor has a monopoly of resources, power cannot be located within a single site of the Core Executive....Consequently, there cannot be Prime Ministerial government, because the Prime Minister will always depend on other actors”<sup>33</sup>. Obviously, no simple command and obey model applies, but, if the Prime Minister doesn’t possess 100 per cent of the power (indeed, no institutional actor, not the most despotic of dictators possesses that amount), does this mean he or she cannot possess, say, 70 per cent at any given time? Or 50 per cent? Or 35 per cent? If the Prime Minister is, in Smith’s phrase, “resource rich”<sup>34</sup>, how ‘resource rich’ can they be? How dependent on other actors can they be? How dependent on the Prime Minister can these other actors be?

As an ‘interactive Chief Executive’ reliant upon ministers and officials to pursue goals, the Prime Minister is equipped with a number of strategies and tactics to apply their resources and advance their interests<sup>35</sup>. As Smith recognises, the Prime Minister is “in a structurally advantageous position...[is] at the centre of the networks that traverse the core executive and therefore he or she has access to all areas of government...[is] able to define the strategic direction of government...choose areas of policy involvement...[and] has a view of government that is not available to other ministers”<sup>36</sup>. While never being ‘totally free’ of other network actors- no actor or institution in any political regime ever achieves this- Prime Ministers exert influence by being ‘less dependent’ of them and to this end require not a

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<sup>33</sup> Smith, The Core Executive, Op Cit. pp28-29.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*

<sup>35</sup> Smith suggests a useful list of these in The Core Executive in Britain, p34.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid* p77

‘monopoly of power’, just ‘sufficient power’. Thus, if it is “impossible, and indeed fruitless, to try to identify a single site of power within the core executive”<sup>37</sup>, it is also wrong to suggest that power is ‘everywhere’. Power is ‘somewhere’ and is found in certain places more than others. Because it is not in one single site does not mean it is in many, many sites; power is an unequally held resource. Because particular executive actors are far more important than others, the Prime Minister being a case in point, they are more powerful, and as a result a hierarchy of power exists among unequal actors.

Prime Ministers do not have absolute, unconditional power, but, subject to any number of variable contingencies, have significant, conditional power. There may well be life in that Politics 101 chestnut describing the UK Prime Minister as ‘*primus inter pares*’, the idea he or she is ‘*first among equals*’. Prime Ministerial authority naturally stems from being *first* and the resources thus granted, but such restriction as can apply to that authority result from their being surrounded by those who can prove *equals*<sup>38</sup>. Ultimately, the Prime Minister’s *conditional power* is dependent on their possession of other *institutional* and *personal* resource factors above and beyond their formal prerogative powers.

The institutional resource base of the Prime Minister has grown exponentially- if incrementally- in recent years. Under Blair, Downing Street has been significantly strengthened<sup>39</sup> and now comprises the separate divisions of the Private Office, the Political Office, the Policy Unit, a Strategic Communications Unit and the ever more important Press Office. To this may be added the important, but separate Cabinet Office, revamped into an institution under the direction of Downing Street. This highly integrated ‘Whitehall Centre’, the “core of the core or the centre of the centre...an executive office in all but name”<sup>40</sup>, is increasingly the servant of a powerful Prime Minister, charged with firstly, issuing representations to departments, and secondly, enabling departments to make representations to the Prime Minister<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid* p6-7

<sup>38</sup> Hennessy quotes a hyperbolic Whitehall insider; “the residual notion of Tony Blair as ‘*primus inter pares*’ is wrong. He’s way above that. Like Caesar, he bestrides his world like a Colossus”. The Importance of Being Tony Op Cit. pp15-16.

<sup>39</sup> For details see: Hennessy, The Blair Centre: A Question of Command and Control Op Cit; Kavanagh and Seldon, The Powers Behind the Prime Minister Op Cit. Chapter 10.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Burch and Ian Holliday, ‘The Prime Minister’s and Cabinet Offices: An Executive Office in All But Name’, Parliamentary Affairs Vol 52 No 1 1999 p32

<sup>41</sup> On centralisation in Whitehall in recent years see Colin Campbell and Graham Wilson, The End of Whitehall: Death of a Paradigm?, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1995.

By prioritising issues, managing business and helping determine departmental priorities, the centre does not just resolve departmental conflict and arbitrate inter-government disputes, but strengthens Downing Street's policy input across Whitehall. Its remit is to be proactive, setting priorities and cajoling departments, preventing fragmentation and imposing a centrally driven unity<sup>42</sup>. As Peter Mandelson, a Blair confidant and one time Cabinet Office minister, argued in 1997, its role is "to support the Prime Minister at the centre of government" and to "evaluate, develop and promote policy on the Prime Minister's behalf... help[ing] ensure that Department's objectives and measures are made consistent with overall government strategy"<sup>43</sup> (for which read: Prime Ministerial intentions).

Blair's strengthening of the centre is designed to give Downing Street, particularly the Policy Unit and the Press Office, greater opportunities to boost the Prime Minister, and so help further presidentialize the current government. Alastair Campbell, Chief Press Secretary to the Prime Minister, is Blair's closest adviser. In speaking for the government, his objective is to present the Prime Minister's view as that of the government and vice versa<sup>44</sup>. It is no exaggeration to say that Campbell (and other key Downing Street staff) exercise more power in government than the vast majority of Cabinet ministers (of course, they exercise power only because they are creatures of the Prime Minister). Campbell himself "has rights of attendance at virtually all Blair's meetings, including Cabinet and bilaterals with Cabinet ministers"<sup>45</sup> and controls all media access to Blair, advises on all policy issues, and determines the government's overall media strategy. Downing Street has right of approval over all ministerial speeches, press releases and new initiatives as well as decides upon their timing and presentation<sup>46</sup>. Few ambitious, relatively powerless ministers would disregard such instructions when their future preferment depends upon Prime Ministerial largesse.

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<sup>42</sup> Burch and Holliday, 'The Prime Minister's and Cabinet Offices: An Executive Office in All But Name' Op Cit.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Mandelson, Speech 16 September 1997, Cabinet Office Press Release.

<sup>44</sup> Where Mike McCurry, Clinton's Press Secretary in 1995-98, had no involvement in determining White House policy, claiming "I'm in sales, not product development" (Quoted in Howard Kurtz, Spin Cycle: How the White House and the Media Manipulate the News, Touchstone Books: New York 1998 p171), this definitively does not apply to Campbell. Although it is said that the role of the White House Press Secretary is to work for both the President and the news media, operating "equidistant between [these] two combatants" (McCurry, New York Times, October 2 1998) as past Press Secretaries claim to straddle the line "between news and propaganda...telling the truth, giving people a window on the White House, and protecting the President" (Kurtz, Spin Cycle p15) the Downing Street Press Secretary works only for the Prime Minister, not the news media, not the public, nor indeed the government.

<sup>45</sup> Kavanagh and Seldon, The Powers Behind the Prime Minister Op Cit. p256.

<sup>46</sup> "All major interviews and media appearances, both print and broadcast, should be agreed with the No 10 Press Office before any commitments are entered into" and policy content has

The causes of presidentialization lie in the ability of the Prime Minister to exercise a series of institutional and personal resources that complement and advance his or her theoretical and practical, formal and informal powers.

The institutional resource factors available to the Prime Minister include the following:

- leadership through patronage and the use of the Royal prerogatives;
- agenda-setting through ‘leadership’ within government using the Policy Unit and the Cabinet Office
- agenda-setting through the news media; using No10 as a ‘bully pulpit’ a la a US President
- ‘creeping bilateralism’ and the manipulation of Cabinet Committee system and the considerable weakening of collective responsibility that results.
- institutional reform: strengthening Downing Street and the Cabinet office so fashioning a de facto Prime Ministerial Department

The personal resource factors available to the Prime Minister which strengthen his or her indispensability to government and enhance their authority include the following:

- personalisation;
- demonstrated and perceived policy success;
- party standing;
- parliamentary reputation;
- electoral popularity;
- party contentment at the prospect of up-coming electoral success;
- favourable media profile; and
- an ‘agreeable image’ deployed by political marketing and political communication strategies.

These are the key Prime Ministerial resources a Prime Minister can possess and apply. Obviously, just as in the case of institutions, political actors, their ideas and actions, exist in the context of the broader social, economic and political setting in which they are located. The possession (or lack of) of the resources listed above is dependent upon the background of these contextual settings and they are the products of exogenous and endogenous factors. Having obtained (or not obtained) these resources, the Prime Minister brings them to bear within the institutional setting of executive government, and uncovering how these resources are accumulated and by what means they are (successfully or unsuccessfully) applied in government offers an exciting agenda for future research.

In passing, it’s worth noting that presidentialization owes a great deal to a personalization of

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to “be cleared in good time with the No 10 Private Office” Cabinet Office, Ministerial Conduct, London: HMSO August 1997.

politics which features in the contemporary focus on the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. In an age when political agendas are all too driven by the dictates of a personality hungry news media, political activity too often revolves around the personas of Blair, William Hague, the Conservative leader and, to a much lesser extent, Charles Kennedy, the Liberal Democrat leader <sup>47</sup>. Given the contemporary focus on political hierarchies, the role of the Prime Minister is continually reinforced by political communications and a news media interest in the leading personality in government (Blair says; Blair does) it encourages.

Of course, while personalisation in politics is considerably encouraged by modern practices, it is not intrinsically new, and Conservative campaign literature made much of the moderation of Stanley Baldwin and his ‘Safety First’ appeal in the late 1920s and the 1945 Conservative Manifesto was famously entitled ‘Mr Churchill’s Declaration of Policy’. However, contemporary personalisation is now underpinned by two related factors: Firstly, the fact that political leaders now dominate their political party in ways previously undreamed of. Secondly, the pervasive role of political communications in the political process. In regard to the first, the hollowing out of parties of left and right and their domination by their leaderships and their ‘electoral professional’ cadre rather than the party at large is well attested. Executive actors, rather than being influenced by the values and policies of their party, are increasingly able to use the party to promote their own values and policies; or else, where there is a rare conflict, they ignore the values and policies of the party. In regard to the second, modern media politics market and package the party leadership rather than the wider political party <sup>48</sup>.

Where John Major was portrayed as ‘weak and indecisive’, Blair presents himself publicly as ‘strong and commanding’, a leader eager to ‘lead his party’ as opposed to ‘follow it’. While used to either promote itself or attack the appeal and image of its opponents, the government’s political communications showcase the leader, enhancing the Prime Minister’s authority. This further strengthens the government centre at the expense of its periphery, particularly when the Prime Minister’s public utterances (or those delivered on his behalf by a favoured insider) can decide the political direction of the government. Political communications empower an already powerful leader and Blair uses Downing Street’s near monopoly of government-sourced PR and marketing strategies to project ‘himself as the

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<sup>47</sup> According to a survey by The Times Blair received three times more newspaper coverage than any other British politician did in 1999. He was “the subject of 27,136 separate stories. Gordon Brown, the Chancellor, was a far-off second, with 9,353 references...[and] John Prescott, the Deputy Prime Minister, was third with 5,572, but the majority of these stories were highly critical of his handling of the transport portfolio” The Times, December 30 1999.

<sup>48</sup> Cf P Mancini and David Swanson (eds), Politics, Media and Modern Democracy, New York: Praeger Press 1996

government', establishing a policy stance political commentators, the electorate, the Labour Party and, particularly, the government itself are obliged to take note of <sup>49</sup>.

### **A Locational Power Model of the Plural-Hierarchical UK Executive**

Institutional analysis cannot explain everything. To discover *what* government does and *why* it does it requires an understanding of the interconnectedness of the state, civil society and the market, and the variety of external environments brought to bear upon government. To analyse *how* government does things, however, requires closer focus on the workings of the institutions comprising the central state and the motivations of the actors who operate within and around them <sup>50</sup>. Britain's parliamentary system encourages a frontbench-backbench and leader-follower divide. While backbenchers possess only a theoretical power of veto, ministers outside of a core elite, have little formal- and few informal- opportunities to dramatically affect or influence the decision making process beyond the narrow departmental issues they have responsibility for. While departments can have significant agenda setting powers, junior ministers have little independence (indeed, serious influence) within their own departments.

According to constitutional 'convention' government should arrive at collective decisions when all members of the collective must participate fully in their making. Such collective decisions having been taken, all members of the government have the duty to defend and advance them in public. Yet, not all members do so participate. The Secretary of State for Defence has no real interest and little inclination to take an interest in the workings of, say, the Department of Health, and visa versa. Naturally, should health as an issue threaten the well being of the government, other ministers may take an interest, particularly if they are expected to defend health policy in public.

In contrast to Bonar Law's relaxed view of the Prime Minister as "a man [sic] at the head of a

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<sup>49</sup>. Critical 'unattributable briefings' by a 'close supporter', 'senior aide' or 'spokesperson' of the Prime Minister are a useful strategy to prevent ministers from stepping out of line. As well as being a source of information about the thinking and opinions of the government elite, they are a self-referential form of public communication indicating to ministers as well as the wider world which minister is on 'the way up', on 'the way down' or on 'the way out'. Few ambitious ministers are likely to court Prime Ministerial disapproval, with the possibility of being publicly labelled a 'lame duck' well out of the governing loop. Cf Richard Heffernan and James Stanyer, 'The Enhancement of Leadership Power: The Labour Party and the Impact of Political Communications' in David Denver (et al eds), British Elections and Parties Review 1997, London: Frank Cass 1997.

<sup>50</sup> As is so well known, 'bringing the state back in' should not necessitate leaving out civil society or the market, nor should the reverse apply; all are to some extent interdependent and the borders between each, while distinct, have become increasingly blurred in the *governance* of the modern world.

big business who allows the work to be done by others...and gives it general supervision”<sup>51</sup>, he or she is obliged to take an interest in all government business and consider the wider picture beyond narrow departmental interests. Only the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s responsibilities remotely approach this, given his or her interests embrace the government’s budget and the public expenditure round, but while the Chancellor may have considerable discretion and autonomy, these matters are also discussed with the Prime Minister.

As with US Cabinet members, British Cabinet ministers are now expected to stick to their Cabinet briefs and are given less and less opportunity to influence policy beyond their department. It is unlikely, say, that the Secretary of State for Media, Culture and Sport can affect economic policy deliberation<sup>52</sup>. Membership of a Cabinet Committee may grant a minister some wider influence within the executive<sup>53</sup>, but, excepting issues where collective discussion genuinely arrives at a strategic decision or a policy stance, ad-hoc committees and bilateral negotiations between the most senior figure in government often pre-empt Cabinet Committee deliberations. This is because the executive is a set of hierarchical networks where key ministers have more power and influence than others. A ‘creeping bilateralism’ long present, is increasingly the name of the Whitehall game, one empowering the Prime Minister and his or her clique at the expense of the collective authority of Cabinet. Ministers are often limited by their departmental functionality; not so the Prime Minister<sup>54</sup>.

Bilateralism is therefore a key feature of presidentialization; the Prime Minister influences policy decisions because he or she is at the centre of an interlocking network of bilateral contacts; all roads, as it were, lead to Rome. Kavanagh and Seldon argues that during his

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<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Alan Clark, The Tories: The Conservatives and the Nation State, 1922-1997, London: Phoenix 1998 p20.

<sup>52</sup> While private disagreements are rife, ministers tend to stick to the governmental line and resignations on grounds of policy disagreements are relatively rare. According to Dowding and Kang, of 205 selected cases ministerial resignations (as opposed to dismissals) in 1945-97, only 60 were the result of policy disagreements compared with 65 for personal or departmental error and 46 for personal reasons. Keith Dowding and Won-Taek Kang, Ministerial Resignations 1945-97, Public Administration Vol 76 1988 pp411-429.

<sup>53</sup> Patrick Dunleavy, ‘Estimating the Distribution of Positional Influence in Cabinet Committees under Major’ in Rhodes and Dunleavy (ed), Prime Minister, Cabinet and Core Executive, Op Cit.

<sup>54</sup> . According to Nigel Lawson, a minister “may well feel reluctant to spend too much of his [sic] political capital, arguing a case against the Prime Minister in a field which is totally outside his departmental responsibility. It is some other minister’s baby and some other minister’s responsibility” ‘Cabinet Government in the Thatcher Years’, Op Cit. p443. Lawson suggests this suited all ministers, and recalls certain ministers who “were arguing very strongly for more collective decision-making in government, were at the same time busy cutting bilateral deals with the Prime Minister on issues within their own bailiwick” *ibid*.

“first 25 months in office Blair held a total of 783 meetings with individual ministers; over the same period, Major held 272 such sessions”<sup>55</sup>. According to Hennessy, Blair meets each Cabinet Minister at the beginning of the parliamentary session to plan their departmental tasks and objectives for the coming year; no other Cabinet Ministers are involved in this process save the Chancellor when the Treasury is involved in expenditure matters. In addition, Blair conducts discussions with the Permanent Secretary of each department to underpin the ‘contract’ he has drawn up with the departmental minister<sup>56</sup>.

This bilateralism reflects the fact that the British executive can be structurally represented as a set of concentric circles, at the centre of which is found a small inner core elite and at the margin a much larger peripheral elite in which the majority of ministers are located. These Inner Core Elite, Outer Core Elite and Peripheral Elites see circles mediate each other. Power is locational: the closer to the centre the player, the more power and influence they have. Obviously, the Prime Minister and his closest- elected and non-elected- associates are to be found in the innermost concentric circle. Of course, while the government remains to some extent collegial, power and authority are still exercised hierarchically and there is a world of difference between senior ministers (the small minority) and junior and middle-ranking ministers (the large majority). Listed in order of importance, there is a clear, if often informal, hierarchy in British government, one in which status, power and authority is accrued the nearer the top an actor is placed:

- Prime Minister;
- senior Cabinet Minister closely associated with or indispensable to the Prime Minister;
- senior Cabinet Minister;
- middle ranking Cabinet Minister;
- junior Cabinet Minister;
- junior Minister I: Minister of State in an important department;
- junior Minister II: Minister of State in a less important department;
- junior Minister III: Parliamentary Under Secretary of State;
- Party Whip and Parliamentary Private Secretary (unpaid Ministerial assistant);
- backbenchers, their status dependant not necessarily on seniority but on loyalty, at the bottom of the greasy pole.

In this centre-periphery model location is everything; it determines which actor and what institution is at the centre of a policy domain, and which are more consequential than others; those nearer the centre naturally exert more influence. There are a number of actors in any network, but rather than consider policy networks simply pluralistic, it should be emphasised that networks are hierarchical and that some actors have more authority and power than

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<sup>55</sup> Kavanagh and Seldon, The Powers Behind the Prime Minister Op Cit. p275

<sup>56</sup> Peter Hennessy quoted in Michael Cockerell, Blair’s Thousand Days, BBC 2 Production, 30 January 2000.



others. Their internal hierarchies determine how actors in which institutions participate and how influential they may be. It is not the case that either the Cabinet will be all-powerful or the Prime Minister omnipotent.

Power dependencies among actors within governmental institutions are not an all or nothing game. Yet, while not all-powerful, the Prime Minister can be more powerful than the Cabinet, Tony Blair most certainly is. It all depends on how significantly more advanced the power resources of each may be. The ability of the executive to collectively check and balance itself is dependent on the power of the Prime Minister and their ability to lead.

## **Conclusions**

Contra Rosenau <sup>57</sup> then, hierarchies matter, and are still to be found (perhaps in the plural rather than the singular) in executive government in Britain. It does not take a blinding insight to recognise that, say, the Chancellor of the Exchequer possesses a greater field of command over policy than the Secretary of State for Wales. A Secretary of State for Wales may aspire to becoming Chancellor, no Chancellor aspires to become Secretary of State for Wales. Advancement in government is still a matter of climbing the famous greasy pole. However 'complex' we deem the executive to be, hierarchical models of executive politics are better informed than ones based upon too differentiated a notion of power. Rhodes' suggestion that "[p]ower is relational, based on dependency not domination... These structure of dependence take the form of overlapping policy networks" <sup>58</sup> is accurate up to a point, but power is not simply relational; it is also locational, and domination can be as important as dependency.

Location matters because it determines network form. Who has access? Who sits where? Has what power? Why? Hierarchical models demonstrate that not all actors- or all institutions- are equal: Even the 'core executive' has a 'core'. Notions of governance, suggesting it is the product of "the interaction of a multiplicity of governing and each other influencing actors", <sup>59</sup> are wholly insufficient without an understanding of hierarchy and the inequalities of power within networks. An elitist-informed perspective rightly emphasises the locational aspect of power and influence, even if tempered to some extent by a relational appreciation of the interactive nature of that power and influence. Thus, Prime Ministers have more power than have other executive actors.

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<sup>57</sup> James Rosenau, Governance, Order and Change in World Politics' in Rosenau and E O Czempiel (eds) Governance Without Government, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

<sup>58</sup> RAW Rhodes, Foreword to Martin J Smith, The Core Executive in Britain, Op Cit. p.xiv.

<sup>59</sup> Jan Kooiman and M Van Vliet 'Governance and Public Management' in K Elissen and Jan Kooiman (eds), Managing Public Organisations, London: Sage 1993 p64

While, with the possible exception of Thatcher in 1983-86 and 1987-89, Blair is probably the most executive-dominant Prime Minister since 1945 (so far), Gordon Brown can lay claim to being the most executive-powerful Chancellor of the Exchequer in that same period. These two factors indicate first, the reality of a creeping presidentialization within the British executive and second, its realisation in the form of an Inner Core Elite within a stratified, concentrically circled hierarchical government.

Actors operate in institutions governed by rules and regulations subject to the uneven distribution of resources and the restraints imposed by the institution. Within these structural rules a number of Prime Ministerial strategies providing for the accruing of authority have been identified, foremost among them the creation of a Prime Ministerial clique composed of advisers, officials and some (but by no means all) executive actors. Hence, while the executive has been generally strengthened by Britain's parliamentary system, contemporary politics has prompted a form of presidentialization in which executive power is not differentiated, but held unequally by a small number of actors.

Therefore, the old Asquithian canard, the idea that a Prime Minister may make what he or she wishes of the position they hold, holds true, but only in part. Each Prime Minister can skilfully apply their theoretical and practical, formal and informal, institutional and personal powers to extend their authority, but their capacity to do so is dependent on the resources they possess and can apply effectively, firstly, in the executive and secondly, in the legislature. However, although the Prime Minister occupies a very privileged position within the executive, one which can border at times temporarily on the autocratic, Prime Ministerial government, narrowly defined as a wholly monocratic form of government, is not possible. But, obliged to treat their executive as both obstacle and resource in the pursuit of their own agenda, Prime Ministers can lead from the front, and do so in concert with their Prime Ministerial clique, much as the US President works with key White House staffers and leading Cabinet members.

The British political system does not *automatically* create an 'individualised presidentialism' dominated by the Prime Minister, although presidentialism can enable the Prime Minister to *consequentially* dominate government for considerable periods. Of course, the notion that power "does vary from Prime Minister to Prime Minister, and....according to the political strength that a particular Prime Minister has at any given time"<sup>60</sup> should always be very much borne in mind; resources come and go, are acquired and lost, given and taken away. The power of a Prime Minister is not permanent, may well be transitory and certainly alters over time. But, at the very least, presidentialization does mark a definitive shift from a collective to a more individualistic control over government and its activities. This can confer a British Prime Minister with powers unavailable to a US President, enabling them to authoritatively preside over a parliamentary executive empowered with greater decisional

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<sup>60</sup> Nigel Lawson, Cabinet Government in the Thatcher Years, Contemporary Record, Vol 8 No 3 1994 pp440-452 p441.

impact than an actual presidential executive, courtesy of the majoritarian nature of the British political system.