

The Power of the Prime Minister

50 Years On

George Jones

THE
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About the Author

George Jones has from 2003 been Emeritus Professor of Government at LSE where he was Professor of Government between 1976 and 2003. He has authored, co-authored and edited a number of books, chapters and articles on British central and local government, including the biography of Herbert Morrison, B. Donoghue and G.W. Jones, 'Herbert Morrison: Portrait of a Politician' (London Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973) and (London: Phoenix Press, 2001).

He has written about advising the Prime Minister and Cabinet in J.M. Lee, G.W. Jones and J. Burnham, 'At the Centre of Whitehall' (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998); and a study of prime ministers in G.W. Jones (ed.), 'West European Prime Ministers' (London: Frank Cass, 1991). He wrote the first study of the private secretaries of prime ministers in G.W. Jones, "The Prime Ministers' Secretaries: Politicians or Administrators?" in J.G. Griffith (ed.), 'From Politics to Administration' (London: Allen and Unwin, 1975). His latest book is with Andrew Blick, 'At Power's Elbow: Aides to the Prime Minister from Robert Walpole to David Cameron' (London: Biteback Publishing, 2013).

Foreword

Half a century ago George Jones provided an important insight into our political system. In an article published in 1965 he took issue with a then-fashionable view. Around this time some influential commentators – among them two Labour politicians and authors John Mackintosh and Richard Crossman – were promoting a particular school of thought about the office of Prime Minister in the United Kingdom (UK). Those who adhere to interpretations of the type they advocated tend to regard the British premiership as growing ever-more-powerful. The general sense they conveyed is of an emergent system of personal rule from No. 10 Downing Street, buttressed by the Civil Service, the party system, and the media. In this scenario, the Prime Minister was becoming more than simply first among a Cabinet of equals and was supplanting collective government and bypassing Parliament, perhaps even to the point of being an unofficial president engaged in a direct relationship with the public.

George Jones rejected this view. I suspect in doing so he was influenced by the former Labour Cabinet minister Herbert Morrison, who Jones came into contact with at Nuffield College, Oxford as a post-graduate in the early 1960s, and whose biography Jones later co-wrote.¹ In his accounts of the British constitution, drawing on the benefits of extensive first-hand

1 Jones's co-author was Bernard Donoughue, now Lord Donoughue, who subsequently became from 1974–1979 first head of the No. 10 Policy Unit, and in this capacity Senior Policy Adviser to successive Labour prime ministers, Harold Wilson (1974–1976) and James Callaghan (1976–1979).

experience, Morrison stressed the enduring vitality of Cabinet. He emphasised and that no-one – including the Prime Minister – could lightly ignore the strength of this forum for group decision-taking. Taking a cue from Morrison and also reflecting the recorded views of previous prime ministers including Lord Rosebery (Liberal, 1894–5) and Herbert Henry Asquith (Liberal, 1908–1916), Jones argued in his 1965 article that prime ministerial-power was dependent upon many variables and subject to important limitations. They included the personal qualities and objectives of the person who held the post at a given time, the profile of those who sat around the Cabinet table and the political circumstances of the day. Jones concluded that exercises of power from No. 10 were always reliant upon some degree of compliance from other ministers in government. They were able between them to restrain a premier if they chose to do so.

With this contribution Jones sparked an important debate that continues to this day. The view of the office of Prime Minister as ever-strengthening still has attractions for some and has periodically been restated – particularly during premierships that at times seemed dominant, such as those of Margaret Thatcher (Conservative, 1979–1990) and Tony Blair (Labour, 1997–2007). Yet it would be as easy to see in Thatcher and Blair evidence that supports the Jones thesis. Thatcher clearly left office sooner than she wanted to, and so did Blair, even if his departure was not as dramatic as Thatcher's. Neither was entirely secure. They both overplayed their hands and eventually paid the ultimate price.

Both the school Jones attacked and the Jones view itself have persisted. So too has the contribution from Jones himself. The thesis he first presented in 1965 has attracted support including from many working within the governmental system. It has proved intellectually influential and other academics have taken a lead from Jones. Over time, political science has demonstrated its

capacity to overcomplicate, detracting from a theory the beauty of which was its simplicity. We now have an array of theories using terms such as resource-dependency, the core executive, predominance and contingency. All of them seem to elaborate upon – but add little of substance to – the basic Jones premise. It is that prime ministers must govern with others. They depend upon the support or at least tacit compliance of their fellow ministers to achieve their goals. This cooperation is not automatic and must be won. To secure it prime ministers deploy resources at their disposal that those who sit around the Cabinet table in turn need access to. Within this overall framework, there is room for prime ministers at times to achieve what can appear to be hegemonic status. Yet in reality there are always limits, and such strength as premiers attain is fleeting. The Jones thesis allows for the office of Prime Minister to develop structurally through history, acquiring – and losing – practical functions, formal powers, and support personnel or aides. Such trends serve to alter the framework within which the premier operates. But they do not remove the mutual dependency at the heart of government.

This realisation is important to understanding the UK constitution and the way in which it can change. Jones sought to dispel interpretations of the premiership rooted in a failure to afford sufficient fluidity to the concept of power. Those who continue to adhere to the flawed conception he attempted to correct might – as we have seen – regard the Prime Minister as increasingly powerful. Another mistaken outlook could be to perceive the premier as not powerful enough. Both conclusions lacked a recognition of the variability involved. But mistaken or not such views could lead in turn to recommendations for reforms designed either to constrain or augment the premiership. Over the decades a number of programmes for change, whether institutional, legal or parliamentary have rested partly in one

or the other of these conflicting views of the premiership. Such alterations may have an impact upon the way in which the Prime Minister operates. But they are subject to the same mutability that characterises the office as a whole. Addressing real problems through constitutional modification is a difficult enough task in itself and will normally have at least some unintended consequences. Seeking remedies to difficulties that do not exist is a distraction with possibly malign consequences. For this reason we should take seriously Jones's warnings about the way in which some misconceive the premiership.

Given the ongoing importance of the debate he first entered in 1965 Jones's sustained participation in it has proved valuable. Regularly he has updated and expanded upon his work in the area, taking into account new events but always demonstrating the persistent viability of his core thesis. I have been fortunate enough to help him elaborate upon his ideas, including using a long term historical perspective stretching back to the time of Sir Robert Walpole, regarded as the first Prime Minister, in the early eighteenth century. This pamphlet is a further update in the rolling exposition of the Jones theory of Prime Minister and Cabinet, a project now in its sixth decade. I commend it to readers, along with all his past – and future – instalments.

This text was completed shortly before the European Union referendum of June 2016, the outcome of which triggered the resignation of David Cameron as Prime Minister. This chain of events has served further to confirm the Jones thesis.

Dr. Andrew Blick
King's College London
June 2016

Introduction

A little over 50 years ago in 1965 the journal *Parliamentary Affairs* published an article of mine titled “The Prime Minister’s Power”.² I wrote it against a then fashionable view. According to this outlook the British Constitution had radically changed. It was held that the power of the prime minister had grown to such an extent that it had supplanted cabinet government with a system of almost presidential government or of an elected monarch. Contrary to such theses I concluded

‘The Prime Minister is the leading figure in the Cabinet whose voice carries most weight. But he is not the all-powerful individual which many have claimed him to be. His office has great potentialities, but the use made of them depends on many variables, the personality, temperament, and ability of the Prime Minister, what he wants to achieve and the methods he uses. It depends also on his colleagues, their personalities and temperaments and abilities, what they want to do and their methods. A Prime Minister who can carry his colleagues with him can be in a very powerful position, but he is only as strong as they let him be.’

2 G.W. Jones, *The Prime Minister’s Power in Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 18, Spring 1965, pp. 167–185.

This last sentence has been much quoted in later years, especially by students writing their essays. Academics and civil servants have used it in their evidence to parliamentary select committees, including the inquiry by the Political and Constitutional Reform select committee of the House of Commons into the *Role and Powers of the Prime Minister*; and it is still true today.³

3 See the written evidence of Professors Martin Smith and David Richards to the House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee's inquiry into the *role and powers of the Prime Minister*, Session 2010–11, and the oral evidence of the former Cabinet Secretary Lord Wilson of Dinton to the House of Lords Committee on the Constitution into *The Cabinet Office and the Centre of Government*, 4th Report, of Session 2009–10, on 24 June 2009 at Question 110.

Contingencies and Resource Dependency

In the *Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership* published in 2014 my collaborator Andrew Blick of King's College, London, and I contributed a chapter called 'The Contingencies of Prime-Ministerial Power in the UK'.⁴ It focuses on the phrase that encompasses the main concept expressed in my 1965 article as, "depends on many variables", now called "contingencies". Dictionaries define contingencies in many ways. Contingency is the state of relying on or being controlled by someone or something else, and the condition of being dependent on chance and uncertainty.

For analyzing prime ministers contingencies are the varying factors, circumstances and tendencies outside the formal remit of the office of Prime Minister that determine his or her power. The most important are political, including whether or not the Government's policies are successful or failing, winning or losing public support, and are likely to bring future electoral victory or defeat.

Resource dependency claims that the exercise of power occurs when those who have powers or resources use them to persuade others to deploy their powers or resources to achieve the former's

4 A. Blick and George Jones, "The Contingencies of Prime-Ministerial Power in the UK" in P.'t Hart and Rod Rhodes, ed., *Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

objectives, which means they are all involved in relationships of mutual dependency.

A Prime Minister's resources comprise his personal attributes, style, way of working, motivation, and his skill in deploying his more tangible resources, constitutional, legal, institutional and administrative. As in a game of cards a skilled player can do well even if dealt a weak hand.

The most important resources are political, above all party. In 1991 I edited a book called *West European Prime Ministers*.⁵ It covered seven prime ministers from European countries. I concluded that of the various resources, and constraints, contingencies indeed, that shaped the power of a PM in all these countries, the main one was party. I wrote "The nature of the party system as thrown up by electoral politics is the critical factor determining the prime minister's power."⁶ I argued "Party management is the main role of the prime minister, intra-party or interparty, or both."⁷

That assertion has been proved by the premierships of David Cameron both in Coalition 2010–15 and as head of a majority government from 2015. For this reason the decline of parties as mass organisations is a real problem for prime-ministers, particularly the breakdown in the UK in party loyalty within the House of Commons, with backbench MPs increasingly likely to vote against their whips.

5 G.W. Jones, *West European Prime Ministers*, (London: Frank Cass, 1991).

6 *Op.cit.* p. 177.

7 *Op.cit.* p. 175.

The Formal Remit and Amorphous Convention

Constitutional lawyers may be wondering about the formal remit, or formal resources, of the Prime Minister. The first official statement about the role of the premiership was in an October 2001 written parliamentary answer by Prime Minister Tony Blair to a question about the nature of the British Prime Ministership [put by Graham Allen MP, who was campaigning for a written constitution and a directly-elected prime minister – and he still is]. The Prime Minister replied: “there are more than 50 specific powers conferred on the office by statute” most of which concerned appointments. The roles of

‘head of Her Majesty’s Government, her principal adviser and as Chairman of the Cabinet are not... defined in legislation. These roles, including the exercise of powers under the royal prerogative, have evolved over many years, drawing on convention and usage, and it is not possible precisely to define them.’

Ten years later the civil service attempted to give a fuller answer. In October 2011 the first edition of the UK *Cabinet Manual* (Cabinet Office, 2011) was published. It described itself as ‘A guide to laws, conventions and rules on the operation of government’⁸ The Manual included within it what was probably the fullest official account of the office of British Prime Minister

8 Cabinet Office, *The Cabinet Manual* (London: Cabinet Office, 1st edition, 2011), p. i.

ever placed in the public domain.⁹ It confirmed the amorphous nature of the premiership.

In the words of the Manual “The Prime Minister has few statutory functions but will usually take the lead on significant matters of state”.¹⁰ As this statement shows, the leadership role of the UK premiership is founded neither in a constitutional text (since the UK has no such entity) nor even to a large extent parliamentary enactment, but in convention – that is various understandings about the constitution that have developed over time and are by definition difficult both to define and to enforce. While UK constitutional arrangements are notable for their vagueness, even within such a setting the office of Prime Minister stands out as less formally defined than many other institutions of governance.

9 *Op.cit.* pp. 21–22.

10 *Op.cit.* paragraph 3.3, p. 21.

Key Stages in the Historical Development of the Premiership

In 2010 Andrew Blick and I wrote a book, *Premiership: The Development, Nature and Power of the Office of the British Prime Minister*.¹¹ It ranged from the so-called first Prime Minister, Robert Walpole (1721–1741) up to 2010. It showed there was no clear progression from a weak PM to a strong one, but instead it tended to vary, with ups and downs. Often an assertive PM was followed by one more relaxed, and *vice versa*.

It also showed that in the development of the Premiership institutions matter. It is often said that Walpole was PM because he successfully bridged the gap between the King and Parliament, mediating between them, and so resolved the conflict that had produced the seventeenth-century civil war and the beheading of the King by the successful Parliamentarians.

But something else contributed to his predominance. He had significant institutional and administrative resources. He was supported by a strong department – the Treasury, of which he was First Lord – a title still today on the name plate of the door to 10 Downing Street and the basis on which the premier lives at this address. This position gave the Prime Minister access to money and staff.

11 Andrew Blick and George Jones, *Premiership: The Development, Nature and Power of the Office of the British Prime Minister* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010).

Biographies of Prime Ministers are Not Enough

In 2013 Blick and Jones produced *At Power's Elbow: Aides to the Prime Minister from Robert Walpole to David Cameron*. It showed that the premiership has always been a group enterprise. Prime Ministers need help to link them to other centres of power which seem significant at that moment. These entities possess resources the Prime Minister wants deployed to achieve his goals and to diminish or bypass their opposition.

So prime ministers have needed assistants to connect them to the civil-service official machine, to Parliament, to the press, to public opinion, and above all to their parties – in the House of Commons and in the country outside parliament.

To study the power of the prime minister, therefore, it is necessary to move beyond the person of the prime minister and assess their resources, especially their closest aides. An assessment of the power of the prime minister necessitates an examination of who these aides are, what they contribute to the premiership, and where they are located so one can see how close they are to the prime minister. Biographies of prime ministers alone will not convey the reach of prime-ministerial power.

Harold Wilson¹²

Harold Wilson was Prime Minister 50 years ago when my article was published. Comparing and contrasting his No. 10 with that of David Cameron's reveals changes and continuities of the intervening period.

Like David Lloyd George before him Wilson was a great innovator at No. 10. He said he wanted it to be a power house not a monastery, but he never established a prime minister's department; indeed he mounted an attack on the idea, based on my writings.¹³

Wilson made five innovations at No. 10:

First, one of his long-lasting innovations began in his initial period as prime minister in the 1960s when he inserted as his aides what were later called SPADs, special advisers,¹⁴ such as the Oxford don Thomas Balogh and his fellow economist from Balliol, later its Master, Andrew Graham (son of Winston Graham the author of the *Poldark* series, and author of the book made into Hitchcock's film *Marnie*).

In 1974 on his return to No. 10 Wilson institutionalised this "think-tank" into the Policy Unit, headed by the LSE political scientist and historian Bernard Donoughue. As Senior Policy Adviser Donoughue headed a team of 7–8 non-civil-service experts, covering a range of domestic policy areas.

12 Ben Pimlott, *Harold Wilson* (London: HarperCollins, 1992).

13 Harold Wilson, *The Governance of Britain* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson & Michael Joseph, 1978) pp. 81–83.

14 A. Blick, *People Who Live in the Dark* (Oxford: Politico's 2004); and B. Yong and R. Hazell, *Special Advisers: Who They Are, What They do and Why They Matter* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2014).

Second, in the 1960s Wilson created a press office headed by former journalists, first Trevor Lloyd-Hughes and Gerald Kaufman, and then later Joe Haines.

Third, around Marcia Williams, his Personal and Political Secretary, he devised in 1964 what became a Political Office.

Fourth, he expanded the private office of civil servants with an additional private secretary, dealing with social affairs, making a total of five inhabiting two rooms adjacent to the Cabinet room.¹⁵ This private office was the hub of No. 10, and it linked the prime minister to Whitehall departments.¹⁶

Fifth, Wilson brought in as his Principal Private Secretaries non-Treasury officials to act as a counterweight to the Treasury. He was suspicious of the Treasury, unlike David Cameron whose closest personal and political ally is George Osborne, Chancellor of the Exchequer. Wilson replaced the Treasury official Derek Mitchell, who he had inherited as his first Principal Private Secretary, with Michael Halls, who had worked as his junior private secretary at the Board of Trade in the late 1940s; and when Halls died from overwork in 1970 Wilson brought in Sandy Isserlis from the Department of Health. Wilson was still wary of the Treasury in 1975 when his Treasury Principal Private Secretary Robert Armstrong, appointed by Edward Heath, was promoted, and he replaced him with Kenneth Stowe from the Department of Health and Social Security.

15 Dennis Kavanagh and Anthony Seldon, *The Powers Behind the Prime Minister: the Hidden Influence of Number Ten* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), pp. 331–332.

16 A good description of their roles is given in Bernard Donoughue, *Prime Minister: The Conduct of Policy under Harold Wilson and James Callaghan* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987), pp. 17–20.

All these entities were not wholly new 50 years ago. They were more clearly-defined institutional versions of key individual aides who had performed similar roles for previous prime ministers.¹⁷

There were more of them. When he first came into No. 10 in 1964, Wilson told the Harvard Professor Richard Neustadt his staff at No. 10 numbered 35.¹⁸ When he left in 1976 there were around 80, which was said to be the limit No. 10 could then physically accommodate.

Wilson's No. 10 prefigured the way David Cameron's No. 10 is organised today. Cameron still has a core Private Office of civil servants, a Policy Unit, a Press Office and a Political Office.

But before looking in more detail at Cameron's arrangements we need to examine Tony Blair's (1997–2007). Blair developed the staff serving the prime minister far more than any previous prime minister, and Cameron may have considered copying the Blair innovations.

Tony Blair – almost a PM's Department

What looked like the start of a new stage of the premiership began with Tony Blair in 1997. He wanted to be an assertive modernising Prime Minister, taking on a more direct policy role. He built up an unprecedented central capacity to devise and implement prime-ministerial objectives.

The number of his staff serving the prime minister rose from John Major's low to mid-hundreds to almost 800 by 2005. Of the total Cabinet Office staff of 2,015 in 2005–06, 782 were designated as

17 G.W. Jones, "The Prime Ministers' Secretaries: Politicians or Administrators?", in J.A.G. Griffith (ed.), *From Policy to Administration* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976), pp. 13–38.

18 Ben Pimlott, *op.cit.* p. 338.

being employed to “support the Prime Minister in leading the Government”.¹⁹ Blair had commandeered staff in the Cabinet Office to pursue his initiatives, almost fusing together the No. 10 staff and those in the Cabinet Office into a Prime Minister’s Department. But Blair held back from that step.

A Blair innovation was to set up a Chief of Staff, Jonathan Powell, to be his closest adviser, trying to pull together various activities focussed in No. 10, and to carry out special missions, especially over Northern Ireland. There were so many staff serving Blair that he needed a Chief of Staff to oversee them.

And Blair conferred on Powell by Order in Council the authority to instruct civil servants, as Blair did to one other special adviser, Alastair Campbell, his Chief Press Officer. [When succeeding Blair at No. 10 in 2007 Brown rescinded the power to instruct, leaving SPADs to assist their ministers.] Blair relied heavily on Campbell, whose office and role were expanded and moved from No. 10 into No. 12 Downing Street, occupying the splendid large room previously held by the Chief Whip and his top official who were moved to 9 Downing Street. This move showed that Tony Blair paid more attention to the media than to the House of Commons. The 24/7 pressures from the media were felt to be more demanding, and potentially destabilising, than pressures from the Commons where Labour had secure majorities from the 1997, 2001 and 2003 general elections.

19 Andrew Blick and George Jones, *Premiership: The Development, Nature and Power of the Office of the British Prime Minister*, (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010), p. 150.

David Cameron – with a department in all but name

David Cameron began his time at No. 10 wanting to differentiate himself from Blair, initially reducing the staff serving him at No. 10 and in the Cabinet Office, and he promised to act in a more collective way, but later after winning an overall majority for his party in May 2015 and being freed from the constraints of Coalition with the Liberal Democrats, he became more assertive, and involved more deeply in a range of policies.

Cameron increased the staff serving him at No. 10 to a level nearly the same as Blair's, and used Cabinet Office units to push his priorities. But again he has not undermined the Cabinet and Ministerial Government by forming a Prime Minister's Department, but instead relies on a flexible network of special advisers and civil servants.

Hung Parliament and Coalition Government

Between 2010 and 2015 the Prime Minister was more constrained than for many years.²⁰ The big change was the hung parliament of 2010 and the Coalition Government that followed. As Lord Donoughue told the House of Lords Committee on the Constitution “the whole process of coalition diminishes the power of the Prime Minister”. He said “Reshuffles become very hard, with the Prime Minister not really in control”.²¹

The Prime Minister was constrained by having to work with a Deputy Prime Minister from another party. A right, previously possessed solely by the Prime Minister, to nominate people for ministerial posts, and to remove them, was formally shared with another member of the government, the Liberal Democrat Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg. Though this power was always exercised by No. 10 subject to political realities and constraints, this shift was more formally defined.

20 Mark Bennister and Richard Heffernan, “The Limits to Prime Ministerial Autonomy: Cameron and the Constraints of Coalition”, *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 68, No. 1, pp. 25–41.

21 House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution, *Constitutional implications of coalition government*. Oral evidence by Lord Donoughue, 9 October 2013, Question 1 at p. 71.

This tying of the hands of a coalition Prime Minister over the composition of the government was set out in an official document, the *Coalition Agreement for Stability and Reform*, published in May 2010. It stated:

‘The establishment of Cabinet Committees, appointment of members and determination of their terms of reference by the Prime Minister has been and will continue to be agreed with the Deputy Prime Minister... [para. 3.1]

Each will have the power to commission papers from the Cabinet Secretariat. [para. 3.3]’

A new Cabinet Committee constrained the Prime Minister called the Coalition Committee with 10 members, half Conservative and half Liberal Democrats, whose remit was to meet as required, to manage the business and priorities of the Government and the implementation and operation of the Coalition agreement. But it was not the key committee. It rarely met. A provision in its terms of reference said that “this Committee will be deemed quorate if two members from each party in the coalition are present.”²²

This provision enabled the emergence of a less formal and cumbersome committee, and the most important committee in the government, known as the Quad, comprising four members, two from each party, the Prime Minister, David Cameron, the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, and his deputy, Danny Alexander, Chief Secretary to the Treasury. Here was where in practice the buck stopped in the Coalition. It was the arbiter of disputes that were not settled earlier lower down; it was where favours and

22 The Cabinet Office, *Cabinet Committee System*, September 2010. www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/60639/cabinet-committees-system.pdf

resources were traded and where the Coalition's major decisions and strategy if they could devise one was agreed.²³

The closest ministerial ally of the Prime Minister was, and is, his friend George Osborne, Chancellor of the Exchequer, the minister he saw most of, meeting daily, moving easily between numbers 10 and 11 Downing Street. Ever mindful of the damage done to Blair's government by the poisonous relationship between Blair and his Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, they were determined to stick close to each other. It is the core relationship that keeps the government together.

23 See journalist and blogger Tim Montgomerie's article at www.conservativehome.com/thetorydiary/2012/02/ten-things-you-need-to-know-about-the-group-of-four-that-runs-the-coalition.html. For a more academic approach see Robert Hazell and Ben Yong, *The Politics of Coalition: How the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government Works* (London: Hart Publishing, 2012).

Fixed-term Parliaments Act, 2011

In addition to a weakening of his patronage and governing power Cameron as Prime Minister was further constrained by a major piece of legislation: The Fixed-term Parliaments Act, 2011. It limits the Prime Minister's power to advise the monarch on the dissolution of Parliament, replacing it with the provision setting in statute the date for future general elections as the first Thursday in May every five years.

It reduced the capacity of a Prime Minister to call an election when it suited his party. It made it harder for him to go to the country earlier than May 2015, even though the Government after four years had run out of steam and needed a fresh mandate, and it is harder for him to call an election soon after a general election, as Wilson did in 1966 after winning a narrow majority in 1964, and then gaining a large majority in a new House of Commons.

But an early election can be contrived in two ways. The first is for the House of Commons to resolve by a two-thirds majority that there should be an early General Election. The second is for the House of Commons to resolve by a simple majority that the House has no confidence in the government. Provided that within fourteen days the Commons has not passed a motion of confidence in a government (seemingly either the existing government or a different one), then an early election can take place. I wonder if Cameron has aides working out now how to have an early general election, when Labour led by Jeremy Corbyn seems in disarray.

Party Dynamics

The dynamics of party have had a major impact on the Prime Minister, weakening his influence. During the Coalition period, rebellions and threats of rebellion within his own party increased; within the Liberal Democrats discontent with Clegg's leadership intensified. Managing their backbenchers became more difficult for both Cameron and Clegg.²⁴ This seething discontent seeped into the Cabinet.²⁵ Leaks abounded. Making ministers keep their arguments inside the Cabinet room and getting them publicly to stick to decisions once made proved difficult. Disagreements were not just between the two Coalition partners but between ministers from the same party.

The Coalition Agreement had attempted to pre-empt the problem of irreconcilable divisions within Cabinet by allowing opt-outs from the principle of collective responsibility. The 2010 edition of the *Ministerial Code*, which listed the rules applying to Cabinet and ministers, as stated in section 2:1 "The principle of collective responsibility, save where it is explicitly set aside, requires that Ministers should be able to express their views frankly in the expectation that they can argue freely in private while maintaining a united front when decisions have been reached. This in turn

24 See the regular reports of Philip Cowley and Mark Stuart from the University of Nottingham at their website <http://revolts.co.uk/>, the latest of which was discussed in an article by Sam Coates in *The Times*, 3 June 2014.

25 See House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution, *Constitutional implications of coalition government*, 5th Report of session 2013–14, HL Paper 130, paragraphs. 70–74.

requires that the privacy of opinions expressed in Cabinet and Ministerial Committees, including in correspondence, should be maintained.”²⁶

The ‘save where it is explicitly set aside’ formulation was a crucial proviso. Before the Coalition, only three such exemptions had been allowed: once in 1931 over tariff reform and in 1975 and 1977–8 over European integration. During the Coalition government they were incorporated into the system as an option that was permanently available. The 2015 edition of the *Ministerial Code* omitted the reference to the possibility of setting aside of collective responsibility. Yet in 2016 Cameron allowed for such an exemption in an attempt to manage divisions over the referendum on Britain’s membership of the European Union.

Disunity within the Conservative party intensified with the referendum on whether the UK should remain within or exit from the European Union. Cameron had had to concede a referendum under pressure from his own backbenchers. In doing so he followed the example of Wilson in 1975, holding a referendum as a means of resolving internal party disputes over the issue. Cameron followed the Wilson precedent further in suspending collective responsibility and allowing ministers to campaign for either side. Cameron was weakened more than Wilson ever was by the spill-over from the referendum dispute into bitter public rows about other issues, notably those related to his promise not to fight another general election which provoked rival contenders to seek popularity.

Cameron’s authority was undermined further as 2016 progressed. A media storm arose in April after revelations about his father’s use of off-shore tax arrangements for an investment fund, and he became the first prime minister to publish his tax returns. The

26 Cabinet Office, *Ministerial Code*, 2010.

humiliated Prime Minister did not seem to be in control of his Cabinet and party, let alone the media and public opinion.²⁷

At the outset of the Coalition Government Cameron, hoping to avoid the centralised control-freakery of Blair and Brown, allowed his ministers much greater scope in operating their departments. Despite slimming down his staff at No. 10, and intervening less in departmental business, he was more prominent in the public arena. Scarcely a day went by without his name appearing in some headline about his latest speech somewhere around the country, or a statement or comment on events. He was frequently interviewed for radio and television, at press conferences, and he contributed to the social media. He was a hyper-active public performer, which as a former public-relations man in the private sector he is comfortable with – the downside is that his contributions were so scattered that he does not project and plant in the public mind any main theme other than that he is there fronting for his government. It was so different 50 years ago – a month could go by without the prime minister making some public utterance.²⁸

27 See “News Tax Scandal” *The Times* 9 April 2016, pp. 6–9; and *The Sunday Times*, 10 April 2016, pp. 1–3 and p. 18.

28 See the written evidence of Professor Richard Toye to the inquiry of the House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee on the *Role and powers of the Prime Minister*, published 7 March 2013.

Wilson and Cameron compared

Changes and continuities in prime-ministerial power over the last 50 years can be illustrated by comparing and contrasting Harold Wilson and David Cameron, now he has a Commons majority.

First they are not conviction politicians. Instead they are pragmatic, seeking what works not some ideological goal. There is no -ism attached to their names. They deal with the short-term and have been criticised for lacking a strategic vision.²⁹ For Wilson a week was a long time in politics. Cameron is known as an “essay-crisis” prime minister, leaving decisions to the last minute.³⁰

Second, they had a common task; their top priority was to keep their parties together and behind them, and that was not easy given the fissiparous nature of both parties, especially as they confronted the fractious issue of Europe. Both prime ministers came up with the same approach: a referendum; and devised an identical solution: the relaxation of collective cabinet responsibility so that ministers could campaign publicly either in favour of the UK remaining in or coming out, and they both sought to ensure these campaigns were conducted to eliminate harsh words that would impede the future working together of cabinet colleagues.

29 Anthony Seldon and Peter Snowdon, *Cameron at 10: The Inside Story 2010–2015*, pp. 487–488 and pp. 537–538.

30 Seldon and Snowdon, *op.cit.* p. 347 and p. 409. A good analysis of his approach was written by a close aide in Rohan Silva in “A dig in the ribs showed me Cameron’s deal-making skills”, *Evening Standard*, 22 February 2016.

Third, the striking difference between the No. 10 of Wilson and that of Cameron is its size. Wilson had a small private office of 4–5 civil servants headed by a Principal Private Secretary, the Policy Unit under Bernard Donoughue of no more than 8 temporary civil servants, (later called SPADS). There was his Political Office under Marcia Williams and a Press Office under Joe Haines. The total staff at No. 10 when he began as PM in 1964 was 35, including junior assistants; by 1976 when he left it was just under 80. But now the number of staff is about 180, composed of 148 civil servants, 32 special advisers and 25 press officers, who are very much part of the No. 10 team. The increase was accommodated by cramming more into restructured rooms, and locating the press and communications staff in No. 12 Downing Street.

Because of this big increase in prime-ministerial staff there was a need for a Chief of Staff, Ed Llewellyn, a special adviser, to oversee and coordinate their work on behalf of the Prime Minister. Cameron even has two Deputy Chiefs of Staff, both special advisers. Craig Oliver, Director of Communications, and Kate, Baroness, Fall, guardian of his diary who keeps him punctual – she is called the Gatekeeper. All three sit in the main private-office room alongside civil-servant private secretaries. In Wilson's day only civil servants sat in this room, now special advisers are in the core of No. 10.

Today two of the special advisers are paid almost as much as is the Prime Minister. Cameron's salary was £142,500, Craig Oliver's and Ed Llewellyn's is £140,00. Three others were paid £100,000 and over.³¹

Another illustration of how special advisers have penetrated No. 10 is the Policy Unit whose title has survived from Wilson's days.

31 Cabinet Office 17 December 2015 Special adviser data releases: numbers and costs and Government transparency and accountability.

It now consists of a staff of 20 composed 50:50 of special advisers and civil servants, and is headed by the former journalist Camilla Cavendish who specialised in social policy. This unit is located on the second floor in rooms that extend over Number 10 and Number 11.

The atmosphere of No. 10 has changed too. One who worked there under Wilson described it as like a cathedral, despite the toxic rows involving Marcia Williams. Another called it a village. Now it is like a modern city office block, with rooms dominated by computers. Whereas in Wilson's day the atmosphere was calm and quiet, now there is bustle as inmates move around and visitors are led along the corridors and up the stairs.

Externally No. 10 is more difficult to enter. In Wilson's time a visitor just walked from Whitehall up Downing Street to the famous black door guarded by a single unarmed British police constable, and once the door opened entered to be met by the doorkeeper. Now one has to go through the black steel gates at the entrance to Downing Street erected in 1989 to guard Margaret Thatcher against terrorist attacks. First an armed policeman checks your credentials before admitting you into the street. You then have to go through a hut that houses X-ray equipment that checks your bags, coats and body. Then you walk across the street to the black door eyed by other armed policemen. Once in No. 10 you have to deposit your mobile phone into a wall nest of 192 pigeon holes. The apparatus of security is ever present. Entering Downing Street is now a forbidding prospect – inevitable now with security controls so essential.

Cameron has supported attempts to make No. 10 more open to the public, engaging outside groups through events held at No. 10, and making use of modern information technology, with blogs and tweets. He has been keen to encourage interest in

No. 10 Downing Street and the people who have worked there. His staff convene joint seminars for those employed at No. 10 together with academics who have also helped revitalise the No. 10 website.

Cameron appears once a week in the Commons on Wednesdays to answer oral Parliamentary Questions, whereas Wilson appeared twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays. This change instituted by Tony Blair in 1997 has reduced the pressure on the time of the Prime Minister, but his time has been more than taken up by visits up and down the country and by overseas summit meetings dealing with international affairs and Britain's relations with the European Union, especially since May 2015 as he has sought win a settlement to commend in the coming referendum.

The 24/7 media demand more of Cameron's attention, and he has responded positively, unlike Wilson whose press secretary, Joe Haines, treated the press with disdain and would never have agreed to the Prime Minister taking part in Leaders' debates during general elections – he would not have allowed the Murdoch empire to dictate the Prime Minister's agenda. No. 10 is now organised to provide the media with news about him personally and politically, revealing the issues he is concerned about and his views of the moment through an array of speeches and statements.

In sharp contrast to the chaos of Gordon Brown's period at No. 10 David Cameron brought a sense of order to the conduct of its business. He changed the rhythm of the way the Prime Minister worked in No. 10 by introducing the procedures he had followed when Leader of the Opposition. He instituted the morning meeting at 8.30 in his study where he and his senior team considered the business of the day, and a meeting of the same team at 4.30 pm looking to the next day. These twice-

daily sessions of a group of seven, might be called the centre of government: comprising the Prime Minister; George Osborne; then Cameron's three chief lieutenants, all special advisers, Ed Llewellyn, Craig Oliver, and Kate Fall; then Simon Case, the No. 10 Principal Private Secretary; and Sir Jeremy Heywood, the Cabinet Secretary, whose influence permeates everything going on at No. 10, because of his close friendly working with Cameron over many years.

By their nature these meetings are more tactical than strategic, enabling the Prime Minister to stay on top of things. They have not replaced the Cabinet, the group of ministers where the buck finally stops. The senior team act within the limits set by the Cabinet – what it has decided, agreed to or acquiesced in.

A major innovation of Cameron's was to set up the National Security Council, which has become a weekly staple chaired by the Prime Minister, in essence a committee of the Cabinet, to coordinate defence and security policy, operating out of the Cabinet Office and headed by a National Security Adviser, now Sir Mark Lyall Grant.

Cameron initially in 2010, when in Coalition, abolished the Blair/Brown Strategy and Implementation Units, and set up the Policy and Implementation Unit, jointly headed by business consultants Paul Kirby for policy and Kristina Murrin for implementation. In 2012 he set up a separate Implementation Unit in the Cabinet Office to support and coordinate the delivery work of departments. Freed from the constraints of the Coalition in May 2015 he set up a set of ten Implementation Task Forces to monitor how departments were implementing cross-departmental projects and to remove bureaucratic barriers. Their work is coordinated by the Cabinet Office Implementation Unit, and Implementation was dropped from the title of the Policy Unit.

In 2010 Cameron added to the private office a military assistant, becoming the first Prime Minister since Churchill to have a service officer, Colonel Jim Morris of the Royal Marines, to advise him at No. 10. His role is not to enable him to intervene in military operations but to translate and interpret for him the somewhat jargon-ridden papers that come in from the Ministry of Defence.

The room where most of the private-office staff work is no longer focussed as in Wilson's day on the "dip". In times past on a table near the door there was the red box into which private secretaries deposited papers for the Prime Minister's attention that evening. The Principal Private Secretary, like the other private secretaries, could 'dip' into the box to see what their colleagues thought about the key issues, as could the Head of the Policy Unit or the Cabinet Secretary, when they came into the room, as they often did. But the Principal Private Secretary had the last word, especially over the order in which the papers were placed. It was a paper-dominated process.

Now in the electronic age, the "dip" is no more, and items for the Prime Minister move around electronically. The duty clerks put papers from the private secretaries into the Prime Minister's red box. The Principal Private Secretary takes the last look at the papers electronically, ensuring that nothing goes to the Prime Minister unless it has been through a private secretary. But the Prime Minister has a real box with real papers in it.

The private office itself has since Wilson's days extended across the corridor into a set of small rooms containing staff engaged on domestic affairs, political matters and the diary. The doors are open, the staff of the private office are within easy reach of each other. It still constitutes a close-knit entity.

Serving the Prime Minister at the top of the hierarchy at No. 10 is the Principal Private Secretary, who sits next to the private secretary [PS] for foreign affairs. There is a PS for economic affairs, a PS for Public Services, a PS for Home Affairs, and a Parliamentary Clerk – handling the PM's Parliamentary Questions. Beneath them two Assistant PSs, one for foreign affairs and the other for public services, and the military assistant who works to the Foreign Affairs PS.

An innovation by the predecessor of Simon Case as Principal PS, the late Chris Martin, was the introduction into the Private Office of two recently-recruited Fast Stream civil servants, to give them the experience and understanding of the work at the peak of government. Essential to the work of the Private Office are the Diary Secretary and a duty clerk who sit, as in the early days of the twentieth century, close to the hoist that still takes papers down to the ranks of the Garden Girls on the floor below. There are limits to electronics.

Looking at the rooms of the private office it seems little has changed in its main features from the days of Wilson, and indeed of Asquith. Although the staff are more spread out beyond the main room, and there is more gadgetry, the processes are essentially the same.

The two key people in No. 10, after the Prime Minister, are Ed Llewellyn, the Chief of Staff and Simon Case the Principal Private Secretary. They fuse together the two worlds the Prime Minister has to straddle: the worlds of politics and of administration. It is fitting that they share one room, the one at the other end of the cabinet room from the Prime Minister's study. In Wilson's days it was occupied by his Political and Personal Secretary, Marcia Williams.

Wilson himself worked sometimes in the Cabinet room and at other times in his study, then on the first floor. Cameron works in his study which is now located between the cabinet room and the private office, in the room occupied in Wilson's time by the principal private secretary and the foreign affairs private secretary.

Cameron works in essentially the same way as Wilson with civil servants and special advisers whose expertise he can draw on as he wants, and they are all based at 10 Downing Street or the Cabinet Office at 70 Whitehall. This area has been the "cockpit" of government since Walpole.

This fundamental continuity demonstrates that beneath certain reconfigurations in the office of Prime Minister important underlying features can persist. The similarity of the challenges facing Wilson and Cameron is illustrated aptly by two cartoons that appeared in the press during their respective tenures at Downing Street. They reveal the dilemmas facing prime ministers. Both cartoons are rooted in the notion that governing is a political circus. The first is by Stanley Franklin, called "The Greatest Show on Earth" from *The Sun* 31 December 1974³² and the second is called "The Other Blindfold High Wire Act In The News" by Peter Brookes from *The Times* 4 December 2014.³³ They depict the contingent factors that press on prime ministers, and show that the problems they face are intractable. These difficulties lack easy solutions, and they can be successfully navigated only through the deployment of the prime minister's political skills.

32 British Cartoon Archive, No. 27150.

33 British Cartoon Archive, No. 101857.

Enhancing the Prime Minister

Over the years some have advocated setting up a Prime Minister's Department. But there is no need for it. British Government is already cohesive from the Cabinet system of collective government; from the party ties of ministers; from the need to present a united front in the House of Commons and to the public; and from the generalist nature of the cadre of top civil servants.

To have a formal Department with a life of its own would freeze bureaucratic arrangements and build an obstacle to prime-ministerial innovation. Prime Ministers have found that rather than creating a separate bureaucratic department they can work better with looser more flexible networks of aides that reflect outside groups and connect to them. The Prime Minister has through such a group of aides access to a set of levers and buttons that do not threaten departmental ministers or the civil service, and allow the Prime Minister control without the distractions of having to manage a bureaucracy.³⁴

The present way of working is fluid, adaptive, matching the messy reality of the problems prime ministers face – the contingencies of political life. It might be said we have a Prime Minister's department in all but name.

34 This issue is covered in Andrew. Blick and George Jones, "The Centre of Central Government" in *Public Policy Review*, Vol. 17, issue 1, 2010, pp. 29–35. The journal of the Institute of Public Policy Research.

Between Wilson and Cameron

Between Wilson and Cameron there were five other prime ministers, all operating from No. 10, with their own distinctive ways of working. James Callaghan (1974–79) at the end out of touch with his Cabinet colleagues and advisors;³⁵ Margaret Thatcher (1979–90) assertive but brought down by her Cabinet colleagues;³⁶ John Major (1990–97), so constrained by his Cabinet colleagues that he had to seek a vote of support from his parliamentary party which he only narrowly won;³⁷ Tony Blair (1997–2007) who seemed to have set up a “presidential” regime but was constrained, indeed thwarted, by his Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, who in effect ousted him;³⁸ and Gordon Brown (2007–10) who began by seeking to be different from Blair but became paranoid and unable to get on with his colleagues.³⁹ They all reveal the contingent constraints on prime-ministerial power, especially of Cabinet colleagues.

35 Kenneth O. Morgan, *Callaghan: a Life* (Oxford, OUP, 1997).

36 Référence électronique: G.W. Jones, “Chronique britannique – Mais qui a tué Maggie ?”, *Pouvoirs, revue française d'études constitutionnelles et politiques*, n°58, 58 – La France en guerre, pp. 113–131. Consulté le 2016-04-12 14:55:22. URL: www.revue-pouvoirs.fr/Chronique-britannique-Mais-qui-a.html; Charles Moore, *Thatcher: the Authorised Biography* (London: Allen Lane, Vol. 1 2010 and Vol. 2 2015).

37 A. Seldon, *Major: A Political Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997).

38 A. Seldon and P. Snowden, *Blair Unbound* (London: Simon and Shuster, 2008).

39 A. Seldon and Guy Lodge, *Brown at 10* (London: Biteback, 2011).

Conclusions

The prime minister shapes the way No. 10 operates. Without his or her input there is no driving force to motivate his aides, other than for the private office which can work according to customary official routines until they reconfigure their work to suit the PM's wishes and ways of working. Lord Donoughue has noted that when James Callaghan became prime minister nothing happened for the first few days since he had not worked out what he wanted to do and what sort of Prime Minister he wanted to be. When he had made up his mind, No. 10 became active. It sprang to life. Two critical contingencies are therefore the prime minister's style and agenda.

A problem for a Prime Minister is how to balance dealing with short-term immediate pressures and the long term. Wilson and Cameron are similar. The short-term prevails, because they have no time to think long-term, with urgent pressures from the 24/7 media and parliament and party issues looming upper-most. They have to push the long term to their aides, and civil servants in the Cabinet Office.

My final conclusion is at odds with some other interpretations of the premiership. Other observers claim variously that the premiership is becoming ever larger, ever more overloaded, ever more presidential, ever less collegiate – ever more powerful. Some even think the Prime Minister has become too weak, and needs a department to buttress his or her position.

But the constitutional position of the Prime Minister has remained constant over the 295 years since Walpole. The premiership is like an elastic band that can be stretched to accommodate an assertive prime minister and relaxed for a less dominant figure. The premier's role has fluctuated: at times dominant and at others less assertive, zig-zagging up or down, depending on contingent circumstances like the attitudes of ministerial colleagues, events, whether government policies are succeeding, the government's popularity, the party composition of the government, and the wishes of the prime ministers themselves. The pressures from politics, from parliament, party, the media and public opinion – the fundamentals – persist. Above all the prime minister remains only as powerful as the cabinet colleagues let him or her be.

The Power of the Prime Minister

50 Years On

George Jones

A little over 50 years ago in 1965 the journal *Parliamentary Affairs* published an article by George Jones titled “The Prime Minister’s Power”. He wrote it against a then fashionable view. According to this outlook the British Constitution had radically changed. It was held that the power of the prime minister had grown to such an extent that it had supplanted cabinet government with a system of almost presidential government or of an elected monarch. Contrary to such theses Jones concluded “The Prime Minister is the leading figure in the Cabinet whose voice carries most weight. But he is not the all-powerful individual which many have claimed him to be. His office has great potentialities, but the use made of them depends on many variables, the personality, temperament, and ability of the Prime Minister, what he wants to achieve and the methods he uses. It depends also on his colleagues, their personalities and temperaments and abilities, what they want to do and their methods. A Prime Minister who can carry his colleagues with him can be in a very powerful position, but he is only as strong as they let him be.” This last sentence has been much quoted in later years, especially by students writing their essays. This pamphlet updates the Jones thesis. Taking into account all that has transpired in the intervening period, it concludes that the basic principle Jones advanced in 1965 remains true.

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