3

The Double-Headed Nation

. . . as the King should not exercise, or appear to exercise, any political bias, he would normally choose as Prime Minister the leader of the party having the largest number of seats in the House of Commons.

Entry in the Cabinet Office's 'Precedent Book', 1949[1]

'It's all about good chaps. 'Fraid so.' *Sir Kenneth Stowe, 1997*[2]

There is only one precept which should concern the triangle (the Cabinet Secretary, the Queen's Private Secretary, the Prime Minister's Principal Private Secretary) in the appointment of a Prime Minister . . . and that is that it is the Monarch's prime duty to find a Prime Minister who will be able to command a majority in the House of Commons regardless or not of whether the sovereign approves of his politics. *Lord Charteris of Amisfield, Private Secretary to H.M. the Queen 1972–77, 1997*[3]

The scene is St James's Park on Saturday 2 March 1974 and the setting another prime ministerial transition – the most difficult and fraught in the postwar period. The park is wet and windswept and pretty empty. But if, by some curious chance, you actually had found yourself there that afternoon and noticed two tall, rather military-looking men walking through the rain deep in conversation, you would have seen the British Constitution at work in, as one of them expressed it later, 'very dicey' circumstances. The distinguished pair were the Secretary of the Cabinet, Sir John Hunt, and the Queen's Private Secretary, Sir Martin Charteris. They were, in effect, retilling that patch of the constitutional soil in which are rooted the two powers that make up the remaining 'personal prerogatives', as they are called in Palace circles, of the Monarch: the power to dissolve Parliament and the power to appoint a Prime Minister.

These are the parts of the Constitution that only the Queen can reach. Potentially, she is still a central player in the political life of her realm.

Across Horse Guards Parade in No. 10 Downing Street that afternoon sat a depressed and dispirited Edward Heath, who, to almost everybody's surprise, had seen his majority melt at the general election held two days before on Thursday 28 February. In the teeth of the second miners' strike within two years and buffeted by a global energy crisis of intense ferocity (oil prices were in the process of quadrupling in almost as many months following the Yom Kippur War),[4] Heath had gone to the country on the question of 'Who rules?' Willie Whitelaw said later that it is always a mistake for a government to resort to the polls sooner than it has to and ask 'Who governs?', because the country tends to reply, 'We thought you were'.[5]

In this case the electorate had answered 'nobody', producing the first hung result since 1929. Labour was four ahead in terms of seats (301 to the Conservatives' 297), but the Tories had slightly more of the percentage of votes cast (37.8 to 37.1 per cent for Labour). On the Friday afternoon Heath informed the Queen, just back from opening the Australian Parliament in Canberra, that instead of resigning straight away he intended to try to strike a deal with the Liberals. He would stay on in No. 10 over the weekend.

The Palace was content with this. Until 1868 it was normal practice for a Prime Minister whose party had been defeated at the polls to meet Parliament and take defeat there too on a confidence vote or its equivalent before resigning (thereafter administrations normally resigned before a new parliament assembled).[6] Baldwin reverted to pre-1868 practice in January 1924 after losing the general election of December 1923.[7] As Lord Charteris told me later in a television interview, '. . . the point that has to be remembered . . . is that a Prime Minister remains Prime Minister until he resigns. That's the starting point, anyway. Ted Heath tried quite hard to come to a deal with [the Liberal leader] Jeremy Thorpe. The result of that was, instead of coming round as soon as the Queen had time [to return to the Palace from Heathrow] and resigning, he hung on till the following Monday. So there was this rather agonizing weekend when we weren't quite sure what was going to happen.'[8]

It is at such moments that crown servants like Charteris and Hunt become the 'continuity girls' – no disrespect or sexism intended – of the British system of government. On the basis of precedent, they advise their respective bosses – Her Majesty and the Prime Minister – on whether

particular courses of action do or do not cut with the grain of traditional constitutional nostrums, insofar as they can be divined from past practice.

By the time Hunt and Charteris stepped into the park, Labour's Shadow Cabinet were, in effect, in purdah. The previous afternoon, steered very much by the Shadow Foreign Secretary and Party Chairman, Jim Callaghan, they had, in Callaghan's words,

> 'decided that we would not challenge Mr Heath; we would allow him to carry on and to try to make any arrangement that he could. We did this because we were fairly satisfied that he wouldn't be able to make such an arrangement. But if he had seemed likely to, then I think I would have taken a very different view about the situation because in some ways, Mr Heath was acting in a way I think was rather prejudicial. The country had expressed its lack of confidence in the Conservative government . . . I won't say it was improper of Mr Heath because there are no conventions on this matter, I think it was stretching the thing a bit for him . . . I remember I took the bold step of saying we should allow Ted Heath . . . "to swing slowly in the wind".'[9]

An old pro like Callaghan knew that, even with Liberal support, the electoral arithmetic would not add up for Heath when converted into what counts: MPs on seats in the House of Commons. If Heath had won over the fourteen Liberals, he would still have been short of an overall majority; he had no joy from those 'loyalist' Ulster MPs who were also approached (though not all of them were), during the course of the weekend as many were still outraged by the power-sharing executive in Northern Ireland created by the Sunningdale Agreement the previous December.[10]

By the time Hunt and Charteris took their walk around the Constitution, Heath had seen Thorpe for the opening coalition bid. Thorpe held out for electoral reform, a longstanding Liberal cause and one central to their hopes of future political influence. Thorpe undertook to consult his colleagues and return the next day.[11] Hunt and Charteris rehearsed the possibilities as they paced the park. 'We were quite certain', Lord Charteris told me many years later in a television interview, 'that Ted Heath remained Prime Minister until he resigned, regardless of what the newspapers were saying, regardless of the fact that people were saying the Queen should send for somebody else. Not at all . . . and, if necessary, it would not be improper for him to meet Parliament and produce a Queen's Speech and see if he could get away with it.'[12]

Thus far, the constitutional position was clear. Hunt and Charteris sought refuge from the rain in the Cabinet Secretary's room in the Cabinet Office. Another Cabinet Office resident, Jim Prior, Heath's Lord President of the Council (again as Lord Charteris recalled) 'suddenly put his head round the door and said, "Are we behaving all right?" We said, "Yes, you're all right, you know."'[13] There can be a touch of Ealing Comedy about these things. But, Lord Charteris continued, 'it was all very dicey'.[14] Why? Question number one was: what would happen if Heath failed to strike a deal but faced the new Parliament with fewer seats than Labour anyway, found himself in difficulty (which he would have been) and asked the Queen for another dissolution of Parliament, thereby – should she grant the request – triggering another election?

'I think it's very tricky this,' Charteris explained. 'You see, another sort of rule is that people don't get dissolutions twice. And, after all, Ted Heath had asked for the first dissolution.'[15] At such moments which test the unwritten constitution, the Queen's advisers like to talk the problem through with political historians (Lord Blake filled this role in 1974)[16] and scholars steeped in the constitutional side of the monarchy (in this case Sir John Wheeler-Bennett, George VI's official biographer).[17] Wheeler-Bennett quoted Arthur Balfour to Martin Charteris, to the effect that 'no constitution can subsist on a diet of dissolutions'.[18] Charteris interpreted this as meaning: 'If you have a Parliament that is fresh from the electorate, it should somehow serve its time before you have another election.'[19]

So, Heath would not be the problem. If he failed to strike a deal with Thorpe or went down to defeat on a Queen's Speech, Her Majesty would send for the Leader of the Opposition, Harold Wilson, and ask him to form an administration. And this is precisely what she did on the Monday evening after Heath, having completed two more sessions with Thorpe on the Sunday and Monday mornings[20] and two gloomy Cabinet meetings on his last day in office, called at the Palace to resign.[21]

But Wilson, himself thirty-four seats short of an absolute majority over all parties, might take office only to go under either in the vote on his Queen's Speech or on a confidence motion shortly thereafter. What would the Queen do if the prime-ministerial Rover then swept through the gates of the Palace and Wilson asked for a dissolution? This second was the rather more vexing question. Charteris had already been in touch with Elwyn Jones, Wilson's Lord Chancellor-in-Waiting, over that 'anxious and uncertain week-end', as Elwyn Jones put it in his memoirs, and they 'discussed the constitutional position, which was that until Ted Heath

resigned or, if he persevered, he was defeated on the Queen's Speech, his government continued in existence'.[22] Elwyn Jones was to be the Palace's back-channel to Wilson on the delicacies of the Queen's position if Wilson wished to increase the diet of dissolutions.[23]

Lord Charteris remembers saying, 'It isn't automatic [that] the Queen's going to say "Yes" or "No". You know, just watch it . . . that prerogative does still exist.' But, Charteris continued, if Wilson had asked for a swift dissolution, 'the Queen would have been very pushed not to give it to him. But . . . it was much better the way it was – that he carried on until the autumn.'[24] The thinking in the Palace on this issue was that Heath had been granted his dissolution, hence the general election on 28 February. Equity required Wilson to be granted one too if he persisted in such a request.

The reason why the television interview with Martin Charteris is so important, and the reason why I have dwelt at length on the walk in the park, is that the events of early March 1974 demonstrate that, at such precarious moments, the British system of government depends on the Queen and a handful of insider advisers, such as Charteris and Hunt, and informal outside consultants, such as Blake and Wheeler-Bennett, spinning between them what Philip Ziegler has called 'instantly invented precedents'[25] from the warp and woof of constitutional practice and experience.

At such times, rare though they may be, (to borrow Sir Stephen Sedley's marvellous notion) ours is a 'silent constitution',[26] without pieces of paper that bespeak the principles, the conventions or even what Sir Sidney Low called the 'tacit understandings'[27] on which it rests. The advisers have to interrogate ghosts like Balfour and old files in No. 10, the Palace and the Cabinet Office archives as they seek to brief the Monarch, the sitting Prime Minister and, should the need arise, the premier-in-waiting or his potential coalition partners, on how best the overriding requirement that 'the Queen's Government must be carried on'[28] might be met. (This notion is attributed to the Duke of Wellington in the 1830s and has been cited as a nostrum of the British constitution ever since.)[29]

Such a process of interrogating the past took place even in the spring of 1997 under the guise of prudent contingency planning in the pre-election period, in case the electorate, to universal surprise, should put the opinion pollsters on the rack again by producing a hung result, thereby denying both John Major and Tony Blair an overall majority. The problems always arise, as Lord Armstrong of Ilminster has expressed it, when 'none of us

has any experience to guide us' (he was speaking in the context of a second hung Parliament in quick succession).[30] Lord Armstrong, like Lord Charteris, has a feel for the tangibles and the intangibles of the Queen's 'personal prerogatives': he was Heath's Principal Private Secretary in 1974 and the only other person in the Prime Minister's study when Thorpe came to call. Armstrong, Hunt and Charteris made up the so-called 'golden triangle' (though their successors in more recent times have tended to be irritated by the phrase; they think it gives the erroneous impression that they are fixers-in-chief as opposed to mere advisers behind this particular patch of the constitutional arras).[31] Armstrong had his own walk in the park with Martin Charteris on 2 March 1974. A passer-by recognized them and said to his companion: 'There go the two most discreet men in England.'[32]

There is a kind of apostolic succession here. For also in No. 10 that anxious weekend was Robin Butler, who served with Armstrong in the Private Office and succeeded him as Secretary of the Cabinet in 1988. A file on the dissolution of Parliament in March 1966 released at the Public Record Office in 1997 revealed an even earlier Butler connection with the finer points of dissolution. As a bright young civil servant and Secretary of the Budget Committee in the Treasury, this same Robin Butler saved Harold Wilson a degree of embarrassment hours before the poll was announced.

There is a tightly choreographed drill for election timing (a procedure to which I shall return in a moment). As the No. 10 'Dissolution' brief for 1966 (the most recent that has been declassified) has it,

> Parliament is dissolved by Proclamation by the Queen in Council after having been prorogued to a certain day . . .
> The Proclamation dissolving one Parliament calls a new one and fixes the date of its first meeting.
> The issue of the Dissolution Proclamation automatically sets in motion the machinery for a General Election.
> It has become customary to give the country a period of notice of the date of a General Election (since the war, at least 9 days), unless this occurs unexpectedly, following a defeat in the House of Commons.[33]

The file goes on, in this rather staccato language, to give the timings as the clock ticks towards election day and lists the elements that must be taken into account – which is where the eagle-eyed Butler came in:

> Issue of Proclamation dissolving Parliament and calling a new one to meet on a stated date.
> Nomination [of candidates] up to *eight* days after the issue of the Dissolution Proclamation.
> Polling Day on the *ninth* day after the last day for Nominations.
> (Sundays, Bank Holidays and days of Thanksgiving are excluded from these calculations).[34]

What both No. 10 and the Home Office (the department in charge of electoral matters) failed to notice, but which Butler spotted, was that in Northern Ireland St Patrick's Day (17 March) was still a Bank Holiday.[35] The first Parliamentary Counsel and the Home Office's Legal Adviser, prompted by Butler's caveat, discovered that, despite Irish partition, the Bank Holiday (Ireland) Act of 1903 still applied in the province.[36] Almost at the last minute, the date for dissolution had to be brought forward by one day to 10 March to allow for this.[37] An 'emergency' telegram was flashed to the Queen, who was on a royal tour in the Caribbean,[38] and she signalled her approval for the change of date.[39] A rejigging of the timetable at a later stage, assuming anybody had noticed the Northern Irish problem, would have been embarrassing as it would have proved inconvenient.

The rest of this record, for all its prosaic qualities, alerts us to a constitutional and legal dimension which could matter if a future election were hung in a fashion that led either to coalition-brokering or to pact-mongering. We might call this the 'ticking clock' factor. Lord Armstrong has spoken publicly in the past about the 'ticking clock and a deadline, the time when the bomb goes off',[40] implicit in the standard election timetable. But in messily hung circumstances, the clock might have to be stopped, the drill altered and prolonged.

The 1966 material traces a detailed choreography clearly drawn-up on the basis of past practice over many elections. Under the rubric of 'Meeting of Parliament' it explained that

> It is necessary to allow 4 working days or about a week for the return of writs to the Crown Office, i.e. between polling day and first sitting day of the new House of Commons.
>
> A new Parliament cannot meet earlier than 20 days after the date of the Proclamation dissolving the old Parliament. But, as Sundays would seem to be included in the calculations, the new Parliament could not meet till the day

following polling day. This is an impracticable date because only a few election returns would have reached the Crown Office.[41]

Here we reach the key passages dealing with Lord Armstrong's ticking clock and how to reset it. The key word in what follows is 'prorogue', which reaches back, in its constitutional usage, to 1455. The indispensable *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, which proclaims that its compilation rests 'on historical principles', explains its meaning.

> Prorogue . . . To discontinue the meeting of (a legislative or other assembly) for a time without dissolving it; to dismiss by authority until the next session. Orig. and chiefly in ref. to the British Parliament. 1455 [of course it was solely the *English* Parliament then].[42]

Here is the passage in the 1966 No. 10 drill:

> An interval of a week between polling day and the meeting of a new Parliament allows little time for the reconstruction of a Government or the final preparations for the forthcoming Session [of Parliament].
>
> When the Dissolution is decided upon, it is customary to announce the relevant dates of the General Election, the meeting of the new Parliament and the date of the State Opening. The meeting of Parliament may be deferred, however, by further proclamation proroguing it to a later day, not being less than fourteen days from the date of such proclamation (Prorogation Act, 1867). But it cannot be accelerated.
>
> The date of the State Opening could also be deferred by Motion in the House because the daily Adjournment has to be proposed at the end of each Sitting from the day the new House first sits.[43]

The Prorogation Act 1867. Not the most familiar of statutes, but it reminded me of a conversation I had had with Sir David Steel (as he then was) about the discussions he and his Alliance partner, David Owen, engaged in prior to the 1987 election with the then Cabinet Secretary, Sir Robert Armstrong, about the contingencies which a hung result might throw up (what Tom McNally, Jim Callaghan's former Political Adviser in No. 10, has called a 'Rubik cube' of possibilities).[44] Sir David said,

> 'There is a set timetable, but – the great glory of the British Constitution being that it is unwritten – there is nothing that says "because you have appointed 3

> November as the date for the State Opening, you have to stick to it". There is nothing whatever that prevents the Prime Minister and the Palace agreeing that, in view of the political situation, you can put it off for a week, ten days, two weeks.'[45]

Sir David was talking to me in 1991. His words led me to suspect very strongly that Armstrong had briefed him and Owen on the contents and scope of the obscure Prorogation Act 1867.

A former student of mine, Amy Baker, has excavated the genesis of the tiny, two-clause Bill which became the Act. She explained:[46]

> It appears that the Bill was non-contentious and passed through all the stages of Parliament merely as a formality.[47] The purpose of the Bill was to abolish the rather awkward ceremony that used to take place on the Prorogation of Parliament during Recess.

This was deemed by ministers to be 'entirely useless and unmeaning'.[48] Baker continued: 'Abolishing the ceremony did not change the powers of the Sovereign in any way, and the restriction of 14 days is perhaps a little meaningless when a string of Proclamations can be issued.'[49] The Prorogation Act, however, could be seen as a pleasing example of how a statute, intended for entirely another purpose, can, quite legitimately, be adapted to future needs.

How would it operate? The statute makes it plain that the Queen would activate it 'by and with the Advice' of her Privy Council. A Prime Minister would be in being. It would be either the incumbent, if he had not resigned, or his successor if he had accepted Her Majesty's commission to try to form an administration that would command a majority in the House of Commons – as Lord Home did on 18 October 1963 after the outgoing premier, Harold Macmillan, mindful of the precedent of Queen Victoria and Lord Aberdeen in 1852, had suggested this procedure to his Sovereign.[50] Home was not Prime Minister as he sat in No. 10 that afternoon persuading his colleagues to serve under him; only when he returned to the Queen to say he could form an administration did he become her First Lord of the Treasury and Prime Minister.

On the morning of 18 October 1963 Macmillan was giving informal advice (with a little 'a', as the Palace likes to put it);[51] advice which, as it touched her personal prerogatives, the Queen did not have to take (unlike formal capital 'A' Advice from a premier, which she does have to accept).

If the Queen were to receive a request from a Prime Minister to invoke the Prorogation Act 1867, it would be exactly that: a request, a piece of little 'a' advice which she could set aside[52] (though it is hard to envisage the circumstances in which she would).

But we need a touch of realism here. The early 2000s are very different from 1852, or even from 1974. The political weather now changes dramatically, especially when it is driven by those two hurricanes of irrationality – the media and the money markets. The more recent 'golden triangles' have been as aware of this as anybody.[53] Since 1974 we have seen the electronic revolution creating the hyper-sensitive, quick-reaction twenty-four-hour global money markets and the electronic news-gathering system which now means that, unlike the long March weekend in 1974, every player in any future rerun will be followed by a camera team. Someone somewhere will say something silly but plausible enough for the markets to believe that the pound is about to succumb to a build-up of domestic political uncertainty and instability. As Tom McNally put it in 1991, a repeat of March 1974 would 'be a moment of great hysteria, and individuals and organizations will have a spotlight trained on them with an intensity they've never experienced before'.[54]

Sir David Steel may have had a point when, speaking of a possible coalition-building pause, he argued: 'To some extent the fact that we haven't got a written Constitution is an advantage. There are no ground rules here. There are historical precedents but, basically, you make them [the rules] up as you go along.'[55] But, even more powerful in my view, given the media/money market problem, was Robert Armstrong's counterpoint when he spoke of its being 'not a bad thing' that there was normally a clock ticking in the background as it 'sharpens people's minds very considerably'.[56]

There is another factor which bothers the 'triangle'. In no circumstances must the Queen be embarrassed or drawn into or be *suspected* of being drawn into political strife or partisanship. This has always been and remains their joint number one rule (the other being that 'the Queen's government must be carried on'). Lord Armstrong was speaking for all postwar 'triangles' when he told me:

'In . . . the hung Parliament situation, the Sovereign and the Sovereign's advisers – and, one would hope, the politicians concerned – would have as primary objectives to ensure that the government of the country was carried on, and that everything possible was done to avoid the Sovereign being put into a position

where action had to be taken which might bring the Crown into the area of political controversy.'[57]

Sir Robin Butler has publicly confirmed that the transcript of the BBC Radio 4 *Analysis* programme, 'The Back of the Envelope', which I made with my producer, Simon Coates, and which preserved Lord Armstrong's words as delivered in 1991, was an encapsulation of the current constitutional thinking on the Queen's personal prerogatives.[58]

Lord Armstrong's point about the avoidance of both embarrassment and apparent politicization have often drifted into my mind when scouring the PRO files for what Mrs Cooper, the No. 10 Archivist, admitted to Derek Mitchell, the Prime Minister's Principal Private Secretary, in 1966, are 'the few papers we have on Dissolution'.[59] In particular, it was on first discovering Mitchell's plan for the 'Deadlock' contingency in October 1964[60] (based on his predecessor Tim Bligh's 1959 version for Harold Macmillan[61]) that I realized how little could be taken for granted.

Just imagine if this memo – prepared by Derek Mitchell in the small hours of 16 October 1964 in case Sir Alec Douglas-Home returned to No. 10 majorityless but still leader of the largest single party in the House of Commons – had leaked in the first edition of that Friday morning's London *Evening Standard* as Harold Wilson travelled to Euston from his Liverpool constituency, still not knowing what to expect in terms of the final result. After considering how Sir Alec might seek succour from the Liberals by offering their leader, Jo Grimond, the post of Lord Privy Seal, Mitchell's 'Deadlock' brief outlined the Queen's choices in the hung contingency. 'She may', he wrote of Her Majesty,

(a) press him [Douglas-Home] to stay on until defeated in the House,
(b) press him to stay on in the hope that he may form a Coalition, or
(c) send for someone who is not the leader of either Major Party in the hope that some sort of compromise Government could be carried on until it were feasible to have another General Election.[62]

If the circumstances were such that contingency (c) had been acted upon, many in the Labour Party and the Labour-sympathizing media would have claimed loud and clear (though erroneously) that the Queen was a Tory and had acted in an unfair and partisan spirit.

The thought occurred to me more than once in the 1990s – given the travails of some members of the royal family and the flammability of

much of the media on this issue – that, in the event of a hung result in a future election, Her Majesty might find herself in a degree of danger on this front. Could there be a way round it? In the past, I have suggested that consultations between the party leaders, the Palace, the Cabinet Office and No. 10 conducted on the Privy Counsellors' net (all the leaders of parties of any size are Privy Counsellors) might be used to produce an agreed set of principles (not detailed drills) which could be published as an indication of how the Queen would approach the exercise of her personal prerogatives.[63] This would have the twin advantages of furthering public, political and media enlightenment while increasing the chances that Her Majesty would be protected from extravagant, damaging or erroneous accusations if she had to exercise those prerogatives.

Neil Kinnock was unhappy as Leader of the Opposition in 1992 with some of the 'tacit understandings' (especially the possibility of the Conservatives clinging to office in hung circumstances while they chose a new leader better placed to cinch a deal with the Liberal Democrats)[64] as they were explained to him in the run-up to the 1997 election, and has made a similar suggestion. Addressing a meeting of senior civil servants in December 1994, he called for 'the identity of those advising the Queen in the event of a hung Parliament to be made known with agreements between Government and Opposition on procedures and principles'.[65]

Those in the 'triangle', past and present, have yet to be persuaded of the case. They are, generally, shrewd, careful and decent people and their reasons must be respected. Those reasons embrace the following counter-arguments to my view and to Neil Kinnock's suggestion:

- First, that flexibility is all important; precise contingencies cannot be predicted, no two are alike. Published principles would bring rigidity to a part of the Constitution which works well partly because of its capacity to adapt successfully to the unforeseen.
- Second, why should the Queen be the one person to be tied down? Party leaders might, under the pressure and heat of events, be capable of causing difficulties, but the Monarch could find herself trammelled by principles agreed with a set of departed party leaders while she remained in post being the one figure in public life who can never retire (privately, she has always ruled out the possibility of abdication).[66]
- Finally, there is the doctrine of inappropriate time – that a period of trouble for the royal family is the wrong moment to suggest that the head of

state may not be in a position to carry out this part of her job safely and satisfactorily, if required, without change to past practice.[67]

These views have heavyweight support in political and academic circles. Former Prime Minister Lord Callaghan once turned the question about the prerogatives back on me: 'Well, it works, doesn't it? So I think that's the answer, even if it is on the back of an envelope and not a written Constitution with every comma and every semicolon in place – indeed, sometimes they can make for difficulties that common sense can overcome.'[68]

The constitutional historian Vernon Bogdanor believes that the realities of political life would vitiate the production of such principles and that crude power, rather than refined principles, would determine the outcome in crisis circumstances. 'The Queen', he writes,

> . . . could only publish such principles upon the advice of her ministers. But her ministers are drawn from the ruling party or parties. There is no reason to believe that leaders of the other parties would concur with the government's view of which particular principles were relevant.
>
> Constitutional crises, then, cannot be resolved through a statement of principles; nor, by the very nature of the Constitution, could there be a 'hidden code' with the power of determining how such crises are to be resolved. It is not that the Constitution consists of 'instantly invented precedents', but rather that, when the precedents conflict, as they invariably will, there can be no authoritative guidance as to which are relevant in advance of a political crisis . . . the outcome of the crisis is as likely to be determined by the facts of power as it is on the basis of an appeal to principle.[69]

I expect the Bogdanor–Callaghan–'triangle' view to prevail, probably unless or until the UK moves to a system of proportional representation for its elections to the Westminster Parliament, in which case a royal drill will need to be spelled out and the Prorogation Act would need to be looked at again.

After a trawl of the files and some private conversations, I prepared in the mid-1990s a version of what the resulting one side of A4 paper might look like if an attempt were made to distil the essence of the Queen's personal prerogatives.

- Only the Monarch can dissolve Parliament, thereby causing a general election to be held.

- Only the Monarch can appoint a Prime Minister.
- After an indecisive general election, the Monarch is required to act only if the incumbent Prime Minister resigns before placing a Queen's Speech before Parliament or after failing to win a majority for that legislative programme in the House of Commons.
- The overarching principle at such delicate times is that the Queen's government must be carried on and that the Monarch is not drawn into political controversy by politicians competing to receive her commission to form a government.
- Normally an outgoing Prime Minister is asked to advise the Monarch on the succession, but the Monarch has to ask for it, and, if given, it is informal advice which can be rejected, rather than formal advice which must be acted upon.
- After an inconclusive result, if the incumbent Prime Minister resigns the Monarch will normally offer the first chance to form an administration to the party leader commanding the largest single number of seats in the House of Commons.
- A Prime Minister can 'request', but not 'demand', a dissolution of Parliament. The Monarch can refuse. The circumstances in which this might happen would be, in Lord Armstrong's words, 'improbable'. But the power to withhold consent could be a check, in Lord Armstrong's words, once more, on the 'irresponsible exercise of a Prime Minister's right to make such a request'.[70]
- The circumstances in which a royal refusal could be forthcoming are according to Sir Alan ('Tommy') Lascelles, George VI's Private Secretary, if 'the existing Parliament was still vital, viable and capable of doing its job' or if the Monarch 'could rely on finding another Prime Minister who could carry out [his or her] Government for a reasonable period, with a working majority in the House of Commons'. (Lascelles, writing pseudonymously in *The Times* in May 1950, included a third ground for refusal: that 'a General Election would be detrimental to the national economy',[71] but that criterion has been quietly dropped during the intervening years.)[72]

These are, to the best of my knowledge, the tacit assumptions that would suffuse the thinking and the advice of the 'triangle' in foreseeable contingencies. It remains my belief that such a principle-establishing exercise could and should be done, with beneficial results all round. And since 1999 a fully working and wholly transparent model of an alternative system has been available north of the Border. Under the Standing Orders

of the Scottish Parliament, the Presiding Officer conveys the will of the Parliament (as expressed through a vote) as to who shall be the Queen's First Minister in Scotland to the Sovereign herself. The Queen then sends for the person concerned and appoints him or her. Given this wholly accepted development there can now be no overriding reason for reticence. And a degree of foreknowledge could prevent both misunderstandings and misrepresentations should the personal prerogatives need to be exercised in future. I would certainly prefer Her Majesty to remain the umpire of this particular constitutional pitch. I am asking simply that the pitch be prepared in a more public and transparent fashion.

If the electorate should ever again wobble inconclusively inside the polling booths of a general election Thursday, you will find me on the following Saturday forsaking my customary weekend pleasures at the South Chingford Sainsbury's for a bench in St James's Park. Should they take a stroll in duo or trio formation to think through another reinvention of the Constitution, the 'golden triangle' will find a student from the Department of History at Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London on every park bench as far as the eye can see, come rain or shine. For who could resist witnessing the British Constitution in motion against such a perfect backdrop?

A final thought in case readers are feeling baffled, as I often am, when faced with the magic and the mystery of the British Constitution. We are in good company. It baffles itself. As the Queen once said when leaving an undergraduate seminar on the subject, 'The British Constitution has always been puzzling, and always will be.'[73] And she, of course, is it. But the best and perhaps the only way to grasp the pieces in 'Her Majesty's Puzzle',[74] or that part of it which relates to the conduct of the premiership, is to retrace the various landmarks in the developing geology and geography of power since the time of Sir Robert Walpole.

4

Organized by History: The Premiership Before 1945

'The complex forms and balanced spirit of our Constitution were not the discovery of a single era, still less of a single party or of a single person. They are the slow accretion of centuries, the outcome of patience, tradition and experience . . .'

The words of G. M. Trevelyan in the mouth of King George V, Silver Jubilee Address to Parliament, 1935[1]

'. . . I don't want to bother you with these theoretical possibilities, because in fact we have evolved by the usual British system of hit and miss a system which, having been rationalized after the event, is found to be quite logical and sound.'

Sir Norman Brook, Secretary of the Cabinet, in a private lecture to the Home Office on 'Cabinet Government', 1959[2]

The person who walks for the first time through the door of Number 10 as prime minister does not create or re-create the prime ministership: the job, to a considerable extent, already exists.

Professor Anthony King, 1991[3]

The paradoxical nature of the premiership is already apparent. How can Asquith's dictum that the office of Prime Minister is largely what its holder chooses or is able to make of it, with its implications of choice and individual flexibility, be squared with Anthony King's description? Can both be accurate? I think they can – and are. For the job, like the wider British Constitution, is a product of history. History deals each new incumbent a certain hand, the bundle of customs and conventions, practices and expectations that go with the office and whose steady accrual will be described in this chapter. The legacy of the past has a definitive *shaping* effect, but not so powerful a *constraining* impact. Because the Constitution or the law actu-

ally prescribes or requires so little by way of functions, a Prime Minister *can* make of the job a very great deal of what he or she wishes, provided other circumstances (size of majority, state of the economy, passivity of Cabinet colleagues, personal health and energy) allow it.

For all but the most insensitive or deliberately ahistorical new arrival (and it's hard to think of a single one, though Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair often behaved as if history was chiefly a guide on what *not* to do), the premiership radiates the past as much as any cathedral or cloister. Two things strike one on entering No. 10 Downing Street – its tranquillity, whatever the turmoil in Parliament, the country or the wider world, and the near tangible feeling of a deep and richly accumulated past whose resonance is such that the walls almost speak. Harold Wilson undoubtedly had a powerful sense of this. He was a great connoisseur of the office he held between October 1964 and June 1970, March 1974 and April 1976. So much did he cherish its mechanics and its past that he devoted to them a sizeable chunk of *The Governance of Britain*,[4] which he sat down to write almost the moment he left 10 Downing Street for the second time. It was a much better volume than he was given credit for in the late 1970s, when his stock among both the political and the commentating classes was low – so low that I remember a civil servant who *was* well disposed towards him saying to me that the trouble with Harold was he concentrated too much on immediate events rather than on the issues which were seriously important.[5]

The Governance of Britain was pure Wilson – steeped in the past,[6] dismissive of what he saw as arid academic debates about prime ministerial versus Cabinet government[7] and brimming with statistics about his workload as premier.[8] This was not Wilson mesmerized by the exciting and the immediate, it was Harold the King's Scout, the eternal member of the 3rd Colne Valley Milnsbridge Baptist Scouts.[9] Other Prime Ministers have had an acute sense of their career, even their personal destiny in the making, but with Wilson it was the degree and detail of this near obsession which was special. He had spent his whole life collecting the equivalent of scout badges – at Oxford, in the wartime Civil Service, within the Attlee governments and during the doldrums years in Opposition before he became Leader of the Labour Party in 1963. Finally, in 1964, he had acquired the biggest badge of all to pin to that laden sleeve – the premiership – and, until his last illness, he always enjoyed communicating the pleasures its possession had brought him, not least in his retirement study of the job and its holders, *A Prime Minister on Prime Ministers*.[10]

For Wilson, much of the glory of the premiership lay in its antiquity. Insofar as his study of *The Governance of Britain* concentrated on the prime ministerial role in Cabinet government, Wilson wrote: 'it describes the day-to-day working of a calling that must be one of the most exciting and certainly one of the best organized – organized by history – in the democratic world: Britain's prime ministership'.[11]

And it is true that everyone who steps through that famous Downing Street door for the first time as Prime Minister must to some extent be as thrilled as Churchill was on 10 May 1940 when, after receiving the King's commission to form a wartime coalition government, he 'felt as if I were walking with destiny'.[12]

Yet the emergence of that destiny-laden office which fell into Churchill's hands during the extreme national emergency of the spring of 1940 was anything but pre-destined by history, to adapt Harold Wilson. What E. P. Thompson once called 'the enormous condescension of posterity'[13] places Churchill 43rd in the line of succession from Sir Robert Walpole,[14] yet the man upon whom history has laid the mantle of Britain's first Prime Minister spent his entire career denying he was any such thing.[15]

A 1950s file at the Public Record Office misleadingly titled 'British Constitutional System' reflects the continuing imprecision about the origins of the premiership. The core document in those files, a 'Historical Table of Changes in Government Organisation', contains this following cryptic, almost shorthand entry:

> 1714 13th October
> Post of Lord High Treasurer finally put into commission. The *Board of Treasury* included the First Lord of the Treasury and the Chancellor of the Exchequer.
>
> It was not at that time self-evident that the First Lord of the Treasury would be head of the Government, but since Walpole's appointment as First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1721, there has almost always been such a correlation. Origin of Prime Minister.[16]

The 'correlation' has held virtually throughout the twentieth century since A. J. Balfour succeeded his uncle, Lord Salisbury, as Prime Minister in July 1902 (previously Balfour had combined the First Lordship with his Leadership of the House of Commons).[17]

A Whitehall handbook baldly noting 'origin of the Prime Minister' is one thing, but Sir John Plumb, in his celebrated eighteenth-century volume in the Pelican History of England, rightly warned generation after genera-

tion of history students from 1950 onwards against any overprecise or schematic interpretations of the waning of royal power at the expense of a 'Cabinet' led by a 'Prime Minister' after Walpole became First Lord of the Treasury in 1721. 'Walpole and George II', Plumb wrote,

> encouraged the development of a small inner cabinet, consisting of the [two] secretaries [of state, for the Northern and Southern Departments], the Lord Chancellor, Lord Privy Seal, Lord President of the Council, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. This body met informally: it had access to all secret papers and it was here that the real decisions on policy were taken.
>
> It was quickly realised that if a minister belonging to this inner circle disagreed with his colleagues on a vital issue he had no alternative but to resign, an attitude which gave rise later to the idea of the collective responsibility of the cabinet. This small inner or efficient cabinet was the true ancestor of the modern cabinet, but still a remote one, and it is extremely misleading to try to impose modern, or nineteenth-century, constitutional ideas on the eighteenth century . . .
>
> In this inner ring of ministers there was frequently one who by common consent was the foremost, whose word carried the most weight and who acted as the principal vehicle in their relations with the King. Sometimes he was called the Prime Minister, but usually only by his enemies and as a term of mild abuse. He was still very much the King's servant.[18]

Despite Plumb's strictures, Walpole's portrait continues to hang on the wall behind the Prime Minister's seat in the Cabinet Room[19] as the *de facto* father of the breed. And despite William Rees-Mogg's observation that, 'However skilful the British Prime Minister may be, he cannot have the world impact of a Pitt, a Disraeli, a Gladstone, a Lloyd George or a Churchill,'[20] that seat beneath that portrait in that room remains the ultimate prize for which the politically ambitious strive in Britain.

So how did a notion which started its life during the reign of Queen Anne as a term of abuse hurled at Robert Harley, the leader of the Tories,[21] come to be the ultimate spur to British political fame? Following the upheavals of 1688–89 it is best seen as one among a number of linked elements which sprang out of and enhanced the growth of political stability first in England and Wales, then, after the Act of Union with Scotland of 1707, in Britain as a whole.

The Bill of Rights of 1689 had, without doubt, clipped the prerogatives of the monarchy and forged powerful new weapons for Parliament, both legislative and financial,[22] but it had by no means determined the real

power flows in late seventeenth-century England. The new 'system was a fragile thing. It was neither party government nor non-party government; while not royal government it was not cabinet government in any collective sense either. It contained a number of able men . . . but none of them had the full confidence of the King . . .'[23]

For a few brief years at the beginning of the eighteenth century it looked as if the country might consciously separate the powers of the executive and the legislature. The Act of Settlement of 1701 laid down that once Queen Anne was dead, no placeman of the Monarch (a minister in modern parlance) could be an MP and that every piece of advice given to the Monarch by the Privy Council should be made known to the House of Commons.[24] Had this part of the Act not been repealed in 1705 before it could be implemented (the Whigs disliked this restriction on the royal prerogatives and feared it might deter the Hanoverians from taking the crown so they got rid of it as soon as they were able), the tectonic constitutional shift, roughly delineated by the eighteenth century, from a monarchical system of government to one based upon collective Cabinet government, albeit a collective led by a leading 'First' or 'Prime' Minister, would not have occurred. Nor would the fusion of the executive and the legislative branches of government which Bagehot rightly saw in the mid nineteenth century as the singular, 'efficient' secret of the British way of governance.[25]

Walpole's significance is that, buttressed by the stability of more effective departmental structures and fiscal arrangements in Whitehall,[26] his gifts and his personality were such that he became the key figure in whose person these potentially conflicting power flows and practices were combined and, thanks to his immense political skills, moderated. The whole enterprise was lubricated by that potent mixture of money and patronage which passed through Walpole's hands as First Lord of the Treasury. As his biographer, Brian Hill, explains:

> British government in Walpole's time, and for most of the eighteenth century, was in a process of transition from the dominant monarchy of the Stuart era to the Cabinet government of the nineteenth century. In Anne's reign there was a Cabinet which at first sight seems recognisably modern . . . Despite appearances, however, there was not yet full collective responsibility, so that ministers often assumed a semi-independent role . . . Yet Walpole's control was never monolithic, being often challenged by parliamentary opposition and finally overthrown by the straightforward and constitutional means of defeat in the House of Commons. He had to please two masters, Parliament and the King, and the loss of support from either could have destroyed him politically at any time.[27]

A modern Prime Minister would recognize elements of present-day reality in this, for in the Walpole years the enduring, DNA-like strands were spun which continue to determine the strength and scope, as well as the vulnerabilities of the job.

But as in any living organism, there is more than one strand of DNA. And the growth of the office of Prime Minister – its power and its functions – has to be seen in the context of other developments which, sometimes singly, often in combination, have determined the political ecology of that potent little cluster of power at the poky end of Downing Street. Over the grand sweep from Walpole to Blair (which embraces fifty-one Prime Ministers in between), one has to examine at least six sources of power or influence and the contexts in which they have fluctuated: the powers of the Monarch; the Cabinet; the Prime Minister; the electorate (increasingly important after 1832) and, from the late nineteenth century, the powers of public opinion and the media.

Insofar as it is possible to freeze any moment of transition involving such shifting variables – for power is a relative concept – let me cite an example from the early nineteenth century when Peel won a decisive victory at the polls despite Victoria's views being decidedly Whiggish at that time. After 1841, the Monarch was unable to exert any real sway over the choice of ministers following a general election. Once the electorate had roughly doubled in size after 1832, with one in five adult males eligible to vote, it was only a matter of time before monarchical patronage began to seriously decay in the face of electoral power. At the end of her reign, Victoria still badgered her premiers, Gladstone especially, about church or military appointments and occasionally ministerial ones (for example, though she could not persuade Gladstone to keep Sir Charles Dilke out of his Cabinet in the early 1880s, 'she did insist on him sending her what amounted to a written recantation of his [Dilke's] republicanism').[28] But by this time, the personal royal prerogatives were, in real terms, already reduced to dissolving Parliaments and appointing Prime Ministers. The power to make or unmake administrations was moving out of the House of Commons to the electorate. Inside the chamber, ever tougher whipping and tautened parliamentary procedure were reducing the behavioural scope of the individual member, and the power to initiate legislation was moving steadily away from Parliament and into the executive.

Inside the Cabinet Room, the Prime Minister was an increasingly important figure, partly for functional and procedural reasons which I shall come to later, but also because of the increasing importance of party leaders due to the personalization of British politics, which grew with changes in the nature of electoral contests, party organization and the media. These shifting relationships took place against the rise of labour (with a small 'l') at home and of international competition (in terms of both trade and political influence) abroad, and the changed political agenda which resulted.

This, however, is to leap ahead too far and too fast. Let us return to those crucial shaping influences which had determined what Victoria, Peel, Gladstone or Disraeli could do and how. It is best to see the eighteenth century in fluid terms as a series of changes which together altered the nature of government from that of a monarchical chief executive dominating a 'Cabinet Council' to a collective executive led by a sometimes dominant figure, a Prime Minister, who none the less fell short of being a chief executive himself.[29] *The* great debate of recent times is whether or not in the second half of the twentieth century Britain saw a reversal of that process through the supersession of the collective executive of the Cabinet by the 'elected monarch'[30] of the Prime Minister.

By the end of the eighteenth century a consensus was forming among those who had to deal with the stresses of first ministership, that the system could not cope without such a designated figure. The hapless Lord North, for example, begged George III to allow him to resign because 'in critical times, it is necessary that there should be one directing Minister, who should plan the whole of the operation of government and control all the other departments of administration . . .'[31] This, poor North confessed, he could not do (which was not surprising; he was a man of some ability but, 'in the end [he] could not cope with the triple burden of being First Lord of the Treasury, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Leader of the Commons' at a time of acute crisis in the North American colonies in the 1770s and 1780s).[32] The younger Pitt put it more tersely when he said 'there should be an avowed and real Minister, possessing the chief weight in the [Cabinet] Council, and the principal place in the confidence of the King'.[33]

Pitt has some claim to be the first modern premier, certainly the first real one since Walpole in terms not just of his appetite for power but in his centrality to his administration and his own power relative to that of his Cabinet colleagues. Part of the evidence for this is the folk memory of

that most peculiar of trade unions – the Right Honourable Society of Ex-Premiers – of which in retirement Harold Wilson became a kind of house historian. Wilson wrote in *A Prime Minister on Prime Ministers*:

If Walpole was the creator of the office of Prime Minister, Pitt is rightly described by historians as the first to hold the office in a sense in which it could be recognised today. While he could still be summarily dismissed by the King, even though enjoying the confidence of Parliament, he was, in the language of those days, the 'efficient' head of his Cabinet. Subject to some grumbles and queries by the King, its members were chosen by Pitt, and where necessary dismissed at his request. More than that, Pitt's administrations were more coherent than those of any of his predecessors, and the policies he enjoined on them and which they accepted were the policies of them all, and were collectively recommended to Parliament . . .

Peel . . . described himself as a disciple of Pitt, and Peel himself has generally been regarded as the first 'modern' Prime Minister, in the sense that his premiership more closely resembles that of a Prime Minister of the 1930s or 1950s than that of Walpole, whose term of office ended a century before Peel's only real administration began.[34]

Wilson rather overdoes some points. For example, not until Balfour's premiership at the beginning of the last century could a Prime Minister be absolutely certain of his power (by recommending their dismissal to the Monarch) to hire and fire other ministers.[35] Even Gladstone was not.[36]

Wilson's disquisition on the mutations of premiership holds good in the sense that Gladstone modelled himself consciously on Peel,[37] and Rosebery, another member of the Honourable Society of Ex-Premiers, described Peel as 'the model of all Prime Ministers'.[38] We should not be surprised by this. Not only does it stem from the sense of the past that most Prime Ministers possess, it has to do with there being no official job description for the premiership, let alone any statute which delineates the premier's functions or powers.[39] (There is no reason to believe, as we shall see, that any of the eleven Prime Ministers since World War II ever saw the one stab at this which was made in the Cabinet Office, the Treasury and No. 10 between 1947 and 1949.)[40]

There are two ways of depicting the development of this extraordinary creation of British history. The standard way is to trace it in terms of the large-scale changes in the political system: the growth of political stability in the first half of the eighteenth century, the executive exigencies created by wars in North America and with the French in the second half of that

same century, the charges whose fuses were lit by the 1832 Reform Act and exploded by its successor in 1867 in terms of the growth of mass parties beyond Parliament which led, in Le May's words, to 'Gladstone . . . more than anyone else . . . creating the conception of the party leader as demagogue'.[41] Allied to these wider factors was the ever tighter discipline exerted on voting patterns inside the Commons. Methods of political communication were changing, too, in response to the growth of a mass electorate. The first half of the twentieth century saw still further changes in the nature of the premiership thanks to the cumulative effect of total war, the growth of the state and the burgeoning technologies of new mass media.

I shall tackle this prime ministerial phenomenon from a different angle, a more microscopic approach which helps illustrate the accumulation of function and relative power over the past 200 years while recognizing that there is nothing either linear or inevitable about it. This, in a way, has been the approach of the more historically minded members of the Honourable Society: 'Can I do this? Doesn't Balfour or Gladstone or Lloyd George provide me with the precedent to stymie those who say I am pushing the boundaries of the premiership beyond the constitutional?' Yet it would be wrong to imagine that, except on rare occasions, First Lords of the Treasury have the time or the inclination to reflect upon the degree to which the topology of the premiership is changing around them. As Gladstone, writing as Prime Minister, noted in his diary on the last day of 1868, 'Swimming for his life, a man does not see much of the country through which the river winds.'[42]

Some modern-day functions were attached to the office from the start in Walpole's day – most notably the disposal of a secret fund, his inheritance from a long line of crown servants beginning with Sir Francis Walsingham in Elizabeth I's time, though the money side only acquired a degree of formal organization in the following century. As Christopher Andrew has explained:

> From the Restoration there was a Secret Service Fund and, from 1797, an annual Secret Service vote in parliament which continues to this day. But the pre-Victorian Secret Service Fund did not provide for an established Secret Service. It was used instead to finance British propaganda on the Continent, an assortment of part-time informants, a variety of secret operations by freelance agents, and an elaborate system of political and diplomatic bribery. During Walpole's twenty-one years as Britain's first prime minister . . . the Secret Fund was probably used more for political bribes at home than for diplomatic bribes abroad.[43]

We can identify overseeing the secret world, together with chairing the Cabinet, dealing with the Monarch and managing Parliament, as one of the core functions of the early premiership. Another is responsibility for warfare. It is significant that the 1950s Cabinet Office file on 'The Constitutional System' refers to a body created in either 1620 or 1621 as 'A Standing Council for War'. 'Probably a committee of the Privy Council', it notes, without quite declaring it to be the prototypical 'War Cabinet'.[44]

We need to move on another sixty years from Walpole's appointment as First Lord to find the next rash of historical accretions which begin to develop a kind of doctrine of prime ministerial indispensability. They came in a cluster in the early 1780s and in spurts thereafter. Let me itemize them, starting with the Prime Minister becoming sole chairman of the Cabinet in the 1780s and finishing with Churchill establishing the primacy of the premier over nuclear weapons policy in the 1940s:

- 1781: Last appearance of a Monarch (George III) at the larger Cabinet Council (the 'Nominal Cabinet', so-called to distinguish it from the smaller or 'Efficient Cabinet' where the real business was conducted).[45]
- 1782–83: Reluctant acceptance by the Monarch that virtually all members of the 'Efficient Cabinet' should change with the appointment of a new Prime Minister,[46] a change which added substantially to the collective nature of Cabinet government. The fall of Lord North's ministry in 1782 is also treated as a constitutional landmark because it demonstrated the difficulty of a Monarch sustaining a government which had lost the confidence of the House of Commons.[47]
- Changes in the scope and nature of warfare. Although, as we have seen, war had long been a central concern of the Privy Council, it was the Napoleonic Wars at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which demonstrated that warfare had become an intensely prime ministerial function. Henceforth, war was added to money (it is important not to forget the importance of the Prime Minister as First Lord of the Treasury; Mrs Thatcher did not)[48] as a great enhancer of the relative power of the Prime Minister.[49] George III could not cope with the executive demands of war, though it would probably be an exaggeration even to see the younger Pitt as presiding over the first of a long line of 'War Cabinets'. As late as the Crimean War in the 1850s, Lord John Russell could describe the Cabinet as 'a cumbrous and unwieldy instrument'.[50] It was worse than that. One historian of that war has claimed that a majority of the Cabinet were asleep during the meeting when it was decided to take Sebastopol[51] – a problem that afflicted the Cabinet

frequently when it was standard practice to meet over dinner.[52] Not until the Hartington Commission of 1889 were serious steps taken to plan for a substantial reshaping of government in time of war.[53] Yet so poorly did Whitehall adapt to the demands of the Boer War that the then Prime Minister, the Marquess of Salisbury, was moved to admit to the House of Lords in 1900 that he did 'not believe in the perfection of the British Constitution as an instrument for war'.[54] Only with the creation of the Committee of Imperial Defence by Balfour in 1904 did matters seriously improve.[55]

- During the same period of what one might call both prime ministerial and Cabinet consolidation in the late eighteenth century, Pitt demonstrated the indispensability of collective responsibility by persuading the King to dismiss Thurlow, the Lord Chancellor, after he had criticized Pitt's Sinking Fund (a more rigorous version of a 1717 device for reducing the National Debt)[56] in the House of Lords in 1792.[57] (Though not till 1801, when Addington finally removed another troublesome ex-Lord Chancellor, Lord Loughborough, was it established that former Cabinet ministers could not simply turn up at Cabinet meetings.)[58]
- That great prime ministerial device for managing both issues and ministers – the modern Cabinet committee – probably dates from 1831 when Grey asked Durham to 'take our Reform Bill in hand' by proposing 'the outline of a measure . . . large enough to satisfy public opinion and to afford some ground of resistance to further innovation, yet so based on property, and on existing franchises and territorial divisions, as to run no risk of overthrowing the [existing] form of government'.[59] The committee of ministers which Durham gathered to advance this, the prototype of a hugely important instrument of modern governance, met regularly at Durham's house in Cleveland Row.[60] (Peter Catterall makes the case for an even earlier appearance of the Cabinet committee in the shape of the 1716 ad hoc committee created to consider the fortification of the French port of Mardyck.)[61]
- In 1835, Peel and Wellington in an exchange of correspondence established the convention (it is no more than that) whereby ministers can be recruited only from the House of Commons or the House of Lords, a move which reduced the pool of talent available for service in the Cabinet Room while tautening the bonds of prime ministerial patronage in the Palace of Westminster. Peel wrote in January 1835, 'The holding of a seat in the Cabinet by a responsible adviser of the Crown – that adviser being neither in the House of Lords nor Commons, is, I fear, extremely unusual if not unprecedented in modern times.' (The only recent precedent was Vesey Fitzgerald, who had carried on as President of the Board of Trade until March 1829 after losing the famous Clare by-election in June 1828.)[62]

As with all constitutional conventions, one must take care not to be dogmatic or overly comprehensive in asserting the primacy of this particular one. For example, in relatively recent times there have been breaches of the Peel convention: Richard Casey was appointed by Churchill as the War Cabinet's Minister of State in the Middle East in March 1942. Casey was an Australian politician and there was no intention of finding him a seat in the House of Commons or of asking the King to make him a peer.[63] Similarly, there is a long tradition of appointing some Scottish law officers from outside Parliament (both Lords Advocate and Solicitors General).[64]

Patrick Gordon-Walker was a rather separate case. Though he lost his seat at Smethwick in the West Midlands after a notoriously racist local campaign by the Conservatives against Labour's stance on immigration during the general election of October 1964, Wilson nevertheless appointed him Foreign Secretary. Reg Sorensen, the sitting Labour member, was eased out of the safe Labour seat of Leyton and into the House of Lords to make way for him.[65] After losing the Leyton by-election in January 1965, Gordon-Walker had no alternative but to step down and Wilson acknowledged the same day that 'the events of the past 24 hours make it impossible for you to carry on at the Foreign Office'.[66]

The only absolute requirement for a Cabinet minister is that he or she must be a Privy Counsellor for, as Lord Curzon wrote in 1924, the Cabinet is but a Committee of the Privy Council (the ancient medieval body for providing advice to the Monarch), a view with which, in more recent times, Lord Hailsham (twice a Lord Chancellor) and Robert Armstrong (as we have seen) concur.[67] And as Lord Hankey, the former Secretary of the Cabinet, confirmed in 1946, all the Monarch's 'principal ministers' are Privy Counsellors.[68] This, for example, enabled Lord Poole, Joint Chairman of the Conservative Party, to attend Cabinet meetings in 1963–64 at the invitation of the Prime Minister even though he held no ministerial office.[69]

Constitutional interpretation has moved on since Curzon's time. All Cabinet ministers are still required to be Privy Counsellors, but 1990s Whitehall practice followed Sir William Anson's view, elaborated in the mid-1930s, that 'To describe the Cabinet a Committee of the Privy Council is misleading . . . The Cabinet does not meet as a Committee of the Privy Council, for it is not so constituted . . . The Cabinet considers and determines how the King's government may best be carried on in all its important departments; the Privy Council meets to carry into effect advice given to the King by the Cabinet or a minister, or to discharge duties cast upon it by custom or statute.'[70] This particular piece of insiderdom strikes me as

over fussy and over finessed and in no way overrides the fundamental point made by Lords Curzon, Hailsham and Armstrong.

- In 1861 Gladstone, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, began the practice of bundling a whole range of tax and spending issues into a single Finance Bill.[71] By tradition, the Cabinet is given a Budget's details only on the morning of the speech. Until then, only the Chancellor and the PM are fully apprised and, to greater and lesser degrees, work in tandem on its preparation.[72] (Palmerston, the first premier to benefit from this stretched, or enhanced, Finance Bill was, ironically, far from happy with Gladstone's position on the issue which led to it – the controversy over the abolition of duties on paper, the famous 'taxes on knowledge'.)[73]
- Once he became Prime Minister, Gladstone increased enormously the power of the premier by ending in 1870 the right of any Cabinet minister to call a Cabinet meeting if he had an important item of departmental business requiring collective discussion.[74] To this day only the Prime Minister can summon a Cabinet meeting.
- Summitry has become an increasingly frequent prime ministerial activity. Though the word is of relatively recent vintage, having been invented by Churchill during the 1950 general election campaign,[75] I would date its first modern form from the Congress of Berlin in 1878. When Bismarck fixed the time and place in June that year 'there could be no question', Robert Blake wrote, 'who would represent England. When it had been merely a matter of a conference the Cabinet had selected Lord Lyons but at a full-scale congress attended by the imperial chancellors of the Northern Courts Disraeli and Salisbury [the Foreign Secretary] were bound to be the English plenipotentiaries.'[76]
- Prime Minister's Questions in the House of Commons in their twice-weekly bear-garden modern form began only in 1961 and lasted until May 1997 when, in an attempt to restore a tad of reason and an element of genuine debate to the occasion, Tony Blair combined the two fifteen-minute slots into a single one of thirty minutes on Wednesday afternoons. But their earliest appearance as a recognizable phenomenon, though one far removed from our current televised trial-by-soundbite, took place in 1881 when 'Questions to the PM' were grouped at the end of the day's list. In 1904 they were arranged, on the instructions of the Speaker, from Question 51 onwards. This was later amended to number 45, where they remained until 1960–61, when Harold Macmillan acceded to backbenchers' demands that a regular time of 3.15 be established twice weekly for the premier to be held to account.[77]

- Top appointments to the civil, diplomatic and armed services and to the Church of England are very much part of a modern Prime Minister's patronage portfolio (and PMs vary considerably in their propensity to take advice from the professionals concerned with such matters). But not until the final argument over the removal of her cousin, the Duke of Cambridge, as Commander-in-Chief of the Army in 1895 (a highly vexatious matter for Rosebery and his Secretary for War, Campbell-Bannerman) did Queen Victoria's sway in such matters publicly diminish, though she maintained until her dying day in 1901 that her prerogatives remained intact in this area.[78]
- The absolute right of a premier to remove ministers came even later, during A. J. Balfour's autumn crisis in 1903 over tariffs. As John Mackintosh put it: 'The most clear-cut demonstration of self-confidence on the part of a Prime Minister was when Balfour decided it was better to shed the free traders, Balfour of Burleigh, Lord Hamilton and Ritchie, faced them in the Cabinet and accepted their resignations without disclosing that he had Joseph Chamberlain's resignation [over this issue] in his pocket.'[79]
- Another Balfourian innovation, the Committee of Imperial Defence, whose secretariat was created by Treasury minute in May 1904,[80] reaffirmed, as Anthony Eden said later, that 'Defence is very much a Prime Minister's special subject.'[81] As John Ehrman has noted, 'It is . . . no accident that the Committee of Imperial Defence should be peculiarly Balfour's monument. He was himself well aware of its dependence upon him; he took care to be present at every one of the meetings held during his premiership,' and it was the main reason why he stayed in office during the fractious year of 1905, because he and the Committee of Imperial Defence were deeply involved with the Anglo-Japanese Treaty.[82] Planning for the contingency of war is not the same as waging it but, to a large extent, the linkage – like a Prime Minster's overall responsibilities for both – is complete. It was in this sense that Eden wrote as he did.
- A spin-off from war, the hurried circumstances of the first general election after the Great War, gave the British Prime Minister another 'special' function, that of requesting the Monarch for a dissolution of Parliament, thereby triggering a general election on his personal say-so rather than as the bearer of a collective request from the Cabinet. This convention was established in the peculiar and complicated circumstances of the Lloyd George coalition ahead of the 'coupon' election of 1918.[83] Though some premiers still consult the full Cabinet ahead of such a request, as was standard practice pre-Lloyd George,[84] and others confide in an inner group,[85] the final decision to approach the Monarch is the premier's alone.

- At about the same time as LG was siphoning away from the Cabinet the power of decision about the timing of elections, he was extending the Cabinet's collective nature down the decision-taking structure by creating in July 1918 the first *permanent* standing committee of the Cabinet (there had been many examples of temporary ones since Durham's ministerial group of 1831) in the shape of the Home Affairs Committee, which has existed continually to this day in various mutations.[86] (Technically, the first standing group was the Economic Defence and Development Committee created in June 1918, but this did not turn out to be permanent.)[87]
- For all the accretions of functions and powers into what Campbell-Bannerman called 'this rotten old barrack of a house',[88] the apparatus in No. 10 has remained a relatively slim machine, certainly compared with what is available to most heads of government.[89] It was not until 1928, however, when Sir Robert Vansittart became Principal Private Secretary to Baldwin, that the career Civil Service fully captured the Prime Minister's Private Office with the departure of Sir Ronald Waterhouse (who, in fact, as George Jones has pointed out 'was the last of the old style personal and political appointees, and the first of the new style civil servants' as he stayed on during the first ever Labour premiership under Ramsay MacDonald in 1924).[90] The position held – just – after the 1997 general election. Tony Blair considered appointing Jonathan Powell as his Downing Street Chief-of-Staff *and* his Principal Private Secretary on the departure of Alex Allan from the Private Secretary's post. After a fuss in the press and private advice from the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Robin Butler,[91] a compromise was reached whereby Powell remained Chief-of-Staff and John Holmes, the Foreign Affairs Private Secretary, assumed also the title of Principal Private Secretary when Allan left to become the British High Commissioner to Australia.[92]
- In the past, such changes usually took place away from the gaze of a public then as now less than enthralled by the finer points of bureaucratics. But in Baldwin's time a very public development occurred which thrust party leaders, and premiers in particular, into the public eye with a novelty not experienced since Gladstone's Midlothian campaign of 1879–80.[93] The initial instrument of the transformation which continues to this day (and forms the crucial component in what Michael Foley has called 'leadership stretch')[94] was the radio, or the 'wireless', as it was then known. If I had to date the beginnings of the 'mediafication' of the British premiership it would be 16 October 1924, when Baldwin delivered his first broadcast in the general election campaign of that year. To widespread surprise, he proved a natural at the 'fireside chat' approach when, as his biographer G. M. Young

puts it, 'his diffidence dropped away . . . a note of authority came into his voice . . .',[95] a capacity Baldwin utilized to great effect during the General Strike of 1926.[96] Baldwin's successor, MacDonald, reformed the internal workings of No. 10 to enable it to cope with new media realities. In 1931 he appointed George Steward as the first Downing Street Press Secretary. Almost immediately Steward arranged fixed times for briefing the Westminster lobby correspondents inside No. 10, thereby converting them, in the disapproving words of James Margach, from 'old style competitive "outsiders" . . . into a fraternity of organised "insiders"'.[97]

- Of all the changes in the powers, responsibilities and reach of the British Prime Minister not illuminated by the arc light of publicity, the development of atomic weapons has been the most awesome and most secret. Churchill kept knowledge of the bomb to the tiniest circle of advisers and colleagues for over five years. He simply did not think it a subject fit for the Service Ministers let alone the full Cabinet. In March 1944, Sir John Anderson, in effect the 'Minister for the bomb', as Martin Gilbert records, 'suggested to Churchill that the time had come to give "full information" about "Tube Alloys" – the atom bomb research programme – to the three Service Ministers and to the War Cabinet. Churchill minuted, however, "I do not agree", asking in a note in the margin of Anderson's request, "What can they do about it?" Anderson, as Lord Cherwell later wrote to Churchill, "was perturbed by your decision", but as a result of it the atomic bomb "was never discussed at Cabinet or in the Defence Committee" at any time before the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki a year and a half later.'[98]

  Churchill took the decision to give British consent to the use of the weapons on Japan, as required by the Quebec Agreement of 1943, on 1 July 1945 without consulting the War Cabinet.[99] For over fifty years the decision about who should be consulted on nuclear weapons policy and in which forum has been an intensely prime ministerial one.[100]

This extraordinary progression from 1721 to 1945 of developments usually scarcely noticed at the time, represents a huge accumulation of functions, procedures and sheer power waiting to be handed over by Mr Churchill to Mr Attlee on the evening of 26 July 1945, after the electorate had inflicted one of what David Butler calls its 'civilised evictions'[101] on the old warrior. But none of the functions I have described is statutory (or was in 1945, to be more accurate).[102] There was very little a Prime Minister *had* to do.

This is not the kind of speculation one ever hears from insiders. As Lord Salisbury (the 5th Marquess, grandson of the late nineteenth-century premier) wrote in one of the many niggling, resignation-threatening letters he sent his premiers (this one to a flu-stricken Anthony Eden in September 1955), 'No one alas! can take the place of the Prime Minister.'[103] And the next chapter will examine just how many demands have stretched the premiership further in the years which span the gap between two very different arrivals of Labour leaders, Clem Attlee and Tony Blair, at the Palace to be converted into the Monarch's First Lord of the Treasury and Prime Minister.[104]

5

Beyond any Mortal? The Stretching of the Premiership Since 1945

'A Tory is someone who thinks institutions are wiser than those who operate them.' *Enoch Powell, 1986*[1]

The Prime Minister is the person who offers advice to the Sovereign, backed by the prospect of being able to deliver a majority vote in the House of Commons in which he is representing the majority. The loss of the constitutional sense that the Sovereign governs on the advice of Parliament accounts for the tendency to treat the office of Prime Minister as to a certain degree independent. *Enoch Powell, 1997*[2]

'There are three classes which need sanctuary more than others – birds, wild flowers, and Prime Ministers.' *Stanley Baldwin, 1925*[3]

'Ours is a pretty hard and unrewarding life.'
Harold Macmillan to Selwyn Lloyd on appointing him Chancellor of the Exchequer, July 1960[4]

It is now a plausible contention to claim that the pressures and opportunities, the expectations and motivations, and the restraints and problems associated with the business of being and remaining a prime minister are sufficiently analogous to the equivalent conditions faced by an American president to justify the term 'president' being applied to the occupant of Number 10. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to assert that what this country has witnessed over the last generation has been the growing emergence of a British presidency. *Professor Michael Foley, 1993*[5]

Whenever the 'presidential' epithet is applied to the UK prime ministership I think of the most exaggerated form in which it has ever been expressed.

Paradoxically, the phrasemaker was Winston Churchill, probably the most self-conscious practitioner of genuinely (as opposed to partially) *collective* Cabinet government during his 1951–55 premiership. The occasion was the appointment of Lord Halifax to the Foreign Office in 1938; the place, the House of Commons. Reacting to objections at having so senior a minister in the House of Lords, Churchill, supporting Halifax's appointment, pointed out that the Prime Minister was in the Commons, adding: 'What is the point of crying out for the moon when you have the sun and you have that bright orb of day from whose effulgent beams the lesser luminaries derive their radiance?' This hyperbolic gem was exhumed to comfort Macmillan in July 1960 when accusations of excessive prime ministerialism were hurled at him (as we shall see in a moment) for appointing Lord Home to the Foreign Office, his thoughtful Private Secretary, Tim Bligh, informing him that the relevant volume of the 1938 'Hansard has a piece of paper in the place and is by your chair in the Cabinet Room'.[6]

Once in No. 10, I suspect that most Prime Ministers find themselves in increasing sympathy with the self-pity of Baldwin and Macmillan (though Macmillan was prone to self-contradiction on this point, telling Ludovic Kennedy, for example, that the premiership was 'much the most relaxed of the offices I held').[7] Nearly all would echo Asquith's reply to a lady who remarked upon how nice it must be to enjoy such power. 'Power, power?' he said. 'You may think you are going to get it but you never do.'[8] There are some premiers who sustain a version of the sun/moon image summoned by Churchill, in the early days of their tenure at least. One such was Harold Wilson. In an interview he gave Kenneth Harris of the *Observer* in 1965 to mark the completion of his first year in office, Wilson declared,

> 'No. 10 is what the Prime Minister of the day makes it. The levers of power are all here in No. 10. In the Cabinet Room [which is where Wilson did his work at that time; during his last premiership he preferred to work in the first-floor study overlooking St James's Park].[9] The ability of the Prime Minister to use them depends on the Prime Minister being in touch with what is going on – and not going on . . . The more things you take an interest in, the more information comes back to you. A Prime Minister governs by curiosity and range of interest.'[10]

There is a great deal to deconstruct in that typically Wilsonian soliloquy. First, does a PM *govern*? Should he (or she)? Isn't the key to the British

system, its safety catch, the tradition that the British people are governed by a collective executive (the Cabinet) rather than a single chief executive (the Prime Minister)?[11] Second, isn't an approach such as the early Wilson's a recipe for stress and overload on the premier's part *and* the route to an increasingly resentful Cabinet irritated by the overmighty intrusiveness of a figure who is far from the *primus inter pares*?[12] And, third could one talk so confidently of 'levers of power', let alone claim that all of them reside in No. 10? In his determination to convince Kenneth Harris that he had indeed converted Downing Street from Alec Douglas-Home's alleged 'monastery' into the 'powerhouse' he promised,[13] Harold Wilson raised in a few short paragraphs most of the issues that have fuelled the great postwar debate about the alleged metamorphosis of Cabinet government into a prime ministerial, or even a presidential, mutation away from the traditional British breed.

That debate was already five years old when Wilson crafted those words. It started, interestingly enough, before John Mackintosh's great work, *The British Cabinet*, first appeared in 1962.[14] Macmillan's appointment of a peer, Alec Home, as his Foreign Secretary in 1960 stimulated the vigorous little debate referred to above about alleged overmightiness in No. 10 which drew Lord Boothby, Earl Attlee and Professor Max Beloff into the public prints, their combined contributions carefully preserved in one of the Cabinet Office's constitutional files. Unknown to any of them, Macmillan had toyed with the idea of creating a Prime Minister's Department just before he won the 1959 general election and had come to what Norman Brook called 'the (rather reluctant) conclusion that it would be unwise for him to establish anything of that nature'. Almost exactly a year later Beloff began his mini-debate with Attlee and Boothby in the correspondence columns of the *Daily Telegraph* by claiming of Home's appointment to the Foreign Office that: 'Taken together with the other Cabinet changes, and in the light of the development of the office of Prime Minister over recent decades, it may well be that it marks a further stage in the evolution of British government from a Cabinet system to what is virtually a Presidential system.' Boothby concurred with this analysis and suggested Parliament needed to develop a system of committees comparable to those enjoyed by the United States Congress 'if the legislature is to regain effective control of any kind over the executive'. Attlee disagreed with both Beloff and Boothby profoundly, discerning no 'continuous trend towards a Presidential system in recent years' and arguing that: 'The essential principle of our British system is that of collective

responsibility. Ministers are not mere creatures of the Prime Minister . . .'[15]

The 1960s produced a further rash of argument – a rather classic set of exchanges, in retrospect – which enticed Dick Crossman and George Jones on to the field mapped so brilliantly by Mackintosh.

Mackintosh claimed baldly in 1962 that:

> The country is governed by the Prime Minister who leads, co-ordinates and maintains a series of Ministers . . . Some decisions are taken by the Prime Minister alone, some in consultation between him and the Senior Ministers, while others are left to the heads of department, the Cabinet, Cabinet Committees, or the permanent officials . . . There is no single catch phrase that can describe this form of government, but it may be pictured as a cone. The Prime Minister stands at the apex, supported by and giving power to a widening series of rings of senior ministers, the Cabinet, its committees, non-Cabinet Ministers, and departments.

A year later, Crossman, never shy of coining a catch phrase, asserted that: 'The postwar epoch has seen the final transformation of Cabinet Government into Prime Ministerial Government'.

George Jones, writing in 1965, took on both Mackintosh and Crossman, stressing the ministerialism (as opposed to prime ministerialism) of British central government, emphasizing the degree to which laws and the spending that goes with the functions they allocate place real power in the hands of individual secretaries of state before concluding that: '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 recently claimed him to be . . . A prime minister who can carry his colleagues with him can be in a very powerful position, but his is only as strong as they let him be.'[16]

Echoes of the original 1960s debate have sounded down the decades ever since. The argument is driven and regularly revived whenever a Prime Minister pushes – or appears to push – his or her own policy in such a way that Cabinet colleagues seem cowed or overridden. The arrivals in Downing Street of Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair are now the best known but by no means the only examples. (There were outbreaks of the debate, too, during Harold Wilson's early years and for much of Ted Heath's tenure.)

The scholarly disputes, unlike the press treatments which erupt whenever political journalists sniff a whiff of overmightiness in No. 10, go beyond the personality factor, however. The Mackintosh–Crossman

school advance changes in the nature and scope of the state, as well as in the internal discipline of party and the extension of a leader's powers of patronage, as almost structural factors which work constantly in the direction of increasing prime ministerial power, largely irrespective of the personality element. Michael Foley has extended the debate into presidentialism using his concept of the 'leadership stretch'[17] (the gap between the premier and all others) that has come with the transformation of the media's reach and increasing personality obsession in the thirty-plus years since Crossman and Mackintosh were writing. Other observers, George Jones in particular, have maintained throughout that statutes assign functions and the public expenditure associated with them to named ministers, not the Prime Minister, and that the grain of central government lies against an overweening chief executive whatever the superficial appearance of overmightiness some premiers display.

I have long thought this classic debate to be lacking in one important respect as it has, to some extent, deteriorated, in Anthony King's apt phrase, to 'the level of a bar room brawl' with competitive anecdote and counter-example flying across the seminar rooms like so many chair legs or broken bottles.[18] A higher level of precision would be possible if we could be clearer about what the job involves – in short, what is a Prime Minister for? In this chapter, therefore, I want to cut a few slices across the accumulated practice of premiership since 1945 in a way that illustrates both the increasing reach of the job and the resultant stresses put upon it – an interesting commentary in itself on the concentration of powers on the Monarch's First Minister at a time when the Sovereign's dominion, precisely defined, has been drawn narrower still and narrower. In doing so I hope to add a little context as well as a dash of data to the great debate about the relative clout of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

There were two sources of immediate inspiration for my first attempt at such measurement. Shortly after the 1992 election, it came to my notice that Mr Major's Downing Street Policy Unit had suggested, in the spirit of the Citizen's Charter, that Cabinet ministers should be subject to a regime of performance-related pay. 'Oh, no,' the cry went up from the Cabinet Room, 'you can't measure what *we* do!'[19] So, an idea occurred to me: if I could construct a set of tasks for the Prime Minister as an exemplar it would be only a short step thereafter to devising a range of performance indicators for him.

And there was a model to hand. This was the Cabinet Office file, to which I have already referred, that was created between 1947 and 1949

to describe the functions of the Prime Minister and his staff.[20] As far as I can see from a close examination of the dossier, it was never shown to Mr Attlee or any of his successors. The original stimulus for its compilation was a cry for help from the Institute of Public Administration, which had to prepare a paper on the job of the UK's political chief executive for a comparative conference in Switzerland. The tidy-minded Cabinet Office took the result over for its own purposes, adding sensitive bits on the very special relationship between monarchs and premiers which they did not divulge to the public administrators.[21]

This late-1940s file reduced the job to about a dozen functions. Top of the list, as always, was managing the relationship between the Monarch and the government as a whole and – *the* great twentieth-century prime ministerial weapon – the power to hire and fire ministers. Chairing the Cabinet and its most important committees and the arrangement of other 'Cabinet business' (the chairmanship of committees over which he did not preside himself, their memberships and agendas) represented another central function and instrument of prime ministerial power. Overall control of the Civil Service lay in the Prime Minister's hands thanks to his status as First Lord of the Treasury, as did top Civil Service appointments. The allocation of functions between departments as well as their creation and abolition left the structures of Whitehall (save those parts which rested on statutes such as the Ministry of Defence Act, 1946) very much a Prime Minister's to change.

The external side to the premiership was recognized by the paper's stress on relationships with other heads of government and a Prime Minister's especially close involvement in foreign policy and defence matters. The external patronage functions were represented, too, with what were called top appointments to many institutions of 'a national character' (a charming phrase when compared with the more modern 'quango'). The Trollopian side of the job was not neglected; 'certain scholastical and ecclesiastical appointments' got their mention. Finally, the document reached the distinctive heart of the British way of government: the unwritten Constitution. For the handling of 'precedent and procedure', as the file puts it, represents largely, though not wholly, oversight of the practical workings of the Constitution itself. No trace of checks and balances or separation of powers here. The most powerful single individual in the land is also *the* effective quality controller and interpreter-in-chief of the rules of the game – a hugely important, though often overlooked, ingredient in the potentially overmighty power of the British premiership.

The late-1940s job description was surprisingly limited if one considers the accumulation of functions outlined in chapter 1. A fully historical awareness of the makings of the mid-twentieth-century premiership would have led to the addition of specific items such as overseeing the preparation of the 'War Book' (including the increasingly important nuclear aspect), the Prime Minister's close involvement with the Chancellor of the Exchequer in budget-making, the co-ordination of the intelligence and security services and oversight of the government's media and publicity arrangements. I would have added, too, private dealings and discussions with Opposition leaders on sensitive matters on the so-called 'Privy Counsellor basis', which, as we shall see, was a continuing feature of the postwar period.

A tabular summary of the late 1940s file would look like this:

1. Managing the relationship between the Monarch and the government as a whole.
2. Hiring and firing ministers.
3. Chairing the Cabinet and its most important committees.
4. Arranging other 'Cabinet business', i.e., the chairmanships of other committees, their memberships and agendas.
5. Overall control of the Civil Service as First Lord of the Treasury.
6. The allocation of functions between departments; their creation and abolition.
7. Relationships with other heads of government.
8. An especially close involvement in foreign policy and defence matters.
9. Top Civil Service appointments.
10. Top appointments to many institutions of 'a national character'.
11. 'Certain scholastical and ecclesiastical appointments.'
12. The handling of 'precedent and procedure'.

But the file, for all its gaps, is of continuing significance as it serves as a hanger over which to drape the fabric of the late-twentieth-century premiership. It led me to draw up my own mid-1990s equivalent, with a little help from my friends in the inner circles of late-twentieth-century government. The result demonstrates a considerable waxing of functions over a fifty-year period. Before examining the changes in detail, certain limitations to the exercise must be underlined.

First, the list embraces only those tasks or duties which fall to a Prime Minister as head of goverment. PMs are also, throughout the years since 1945, leaders of a party. And at times the difficulties which stem from the

job of party leader can appear to all but overwhelm the head-of-government aspect of the premiership (one thinks, for example, of Major at the height of the Conservatives' Euro-neurosis 1992–97).

Similarly, it is important to recognize that not all of a premier's functions as head of government are demanding simultaneously. An example of this is the 'War Book'/nuclear element – a necessary and terrible preoccupation in, say, Macmillan's time, but much less so for later premiers. Several of the functions, too, are self-evidently occasional (requesting a dissolution of Parliament) or latent (hiring and firing ministers). It is especially important to remember such variations upon the functional theme when examining specific incumbencies or the individual performances of Prime Ministers. What follows is not a set of management consultants' 'performance indicators' against which each premier must be awarded a mark on a scale of 1 to 10. Rather, it is a description of a growth in reach or, in some cases, expectation.

Yet so abundant are the premier's current functions (potential, latent or activated) that it is best to divide them into seven kinds: procedure and the constitution; appointments; the conduct of Cabinet and parliamentary business; organization and efficiency; budgets and market-sensitive economic decisions (though here the position changed radically in May 1997); and special foreign and defence functions.

CONSTITUTIONAL AND PROCEDURAL

Managing the relationship between government and the Monarch

The Home Office, by tradition, is the department for royal affairs (from royal births to the use of the royal prerogative for declaring war). But, in practical terms, any serious or sensitive matters involving the Monarch or the most immediate members of the royal family (such as the heir to the throne) are dealt with by the Prime Minister. His or her Principal Private Secretary is in regular touch with the Queen's Private Secretary on what is, perhaps, the most delicate of all governing membranes. Its special sensitivity is reflected in Buckingham Palace's unwillingness to release any material from the Royal Archives relating to the present Monarch's relationships with her premiers since 1952.[22] What primary material we

have is gleaned almost entirely from Whitehall files, those of 10 Downing Street in particular. The exchanges of advice and comment between the head of state and the head of government fall into a category so sacrosanct that only the rules protecting the operations of the secret services rival them. On exceptional occasions, such as the aftermath of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales in the summer of 1997, the toing and froing between the Palace and No. 10 becomes semi-public even if not wholly transparent.

Special it may be, but the No. 10–Palace relationship has its routines. There is the regular Tuesday evening meeting at the Palace to be prepared for,[23] an occasion taken immensely seriously by both sides. And some one-offs can be both protracted and time-consuming. During John Major's horrendous late summer and autumn of 1992, for example, he had to spend a great deal of time on the separation of the Prince and Princess of Wales and the Queen's decision to pay tax while wrestling with pit closures, the destruction of his currency policy on Black Wednesday and the rolling political and parliamentary woes stimulated by his need to pilot through the House of Commons the Maastricht Treaty provisions to which Britain had signed up.

Managing the relationship between government and Opposition on a Privy Counsellor basis

All new Privy Counsellors are required to swear the Privy Counsellors' Oath of Confidentiality (which requires them to keep all matters entrusted privately to them a secret). Whitehall operates as if it takes the oath seriously, but there is private scepticism ('for what any oath may be worth', as the somewhat sarcastic Parliamentary Counsel, Sir Noel Hutton, put it in 1963).[24] The Leader of the Opposition (who is always a Privy Counsellor) and any of his Opposition colleagues who are former Cabinet ministers can be briefed on Privy Counsellor terms by the PM and other ministers for the purpose of providing background on sensitive matters. Only when the files are declassified at the PRO does one begin to appreciate this hidden flow of information. It usually involves foreign policy or defence matters. In recent times Northern Ireland has been one of the most important questions dealt with on the PC net.[25]

Examples from the postwar years include the Middle East in the mid 1950s,[26] the Cuban missile crisis and Macmillan's conversations with President Kennedy during it,[27] Whitehall security against subversion by

the Soviet Union,[28] the reorganization of the Ministry of Defence,[29] the Profumo affair and the creation of the Security Commission in its wake,[30] the future of the nuclear deterrent[31] and the pound sterling (Douglas-Home saw Wilson about the gold and dollar reserves in February 1964, for example, and Callaghan, as Chancellor, briefed Heath on devaluation three hours ahead of the announcement in November 1967).[32] But the most extraordinary example, in procedural terms at least, is the handling of Churchill's six-page memo on British Defence in the light of the Soviet threat in May 1949.[33]

Not only did Attlee establish a special Cabinet committee to examine the concerns of his old World War II chief, he invited Churchill and no fewer than four of his Privy Counsellor colleagues on the Conservative benches to sit on that same Cabinet committee, GEN 293, to discuss defence matters over three meetings in the summer and autumn of 1949[34] – all this at a time of intense party strife over the nationalization of iron and steel and the power of the House of Lords. These talks represent an intriguing piece of evidence in the 'great debate' about the extent (even the existence) of a consensus in the early postwar years: rival sets of historians have stressed either the degree of policy harmony between the parties, nationalization excepted, or the distance and partisanship between them which an artificially created afterglow from the wartime coalition government and the creation of the welfare state has camouflaged.[35] The Liberal Democrat lawyer, Philip Goldenberg, cited these talks as the precedent his leader, Paddy Ashdown, might use in pressing for the joint Government/Liberal Democrat Consultative Cabinet Committee which was created and began meeting in the autumn of 1997.[36]

There were precedents, too, for the 1949 talks. The tradition started on foreign and defence matters in 1908, when A. J. Balfour was called to give evidence to his own creation, the Committee of Imperial Defence. In 1913 Asquith invited Balfour to sit on a CID sub-committee charged with examining the UK's vulnerability to attack from overseas.[37] As we have seen earlier, the basis for all such dealings throughout the twentieth century has been the fact that, as the former premier Lord Rosebery put it in his celebrated 1899 essay on Robert Peel: 'The Prime Minister . . . is technically and practically the chairman of an Executive Committee of the Privy Council, or rather perhaps of Privy Councillors.'[38] (Though we now know that since the 1930s Whitehall has treated it as the latter.) And it must always be remembered that, compared with the premiership, the Privy Council is a truly ancient and established instrument of governance.

(The Cabinet Office's 'Historical Table' traces the first mention of it to 1318, almost 500 years before Walpole assumed the First Lordship of the Treasury. Even then, according to the Cabinet Office's reading, 'probably a distinction between an inner and an outer circle was normal'[39] – traces of an 'inner cabinet' even in the thirteenth century!)

Establishing the order of precedence in Cabinet

This matters more than one thinks in terms of establishing the power of a Prime Minister in relation to his most senior colleagues. In recent years it has been updated at the beginning of each parliamentary session (or after a reshuffle) and released as part of the annual list of ministers. It is published almost invariably in full by the quality newspapers and in the *Civil Service Yearbook*. As the full and detailed files at the Public Record Office show, only a Prime Minister can determine the pecking order. As a briefing for the War Cabinet Secretary, Sir Edward Bridges, put it in December 1939, he 'has a completely free hand'.[40] And where a minister is placed by the premier really matters to him or her.

This is partly because the annual publication of the list can be used to indicate promotion or demotion (the new list released after a reshuffle is especially carefully scrutinized for this purpose) and partly because if Minister A needs to talk to Minister B and B is higher up the order, A has to call on B in what one might call the choreography of power. The files have some choice examples of status anxiety on the part of Cabinet ministers. After Ormsby-Gore complained to Baldwin in 1936 about 'the lowly position he occupies in the list of the Cabinet as Colonial Secretary',[41] as the No. 10 brief for the Prime Minister put it, Baldwin bumped him up a little.[42]

The most neurotic example in recently declassified files is that of Duncan Sandys, Macmillan's tough, demanding and seemingly self-confident Defence Minister. A new order of precedence is naturally published after a general election,[43] and the imminence of a new Parliament being summoned after the 1959 general election produced the following exchanges between Macmillan and Sandys, who was to be moved from Defence to the Ministry of Aviation:

13 October 1959

My dear Prime Minister,

Thank you very much for your nice letter of yesterday.

It goes without saying that I shall always be happy to serve in whatever capacity

you think I can be most useful. It is an honour to have the opportunity to continue as a member of your team.

You kindly said that you would see that the impression was not given that I was being 'demoted', which would weaken my influence in the new job.

I hope that, so as to make this clear, it will be possible for me to keep my present place in the order of Cabinet seniority, when the new list is published.

With every good wish for continued success in your second innings.

Yours ever
Duncan.[44]

14 October 1959

Dear Duncan

Thank you so much for your letter of October 13.

I will certainly make sure that you are not 'demoted' and you will certainly keep your present place in the order of Cabinet seniority. You will, in fact, be one up!

Once again let me say how grateful I am to you for taking on this new department. It is of the greatest importance to this country, and I know you will do all you can to make it a success.

Yours ever,
Harold Macmillan.[45]

As a senior Cabinet minister, Macmillan himself had not been free of the status neurosis. A protracted exchange of notes with Eden about his position relative to Butler accompanied his eventual agreement to be switched from the Foreign Office to the Treasury in December 1955. He was particularly keen that Butler should enjoy neither the title nor the status of 'Deputy Prime Minister' and Eden agreed to this. The initial letter was vintage Macmillan. In a handwritten note accompanying it, he told Eden: 'DO NOT be alarmed. Dorothy typed it for me.' Lady Dorothy tapped out her husband's reluctance to leave the Foreign Secretaryship which was 'the fulfilment of a long ambition'. There was no point in his quitting the FO 'to be an orthodox Chancellor of the Exchequer. I must be, if not a revolutionary, something of a reformer. However, to reform the Treasury is like trying to reform the Kremlin or the Vatican. These institutions are apt to have the last laugh . . . As Chancellor I must be undisputed head of the Home Front under you. If Rab becomes Leader of

the House and Lord Privy Seal that will be fine. But I could not agree that he should be Deputy Prime Minister.' If Butler were so appointed, Macmillan concluded, 'my task would be impossible'.[46]

The establishment and interpretation of procedural guidelines for both ministers and civil servants

This may sound flat, almost a routine area of prime ministerial activity, but of its nature it is profoundly revealing of the British Constitution. For, as the constitutional lawyer-turned-Conservative MP Sir Kenneth Pickthorn famously observed in 1960, living in a political nation without formal, written rules of the game means that 'procedure is all the Constitution the poor Briton has'.[47] And if the single most powerful executive figure is also the chief and often the final determinant of procedure, the true extent of the lack of checks and balances in Britain's system of central government becomes dazzlingly apparent. It represents the political equivalent of insider trading.

The important pair of procedural documents over which the Prime Minister has the final say are *Questions of Procedure for Ministers*, which we shall examine in a moment, and the *Civil Service Code*, which is intended to protect the public service from deceitful or politically partisan instructions.[48] There is no statute that governs civil servants or diplomats, though there are statutes for the crown (as distinct from civil) servants who people MI5 and MI6 (the secret servants of the state have never been made part of the civil or diplomatic services) and the 4,500 or so officials working at the Government Communications Headquarters who are civil servants. Though the *Civil Service Code* was framed in 1996, after consultation with the parliamentary select committees which the Major government deemed politic,[49] a Prime Minister could amend or even abolish the code if he or she so chose (and it would be as a courtesy only, rather than as a right that Parliament had a say in any changes). This position could change if the Blair administration finds the parliamentary time to enshrine the *Civil Service Code* in a statutory form.

But the most important set of procedural guidelines of which the Prime Minister is the ultimate quality controller are *Questions of Procedure for Ministers* (renamed *Ministerial Code: A Code of Conduct and Guidance on Procedures for Ministers*, when Blair published his version in July 1997).[50] Since John Major made them public in 1992, these have had an

increasing influence on a wide range of governing issues, not least ministerial resignations.[51] The document ranges from high constitutional matters, such as the conduct of Cabinet business and ministerial relationships with Parliament, to personal matters such as arrangements for personal shareholdings or membership of Lloyd's of London during the tenure of ministerial office. *QPM*, as the document is still known in Whitehall, has been essentially a prime ministerial instrument since the rules were drawn together in a newer, more coherent form for Attlee in 1945, enabling premiers to set behavioural expectations as well as to frame precise rules.[52] And, as Amy Baker has shown, they acquired a stronger, more permanent status inside the constellation of the constitution when they successfully made the transfer from a Conservative to a Labour administration in 1964.[53] At that time the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Burke Trend, described *QPM* to Wilson as 'an entirely non-Party document, which codifies the general principles of ministerial conduct as they have evolved over many years. It has the authority of a good many Prime Ministers, of different party complexions.'[54] Longevity gave *QPM* the kind of status it did not appear to have when power moved from Attlee to Churchill in 1951.

Even though a pair of select committees (the Treasury and Civil Service and the Public Services Committees of the Commons) and a duo of inquiries (Nolan on standards in public life and Scott on arms to Iraq) made some contribution to the 1990 revisions of *QPM* (the Blair *Ministerial Code* reflects them too), its application remains very much a prime ministerial matter. With the PM acting as both judge and jury the view from No. 10 is usually the determining factor in whether a minister in trouble goes or stays. As Peter Clarke puts it, 'Politics is the final arbiter under an unwritten constitution.'[55]

Oversight of changes to Civil Service recruitment practices

The bulk of the detailed work here is carried out by the Civil Service Commission, the body invented by Gladstone in the mid nineteenth century to depoliticize the Civil Service by placing responsibility for recruiting officials in the hands of commissioners who answered to the Monarch rather than to ministers. Nowadays the Commission sets the standards required of the Recruitment Services Agency which was privatized in 1996 to widespread condemnation from former permanent secretaries.[56] The

Commission is attached to the office or department which currently houses the minister with day-to-day responsibility for the Civil Service. But, once more, the Prime Minister is the ultimate overseer of the process whereby, as the Civil Service White Paper *Continuity and Change* stated in 1994, 'the key principles on which the British Civil Service is based: integrity, political impartiality, objectivity, *selection and promotion on merit* [emphasis added] and accountability through Ministers to Parliament' are 'sustained'.[57] If the Civil Service orders in council were altered in such a way that the political neutrality of the career Civil and Diplomatic Services was removed,[58] it would, as a matter of the royal prerogative, be a prime ministerial responsibility.

Classification levels and secrecy procedures for official information

Considerable strides have been made away from the closed system of government which had long kept Whitehall the world leader in the degree of administrative secrecy which could be maintained while remaining within a democratic society.[59] The scope of secrecy legislation was narrowed under Mrs Thatcher (criminal sanctions being removed from unauthorized disclosures involving all but an inner ring of activities such as defence, security and intelligence, Cabinet matters and relationships with other nations),[60] but John Major was the first premier in history to seriously try to institute a positive regime of greater openness. His 1993 Code of Practice on Open Government, while falling short of a statutory right-to-know, none the less provided a figure outside the governing circle, in the shape of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration (the 'Ombudsman'), to report on disputed cases.[61]

Unless and until a piece of primary legislation establishes freedom of information by statute (which the Blair administration began to do during the 1999–2000 session of Parliament), it will be perfectly possible for future premiers to steer Whitehall back into its covens of confidentiality without troubling the parliamentary draftsmen (though there would be a row in Parliament as various codes and guidelines, including *Questions of Procedure for Ministers*, the *Civil Service Code*, and the 'Osmotherly Rules' governing what civil servants can and cannot say before select committees[62] would need to be rewritten). But without a Freedom of Information Act, the tones of openness and confidentiality are very much

set by No. 10. Significantly, Tony Blair reiterated the government's manifesto pledge to introduce a Freedom of Information Act almost at the outset of his administration in the Foreword to his *Ministerial Code*.[63]

But, as we shall see, the FOI Bill, when it was finally published in December 1999, fell short of the full-blooded measure expected in the early days of the New Labour Government.

Requesting the Sovereign to grant a dissolution of Parliament

Until 1918 this was a matter for the full Cabinet when, as we have seen, Lloyd George changed it to a prime ministerial function. Since then thus it has remained, though most premiers usually consult their senior colleagues, if not the whole Cabinet, before asking the Monarch to fire the starting-gun for an election.[64]

APPOINTMENTS

Downing Street distinguishes between crown appointments and public appointments. The distinction is historical if arcane. It rests on those posts which serve the Crown and act directly in its name (such as 'ministers of the crown') or those that are filled by royal patronage (Regius professors are an example). Public appointments cover the remaining areas of Downing Street patronage. The distinction means that the armed forces and the secret services are crown appointees, whereas members of the Civil Service and the Diplomatic Service are not.

CROWN APPOINTMENTS

Appointment and dismissal of ministers

Here lies the true locus of prime ministerial primacy in terms of the relative power of the *primus* over the *pares*. And the instrument of that power is, in Enoch Powell's vivid phrase, the equivalent of Henry VIII's axe, which

a Prime Minister always has beside his chair in the Cabinet Room.[65] In terms of firing ministers, it really can be a matter of off-with-their-heads, though political reality does limit the scope of wholesale butchery, at least. Conventional wisdom is right to see Macmillan's 'Night of the Long Knives', when he sacked a third of his Cabinet in a terrible rush (fearful of a leak), as to some extent a self-inflicted wound. As Alec Home told me, Macmillan was never the same premier again.[66] Macmillan himself had a sense of overkill the moment he had swung the axe. As he put it in a personal note to one of the victims, Charles Hill, who had until then handled the government's press relations with considerable aplomb:

> Of course, you will realise that I had to do *prematurely* what I knew had to be done some time this or early next year. Even so – although I felt a change at the Treasury vital (not so much in present policy but in approach to the next set of problems) I had hoped to go a little more quietly. But when the situation (and the Press speculation) began to develop, the only way to avoid disaster was to act swiftly. I deeply regret the apparent discourtesy involved, especially to old friends like you and David Kilmuir and Harold Watkinson.[67]

The No. 10 file dealing with the events of 13 July 1962 is wonderfully revealing of the elaborate care with which most Prime Ministers consider their moves on the ministerial chessboard. It is worth lingering over, not merely because of the intrinsic importance of the event to postwar British political history, but also because it offers a very rare insight into the brutal realities of ministerial departure. I have found no other file in the archives which comes as near to recording or capturing the human or the manipulative aspects of such moments.

What is different, however, about the 1962 exercise – compared with, say, Attlee's personally typed permutations before the September 1947 reshuffle (his careful concern for age, trades-union background and regional balance),[68] or Wilson's plans for the autumn reshuffle of 1965 (how intriguing that his first thought for a new Home Secretary to replace Sir Frank Soskice was not Roy Jenkins but Arthur Bottomley)[69] – is the intensely political role played by Macmillan's Principal Private Secretary, Tim Bligh. Though a civil servant, Bligh briefed Macmillan on a 'possible reconstruction' of the government as early as 19 April 1962. 'It is possible', he says in his personal and confidential memo to his boss, 'that you may have been giving some thought to a major Cabinet reconstruction some time in the future. I apologise for these few random thoughts.'[70]

There was nothing 'random' about them. They were a pre-med before a messy piece of surgery. A list of over-55s was drawn up, with Bligh saying, 'of these you would want to keep Mr Butler, Lord Home and Mr Brooke in any new Cabinet'. (What, I wonder, would, for example, Selwyn Lloyd at the Treasury have made of his omission from Bligh's list of the seriously mature to be saved from the abattoir?) The Chancellorship of the Exchequer, Bligh continues, now needs 'the right sort of man, young, tough, imaginative, politically strong and publicly articulate'.[71] There is more in this vein, the whole memo making a mockery of the notion that the Prime Minister's Private Office is free of party political considerations, not least because of the coincidence of Bligh's early thoughts and the reality of the July purge when it took place.

The same Bligh choreographed the executions when the time came, suggesting the wording of the resignation letters[72] and providing the speaking notes for Macmillan's chats with those affected. Ted Heath, for example, was to stay where he was as number 2 to Home at the Foreign Office. 'You wish to tell him', Bligh informed Macmillan, 'about the main reconstruction changes. He must not be worried. One day he will be Foreign Secretary.'[73] He never was, of course. Though they did not reach the PRO in Kew until 1996, the smell of blood still clung to those 'Night of the Long Knives' papers, as did the sense of prime ministerial power in the raw.

Headships of the intelligence and security services

This is an especially important area of prime ministerial patronage. Even in the era of statutory frameworks for the agencies concerned (since 1989 for MI5 and 1994 for MI6 and GCHQ) and with a measure of parliamentary oversight (since 1994) for the whole secret world, prime ministerial choices at the top remain crucial to the restraint as well as the effectiveness with which the state applies its instruments of intelligence and security. Prime Ministers rely here to a considerable extent on the advice of the Cabinet Secretary, who usually chairs the small group of permanent secretaries which interviews the candidates for the top jobs in the secret agencies. The first requirement is to avoid those who will dress up the products of their secret activities to suit ministerial wishes or cherished mind-sets.

Sir Percy Cradock, former Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee (the 'high table' of British Intelligence, as he liked to call it,[74] where each week the intelligence yield from all sources, covert and overt, is appraised in the round and an agreed overall assessment is prepared for the Prime Minister and a small group of ministers), made the seriousness of this criterion plain when discussing the need to separate intelligence analysis from policy-making. 'If there is no partition,' Sir Percy declared, 'there is a risk of intelligence being slanted to provide the answers the policy-maker wants. This is a grave sin: the analyst must convey his message, usually unpalatable, without fear or favour.'[75]

The performance indicator here was articulated by Sir Maurice Oldfield as chief of the Secret Intelligence Service, MI6. Asked by his new Foreign Secretary, Jim Callaghan, in March 1974: 'Sir Maurice, what is MI6 for?' Oldfield replied, 'Our job, Secretary of State, is to bring you unwelcome news.'[76] Even the new openness, however, has left us (not surprisingly) largely without the archival means to assess the degree to which the Oldfield test has been met by his fellow intelligence chiefs in the postwar period, though the progressive release since 1995 of the papers and minutes of the postwar Joint Intelligence Committee is helping.

Senior appointments to the armed forces

The degree to which Prime Ministers are *au fait* with senior military officers varies enormously. Some premiers rely heavily on the advice of their Ministers of Defence when making their dispositions. Churchill, of course, had a deep and sustained knowledge of the personalities: he even persuaded two of them to join his last government at full Cabinet level – Field Marshal Lord Alexander going to Defence and General Lord Ismay to the Commonwealth Relations Office. Attlee, a great believer in civilian control of the military, once remarked tartly of Field Marshal Lord Montgomery, who had not been a success as Chief of the Imperial General Staff after the war, that 'the self-confidence that inspired the 8th Army [during World War II] is not always useful in complicated affairs in which many of the factors are outside his ken'.[77] Mrs Thatcher acquired a high level of knowledge about the senior soldiers, sailors and airmen of the 1980s owing to their enforced intimacy during the Falklands campaign, during which high levels of mutual regard were engendered.[78] But whatever their insights into the characters and the prowess of the men concerned, Prime

Ministers have to take a careful interest when the Secretary of State for Defence enters with a list of candidates for top posts, both because of the service chiefs' importance to the size and shape of the Defence budget and also in case military emergencies occur that are likely to project them to the centre of decision-taking.

Senior appointments to the judiciary

This, I suspect, is not an area of patronage in which most premiers feel at ease, so they tend to rely very much on Lord Chancellors for advice. This was apparent, interestingly, when John Major was seeking senior judges to chair both the inquiry into standards of conduct in public life in 1994 and the inquiry into the arms to Iraq affair after the collapse of the Matrix Churchill trial in 1993. He simply did not know anybody suitable. James Mackay, his Lord Chancellor, found in Lord Nolan and Sir Richard Scott two very independent-minded lawyers, both, for different reasons, imbued with a high moral charge.[79]

Unless a premier has been Home Secretary en route to the top (only Churchill and Callaghan have among the postwar eleven, though Tony Blair was Shadow Home Secretary), or is himself a lawyer by professional training (only Attlee and Blair fit the bill), they are unlikely to pick up any real knowledge of the senior judicial figures of their day.

Top ecclesiastical and Regius academic appointments

Not for nothing is the No. 10 Appointments Secretary known as 'Heaven's talent scout' (though his scouting has been powerfully assisted by the Anglican Church's own Crown Appointments Commission since its formation in 1977)[80] and his is the only Civil Service job that has to be filled by a practising Anglican.[81] The Appointments Secretary advises the Prime Minister on a wide range of jobs – potentially everything, in fact, which is not directly political, such as the choice of ministers, or is not covered by the heads of the home and diplomatic services. There is invariably more than one name submitted to the Prime Minister after his 'talent scout' has completed a range of discreet inquiries with the people and the institutions concerned. The Anglican element is a big component of his job.

It is this aspect of No. 10 life that can most amaze foreign visitors. For example, at the London G7 summit in 1977, President Carter's National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, was allocated the Appointments Secretary's room. During one of the early breaks he accosted the Cabinet Secretary, Sir John Hunt, to ask about the map on the wall. 'What is it?' he inquired. 'All those little pins over the country – are they missile sites or oil refineries?' 'They're bishoprics', Hunt replied to the utterly incredulous American.[82]

On more than one occasion Tony Benn has been heard to declare that the only privatization he is in favour of is the established church. On one level, he has a point. Until Tony Blair's arrival, the last practising Anglican in No. 10 had been Ted Heath. It has always struck me as odd that premiers with no personal, let alone spiritual, connection with the Church of England should have the final say in recommending candidates for preferment to the Monarch (who in the case of the Queen is not only the non-spiritual head of the Church, but a believer too).

The same applies to the Regius professorships. Mr Major had many virtues, but a deep scholarly background, to his regret, was not among them. Someone claiming to be his friend remarked unkindly and unfairly in the mid 1990s that: 'The Prime Minister has both Jeffrey Archer and Anthony Trollope by his bedside. The trouble is he can't distinguish between the two!'[83] Heaven's talent scout, however, is also scholarship's.

There are twelve Regius chairs. They embrace two ancient universities (Oxford which has eight; and Cambridge which has four) and nine subjects. The chairs at Oxford are: Civil Law, Divinity, Greek, Hebrew, Medicine, Modern History, Ecclesiastical History and Moral and Pastoral Theology; those at Cambridge: Civil Law, Physic, Modern History and English Literature.[84]

Under John Major there was an important break with tradition. The appointments were still prime ministerial, but the Regius chairs of Ecclesiastical History and Modern History at Oxford in 1997 went to Dr Henry Mayr-Harting and Professor Robert Evans, respectively, after the vacancies had been advertised and the Department of History at Oxford had made its preferences known to Mr Major via his Appointments Secretary, John Holroyd.[85]

Top public sector appointments and appointments to royal commissions and top committees of inquiry

Here a special problem arises for prime ministers: do you treat such preferment as an extension of political patronage (the chairmanship of the BBC is an especially sensitive example) or do you try to rise above the mire of partisanship and strive for balance and merit? Here, I think, was the terrain Mrs Thatcher did politicize (by contrast with the senior Civil Service), and, I believe, she did the same in appointing chairs of committees of inquiry (she eschewed the ponderous magnificence of the traditional royal commission). Since the Nolan Committee began to report, appointments to the 'quangocracy' have come under the scrutiny of an independent commissioner (first Sir Len Peach and, later, Dame Rennie Fritchie), who publishes an annual report on the health of the system as well as enjoying access to the Prime Minister, ministers and Cabinet Secretary and the Head of the home Civil Service about cases that cause concern.

In practice there are variations from premier to premier and era to era. All senior appointments of this kind flow through No. 10 to some degree. Ministers are required to submit their preferred candidates. In an era of incomes policy, for example, a Prime Minister would take great care over the head of a pay or relativities board or an old-style inquiry into a particular industrial dispute, such as Lord Wilberforce's into miners' pay in 1972.[86]

In Tony Blair's first eighteen months in No. 10, considerable and increasing prime ministerial attention was paid to arts appointments in a manner which often appeared to override the Culture Secretary, Chris Smith. Appointments such as Gerry Robinson to the Arts Council were Smith's, but the Prime Minister's direct interest in both arts policy and personnel was vividly demonstrated by the supposedly secret Downing Street 'summit'[87] on 29 June 1998.[88]

Award of peerages and honours

This is the area of greatest magic and mystery. The working of the honours system has never been opened fully to public scrutiny. The Main Honours Committee, which consists largely of Whitehall permanent secretaries and which the Cabinet Secretary chairs, has never had its terms of reference

or its membership avowed any more than have its satellite committees which embrace various walks of life. The files of the PRO remain almost barren on honours, partly because of the personal delicacies involved and partly because it impinges on the inner core of royal activity and sensitivity as the Monarch, in name at least, is the fount of all honours. (This, it was explained to me in the early 1990s by a real honours insider, is why the House of Commons Table Office will not accept any parliamentary questions on honours. 'It's the Palace,' he explained confidentially.)[89]

Yet these are, after ministerial appointments, the most potent pieces of patronage in a premier's hands. Apart from honours such as the Order of Merit or the Royal Victorian Order, which remain wholly in the personal gift of the Monarch (and, apart from the close involvement of her Private Secretary, we know very little about how the Queen takes advice on the bestowal of OMs), the Prime Minister can intervene – to add or to strike-out names at all other levels. The hope of an honour and the sense of obligation once one has been conferred soften the edges of dissent or rivalry.

Those blood-soaked files from the 'Night of the Long Knives' are of special and historical value here, too, as they contain some choice examples of this. Bligh's early trip around the field earmarking ministers for the slaughterhouse considered the possibility of the House of Lords as a form of 'life after death' (as that fine Methodist, Lord Soper, once said of the quality of debate in the Upper House).[90] 'How many', Bligh inquired of Macmillan, 'would be prepared to go into the House of Lords? Messrs Watkinson [Defence Secretary] and Marples [Minister of Transport] probably feel that they have got as far as they are likely to get politically, and might be ready for the Lords . . . Mr Lloyd [Chancellor of the Exchequer] at present feels on top of the job, but might be persuaded to become Lord Chancellor.'[91]

When the moment came for plunging the blade on 13 July 1962, Bligh's speaking notes for Macmillan's interviews with the victims contained several 'life after death' clauses:

Lord Mills – 10.15 a.m.
You are reconstructing your Cabinet and have to make a number of changes. You hope that after his many years of outstanding service to the country he will accept a *Viscountcy*. [Macmillan underlined this].[92]

Mr Maclay – 10.30 a.m.
You are reconstructing your Cabinet and feel sure he will agree that it would be

right for you to appoint a new Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Michael Noble). You would like to recommend him for a *CH* [Companion of Honour] *Now* and a *Viscountcy* later at a suitable time.

['Yes he agrees', Macmillan wrote by the CH. 'It's yours at any time', he scribbled next to the proposed Maclay Viscountcy.][93]

Bligh's briefing note for Harold Watkinson contains the following paragraph:

Would Mr Watkinson like an honour? You would be pleased to recommend him to the Queen for a Baronetcy and he could go to the House of Lords in due course if he so wished.

[Beneath this Macmillan wrote 'For next CH vacancy'.][94]

I am sure Bligh's briefing notes reflected the wishes Macmillan had conveyed to him, but the utility of the honours system and the cynicism with which the preferment weapon was fired are wonderfully apparent in these rare files, which I suspect neither Bligh nor Macmillan thought would ever see the light of day.

Nearly all Prime Ministers spend a great deal of time on shaping the honours lists they submit to the Monarch. Ted Heath was an exception and I have heard it argued that those on his backbenches who had been disappointed were not quite as ready to rally to him as they might have been when Mrs Thatcher challenged him for the Conservative Party leadership in 1975. Harold Wilson, though suspending the award of honours for political services, liked to sprinkle 'stardust'[95] on his lists with a generous (and generally politically astute) eye for a showbiz celebrity or two. His notorious Resignation List in 1976 led to a refreshed membership of the Political Honours Scrutiny Committee (great faith was placed in the appointment to it of the austere and honourable philosopher and public servant, Lord Franks), which was encouraged by Whitehall to watch especially carefully for cases where merit gave place to personal acquaintance with senior politicians.[96] Above all else, the Scrutiny Committee requires the government to show that honours are not being used to reward party funders, and Chief Whips have to certify this. Much greater transparency is required here, which may come when the *modus operandi* of the proposed Appointments Commission for life peerages becomes clearer.

Peerages always have been a special category because, as the political

philosopher Michael Oakeshott pointed out, they have an instrumentality about them: they convert the recipient into a legislator.[97] Here again obligations are often involved, particularly if the Whip of the Prime Minister's party is taken by the new peer in preference to the institutionalized independence of the cross-benches. It may be apocryphal, but there is reason to believe that the following exchange took place between Mrs Thatcher and her gloriously funny and outspoken Chief Whip in the Lords, Lord Denham, during her last summer as Prime Minister, when their lordships continued their occasional practice of voting down government measures:

MRS THATCHER: Bertie! I do not create peers to have them vote against me in the House of Lords.

LORD DENHAM: Prime Minister, even you should know better than to expect me to find you a majority during Gold Cup week.[98]

Quite apart from the Wodehousian shades of Bertie Wooster confronted by his Aunt Agatha, this exchange, if true, is a perfect example of the old and the new Tory parties talking right past each other. What *is* certainly true is that Mrs Thatcher was heard to rage during her last year as Prime Minister against the 'landed and the unelected' in the House of Lords who would not do her bidding[99] in an unconscious echo of Lloyd George's legendary Limehouse speech of 1909, when he referred to the peers as 'five hundred men, ordinary men chosen accidentally from among the unemployed'.[100]

PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS

Trustees of national museums and galleries

These have emerged in recent years from the quietly decorous pastures of the Great and the Good. The adoption of charging for entrance, and modern marketing methods, as well as the financial travails of the British Library, have raised the level of media attention and with it, significantly and inevitably, the degree of political sensitivity. This, for example, was another swathe of activity discussed by Tony Blair's arts 'summit' in 1998.[101]

Members of pay review bodies

There has always been intense political delicacy here. Even governments like Mrs Thatcher's or Mr Major's that have eschewed a formal incomes policy as an instrument of counter-inflation, always have one for public sector workers. And when those 'workers' embrace generals, permanent secretaries and judges, not to mention MPs and ministers, the tabloid press (those monuments to perpetual class war) are poised to beat their drums against the financial wellbeing and proper rewarding of those allegedly in a position to enhance and featherbed their own economic interests. As a result, recent premiers have taken great care about top pay awards and the phasing-in of increases.

Top appointments to the Home Civil Service and the Diplomatic Service

Here, in contrast to the judiciary and the military, Prime Ministers do tend to know many of the civil servants and diplomats who aspire to the most glittering prizes the bureaucracy has to offer, unless, of course, they are Tony Blair entering No. 10 with no previous ministerial experience and a slate of top public service appointments awaiting his attention. The other premiers in the postwar first eleven had quite a width of departmental experience before reaching Downing Street, Mrs Thatcher being an exception with only her time at the Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance and the Department of Education and Science as her formative experiences. Churchill, the most experienced of them all, unfortunately by 1951 found it hard to remember the names of those officials who served him unless they had been part of his wartime circle, so the seasoning of decades was of little advantage to him.

Since William Armstrong's headship of the Home Civil Service (which spanned the years 1968–74), there has been a Senior Appointments Selection Committee which, unless a competition involving outsiders is mounted (in which case the First Civil Service Commissioner will preside over a board), provides the PM (and the Secretary of State concerned) with a list of possibles (usually three, one of whom carries a preferred recommendation).[102] We will assess the allegations of politicization during the Thatcher years when we examine her premiership in chapter 16. What

was undeniably true was the close attention she paid to such appointments compared to most of her predecessors.

CONDUCT OF CABINET AND PARLIAMENTARY BUSINESS

Calling meetings of Cabinet and its committees

The Prime Minister dominates the processes of Cabinet government. Only he or she can create a Cabinet committee and appoint its personnel. A premier not keen on a genuinely collective approach, such as Mrs Thatcher, can easily be tempted to steer in advance the result of a meeting, keeping particular ministers off a committee and certain issues off its agenda. Some premiers prefer to confine much of their effective decision-taking to groups which do not qualify as Cabinet committees (Tony Blair joins Margaret Thatcher in this category, especially on economic matters).

The calling of 'Political Cabinets'

There have, by tradition, been certain regular occasions where the Cabinet goes purely political and officials are not present. The discussion of the Budget a few hours before its delivery is one such – a strange tradition as Budgets are thoroughly governmental matters as well as political occasions. John Major made 'Political Cabinets' a regular feature of his premiership and used them chiefly to plot Conservative strategy and tactics to counter Labour's advances in the opinion polls after September 1992 and the events associated with the UK's withdrawal from the European exchange rate mechanism on 'Black Wednesday'. Tony Blair revived the practice of 'Political Cabinets' in the autumn of 1999.[103]

Cabinet Secretaries have been very sensitive to such metamorphoses when full Cabinets have changed into 'political' ones. Burke Trend was especially good at this. If he thought the Cabinet had crossed the line he would put down his pen rather noisily as a signal to his fellow minute-takers to leave the Cabinet Room as unobtrusively as possible.[104]

Deciding issues where Cabinet or Cabinet committees are unable to agree

Naturally, this has been an element of prime ministerial leadership since Pitt. But it was one of Major's ministers, Lord Wakeham, who talked about it in a lecture designed to show that proper collective Cabinet government had been restored once Mrs Thatcher had departed.[105] What was unusual about this was the public candour involved. Most Prime Ministers have preferred to maintain the public fiction of collective responsibility – that all decisions emerge from shared discussions which bind them all. The implication of Wakeham's admission was that Major's colleagues did not resent the occasions when he made an individual decision because genuine collective discussion was his normal and preferred practice.

Granting ministers permission to miss Cabinet meetings or to leave the country

Only a summons from the Queen takes precedence over a meeting of the Cabinet if a Cabinet Minister is in the country.[106] To be absent from the country requires the Prime Minister's permission, which can be rescinded at any time.[107] The Callaghan government and the last months of the Major administration saw a familiar procession of ministers arriving jet-lagged at Heathrow before being driven off to Westminster for an important vote in the House of Commons.

Ultimate responsibility with the Leaders of the House for the government's legislative programme and the use of government time in Parliament

Commanding a reasonable majority in the House of Commons automatically gives a government both the lion's share of parliamentary time and a powerful chance of deploying that time in a way that will deliver the outcomes its leader desires. Awarding a Bill a place on the legislative timetable is an important piece of political rationing as well as policy-making. (The failure rate of Bills brought forward to the Cabinet's legislation committees is high; even in relatively light legislative years, only about one in four finds a place.)[108]

Answering questions twice and (later) once a week in the House of Commons

This piece of political theatre, as we have seen, gained its regular place as a parliamentary fixture in 1961. Only since the late 1970s, however, has it acquired its all-embracing character. Until then, premiers would not take questions on subjects where there was a clear lead department; the questioner would be referred to a particular Secretary of State. Since then, however, the portmanteau question ('Would the Prime Minister list his engagements . . .') has enabled almost anything to be asked unannounced. The inquiring MP is able to say, 'If the Prime Minister *had* found time to visit my constituency he would . . .', thereby introducing any issue which takes his fancy.

This added greatly to the stress and intensity of the preparation required in No. 10 on PMQ days. Yet the process came to be fashioned into an instrument of prime ministerial power. For it gave a Prime Minister a valid (and unanswerable) reason for asking about any aspect of a department's activity in case a question was put on it.[109] It was an irony that an increase in prime ministerial accountability to Parliament after 1961 strengthened the possibility of an overmighty premiership.

One of Tony Blair's first acts, without consulting Parliament, which had still to meet,[110] was to announce that henceforth he would take questions only once a week on Wednesdays for half an hour.

ORGANIZATIONAL AND EFFICIENCY QUESTIONS

Organization and senior staffing of No. 10 and the Cabinet Office

This is the locus of prime ministerial power, the core of the core executive and what a former head of the Central Policy Review Staff, Sir Kenneth Berrill, has called the 'horseshoe of power' that embraces No. 10 and the

Cabinet Office.[111] All debates about what the former Cabinet Secretary, Lord Hunt, called the 'hole in the centre'[112] and the desirability or otherwise of a Prime Minister's Department, have to do with this patch, its configuration and the relationships within it.

The way the horseshoe is fashioned strongly reflects a premier's wishes. There are, however, some fixed points:

(a) The job of Cabinet Secretary has seemed safe from abolition since Sir Warren Fisher of the Treasury (who wanted his department to absorb the Cabinet Office) was seen off by the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Maurice Hankey, after Lloyd George had been replaced by Bonar Law in 1922.[113]
(b) Until May 1997, it similarly seemed unlikely that the job of Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister would be prised out of the hands of the career Civil Service after Vansittart had replaced Waterhouse, as we have seen, in 1928.
(c) Though Mrs Thatcher initially thought she could dispense with them,[114] no Prime Minister could operate without a Cabinet committee structure of some kind, unless all pretence at collective responsibility were abandoned.
(d) The No. 10 Policy Unit, created by Harold Wilson in 1974, had by the mid to late 1990s acquired the air of a permanent fixture.

That quartet apart, the 'horseshoe' is to a large extent the plaything of the Prime Minister of the day, who can reshape it quite substantially to meet his or her particular interests and style of working.

Size of the Cabinet; workload on ministers and the Civil Service; the overall efficiency of government

This is a huge area. 'Overload' is a theme deserving a book on its own.[115] And many of the constituent problems which together make a peculiarly malign compound have a perpetual and a repetitive air about them. The size of the Cabinet is a classic example. The files of the postwar Prime Ministers are replete with briefs on how to trim the size of the Cabinet, starting with Churchill's construction of his 'Caretaker Cabinet' in May 1945 (he had the idea of keeping the Lord Chancellor out to get the number down to 16),[116] through to Wilson's wrestling in October 1964 with ministerial numbers. (These burst the limits prescribed by the Ministerial Salaries Act 1957 with eight secretaries of state, seventy ministers in

all, and no fewer than twenty other statutes ranging from the Succession to the Crown Act 1707 to the Defence (Transfer of Functions) Act 1964.)[117] Several postwar premiers had a similar stab at the problem of numbers, usually with limited temporary success.[118]

The difficulty with the stress/overload factor is that even if others suggest an attack upon it (as Norman Brook did to Macmillan a few weeks after he became Prime Minister),[119] only a premier can initiate the thinking required and take action on the basis of such inquiries. All too often since 1945 such efforts have run into the Whitehall sand because, ironically, the pressure of events has shoved them off immediate or priority agendas.[120] This is one of those problems of government that only the PM can reach; if he or she is not minded so to do, paralysis results and the status quo creaks on.

The overall efficiency of the secret services; their operations and their oversight

The Prime Minister is the only minister who can lead the entire UK intelligence and security effort. Only he or she is in a position to take a complete overview and, therefore, to provide the oversight since the Joint Intelligence Committee was removed from the Chiefs of Staff in 1957 and brought under the purview of the Cabinet Office, partly to enhance the flow of intelligence to ministers.[121] A small group of ministers have received what became the famous 'Red Book', the 'Weekly Intelligence Summary' provided by the Joint Intelligence Committee. Copy No. 1 goes to the Queen, who is its longest continuous reader, having received her first edition in February 1952 – she is, and always has been, interested in it and asks her intelligence chiefs very astute questions on the basis of what she has read in it.[122]

The full summary, like all intelligence and security material, is kept to the smallest number of readers who 'need to know' in Whitehall parlance, for fear of leaks. But the Prime Minister has, in addition to the 'Red Book', his or her individual feed in the special box known as 'Old Stripey' from the red band in its blue leather carapace.[123] And each intelligence chief has the right of personal access to the premier.[124] Here, too, Prime Ministers have acquired an indispensability; the most delicate special operations have to be cleared with the Prime Minister.[125] Most premiers love this side of their work – so much more exciting than dealing with local government finance.

The creation, abolition and merger of government departments

Some premiers relish this. Harold Wilson in his 1960s premierships was particularly keen on tinkering with departmental boundaries as an accompaniment to his reshuffles. They are mainly achieved by statutory instruments through dissolution orders or transfer of functions orders. But a surprising number of departments enjoy (or have enjoyed) a statutory existence, the most notable of today's crop being the Ministry of Defence (which acquired this status partly because it was given certain executive powers).[126]

Preparation of the 'War Book'

Supervisory though this function may be, it is important both traditionally (Balfour made it part of the Prime Minister's portfolio) and currently. Since the early days of the Committee of Imperial Defence plans have been in existence for the transition to serious and large-scale wars that would require not just a widespread mobilization of the armed forces but also the transformation of the Whitehall machine. They are updated routinely and, very occasionally, they require sudden and substantial rethinking. For example, the sudden demise of the Soviet Union and the military apparatus organized under the old Warsaw Pact left Whitehall's contingency planners at a loss. Far from a 'new world order' materializing, as President Bush had predicted in 1991,[127] a high level of fluidity ensued which meant there would be no return to any kind of steady state for the foreseeable future. So from the fall of the Berlin Wall until the mid 1990s, there was a hiatus in War Book work which began to be put right only in the later Major years.[128] The Central War Plans Secretariat, a joint Ministry of Defence/Cabinet Office enterprise (housed in the Cabinet Office from its creation in 1954), had long since gone as a separate entity with important prime ministerial input.[129] In the 1990s the responsibility belonged to the Overseas and Defence Secretariat in the Cabinet Office.[130] The work has always been immensely sensitive; even with the ending of the Cold War and a new climate of openness for public records, the Ministry of Defence was not able to meet my request in the mid 1990s for the complete declassification of a post 1945 War Book.[131]

Contingency planning of other kinds

Much of this is delegated to the Home Secretary. Important permanent machinery exists in the Cabinet Office to cope with the emergencies that arise from strikes which hit the essentials of life (such as water, heat and light) and intense, individual terrorist incidents (such as the Iranian Embassy siege of 1980). Again, it is a sub-activity of the Cabinet Office's Overseas and Defence Secretariat, the most important body for the sustenance of essential services (whatever the cause of their disruption) being the Civil Contingencies Unit. As the occasion demands, this unit can transform itself instantly into a mixed committee of ministers, officials, the military, the police and the security services with the Home Secretary in the chair[132] (though there were worrying signs of a downgrading of this work in the Cabinet Office following the death of its Secretary, Brigadier Tony Budd, in 1997).[133]

Overall efficiency of the government's media strategy

Usually this is delegated to another minister on a day-to-day basis. Willie Whitelaw took on the task for Mrs Thatcher in the 1980s and Michael Heseltine for John Major after assuming the job of Deputy Prime Minister in 1995. Peter Mandelson's role as Minister without Portfolio in 1997 probably aroused more media attention than any of the new government's jobs during its first 'hundred days' apart from Mr Blair's, and Blair's Press Secretary, Alistair Campbell, achieved the status of a bespoke biography in the autumn 1999.[134] The Prime Minister's Press Secretary, however, is always an influential figure, and in Bernard Ingham's time with Mrs Thatcher the job of Press Secretary was combined with that of Head of the Government Information Service.

It is, of course, utterly misleading to conceive of this as a mechanical or a straightforward function. The 1990s saw a burgeoning of what William Waldegrave rightly called 'the media-political complex . . . by which we are ruled',[135] to a degree that seemed unimaginable – not just in the Attlee–Churchill era but even in the Macmillan–Wilson days (and these two were on their day no mean manipulators of the media).

Richard Eyre, then director of the Royal National Theatre, invited by the *Financial Times* to 'review the acts of the players' during the 1997

general election campaign, concluded that since the days of Churchill and Attlee

all politics has declined to the condition of show business, and all politicians have been obliged to become performers. They choose their costumes carefully, their decor fastidiously; their fellow actors and their agents; they study their scripts, they rehearse, they put on make-up and they give performances; they adapt their acting styles from the would-be intimacy of the small screen to the not-to-be-avoided histrionics of the public platform; and sometimes, often disastrously, they improvise.[136]

Allowing for a slight degree of exaggeration, this fitted the picture of not just electoral politics but of the politics of government, too. By the change of administration in 1997, sensitivity towards the media had infected governmental life so deeply and comprehensively that its contagion affected and distorted virtually every aspect. In many ways, this represented the largest single change in the day-to-day conduct of the premiership. Mr Attlee would not only have found the media life of Mr Blair incredible, he would have recoiled from it absolutely. Indeed, he almost certainly could not have existed within it. No winnable Labour seat would have selected such a modest, unassuming, non-media friendly figure as their prospective parliamentary candidate. The man who, in many ways, set the gold standard against which other postwar premiers have been judged simply would not have been a contender in late-twentieth-century politics. He would not have passed the first hurdle. Even John Major shone by comparison.

BUDGETS AND MARKET-SENSITIVE ECONOMIC DECISIONS

The Budget

Budgets are an overblown ritual. Bundling a ragbag of measures together under a financial wrapping was a clever Gladstonian device for slipping changes through on a crude, take-it-or-leave-it basis – as useful for dragooning ministerial colleagues as for applying the brute force of the whipped vote in Parliament. Given the degree to which ministers (other

than the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Prime Minister) are excluded from the Budget-making process, it has been since the 1850s a kind of institutionalized breach of the collective nature of Cabinet government, which the short-lived combined Budgets of the Major years after 1993 (with a much more collective input into the public expenditure component) only partially filled.

The taking of market-sensitive decisions

Here, more even than nuclear weapons policy or intelligence (which usually have their own Cabinet committees), one used to find the secret garden of the governing system. The post-1992 changes opened the gates to the arguments conducted inside that garden a month after they have been concluded, when the minutes were published of the Chancellor's exchanges with the Governor of the Bank of England. Until May 1997, prime ministers and chancellors together determined the procedures and the outcomes and, to an extraordinary extent, Cabinets put up with it.

All this changed out of the blue on 6 May 1997, five days after the general election which carried Tony Blair into No. 10 and Gordon Brown into the Treasury. With only the other two members of the 'Big Four', Prescott and Cook in the know[137] (and the decision was Blair's and Brown's, not theirs), it was announced that henceforth the Bank of England would be given the power to set interest rates as a matter of 'operational responsibility', subject only to government override at a time of national crisis.[138] As interest rates since 1979 had become government's chief instrument for manipulating the domestic economy, this was a change of the first magnitude and a rare example of power shifting from that tightest of nexi – the PM/Chancellor relationship – to, in this instance, a Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee consisting of the Governor of the Bank plus eight others[139] (who proceeded, once convened, to raise interest rates no fewer than four times during the Blair government's first 'hundred days').[140]

SPECIAL FOREIGN, DEFENCE AND EUROPEAN FUNCTIONS

There are certain matters which can only be managed at the highest political level. Probably the most important continuous or regular example has to do with the special intelligence relationship with the United States (which dates from the secret UKUSA Treaty of 1948) and the special nuclear relationship (which was restored in 1958 after a twelve-year disruption, on most if not quite all atomic matters). These very practical relationships tend to purr on whatever the personal chemistry between the President and Prime Minister of the day, though each President on arrival looks at such relationships anew and any changes to them have to be handled at the top.

As a senior British insider put it when the government changed in 1997: 'There is still no other European country that has the capacity to provide intelligence on a global basis and the nuclear element continues to be very basic to the [US–UK] relationship. It ticks on and the British have been very shrewd in ensuring that the nuclear and intelligence relationships, and all that is associated with them, depend on reaffirmations by Presidents and Prime Ministers.'[141] Just occasionally, rare examples of these highly secret reaffirmations reach the surface at the Public Record Office. In 1997, for example, the exchange of letters between the newly installed President Kennedy and Harold Macmillan on the 'operational control' of the joint decision process governing the launch of US Polaris missiles from submarines in UK territorial waters, turned up in a Cabinet Office file on 'Nuclear deterrent policy'.

'Our understanding', Kennedy told Macmillan, 'on the use of British bases is that the President and the Prime Minister will reach a joint decision by speaking personally with each other before certain forces equipped with US nuclear weapons and operating from bases in the United Kingdom will use nuclear weapons . . . There is a second, more general understanding with the British that we will consult with them before using nuclear weapons anywhere, if possible' (this last pledge was given by Eisenhower first in 1953 and more recently in October 1960 with the proviso that it was 'not intended to be used publicly').[142]

Representing the UK at summits of all kinds

The frequency and importance of such gatherings has added powerfully to the proportion of prime ministerialism within the governing collective, whatever a premier's place on the spectrum of collegiality. For example, deals struck in the small hours at European Councils or Inter-Governmental Conferences require a great deal of discretion, and effective decision-making power to be placed in the hands of a Prime Minister. Of course, he or she is subject to Cabinet discussion once home and must report to Parliament. It was, after all, Mrs Thatcher's failure to carry her Cabinet with her on her hardening line towards further European economic and monetary integration after the Rome summit of November 1990 which began the rapid sequence of events that led to her resignation as Prime Minister. Such European events made much of the more volatile domestic political weather in the UK of the 1990s, and preparing for summits, negotiating a way through them and managing their consequences in many ways set the rhythm of a premier's life.[143]

The use of Her Majesty's armed forces in action

This is such a special, important and revealing activity that it deserves to be dealt with separately, which it is in chapter 6.

Making or annulling of treaties; recognizing or unrecognizing of countries

These activities usually involve the Cabinet or its overseas and defence policy committee. But the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary are the ministers most closely concerned. And here, the royal prerogative is all. Unless primary legislation is required, Parliament does not have to be routinely involved at all. There is one exception: the only concession the Union of Democratic Control (a political pressure group which argued that secret diplomacy had been largely responsible for triggering the Great War and that public opinion might curb such excesses if only it knew what was happening) won from the Labour government of 1924, after a long campaign, was the so called 'Ponsonby Rule', whereby treaties must

be laid before the House of Commons for twenty-one parliamentary days before they take effect.[144] All this means, in reality, is that the treaty is placed in the House of Commons Library where MPs can read it.

Launching a UK nuclear strike

Only the Prime Minister can activate the codes that do this. It is, as both Alec Home[145] and Jim Callaghan[146] told me and as a late-1960s Chief of Staff file makes plain,[147] a purely prime ministerial function. The launching of a Trident missile, very possibly the last act a British Prime Minister would take, would settle once and for all the great debate about prime ministerial versus Cabinet government. (Sometimes I feel nothing else will.) Since Ted Heath's time, a Prime Minister's wishes would prevail from his or her grave. Should he or she be wiped out by a bolt from the blue, the Royal Navy commander of whichever Trident submarine is then on patrol in the North Atlantic, after some days of scanning the air waves for signs of life back home (the failure to pick up the BBC *Today* programme for a few days is regarded as the ultimate test),[148] will, accompanied by his executive officer, open the sealed instructions which that Prime Minister must make ready within a few days of taking office. (The choice, crudely put by one insider, is 'let them have it' or 'sail to New Zealand if it's still there'.)[149] These instructions are perhaps the greatest secret of all, for on them depends the whole theory of the British version of nuclear deterrence (always assuming that the Trident commander *would* obey prime ministerial instructions from the grave).

Their nuclear briefing in 'PINDAR', the secret operations room deep beneath the Ministry of Defence, marks the moment, I suspect, when new Prime Ministers first fully appreciate the dreadful (in the proper sense of the word) responsibilities which fall upon them. Tony Blair went through his initiation during the middle of his first full week as premier.[150] Three weeks later he told a ceremony in Paris to mark the signing of the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Co-operation and Security between NATO and Russia that 'ours is the first generation able to contemplate the possibility that we may live our entire lives without going to war or sending our children to war'.[151] Like all his predecessors, Blair must have had a sense of what it might be like if he ever had to tread for real the 'secret' corridor under Whitehall which links No. 10 and the Cabinet Office with PINDAR.

The Prime Ministerial Files

The mid-1990s warehouse of prime ministerial functions is awesomely large. Most involve a high degree of indispensability. It is, too, a warehouse filled with 'kegs of political dynamite', to borrow a phrase of the former Home Office civil servant, Robert Hazell.[152] Yet it strikes me that still more detail is needed on the prime ministerial workload, especially if the qualitative and quantitative changes since Attlee are to be appreciated. Range of activity is one thing; frequency is quite another. What actually passed over prime ministerial desks is the next puzzle to be pondered, and the key lies in the Public Record Office, at least until the Thirty-Year Rule ceases to bite.

Mercifully, the PRO has allocated special classes for Prime Ministers' subject papers in the postwar period – PREM 8 for Attlee; PREM 11 for the four Conservative Prime Ministers between 1951 and 1964; and PREM 13 for Wilson onwards. Culling and categorizing them has proved a revealing and fascinating exercise but, before exposing the results, I must come clean about its crudities. These are of two main kinds: not every file that crossed the PM's desk is to be found within the bounds of these PREM classes. Some of them are scattered across various Cabinet Office categories; the intelligence material, an occasional mistake and JIC assessment apart, has been stripped from the PREM series for the postwar period leaving no trace, for example, of the regular flow of so-called 'CX' reports from the Secret Intelligence Service.[153] (Though a dash of scepticism is needed here. One former Cabinet Secretary has confessed to me that he would sometimes place the magic letters – 'CX' – on a brief he particularly wanted a busy PM to read in the certain knowledge that it would have the desired effect.)[154]

Secondly, my categorizations of files by type are necessarily imperfect. For instance, sometimes material dealing with atomic weapons is best placed under the heading of 'Defence'. At other times it fits more accurately under the caption 'Foreign Policy (USA)'. Others, might have chosen a different variety of label to affix. Some subject headings carry different meanings in different periods: Ireland in the late 1940s, for example, had largely to do with the South's eventual abandonment in 1949 of dominion status within the British Commonwealth for independent republican status. Northern Ireland until 1966–68 usually meant trade and industry policy as opposed to terrorism and security.

With those qualifications in mind, here is the result. Let us take first Mr Attlee's tally for 1948 (table 1).[155] I chose 1948 as the year to measure because the comparisons I wish to make are, relatively speaking, for peacetime years and I wanted to move beyond the immediate shadow of World War II, some of whose unfinished business might have produced an abnormal workload. Distortions there are, of course, in 1948. For example, the leading category by volume, Imperial/Commonwealth, is distended by the transfer of power in the sub-continent. India accounts for 25 of those 54 items.

Apart from the overall total of 215 files (some of which, as with the whole twelve months surveyed, ran on from previous years), what is striking is the preponderance even in peacetime of foreign, defence and imperial concerns as an absorber of prime ministerial attention. Imperial and Commonwealth matters alone outstripped the Economic/Industrial/Regulatory category at a time of considerable shift in the public sector and the continuing transfer of industry to a peacetime footing. The Domestic Policy items, too, are surprisingly low in number during a year when

Table 1

Prime Minister's Office: papers and correspondence (individual files); Clement Attlee, 1948

Rank	*Category*	*No.*
1	Imperial/Commonwealth	54
2	Economic/Industrial/Regulatory	42
3	Defence	39
4	Foreign policy (excluding USA and Middle East)	26
5	Whitehall/Ministerial/Constitutional/Parliamentary	18
6	Domestic policy	14
7	Security/Intelligence	5
8=	Foreign policy (USA)	4
8=	Foreign policy (Middle East)	4
8=	Monarchy	4
11=	Trades Unions/Strikes/Pay	2
11=	Ireland (excluding NI)	2
13	Party matters (Lab.)	1
	Total	*215*

the last big piece of the postwar welfare state – the National Health Service – was put into place.

Let us turn now to the supposedly relatively hands-off premiership of Winston Churchill (table 2).[156] Churchill was re-elected in 1951, partly on a ticket of reducing the waste and bureaucracy of what he liked to depict as a socialist government.[157] (This is not the place to debate just how 'socialist' were the policies of the Attlee government.) I have taken 1952, the first full year of his last premiership, as my test-bed. There are distortions here too, chiefly in the Monarchy category: following George VI's death in February 1952, considerable effort went into preparing for the coronation of Elizabeth II, a matter in which Churchill took an intense personal interest.[158]

But look at that total: 314 items, up 46 per cent on Attlee's tally four years earlier. The primacy of Defence is no surprise; it was Churchill's

Table 2

Prime Minister's Office: papers and correspondence (individual files); Winston Churchill, 1952

			1948	
Rank	*Category*	*No.*	*No.*	*Rank*
1	Defence	66	39	3
2	Economic/Industrial/Regulatory	65	42	2
3	Foreign policy (excluding USA and Middle East)	53	26	4
4	Whitehall/Ministerial/Constitutional/Parliamentary	38	18	5
5=	Domestic policy	20	14	6
5=	Security/Intelligence	20	5	7
7	Foreign policy (Middle East)	17	4	8=
8	Monarchy	14	4	8=
9	Imperial/Commonwealth	10	54	1
10	Foreign policy (USA)	9	4	8=
11	Trades Unions/Strikes/Pay	2	2	11=
12	Ireland (excluding NI)	0	2	11=
13	Party matters	0	1	13
	Totals	*314*	*215*	
	Percentage increase 1948–52 = 46%			

great preoccupation. Foreign Policy (USA) is surprisingly low, given the immense importance he placed on restoring the 'special relationship' which he thought had decayed under Attlee, in nuclear collaboration especially.[159]

Lord Salisbury, the great nineteenth-century Marquess (not 'Bobbety', who resigned ostensibly over the return of Makarios to Cyprus in 1957),[160] would have been fascinated to observe the remorseless rise of prime ministerial activity over the six years from Churchill in 1952 to Macmillan's first full year in 1958 (table 3),[161] given Britain's decreasing influence in the world post-Suez, and given Salisbury's distrust of expert advice in particular[162] and his scepticism about government intervention in general. The Suez shadow is pronounced here, with Foreign Policy

Table 3

Prime Minister's Office: papers and correspondence (individual files); Harold Macmillan, 1958

			1952		*1948*	
Rank	*Category*	*No.*	*No.*	*Rank*	*No.*	*Rank*
1	Foreign policy (excluding USA and Middle East)	75	53	3	26	4
2	Imperial/Commonwealth	58	10	9	54	1
3	Foreign policy (Middle East)	43	17	7	4	8=
4	Economic/Industrial/Regulatory	42	65	2	42	2
5	Defence	41	66	1	39	3
6	Whitehall/Ministerial/Constitutional/ Parliamentary	40	38	4	18	5
7	Domestic policy	20	20	5=	14	6
8	Foreign policy (USA)	14	9	10	4	8=
9	Monarchy	9	14	8	4	8=
10	Trades Unions/Strikes/Pay	8	2	11	2	11=
11	Security/Intelligence	6	20	5=	5	7
12	Party matters (Con. 1; Lab. 2)	3	0		1	13
13	Ireland (excluding NI)	1	0		2	11=
	Totals	*360*	*314*		*215*	
	Percentage increases 1948–58 = 67%; 1952–58 = 15%					

(Middle East) in third place, though Defence has tailed off from its Churchillian pre-eminence.

It was the release of the 1965 files for Harold Wilson's first full year as Prime Minister which stimulated the idea of this exercise for there had, quite plainly, been an explosion of activity since the late 1950s. The tally of files was up 63 per cent on Macmillan's 1958 figure, 87 per cent on Churchill's 1952 accumulation and a staggering 173 per cent on his Labour predecessor's score seventeen years earlier (table 4).[163] Part of the inflation can be attributed to the Rhodesia crisis (34 of those Imperial/Commonwealth files dealt with it). Wilson's delight in tinkering with the machinery of government and its minders makes the Whitehall/Ministerial/Constitutional/Parliamentary figure understandably, if unusually, high.

Wilson, as we shall see, was an 'almost a natural generator of "overload"'[164] – a very high price to pay for his determination to turn No. 10 from an alleged 'monastery' into a putative 'powerhouse'.[165]

Crude though these file-based comparisons are (not least because Downing Street private secretaries vary in how material is categorized and presented to their Prime Ministers), they do, I think, amount to a new and useful indicator of 'overload'. To the best of my knowledge, they have not been compiled in the UK before, nor does my friend Professor Richard Neustadt think there is anything comparable for the US presidency in the postwar period.[166] Their value is demonstrated by the itch I have for the impossible – access to the files of successive Prime Ministers since yesterday. For the period in which the archival treasure has still to reach the Public Record Office we are very much in the dark in terms of detail. Though from several conversations with retired and serving ministers and officials I have acquired the firm impression that the weight of material passing across a premier's desk continued to expand in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, despite periodic attempts to ease it.

Wilson afforded one last beam of insight for the twilight of his final premiership. As befitted a former President of the Royal Statistical Society,[167] he published in *The Governance of Britain* an analysis of his diary for the period 1 October to 31 December 1975 (table 5).[168]

Rather plaintively, Wilson added: 'Christmas apart, I was not able to record a single private or social engagement.'[169]

There is nothing comparable in Mrs Thatcher's *The Downing Street Years*. All we get is the following passage (though it's a quite revealing one):

Table 4
Prime Minister's Office: papers and correspondence (individual files); Harold Wilson, 1965

Rank	Category	No.	1958 No.	1958 Rank	1952 No.	1952 Rank	1948 No.	1948 Rank
1	Imperial/ Commonwealth	117	58	2	10	9	54	1
2	Whitehall/Ministerial/ Constitutional/ Parliamentary	110	40	6	38	4	18	5
3	Economic/Industrial/ Regulatory	102	42	4	65	2	42	2
4	Foreign policy (excluding USA and Middle East)	93	75	1	53	3	26	4
5	Domestic policy	52	20	7	20	5=	14	6
6	Foreign policy (USA)	38	14	8	9	10	4	8=
7	Defence	37	41	5	66	1	39	3
8	Trades Unions/Strikes/ Pay	10	8	10	2	11	2	11=
9	Foreign policy (Middle East)	9	43	3	17	7	4	8=
10	Monarchy	8	9	9	14	8	4	8=
11	Security/Intelligence	6	6	11	20	5=	5	7
12	Party matters (Con. 1; Lab. 2)	3	3	12	0		1	13
13	Ireland (excluding NI)	1	1	13	0		2	11=
	Totals	586	360		314		215	

Percentage increases 1948–65 = 173%; 1952–65 = 87%; 1958–65 = 63%

The hours at No. 10 are long. I never minded this. There was an intensity about the job of being Prime Minister which made sleep seem a luxury. In any case, over the years I had trained myself to do with about four hours a night. The Private Office too would often be working till 11 o'clock at night. We were so few that

Table 5
Pattern of prime ministerial business, 1 October to 31 December 1975

Rank	Category	No.
1	Ministerial meetings (excluding Cabinet or Cabinet committees)	43
2	Meetings with industry, prominent industrialists etc.	28
3	Official meetings (unspecified)	27
4	Cabinet committee	24
5	Official lunches and dinners	20
6	Ministerial speeches	17
7	Visits within Britain	13
8=	Cabinet meetings	11
8=	Political meetings (no speech)	11
10	Political speeches	9
11=	Audiences of the Queen	8
11=	Receiving foreign VIPs	8
11=	TV or radio broadcasts (excluding party conference)	8
14	Visits by heads of government	5
15	Visits abroad	2
16=	Visits to Northern Ireland	1
16=	State visits	1
	Total	236

there was no possibility of putting work on someone else's desk. This sort of atmosphere helps to produce a remarkably happy team, as well as a formidably efficient one. People are under great pressure, and there is no time for trivia. All the effort was to go into getting the work done.[170]

'No time for trivia'; a deliciously Thatcherian phrase. It is striking how, over a period of thirteen years (which is the gap between the two most dramatic and highly unusual insights into the most secret processes of 1980s policy-making: the Franks Report of 1982[171] and the Scott Report of 1996[172]) just how *little* (especially in the case of arms and equipment to Iraq; less so the Falklands) reached prime ministerial level in No. 10 at the time for all the attention they demanded and got from Mrs Thatcher (in the case of the Falklands) and Mr Major (on arms to Iraq) at a later stage.

It is worth dwelling on another aspect of Mrs Thatcher's premiership which underscores a central aspect of the job of Prime Minister – the linking of the party political with the administrative in the business of government. Mrs Thatcher would constantly remind her ministerial colleagues that she, as Prime Minister, felt herself 'the guardian of the strategy' – hence her habit of intervening early and often in ministerial discussions.[173] Guarding a government's overall strategy has been a key function of all postwar premiers, whether they were overly intrusive in the Cabinet Room or not. It was – is – a function which falls into every PM's lap. No one else can be expected to do it, even if they are designated 'Deputy Prime Minister' with co-ordination and Cabinet committee functions, as was R. A. Butler in 1962–63[174] and more so Michael Heseltine in 1995–97.[175]

This requires premiers to be kept up to speed on a huge range of matters – some issues which, in the end, only they can handle; many more issues of such magnitude that they invoke questions of collective responsibility at their most intense; and finally the kind of issues that could steal up on government suddenly and, sometimes (for example – again – the Falklands) in a way that can threaten a premier's, even an administration's, survival. The dilemma of the job of Prime Minister is that its holders must be selective in their detailed interventions yet constantly sensitive to virtually the whole range of government activity (a theme to which I shall return in chapter 20).

The federal nature of Whitehall demands a high degree of policy devolution from the centre, but it has to be a knowledgeable and essentially sympathetic form of devolution. As Ferdinand Mount (a man with direct experience of No. 10 life as the head of Mrs Thatcher's Policy Unit in 1982–83) put it in his marvellously sensitive novel based on the life of Lord Aberdeen, 'George [as Prime Minister] encouraged and nudged and approved [Gladstone at the Treasury, Palmerston at the Home Office and Wood at the India Office]. These were not his fields, but he was happy to lean on the gate and watch them grow.'[176] This was as true of Whitehall in the late 1990s as it was in the 1850s.

The PREM files for the post-1945 period show, too, an intriguing and important linkage with the wider analysis of the centre of central government – the so-called 'core executive' approach – developed by British political scientists over the past decade. As one of its leading lights, Rod Rhodes, has written, it is time to get away from 'the textbook Prime Minister'[177] (by which he means an over-concentration upon what happens

in No. 10 Downing Street) and into the wider realms of a premiership in the context of that 'core executive' which he describes as 'all those organisations and procedures which co-ordinate central government policies, and act as final arbiters of conflict between different parts of the government machine'.[178] An historian's trawl through the Prime Minister's Office files at any point in the postwar period would illustrate just such linkages and processes in routine abundance though, as the differences between the Franks and Scott reports underline, it would be wrong to think that all powerlines and every delicate issue find their way automatically into No. 10.

What does find its way into No. 10 – constantly and relentlessly – is politics. The analysis of the job of Prime Minister in this chapter has concentrated on the governmental and not the party functions. But get the party politics wrong and the whole apparatus can be removed from your hands at a speed which surprises the rest of the world – as happened to Mrs Thatcher in November 1990 (though the elaborate, all-party ballot required to choose a Labour leader in the age of one member, one vote means the hold on power of a Labour Prime Minister could be much surer than his Conservative counterpart).

Party is a constant factor for all premiers. And, as a retired permanent secretary put it as the premiership was about to change hands in 1997, leverage of your party is a resource that premiers must husband carefully. Prime Ministers, he explained, 'possess a limited amount of credit with their parties. If they are really determined they can usually whip their MPs through the division lobbies on a particular issue. But if, as Major did on the Maastricht vote in 1993, they use up their capital beyond a certain point, they are never quite the same again.'[179]

The way premiers manage the party factor is very revealing of them and their style of politics and, naturally, it fluctuates according to circumstances. I shall examine it as part of the treatment of individual tenures which follows. It cannot be isolated from the governing functions or administrative processes upon which I have concentrated in this chapter. This was illustrated neatly by another experienced former permanent secretary at a private seminar just before Easter 1997 which, among other things, examined the perils that awaited Tony Blair if, as the signs strongly indicated, he adopted a command rather than a collective approach to the premiership. 'Cabinet government,' he said, 'has been failing over the past eighteen years because Mrs Thatcher didn't want it and John Major has not had a chance to run it.'[180]

It is the last part of this judgement – 'not had a chance to run it' – which is both interesting and significant, because John Major was firmly at the collegial end of the spectrum as a chairman of Cabinet. Yet the fissiparous tendencies within his Cabinet Room, especially on European matters, which (to borrow Lord Denning's famous metaphor on the Treaty of Rome) was a constantly 'incoming tide' flowing up nearly every estuary of policy,[181] prevented him from leading successfully through a collective approach. The preconditions of collegiality simply were not present. His 'put up, or shut-up' self-inflicted leadership challenge in 1995 was designed to engineer these preconditions but that, too, failed. In Norman Lamont's bitter words (echoing A. J. P. Taylor on MacDonald's first Labour government)[182] he all too often gave the impression of being 'in office but not in power'.[183]

Yet Major demonstrated a powerful grip on the office of Prime Minister despite the appearance of external weakness to which Lamont alluded. He defied for over four and a half years (from Black Wednesday, 16 September 1992 to his loss of office on 2 May 1997) Churchill's iron law of premiership and party leadership: 'The loyalties which centre upon number one are enormous. If he trips he must be sustained. If he makes mistakes they must be covered. If he sleeps he must not be wantonly disturbed. If he is no good he must be pole-axed.'[184]

'If he is no good' – a phrase as imprecise as it is haunting for any individual taking on the premiership. Can anyone be expected to be 'good' at it in modern circumstances? Do those relentless demands – the great bundle of tasks that now fall into a premier's lap, the constant and often excruciating attention of the media, the demands of party management, the intermingling of the domestic, the European and the international, not to mention Macmillan's 'events' – mean, as one of the most seasoned of postwar Cabinet Office hands put it, that the job of Prime Minister is now 'beyond any mortal'?[185] The pole-axe in Churchill's metaphor seems perpetually to hover. Churchill, of course, was referring to premiership in conditions of war.

No strand of the warp and woof of the modern British premiership I have just described has been as taut or as important as every other during successive phases of the past fifty and more years. But the individual tapestries spun by each incumbent can only be appreciated and understood in the context of a wider backcloth. For like the England of George Orwell's *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 'There is something distinctive and recognisable'[186] about the job of Prime Minister, however much the personalities and the externalities pummel and pound it.

Even during the most intense pounding imaginable, nuclear war, the Whitehall planners' assumption was 'that some political control must be maintained for as long as possible in the days preceding the outbreak . . . and must be revived as soon as possible after the initial period of devastation . . .' Political control in such a context meant 'supreme control' by an effective Prime-Minister-as-war-leader, backed up by a small 'War Cabinet'.[187] Armed conflicts, even those well short of total war, can be the makers or the breakers of a Prime Minister. Aberrational rarities though war or limited war premierships might be, they are great revealers of individual Prime Ministers and of the powers and constraints latent in the job.

6

Where the Buck Stops: Premiers, 'War Cabinets' and Nuclear War Planning Since 1945

'Everybody knows that the system won't produce by itself effective executive control, and what is required is the right kind of personal leadership.' *Sir Norman Brook, Secretary of the Cabinet, on War Cabinets, 1959*[1]

'Distant, yes; but none the less an obligation.'
Clement Attlee on the UK's response to the United Nations' call for assistance following the North Korean invasion of the South, 1950[2]

'We are in an armed conflict; that is the phrase I have used. There has been no declaration of war.'
Sir Anthony Eden on the Suez Crisis, 1956[3]

From the moment I heard of the invasion [of the Falkland Islands], deep anxiety was ever present.
Margaret Thatcher recalling the events of March–June 1982 in 1993[4]

'It may be very nice to have the capacity [to mount an invasion of the Suez kind], but all the thinking was moving towards a major war with Russia. That was the trouble. And that meant a NATO war, and it meant that if we had the things we wanted for NATO we would inevitably not have the things we wanted for these little operations all round the world.' *Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Dermot Boyle, recalling the mid-1950s in 1987*[5]

'Grandfather [Harold Macmillan] told me that as an old man he only had nightmares about two things: the trenches in the Great War and

what would have happened if the Cuban missile crisis had gone wrong.' *Lord Stockton, 1998*[6]

War is an intensely prime ministerial activity. Nothing defines, or can offer so much historical insight into, the unique role of the PM as his or her responsibilities and powers during war or the preparations for it. 'The nuclear', as Harold Macmillan liked to call it,[7] has underlined this powerfully since November 1953, when the first British atomic weapon, the Blue Danube bomb, was delivered to Bomber Command's Armament School at RAF Wittering alongside the A1 near Peterborough.[8] As a top secret internal RAF paper on the 'initiation and control of nuclear strikes' put it during the Macmillan premiership in 1962: 'The decision to use nuclear weapons is reserved to the Prime Minister or his designated deputy. Adequate arrangements have been made for the Prime Minister or his designated deputy to be continuously available in a period of tension to receive information . . . and to give decisions.'[9] And, as we saw in the previous chapter, arrangements have been in place since Ted Heath's time for a Prime Minister's wishes to be available to Royal Navy commanders on Polaris and later Trident submarines in the event of a pre-emptive strike eliminating the premier before instructions could be transmitted.

But it is not just the contingency of World War III (or any conflict that might involve an exchange of nuclear weapons) which sees the buck stopping with the Prime Minister, to adapt the famous motto inscribed on the wooden plaque which rested on President Harry Truman's desk in the White House between 1945 and 1953.[10] So-called 'limited' wars such as in Korea, Suez, the Falklands and the Gulf have tested prime ministerial mettle and revealed much about their styles of government under duress. 'Near War' committees, like the one which Attlee used during the Berlin crisis of 1948 or the plethora of groups Wilson spawned in the early days of the Southern Rhodesian unilateral declaration of independence after November 1965, also need to feature in any treatment of a premier's stewardship, and will do so in the chapters on individual Prime Ministers which follow.

The special nature of this aspect of the job and the importance of past practice to it was vividly, if privately, illustrated in Mrs Thatcher's flat in No. 10 Downing Street on Sunday 4 April 1982 and in her room at the House of Commons the following Tuesday afternoon during the early phase of the Falklands crisis. Her visitor on what might be called 'Falklands Sunday' was Sir Frank Cooper, Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of

Defence, who had been among the small group of officials and military men who briefed her the previous Wednesday evening when it became clear that a sizeable invasion force was on its way from Argentina to the Falkland Islands. The briefing left her, in Cooper's words, 'very shaken . . . [and] . . . deeply angry that this had come and there had been no warning'.[11] By the time of Cooper's Sunday meeting, the Cabinet had already agreed that a task force would be sent to the South Atlantic (they did so at a meeting on the Friday evening) and Parliament had been informed of this during the Falklands debate on the Saturday.[12]

Frank Cooper, a Spitfire pilot in World War II who joined the Air Ministry in 1948,[13] had had direct personal experience not just of nuclear planning but of virtually all the variations of War or Near War Cabinets in the post-war period. His special role in transmitting the fruits of Whitehall's folk memory of 'War Cabinets' and premiers as war leaders only came to light in a conversation in 1996 when I asked him if he knew whether, how and by whom Mrs Thatcher had been briefed on past practice. 'What nobody knows,' he said, 'is that I told her at a private lunch on the Sunday. I was ushered up to her little flat on the top floor. Carol [Thatcher] took lunch out of the fridge – a bit of ham and salad. We had a gin and she [Mrs Thatcher] asked me "How do you actually run a war?"'[14]

I asked if he had written anything down.

'No, I didn't write it down. I knew it and I said, "First, you need a small War Cabinet; second, it's got to have regular meetings come hell or high water; thirdly, you don't want a lot of bureaucrats hanging around." Then we talked about its composition.'[15]

I wondered in what sense did Sir Frank 'know it'?

'One had seen it so often in a funny sort of way . . . I knew about Berlin, Korea, Malaya. We'd had Suez, which was a monumental cock-up. Cuba was different – very much a No. 10/Kennedy thing. And we'd long had this Transition to War Committee [In 1956 it was called the Defence (Transition) Committee. It became TWC in 1961.][16] which actually met at the time of Suez and was the biggest shambles of all time. The one thing I was quite clear about was that you couldn't have this bloody thing where people weren't going to take decisions.'[17]

In a later interview, Cooper elaborated still further upon his conversation with Mrs Thatcher on 'Falklands Sunday'. He stressed to her that 'the chain of command should be kept as simple as possible'.[18]

In return Mrs Thatcher 'raised some ideas of her own . . . she didn't, for example, want to have too many ministers on the core group and she

didn't want the Chancellor [of the Exchequer] . . . She thought that the money could be too much of a distraction.'[19] Sir Frank's evidence is significant here as the idea of keeping the Treasury out of the Falklands 'War Cabinet' is usually attributed to Harold Macmillan who, as is well known, called on Mrs Thatcher just after Prime Minister's Questions the following Tuesday (6 April 1982) to be asked the same question she had asked Cooper: 'Harold, how do you run a war?'[20]

It is interesting to compare the versions of the two participants in the Macmillan–Thatcher exchange. First 'Uncle Harold', as older Tories like to call him, in conversation with Ludovic Kennedy in 1983:

MACMILLAN: I did try to help her about how to run a war because it's such a long time since anybody's run a war – I mean the technical methods of running a war – which she did very well.

KENNEDY: What were you able to draw on there in your own experience?

MACMILLAN: Well, I mean that you have to have a War Cabinet, you have to have a Committee of Chiefs of Staff, that the Secretary of the Committee of Chiefs mustn't be the Secretary of the War Cabinet. It must be the nearest thing you could get to Lord Ismay . . . [Military Secretary to the War Cabinet 1939–45 and, in effect, Churchill's personal Chief of Staff] . . . it was just the tip how to run it . . . All of which I'd learnt from Churchill, of course.[21]

Now Mrs Thatcher's account in her memoirs of her Overseas and Defence (South Atlantic) Committee, commonly known as the Falklands 'War Cabinet':

Its exact membership and procedure were influenced by a meeting I had with Harold Macmillan who came to see me . . . to offer his support and advice as the country's and the Conservative Party's senior ex-prime minister. [Reliable inside knowledge suggests that Macmillan asked to see her rather than the other way round.][22] His main recommendation was to keep the Treasury – that is Geoffrey Howe – off the main committee in charge of the campaign, the diplomacy and the aftermath. This was a wise course, but understandably Geoffrey was upset. Even so I never regretted following Harold Macmillan's advice. We were never tempted to compromise the security of our forces for financial reasons.[23]

There was, as always with Uncle Harold, slightly more to the occasion than met the eye. Macmillan did not care for Mrs Thatcher or her style of government. Seven years earlier, shortly after she had become Leader of

the Opposition, he told me, 'You couldn't imagine a woman as Prime Minister if we were a first-class power . . .'[24]

On that April day in 1982 he shuffled in 'doing his old man act',[25] and gazed around the room he had come to know so well between 1957 and 1963. It was unusually empty. Mrs Thatcher was due to see a group of her backbenchers that evening and space had been made ready. 'Where's all the furniture?' said the old statesman to the new. 'You've sold it all off, I suppose.'[26]

The first question he asked her was 'Have they got the Bomb?'[27] On being told the Argentinians had not, he imparted his wisdom about keeping the Treasury out and bringing in a 'Pug' [Lord Ismay's nickname]. In fact, Whitehall could not produce an Ismay. Some figures with real fighting experience were considered, such as the former Chief of the Defence Staff, Lord Carver. But he was not a sympathetic colleague for Mrs Thatcher, being in her view 'unsound' on Trident and other defence matters.[28] So Sir Michael Palliser, the outgoing Head of the Diplomatic Service, was kept on to do the job.[29]

Privately Macmillan later expressed his ambivalence towards Mrs Thatcher on that occasion. As one of his friends said, 'His attitude towards her was a mixture of admiration and disdain: admiration because she obviously had the backbone; disdain because she should have had more background knowledge – at least 150 years, perhaps 500 years, of the history of the country concerned.'[30]

Background knowledge. That is an important theme in this context, because in April 1982, as it had for the previous fifty-four years, the Cabinet Office archive contained a rich and accruing seam of distilled wisdom about the adaptation of the United Kingdom's system of Cabinet government for the purpose of fighting wars. The first key initial document is a paper the then Secretary of the Cabinet, Sir Maurice Hankey, prepared in 1928 for the Prime Minister and the Committee of Imperial Defence (of which he was also secretary) entitled 'Supreme Control in War'.[31] In a sub-section of his draft on 'Alternative Systems for the Exercise of Supreme Control', Hankey examined the variations of 'War Cabinet' or 'War Committee' that might be used in conflicts of varying scope and severity. (Sir Frank Cooper told me he was aware when briefing Mrs Thatcher that Hankey had produced a study of war cabinets, though not of the 'limited' version of the breed.)[32]

Hankey's paper, though drafted long before the nuclear age, remains a seminal document for any treatment of the adaptation of the British

Cabinet system for warlike purposes and for the place of the Prime Minister within it. Thanks to the work of Colin Seymour-Ure in the mid 1980s[33] and more recently of some of my own students who have been plundering the riches of the Public Record Office,[34] we are moving towards a position where a respectable brief on post-1945 practice could be written for a future British Prime Minister confronted with a crisis that might lead to a serious spell of military activity of the hostile kind.

But, even now, such a briefing would have to start by going back to Hankey in 1928, drawing up the lessons of the 1914–18 Great War for future use. This review came rather late, one might think, for, as he noted in his paper, since the Armistice of 1918 the full Cabinet had been advised by a smaller group of ministers during successive crises in the Near East, Egypt, Iraq and China 'all of which involved questions affecting the fighting services; questions of high policy were reserved for the decision of the Cabinet advised by a Special Cabinet Committee, which was sometimes empowered to take decisions on questions within the order of ministerial competence, without prior reference to the Cabinet'.[35]

It must be remembered that Hankey, with Lloyd George, had been instrumental in transforming the Whitehall war machinery on the demise of Asquith's premiership in December 1916.[36] By 1928 he was, by any standards, the Civil Service's supreme technician of state.[37] On such matters as War Cabinets he was, quite simply, the oracle. 'Although the War Cabinet proved by far the most efficient method for the exercise of the supreme control of our war effort in the Great War', Hankey reflected ten years after its end,

> it does not follow that this plan should be adopted in all wars. For example, to take an extreme case, it would be absurd to unsettle the ordinary constitutional machinery of Government by setting up a War Cabinet in order to conduct a war with Ibn Saud or the Imam! Each case must be considered on its merits by the Prime Minister of the day. It must be remembered that the appointment of a War Cabinet involves a very considerable dislocation of the ordinary machine of Government. Moreover, the exclusion of Ministers who in normal times are members of the Cabinet from the conduct of the vital affairs of the nation could never be popular among the excluded Ministers, and would only be tolerated in case of a national emergency of the very gravest kind.[38]

Hankey described four models for the supreme control of war (for the interwar Committee of Imperial Defence read, in today's circumstances,

the Cabinet Committee on Overseas and Defence Policy which, like the CID of old, the Prime Minister chairs):

(A) The normal peace system, the Cabinet, advised by the Committee of Imperial Defence.
(B) The Cabinet, assisted by a Special Cabinet Committee, with powers of decision on questions within the order of ministerial competence [i.e., those ministers actually sitting on the Special Cabinet Committee], but not necessarily designated 'The War Committee'.
(C) The Cabinet, assisted by a 'War Committee' with fuller executive powers than the Cabinet Committee referred to in (B) above.
(D) A War Cabinet, which absorbs the functions of both the Cabinet and the Committee of Imperial Defence.[39]

'Whichever of the above systems is adopted,' Hankey continued, 'the Supreme Control must be provided with: (a) co-ordinated advice on questions of detail; and (b) adequate secretarial staff.'[40]

The Hankey-like wisdom which Frank Cooper conveyed to Mrs Thatcher over lunch on 'Falklands Sunday', the Lloyd George–Hankey experiences as adapted by Churchill during World War II and refined still further during a series of emergencies post-1945, represented the latest mutation in Whitehall's thinking. For example, in a highly unusual fashion for the British way of government, the law became – and remains – involved. Since the Ministry of Defence Act 1946, not just that department but the Cabinet's Defence Committee, through its various labellings and rejiggings, has been a creature of statute – the only Cabinet committee with that singular status.[41] This is an important factor as many, though not all, of the limited wars in which Britain has been engaged since 1945 have been 'run' by either the Defence Committee [Attlee and Korea] or offshoots of it, OD (SA) [Overseas and Defence (South Atlantic)] for Mrs Thatcher and the Falklands, and OPD (G) [Overseas Policy and Defence (Gulf)] for the Gulf War under Major. The one big exception is the Egypt Committee, the inner group on Suez, which did not create a happy precedent, though the disasters associated with that episode can hardly be attributed entirely to inadequacies in Eden's approach to the machinery of government at a time of intense stress. (Yet these mechanical inadequacies did undoubtedly add to the malign shambles of Whitehall in the late summer and early autumn of 1956, as we shall see in chapter 9.)

Increasing tension between East and West after 1945 also stimulated

significant rethinking. As the Cold War chilled and Attlee began in 1948 to consider the outlines of a World War III War Cabinet, the new legal status of the Defence Committee presented a problem. Would it be possible to exclude regular members in the event of major war requiring a different ministerial configuration?[42] By the spring of 1951, with the Korean War raging in the Far East, Whitehall's collective mind turned once more to the possibility of total war. It was decided by Attlee that in such circumstances he would assume the job of Minister of Defence as well as Prime Minister, as Churchill had done during World War II. The then Minister of Defence, Manny Shinwell, was informed accordingly.[43] In the event of World War III erupting, Attlee would have presided over a War Cabinet of nine: Foreign Secretary, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Minister for the Co-ordination of Economic Affairs, Minister of Labour and the Home Secretary, plus up to four non-departmental ministers who would chair the War Cabinet's Committees.

All this contingency planning was very much the work of Hankey's successor-but-one, Sir Norman Brook. It was Brook, too, who advised Attlee on the creation of a fistful of War or Near War Cabinets between 1948 and 1951, the most important of which, apart from the 'doomsday' one we have just examined, were

- GEN 241, the Cabinet Committee on Germany which met between June and September 1948 to run the British end of the Berlin airlift. (This was the group chaired by Attlee but dominated by Bevin that permitted the stationing of US B-29s on East Anglian airfields, leading to an American Cold War military presence in the UK and, eventually, a nuclear one too,[44] which came to an end only in October 1996 when the F1-11 bombers of the USAAF flew out of East Anglia for the last time.)[45]
- GEN 363, the Persia Committee, again chaired by Attlee, in May 1951, to handle the crisis created by Dr Mossadegh's nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company.[46]
- The Malaya Committee, established in March 1950, which Shinwell chaired for the purposes of closer co-ordination of the various Whitehall interests involved in the Malayan emergency.[47]
- The Defence Committee itself, which was Attlee's chief instrument for handling the Korean War from its outset until Labour lost office in October 1951.[48]

It would take another book to examine fully the details of these committees: their memberships, terms of reference and relationship to other

Cabinet committees and, above all, to the full Cabinet itself. It is, however, worth mentioning that the picture is mixed in terms of full Cabinet involvement even under a usually strong advocate of Cabinet collegiality such as Mr Attlee (especially on Berlin, as we shall see in chapter 7). Churchill, another great Cabinet government man, more so even than Attlee when it came to consulting the full Cabinet about nuclear weapons policy during his peacetime premiership (in sharp contrast to his World War II practice, as we shall see), ran Korea after October 1951 with a personal mix of government-by-committee, government-by-small-group and personal diplomacy.[49] As Paul Addison has remarked, 'One tends to forget that Churchill ran another war.'[50]

As can be seen from the Attlee and Churchill years, it is somewhat artificial to demarcate too rigidly between Near, Limited and possible Nuclear War Cabinets. The same ministers, civil servants and planners are involved in all three. But from the last months of Churchill's postwar premiership, a distinction has to be made between the World War III contingency and the rest. This became plain when Whitehall confronted the dreadful realities of thermonuclear warfare in the mid 1950s, as hydrogen bombs were at least a thousand times more powerful than atomic weapons. Their development by the United States and the Soviet Union in the early 1950s and the Churchill Cabinet's decision in the summer of 1954[51] to manufacture a British thermonuclear weapon stimulated a revolution in the scope and nature of war planning and the Prime Minister's role in it.

So I shall treat the post-1954 World War III element of the premiership separately from the limited conflicts (or near conflicts) in which Prime Ministers found themselves thereafter (which will be examined in the chapters dealing with individual premierships). There are three reasons for concentrating on 'the nuclear' in this fashion: the magnitude of the contingency; the secrecy of the planning associated with it which, until the declassifications of the 1990s, left the Public Record Office – let alone the public's perception of this side of a Prime Minister's life – virtually bereft of any substantial or reliable information; and finally because, mercifully, none of the eleven postwar premiers found themselves their country's World War III war leader (though during the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, as we shall see, Harold Macmillan's closest advisers thought he might be a day or so away from becoming it).

As we have already seen, Attlee began thinking about the rudiments of a World War III War Cabinet in 1948. The following year the Chiefs of

Staff Joint Planning Staff began to design a military command structure to underpin it and the chiefs themselves agreed the following year that 'a joint command organization should be established in war'.[52] But these early efforts were swiftly overtaken by technological events.

As Whitehall's scientists and military planners caught up with the implications of the US thermonuclear test at Eniwetok in 1952[53] and the Soviet Union's comparable explosion in Kazakhstan the following year,[54] it became apparent, as Norman Brook put it to Harold Macmillan (then Minister of Defence) in December 1954, that a combination 'of "fall-out", added to the destructive power of the thermonuclear weapon' meant that in a future war, 'the United Kingdom – the nerve centre of European resistance – would be extremely vulnerable to nuclear attack [and] there is not in sight any air defence system which could protect us effectively'.[55] Not only, Brook argued, did this mean that 'to maintain the strength of the [nuclear] deterrent must be the heart of our defence policy . . . The latest scientific appreciation of the nuclear weapon demands a fresh reappraisal of our defence plans, both military and civil . . . The implications of this need profound study.' Existing plans required 'a radical reshaping'.[56]

Five days later, Macmillan, with Churchill's approval, appointed a six-person committee of three senior civil servants, two military men and the Scientific Adviser to the Ministry of Defence to study 'the effect of "fall-out" on our war plans'. William Strath of the Cabinet Office took the chair[57] and the group reported to the Cabinet's Defence Committee, which the Prime Minister chaired, some four months later.[58] Churchill, for his part, was good at keeping the Queen informed on matters thermonuclear. In July 1954 he told her the Cabinet was on the verge of authorizing the manufacture of a British H-bomb[59] and in December 1954 he sent her a copy of his Cabinet Paper on Atomic Warfare, which is still classified.[60]

The Strath Report remains secret, too. It has been removed from the Defence Committee's papers for 1955 under section 3(4) of the Public Records Act 1958 (which allows for the retention of specially sensitive items beyond thirty years).[61] We know, however, that it exerted a profound and continuing influence over the machinery of government under conditions of nuclear war. From Brook's brief on Strath to Eden (who had just replaced Churchill) we can reconstruct its essentials including the 'broad conclusion . . . that, although a determined hydrogen bomb attack against this country would cause human and material destruction on an appalling scale, it would be possible to contain its effects and enable the

nation to survive if adequate preparations had been made in advance'.[62]

In general terms, Strath had an air of unreality about it from the start. Brook's memo to Churchill made plain the huge cost of large-scale civil defence and the difficulty of evacuating substantial sections of the population.[63] Philip Allen, the Home Office's man on Strath, underlined this for me many years later when he said:

'I can remember sitting on a committee working out the horrors of the H-bomb as distinct from the much more modest A-bomb. And, although it seemed like Never-Never Land at the time, we did work out these theoretical methods of keeping on the government – setting up organizations. One had a feeling that, if it came to it, nothing would work quite in the way one was planning. But, nevertheless, one simply had to plan.'[64]

And plan they did, in immense detail – at least for the sustenance of government during and after a thermonuclear attack on the UK.

From other documents influenced by Strath it is possible to piece together most of its assumptions about a Britain close to or under thermonuclear attack. There would be:

- A 'Precautionary Stage'[65] of about seven days between a period of international tension reaching a point which indicated it was likely to crash into 'global war'.[66]
- A 'Destructive Phase' in which 'the devastation caused by the nuclear attack on the United Kingdom would be very great' during a 'period which might last from 48 hours to 7 days'.[67]
- A 'Survival Phase'.[68] Planning for this would be aimed 'solely at tackling the problems of *survival*' with a high degree of devolution, initially at least, to Civil Defence Regions, each with its own complement of ministers, officials and military.[69]

But for students of the British premiership, it is the central element of immediately pre- and post-attack Britain – what Norman Brook called 'a very small nucleus at the centre'[70] – that is of especial interest. For, post-Strath, 'Ministers . . . accept[ed] the view that it would be extremely unlikely that central control would continue to operate from London after attack and that the government of the United Kingdom would be conducted by a central nucleus in protected accommodation in the country.'[71]

Only in 1998, when previously immensely secret Chiefs of Staff papers reached the PRO, in a file that contained information too sensitive to be placed amongst their normal material, did it became possible to map the transformation of Cabinet government to what would, in effect, have been virtually prime ministerial government (one hundred per cent so if the use of British nuclear weapons was authorized). The plan, part of an update of both the Government War Book and a 'Top Secret Supplement to the Ministry of Defence War Book', was circulated to the Chiefs of Staff on New Year's Day 1959.[72]

But before tracing what might have been the last ever mutation of British Cabinet government, it is important to depict the magnitude of the decision-taking involved. Harold Macmillan, the Prime Minister of the day, was the first UK premier to have a finger on the thermonuclear trigger. The earliest British hydrogen bombs, the Yellow Sun Mark IIs, were fitted to the RAF's V bomber forces from 1961 onwards after the successful Operation Grapple tests on Christmas Island nearly four years earlier.[73]

In 1957–58 Macmillan had distilled the purposes of the UK's 'independent nuclear capability' in specific terms:

(a) To retain our special relation with the United States and, through it, our influence in world affairs, and, especially, our right to have a voice in the final issue of peace or war.
(b) To make a definite, though limited, contribution to the total nuclear strength of the West – while recognising that the United States must continue to play the major part in maintaining the balance of nuclear power.
(c) To enable us, by threatening to use our independent nuclear power, to secure United States co-operation in a situation in which their interests were less immediately threatened than our own.
(d) To make sure that, in a nuclear war, sufficient attention is given to certain Soviet targets which are of greater importance to us than to the United States.[74]

RAF Bomber Command, then the sole carrier of the British nuclear weapon, was highly integrated with its US equivalent, the Strategic Air Command. Bomber Command was, however, carefully prepared for its own 'strategic target policy' should 'purely national, *unilateral*, action' be authorized by the Prime Minister.[75] It was known in the trade as a 'cities policy': 'If the UK should be forced to take unilateral retaliation against the USSR, the target policy of Bomber Command should be to attack the

Soviet centres of administration and population. This is the most effective target system for our limited forces.'[76]

In 1958–59 the RAF converted their planned nuclear strike capacity into a '30–40 cities' policy[77] (though before Macmillan left office in 1963 this had been scaled down to sixteen cities because of improvements in Soviet air defences).[78] Once up to strength, the '30–40 cities' targeting was estimated to break down as follows:

(a) 35 bombs on 15 cities with populations in excess of 600,000;
(b) 25 bombs on 25 cities mostly with a population in excess of 400,000.

It was estimated that when the force is armed with megaton [hydrogen] bombs the casualties per bomb dropped would be of the order of:

(a) killed about 135,000 – total about 8,000,000;
(b) injured about 135,000 – total about 8,000,000.[79]

So the 'button' designed for Macmillan's use, once the V force reached its peak in the early 1960s, would within a few hours have enabled him if he pressed it to kill eight million Russians and injure a further eight million. That, at least, was the plan, though technical developments on the Soviet side swiftly reduced those estimates. But the body counts remained horrifying by any standards.

By late 1959, 'structural work for [the government's World War III] headquarters [was] almost complete, and the installation of communications [had] begun'.[80] This was the huge underground capability known as 'Turnstile' (though it went under a variety of codenames including 'Burlington') deep beneath the limestone of the Cotswolds between Bath and Corsham in Wiltshire.[81] So, how would Macmillan and his ministerial colleagues have taken their decisions if the plans for the transition to World War III had been activated and adhered to?

On receiving a 'strategic warning' from the Joint Intelligence Committee based on 'intelligence constituting a positive indication that an enemy attack is to be expected',[82] the Cabinet would meet and, on advice from the Chiefs of Staff, it would decide whether or not to declare that Britain was in a 'precautionary stage'. If it did so decide, various 'emergency measures' would be triggered, including the placing of UK 'air defence systems on a war footing [and] bringing assigned and earmarked forces to a war footing' as well as activating 'home [i.e., civil] defence measures'.[83]

Throughout this stage, the plan assumed that the full Cabinet would,

when 'necessary', receive recommendations from the Minister of Defence and the Chiefs of Staff.[84]

On receipt of a 'tactical warning, i.e., when attack is imminent and the Allies have received definite information of an enemy attack having been launched, probably by the identification of enemy aircraft or missiles on the radar screens',[85] the Chiefs of Staff would proceed to a meeting with the Prime Minister and '(a) the Home Secretary, (b) the Foreign Secretary, (c) the Minister of Defence, (d) the Secretary of the Cabinet.'[86]

Here we find the post-hydrogen bomb World War III War Cabinet – the PM, plus three ministers and the Cabinet Secretary. It is one-third the size of the World War III 'War Cabinet' designed for Attlee in the atomic bomb era – no sign here of a Minister of Labour or a Minister for the Co-ordination of Economic Affairs. As Norman Brook had predicted to Eden at the time the Strath Committee reported, there would no longer be any point in having the kind of 'skeleton organization of wartime industrial controls' previously planned for.[87] This 1959 version, had it materialized, would have been the tiniest War Cabinet ever. Though, as the files make plain, only the Prime Minister or his designated deputy could authorize the RAF to retaliate.

There is an intriguing curiosity here. We know that Macmillan's designated deputy at this time was Derick Heathcoat Amory and, when he retired in 1960, the mantle fell on Selwyn Lloyd.[88] Both were Chancellors of the Exchequer. Neither had a seat on the attack-imminent War Cabinet.

From the 1962 file of an intensely secret Working Group on Nuclear Retaliation Procedures chaired by Bill Geraghty of the Cabinet Office we know that, since the Soviet Union had been judged to have acquired the capacity to attack all its UK targets with missiles the previous year, 'Deputies to the Prime Minister would be appointed in peacetime'.[89] The same file when it was released in 1998 solved a mystery which had baffled me for years and which Alec Home, privately, asked me not to draw attention to – why, unlike any other nuclear-tipped leader, the British Prime Minister is not accompanied everywhere by a military officer carrying the launch codes. The Geraghty report, bafflingly, declared that 'when the Prime Minister is travelling by car or rail . . . it should be possible to intercept him [and recall him to Whitehall] through police or rail channels, but the Working Group recommend that consideration should be given to providing a radio link in the Prime Minister's car'.[90]

Other questions arise which the files still do not answer. Where would the decisions be taken? In the Cabinet Room, presumably, before and for

much of the 'Precautionary Stage'. With a few minutes to go, one assumes the PM and the designated four would be a hundred feet or more below the Cotswolds in 'Turnstile'. As the former Permanent Secretary at the Home Office, Lord Allen of Abbeydale, told me, he was earmarked to go underground with the Home Secretary and was issued with, he thought, a ticket of a particular colour for this purpose.[91] It was the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 which brought Britain to the verge of having to activate these immensely secret plans when, as Philip Allen recalled, 'for a time we did think those coloured tickets might be used for real'[92] as the inner government headed down the A4 (the M4 had still to be built) to 'Turnstile'.

Before examining that crisis and the question of whether Allen's Law – that 'nothing would quite work out in the way one was planning'[93] – came into operation, it is necessary to determine the degree to which the military controllers of the British nuclear force, the Chief of RAF Bomber Command in particular, possessed powers delegated by the Prime Minister to launch the V force during an emergency and, in extreme circumstances, to order the bombers to deploy their nuclear weapons on Soviet cities. This contingency is jocularly known in Whitehall either as the 'bolt-from-the-blue', the 'decapitation' or the 'headless chickens' scenario.[94]

The first time an official mention of this possibility came to light was in a PRO file unearthed by Dr Stephen Twigge. It was contained in the penultimate paragraph – it appears almost as an afterthought when read in full – of a letter from the Vice-Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Edmund Hudleston, in August 1959 to the newly appointed Chief of RAF Bomber Command, Sir Kenneth Cross, on the state of readiness of his force. 'It is also appreciated', Hudleston told Cross, 'that circumstances could exist, such as a total breakdown in communications, under which you would have to assume responsibility for launching the attack.'[95]

Such scraps of archive can lead to important breakthroughs in knowledge. This one certainly did. Hudleston's letter had a circulation list of six people. Number five was 'Mr Cooper', who as Sir Frank Cooper later headed the Ministry of Defence as its Permanent Secretary. While interviewing him for the television programme *What Has Become of Us?* I drew his attention to the paragraph and asked him to comment. He replied,

> If the country was attacked and if you couldn't get any political clearance, and it was clear beyond peradventure, then I think the C-in-C [Commander-in-Chief of] Bomber Command and later the submarine captain [of a Royal Navy Polaris or Trident vessel, though, as we have seen, since the early 1970s instructions from the Prime Minister on whether or not to retaliate have been kept in a safe on these boats] would have said it was his decision whether to do it or not to do it.
>
> The decision to launch that strike going to a man in uniform seemed to me a very unlikely thing ever to have happened. But supposing everybody was dead – all the politicians were dead. The country had got to have some kind of leader. Where else are you going to get a leader from?'

Sir Frank added that 'You would probably have had to have had a military government anyway.'[96] There is no detailed plan for this in the 'War Book' material declassified so far, though Norman Brook told Home Office officials in 1959 that 'We plan to maintain central direction . . . even in the most rudimentary form, for as long as possible in the intensive period of nuclear attack and . . . the capacity to re-assert civil control, and, as soon as possible, central political control, for the period of recovery after the initial nuclear phase.'[97]

Seven months before Hudleston informed Cross of the circumstances in which the launch decision would fall to him, the planners had drawn up the 'positive control' scenario whereby the Chief of the Air Staff could order the bombers into the air 'to avoid loss on the ground by enemy action. In this sense "positive control" means the aircraft will fly on pre-arranged routes toward targets, but will not pass beyond a specified line pending the receipt of further definite instructions. The time at which aircraft are scheduled to reach this specified line will be made known to the Prime Minister . . . and the Chiefs of Staff.'[98]

In September 1962, a few weeks before the Cuban missile crisis, Cross was given revised detailed instructions from the Chief of the Air Staff, Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Thomas Pike, on what to do if:

> (a) From all sources of information available to you, you judge that your force in this country is about to be attacked with nuclear weapons and there has been no preceding period of strategic warning that a nuclear attack is imminent, or
> (b) nuclear bombs from an enemy attack have burst on this country before you have been authorised to retaliate, you are authorised
>   (i) to order all bomber aircraft within your Command to be airborne under positive control in accordance with the agreed plans covering this procedure;
>   (ii) to seek contact by any means of communication open to you with the Prime Minister or his Deputy in London or at the alternative

Government Headquarters (Burlington) and act in accordance with his instructions.[99]

If enemy nuclear weapons had fallen on the UK and attempts to contact the Prime Minister had 'proved abortive, you are authorized in the last resort to order on your own responsibility nuclear retaliation by all means at your disposal'.[100] (This later archival discovery by Stephen Twigge and Len Scott fleshed out that sparse paragraph from Hudleston to Cross discovered over three years earlier and confirmed what Sir Frank Cooper had told me on the basis of it.)

A mere twenty days after Cross received that directive, a United States U2 spy plane on a reconnaissance mission over Cuba found evidence that the Soviet Union was in the process of placing intermediate-range ballistic rockets on Cuba capable, once operational, of striking American cities with their nuclear warheads within minutes of being launched. President Kennedy was informed of this two days later, on 16 October, and the Cuban missile crisis began.[101] On 19 October two members of the British intelligence community were briefed on the Cuban missiles by the CIA while on a visit to Washington.[102] The British Ambassador in Washington, Sir David Ormsby-Gore, an exceptionally well-informed intimate of President Kennedy's, cabled the Foreign Office on Saturday 20 October about 'reports which suggest that the types of arms introduced [into Cuba] may not be entirely defensive'.[103] Ormsby-Gore was personally briefed by Kennedy about the developing crisis on Sunday 21 October[104] and Kennedy sent Macmillan a personal message about it that evening.[105] For the next seven days the world, in Macmillan's own words, stood 'on the brink'[106] while Khrushchev and Kennedy conducted the most alarming and intensely studied of the Cold War's stand-offs. Macmillan, who returned to Admiralty House (No. 10 was undergoing renovation) from Chequers on Monday 22 October in time to receive David Bruce, the US Ambassador to London, and a CIA officer bearing intelligence at noon, dubbed it in the notes he made at the time the 'first day of the World Crisis!'[107]

There was much debate at the time (and since) about whether Britain, far from being the most 'special relation' of the USA (the fundamental premise of Macmillan's case for the UK being a nuclear power four years earlier),[108] was, as the Labour front-bencher, Dick Crossman, swiftly alleged, a powerless observer, and that as for British nuclear weapons giving the UK a place in the 'councils of the nations' and making sure

that the Americans will listen to us more than to any other ally . . . that little myth is exploded'.[109] British scholars have subsequently probed the degree to which Macmillan fully commanded and controlled the UK nuclear strike force during those seven days which he later described as 'the week of most strain I can ever remember in my life',[110] claiming that 'neither Sir Alec Home [the Foreign Secretary] nor I ever slept at all during the whole seven days'[111] (though his diary suggests he did – albeit fitfully). But the crisis, until recently, had remained curiously under-examined as a case-study of the British Cabinet system under stress and the true testing time for what was by this stage an elaborate set of contingency plans for central government action during a period of international tension which might culminate in an exchange of nuclear weapons. As a very senior defence and intelligence figure put it many years later: 'Cuba was the big one – *the* defining moment.'[112]

Neither Macmillan nor his war planners had worked on the assumption that Cuba might be the world's nuclear flashpoint in the Cold War. Berlin was always treated as the most likely locus and there had been a series of Berlin crises since the 1948–49 airlift (1958 and 1961 being the most recent). The British and the Americans from the outset in October 1962 saw a direct linkage between Cuba and Berlin. As Macmillan put it to Hugh Gaitskell, when he and Home briefed the Opposition leader and his senior colleagues, George Brown and Harold Wilson, on a Privy Counsellor basis at Admiralty House on the evening of Tuesday 23 October:

> It seemed to him [Macmillan] very likely that Khrushchev wished to force an international conference which he would then face with two cards in his hand – Cuba and Berlin. He might then hope that he would secure an advance on Berlin by appearing to make a concession on Cuba.

This, Macmillan added, 'might be a brilliant coup on the part of the Russians'.[113] Just over a year earlier, the ever meticulous Sir Norman Brook had drawn up a plan to deal with just such 'a crisis in Berlin'.[114] In June 1961 Macmillan thought, as he confided in his diary, that the Russians' latest attempt to prise the Western Allies out of their zones in Berlin might produce a 'drift to disaster . . . a terrible diplomatic defeat or (out of sheer incompetence) a nuclear war'.[115] The following month Macmillan and Brook exchanged notes on the preparations to be taken in case the position worsened.[116]

In August Brook consulted senior officials and the intelligence

community on a rejigging of the Whitehall machine to enable it 'to deal promptly with the issues which may arise over Berlin in the months ahead'.[117] In September he produced his plan.[118] The following month, almost exactly a year before the Cuban crisis erupted, Macmillan reached the point of designating which of his ministerial colleagues would, in the event of war, join him below ground at 'Turnstile' and which ministers would be dispersed to the bunkers that comprised the regional seats of government (sadly, the file does not tell us who would have gone where or which ministers would be left to do as best they could above ground).[119]

Brook's plan, one might have thought, would have proved almost ideally crafted for the crisis of October 1962. He wrote in September 1961,

> We must be prepared for a lengthy period of fluctuating political tension with the possibility that, either suddenly or in the course of negotiations if they begin, a critical politico-military situation may develop. If such a situation arises urgent consideration will have to be given to the possibility of action – diplomatic, economic or military.

The Whitehall machine, therefore, would need to be arranged in such a way as to 'allow vital decisions to be taken in an orderly and speedy way'.[120]

Brook, in essence, designed a halfway-house system to bridge the gap between the normal peacetime mechanics of government and the 'strategic warning stage . . . [at which] point we might have to consider the possibility of a small War Cabinet'.[121] During such a halfway contingency, in Brook's words, 'we shall not go underground or have executive decisions taken by "map rooms". But the normal methods must be accelerated.'[122]

At this point, Brook continued,

> the Prime Minister would appoint a Ministerial Committee on Berlin. It is likely that this Committee would consist of:
>
> Prime Minister (in the Chair)
> Home Secretary
> Chancellor of the Exchequer
> Foreign Secretary
> Commonwealth Secretary
> Minister of Defence.[123]

This committee would be serviced by the 'Cabinet Office Berlin Room'

into which the departments affected, the Chiefs of Staff and the Joint Intelligence Committee would feed on a twenty-four-hour basis. The 'Berlin Room' would be linked by scrambler telephone and teleprinter 'to all the major points of the central government concerned with the emergency'.[124]

Needless to say, RAF Bomber Command would have been plugged into this central centre of decision-taking. In July 1961, the V-bomber airfields had received the latest version of their 'alert and readiness procedures' which were the ones that were operational during the Cuban missile crisis – the so-called 'alert conditions 5–1':

> 5. *Normal.* Bomber Force in normal peace time condition.
> 4. *Precautionary Alert.* Instituted during periods of political tension . . .[125]

Bomber Command, or one of its sub-groups, could order action on 4.[126]

The next alert condition – 3 – was designed to enable the Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command 'during a period of political tension, to take certain precautionary measures short of the full and specific measures involved in the calling of higher alert conditions'.[127] It is important to consider this carefully as this is the condition to which Air Marshal Cross ordered the V force at 1.00 p.m. on Saturday 27 October as the Cuban crisis approached its peak.[128] It read as follows:

> 3. *Aircraft Generation.* The maximum number of aircraft are to be made Combat Ready. At Main Bases, aircraft planned to operate from those bases are to be prepared for operational take-off; the remainder are to be armed and prepared for dispersal.[129]

Alert condition 2 would have seen much of the V force dispatched to around twenty-six airfields in the UK under the 'Dispersal Plan' to reduce the risk of aircraft being destroyed on the ground.[130] Alert condition 1 involved placing 25 per cent of the nuclear strike force 'at 5 minutes readiness'.[131] All five alert conditions, as we have seen, remained subject throughout the Cuban missile crisis to the Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command's 'last resort' power to launch a retaliatory strike if Soviet bombs had burst over the UK and the Prime Minister or his designated deputy was beyond reach.[132]

So, how did Macmillan react to Kennedy's messages, to Ambassador

Bruce's noontime briefing on Monday 22 October and the U2 photographs of the missile sites on Cuba which the CIA's Chester Cooper (who was accompanying Bruce) brought with him to Admiralty House?[133] Did he consult Brook's careful 1961 plan and order Whitehall to its halfway-house condition? Did he press the Chiefs of Staff to bring the armed forces to a state of readiness? Did he ask for 'Turnstile' to be made ready? Did he decide which ministers would go to what bunkers?

He did none of these things. I have often wondered what Brook, the supreme organizer, would have advised had he not been ill and off work.[134] Despite the likelihood, as Macmillan told the full Cabinet the following day, that if Kennedy took steps to remove the Cuban missiles and Khrushchev retaliated by blockading Berlin it 'would lead either to an escalation to world war or to the holding of a conference',[135] the Prime Minister took no steps to create a Berlin-style committee or operations room, let alone a War Cabinet. The nearest he came to establishing any formal machinery was on Thursday 25 October when he told the Cabinet: 'The situation was still developing rapidly and it might be necessary for him to call a meeting of Ministers at short notice.'[136]

In fact, it seems as if Macmillan quite deliberately decided to do the reverse (though there is evidence that he had doubts about this during his post-Cuba rethink, as we shall see in a moment). Why did he take such a line? We know from his official biographer, Alistair Horne, that Macmillan, like Kennedy, had been 'profoundly affected'[137] by the recently published *The Guns of August*, in which Barbara Tuchman made an eloquent case for the great powers tumbling into a world war through miscalculation and inadvertence in 1914.[138]

On the evening of Monday 22 October Macmillan struck a very Tuchmanesque note in conversation with General Lauris Norstad at a long-planned dinner in Admiralty House to mark the American's farewell as NATO's Supreme Allied Commander, Europe.[139] This, Macmillan recorded in his diary that night,

> lasted from 8–11. But it gave me a chance of a private talk with General Norstad. Washington, in a rather panicky way, have been urging a Nato 'alert', with all that this implies (in our case Royal Proclamation and call-up of Reservists). I told him that we wd *not* repeat *not* agree at this stage. N. agreed with this and said he thought NATO powers wd take the same view. I said that 'mobilisation' had sometimes caused war. Here it was absurd since the additional forces made available by 'Alert' had *no* military significance.[140]

In his memoirs Macmillan quoted most of this diary entry omitting the reference to 'a rather panicky' Washington and adding: 'Indeed, apart from certain precautions affecting the Royal Air Force, we maintained this position throughout the crisis'[141] (we shall examine those 'certain precautions' in a moment). In his reflective and retrospective diary entry when the crisis was past, Macmillan recorded that his first post-Cuba week had 'seemed rather unreal, compared to the week before – with all those messages and telephone calls, and the frightful desire to *do* something, with the knowledge that *not* to do anything (except to talk to the President and keep Europe and the Commonwealth calm and firm) was prob. the right answer'.[142]

The Kennedy–Macmillan conversations have become a very well-known piece of history. There was a high degree of consultation between Kennedy and Macmillan which the President accorded to no other head of state or head of government. So close were the contacts that Ernest May and Philip Zelicow (whose moment-by-moment reconstruction of the Washington end of the decision-taking process became possible when they gained access to presidential tapes for October 1962) concluded thirty-five years later that 'It is . . . obvious from these records that Macmillan and Ormsby-Gore became *de facto* members of Kennedy's Executive Committee [the President's equivalent of a war cabinet]'[143] thanks to the frequent use of the transatlantic scrambler telephone which Macmillan had had installed in Admiralty House. (His lack of dexterity meant that Macmillan could never master the buttons on this machine and Philip de Zulueta, his private secretary for foreign affairs, had to work it for him.[144] As another of his private secretaries put it, 'Harold Macmillan could never handle the 'hot-line'. He would always talk to the air.')[145]

What has still to be reconstructed in any detail is the way in which he did make use of the Cabinet and Whitehall machinery, having failed to activate Brook's contingency plan. It is possible to go some way towards this thanks to Macmillan's memoirs, his own diaries, the diary of his Press Secretary, Harold Evans, and various public records.

It is quite plain that the management of the British end of the Cuban missile crisis was very largely a Prime Minister–Foreign Secretary affair conducted throughout from Admiralty House, to which the full Cabinet were admitted for three quite long discussions on the morning of Tuesday 23 October, the afternoon of Thursday 25 October and the morning of Monday 29 October.[146] (And on 26 October, Macmillan allowed the Acting Cabinet Secretary, Michael Cary, to circulate a Joint Intelligence

Committee paper on 'The Threat Posed by Soviet Missiles in Cuba' to all Cabinet members.)[147] As soon as Bruce and Cooper had left on the Monday afternoon, Macmillan summoned Lord Home and his 'chief advisers' from the Foreign Office to discuss the Air Staff's analysis of the U2 photographs and to draft a reply to Kennedy's first long telegram.[148] Thereafter, as Macmillan recorded in his diary after the Thursday Cabinet meeting, 'I told the Cabinet about Cuba (which they seem quite happy to leave to me and Alec Home)'.[149]

Confirmation of the centrality of the Macmillan–Home axis came in the post-crisis thankyou note penned on behalf of the Queen by her Private Secretary, Sir Michael Adeane. 'As I mentioned to you last night', Adeane wrote to Macmillan on 31 October,

> I made a rough note of the various contacts which took place during the last weekend between the Queen on the one hand, and yourself and the Foreign Secretary on the other. These were numerous and as a result Her Majesty was fully and continuously informed of what was going on in the relations between this country, the United States and the USSR.
>
> The Queen knows very well what a heavy strain both you and Lord Home and your staff were working under during these days and she wishes you to know how much she appreciates the trouble which was taken in your own office and the Foreign Office to see that she was kept up to date with the rapidly changing news.[150]

Intriguingly, the PRO material gives no indication of which place of safety was set aside for the royal family when the missiles looked likely to fly. The Royal Yacht *Britannia* was a fully fledged command and control centre with washdown facilities to tackle nuclear fall-out. I have always suspected the argument that it would have served as a hospital ship in time of war was a particularly feeble cover story. But the Queen, like her Minister, stayed above ground during the Cuban missile crisis.

In his retrospective diary entry of 4 November, Macmillan gives pride of place on the UK side to himself, Home and Ormsby-Gore, a primacy which the public records corroborate: '. . . the President and [Dean] Rusk [US Secretary of State] (and, above all, the President's 'chef de cabinet', McGeorge Bundy) were in continuous touch with Alec Home and me. David Gore was all the time in and out of the White House. The whole episode was like a battle; and we in Admiralty House felt as if we were in the battle HQ.'[151]

Once it was all over, on Sunday 26 October 1962, when Khrushchev agreed to withdraw his missiles from Cuba in return for the USA withdrawing its Jupiter rockets from Turkey, Harold Evans, in an atmospheric entry in his diary, described Macmillan's Cuba inner group (if, indeed, the ministers involved deserved such a precise designation):

> 'It's like a wedding', said the PM, 'when there is nothing left to do but drink champagne and go to sleep.' He had flopped down in the chair by the tape machine, with Tim [Bligh, Principal Private Secretary], Philip de Zulueta and myself as audience. The captains and the kings had departed and this was the No. 10 family.
>
> The captains and the kings – Rab [Butler] and Alec Home in particular, plus Ted Heath [Home's number 2 at the Foreign Office] plus Harold Caccia [Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office], plus (this morning) Thorneycroft [Minister of Defence] – had spent most of the last twenty-four hours in and out of Admiralty House.[152]

To Evans's list I would have added (for the first days of the crisis at least) the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Reginald Maudling. For example, as soon as Home had left Admiralty House on the afternoon of Monday 22 October, Macmillan sent for Maudling 'and put him in the picture. His advice was sensible. He wd see the Governor of the Bank. There wd be heavy buying of gold and a general fall of all stocks and shares – but no panic.'[153]

By the time of the Cuban missile crisis, Butler was not only the number 2 in the government, he carried the title of Deputy Prime Minister as well. Macmillan saw him privately at 3.15 on the afternoon of Tuesday 23 October (just before Gaitskell, Brown and Wilson came in to be briefed by the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary). Macmillan wrote in his diary: 'Butler. I had not been able to keep him fully informed, so I thought it wise to have a good talk.'[154]

Butler's number 2 position in the administration in October 1962 did not imply, any more than it had before he acquired the title of Deputy Prime Minister, that he would be Macmillan's 'designated deputy' when it came to authorizing the use of nuclear weapons should the PM be dead or beyond reach. Selwyn Lloyd had been the most notable victim of the July 1962 'Night of the Long Knives' reshuffle. We have no knowledge of who Macmillan chose to replace him in the nuclear role. My own guess would be that it was Home, and not merely because of his responsibility for and knowledge of foreign affairs. Macmillan had a very high regard

for Home's judgement and decisiveness. Though Butler was part of the Admiralty House group during the Cuban crisis, the surviving records suggest that he was there because of what he was rather than who he was. Macmillan's diary confirms Evans's – noting Butler's presence 'for a short time'[155] in Admiralty House on the especially tense Saturday evening, 27 October. (It was on this evening that Philip de Zulueta, arriving home late for a dinner party, told his wife and friends sombrely that 'we may be at war tomorrow'.)[156]

The Prime Minister's Cuba files contain no minutes of ministerial meetings. It appears to have been a remarkably fluid example of crisis management, with ministers mingling not just with officials but with younger members of the Macmillan extended family too. The Prime Minister's grandson Alexander (then aged nineteen) was living in Admiralty House at the time. 'I could tell from people's body language that it was serious,' he recalled. 'I remember Dennis Greenhill [a senior Foreign Office diplomat] coming in to brief Grandfather and looking at me. "It's all right," Grandfather said. "You can speak in front of Alexander. If we get this wrong it is his generation that will suffer." '[157] Evans's account adds further touches of domesticity, describing his (Evans) arriving in the dining room with 'chairs pulled back from the table and Ted [Heath] still eating before discussion shifts to the drawing room'.[158]

The Cabinet minutes for the three Cuban crisis meetings (which, naturally, do form a traditional recorded part of the processes in Admiralty House) give the impression of fairly full briefings by Macmillan and Home and fairly wide general discussions resulting on the wider implications of the crisis. (The Lord Chancellor, Lord Dilhorne, for example, had at the Cabinet's request prepared for its Thursday meeting a paper on the legal justification for Kennedy's naval blockade of Cuba.)[159]

On the Tuesday, Macmillan gave the first Cuba full Cabinet of the crisis what from the minutes appears to be a substantial picture of his dealings with Kennedy (and he used his colleagues as a sounding-board for the way he proposed to handle Parliament).[160] As he put it in his diary that night,

'Cabinet 10.30 – 1. I explained the whole Cuba situation, and *read* out aloud (but did *not* circulate) the vital documents – viz, (a) The President's confidential message to me, (b) The Ambassador's dêmarche and the summary of the evidence about the missiles in Cuba, (c) my replies, (d) summary of our telephone talk. Ministers seemed rather shaken, but satisfied.[161]

That evening, before completing his diary entry while feeling 'exhausted' (he was sixty-eight by this time), Macmillan had briefed the Queen at 6.30 and had supper with his close friend, Ava Waverley, the widow of John Anderson, Lord Waverley, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer and member of Churchill's World War II War Cabinet.[162] Just as the absence of a Cuba War Cabinet is surprising given all the prior contingency planning, Macmillan's use of the full Cabinet as a forum for discussion – if not decision – is quite striking. There was no attempt to use the Cabinet's Defence Committee as a halfway house between the full Cabinet and a War Cabinet. The Defence Committee did meet under Macmillan's chairmanship in Admiralty House on the afternoon of Wednesday 24 October (its last meeting in 1962). The first item under discussion is still secret (the others were the export of guided missiles and air defence and air traffic control). But it is most unlikely that the missing section was about Cuba, as it was devoted to the discussion of a prepared paper (which also remains classified), which suggests that it was a long-planned piece of business.[163]

There is evidence that had the Cuban missile crisis developed into a very strong likelihood of armed conflict, it was the full Cabinet to which Macmillan would have turned for authorization of a 'precautionary stage', as the War Book prescribed. Had this happened, the state whereby during the Cuban crisis 'We . . . were involved but detached', as Sir Frank Cooper described it,[164] would have been overtaken by rather more intrusive events.

From Ministry of Defence and Chiefs of Staff files it is clear that the warlike possibilities became substantially more alarming after Kennedy made it plain on Friday 26 October that, as Peter Thorneycroft, the Minister of Defence, put it to the Chiefs of Staff two days later,

unless he [Kennedy] received assurances regarding the disarming of Russian missiles in Cuba, the cessation of further construction work, and a halt to the shipping of further offensive weapons, he would have to consider what action should be taken to meet these ends.[165]

'In the light of this,' Thorneycroft continued, 'it would have been prudent to consider what precautionary measures the United Kingdom should take; dispersal of the V force [i.e., alert condition 2] and possibly even mobilisation represented possible options.'[166] Sunday 28 October was clearly to have been a key day of decision for Macmillan, his ministers

and his military advisers had word not come through that Khrushchev was backing down. (Macmillan was finishing eating lunch with Butler, Home, Thorneycroft and Heath when 'the news came (by radio) that the Russians had given in'.)[167]

The previous day Macmillan had told Pike, the Chief of the Air Staff, that 'if the situation deteriorated further [he] intended calling a Cabinet meeting on the next afternoon [Sunday]' with the Chiefs of Staff in attendance.[168] Thorneycroft's meeting with the chiefs just after his Sunday lunch with Macmillan had plainly been intended to co-ordinate military advice ahead of the Sunday afternoon Cabinet meeting had it convened. Given Khrushchev's climbdown, Thorneycroft told the chiefs, he 'did not ... consider that any immediate precautionary measures were necessary'.[169]

To what extent *had* certain precautionary measures been taken already, despite Macmillan's insistence that Tuchmanism prevail? As we have seen from the contingency plans, the Cabinet was to be invited to consider declaring a 'precautionary stage' on receipt of a strategic warning from the Joint Intelligence Committee that the intelligence community had 'a positive indication that an enemy attack is to be expected'.[170]

We now know that the Soviet military intelligence officer, Colonel Oleg Penkovsky (an agent-in-place recruited by the British Secret Intelligence Service who since April 1961 had been passing high-grade information on nuclear capability to Whitehall and Washington), was arrested by the KGB on Monday 22 October 1962 (the day Macmillan received the U2 photographs) at the moment, probably, of the West's greatest need of him (he had a system for warning the Secret Intelligence Service, SIS, and the CIA of sudden dangerous developments).[171] We know from his official biographer that Macmillan believed Penkovsky's information about the capacity of Soviet missiles, including the SS-4s installed on Cuba, had an important bearing on the 1962 crisis.[172] Two messages indicating imminent danger were received by the SIS and the CIA from 'Penkovsky' (i.e., his captors and controllers) on 2 November 1962, nearly a week after the crisis had dissipated and eleven days after Penkovsky's arrest.[173] His SIS controller in the British Embassy in Moscow was convinced they were not genuine and, mercifully, made his advice to this effect plain to his superiors.[174]

In the absence of Macmillan's daily Cuban crisis intelligence feed, from SIS especially, we can only conclude that up to Sunday 28 October, he had received nothing to trigger a move to the 'precautionary stage'. Had

Kennedy 'taken out' the missiles on Cuba or invaded the island on 29 October or thereafter, a Soviet move against Berlin was widely expected which would have swung the War Book into action. (And Macmillan expected Khrushchev to make just such a 'counter-move' on Berlin even after his climbdown on Cuba.)[175]

Following the publication in 1980 of the memoirs of Air Vice Marshal Sir Stewart Menaul, Senior Air Staff Officer at Bomber Command's Headquarters in High Wycombe in October 1962, it became widely believed that on his own initiative, Menaul's chief, Air Marshal Cross, had 'increased the readiness' of the V bombers to fifteen minutes away from take-off.[176] This, rightly or wrongly, created the impression that the country's leading nuclear airman had extended a routine readiness exercise, thereby exceeding his powers in contravention of the wishes Macmillan expressed to General Norstad on 22 October and to the Chief of the Air Staff on 27 October (when an 'adamant' Prime Minister told Pike at the Saturday morning meeting in Admiralty House that even now 'he did not consider the time was right for any overt preparatory steps to be taken such as mobilisation'[177]). Macmillan, it should be remembered, had been *au fait* with War Book matters since his spell at the Ministry of Defence in 1954–55. As Prime Minister he had also observed a V-bomber 'scramble' exercise at RAF Cottesmore some years earlier. (There exists some marvellous newsreel footage of him standing on the tarmac bowler-hatted, erect as the Guardsman he once was, umbrella by his side as the Klaxon sounds and the airmen race to their bombers).[178] In short, he was neither naïve nor a novice when it came to the transition to war.

It is slightly surprising, however, that Macmillan waited until the morning of Saturday 27 October before summoning the Chief of the Air Staff, Sir Thomas Pike, to discover what was 'the current alert posture of our forces' (as Pike put it when reporting to his fellow chiefs on the Saturday afternoon).[179] Pike told Macmillan 'that at the moment the three Service Ministers had warned their senior officers to be available, if required, at approximately one hour's notice'.[180]

Macmillan briefed Pike on what Kennedy had told him over the 'hot-line' the previous evening – that if the Russians did not stop the shipment of missiles to Cuba or the work on the missile sites and did not 'defuse' the weapons already there within forty-eight hours, 'he [Kennedy] would take action to destroy the rocket sites either by bombing, by invasion or by both'.[181] The US invasion force, Macmillan continued, would not be ready until Monday 29 October but, once it was, Kennedy might take 'definite

action' informing his allies of this rather than consulting them in advance.[182]

Despite the possibility that within two days Kennedy might take direct steps against Cuba, thereby triggering a response from Khrushchev against Berlin, Macmillan none the less, as Pike told his fellow chiefs, 'had been adamant that he did not consider the time was appropriate for any overt preparatory steps to be taken such as mobilization. Moreover, he did not wish Bomber Command to be alerted, although he wished the force to be ready to take the appropriate steps should this become necessary.'[183] In other words, Macmillan asserted firm political control over his nuclear war machinery that Saturday morning. It is plain from the records that Pike passed on the Prime Minister's instructions to the Chief of Bomber Command, Cross.[184] At one o'clock on the afternoon of Saturday 27 October, Cross placed the V force on alert condition 3 in line with Macmillan's wish that they be made ready. And this condition was maintained until Guy Fawkes Day, 5 November 1962.[185]

When the Chiefs of Staff met an hour and a half after alert condition 3 had been declared to hear Pike's account of his conversation with Macmillan in Admiralty House that morning, they considered what action to recommend to the Cabinet (if, as Macmillan warned Pike might happen, a meeting was called on the Sunday afternoon). The Chiefs believed that 'Bomber Command should be alerted and dispersed [i.e., moved up to alert condition 2] in the event of positive indications that the United States propose to operate against the Cuban mainland'.[186]

Like Macmillan, the Chiefs thought: 'One of the most likely Russian reactions to the United States action over Cuba would be to occupy West Berlin.'[187] This, quite plainly, would have activated all the elaborate nuclear War Book planning developed piece by piece since the Strath Report over seven years earlier. And, from the way the Chiefs put it, there would have been more than a touch of *The Guns of August* had the Russians moved against West Berlin:

> In view of the overwhelming force that they [the Russians] had available, this could be conducted with little warning. Moreover, Berlin was indefensive [sic] militarily and the [Western] forces there were in token strength only . . .
>
> It would be essential for Bomber Command to be alerted and dispersed as soon as the situation so warranted in order that its deterrent effect should be seen to remain credible. This measure would be the most effective that could be carried out short of general mobilisation . . .[188]

It is quite plain from the secret British archive on Cuba that the UK 'brink', to which Macmillan referred in his memoirs, would have been reached on Monday 29 October 1962 had Khrushchev not backed down the previous day.

So, as Macmillan finished his Sunday lunch in Admiralty House and the news of the Soviet climbdown came over the radio, what nuclear capacity had the Royal Air Force prepared ready to move to alert condition 3 should the political authorization have been given so to do? It is worth pondering, as Saturday–Sunday 27–28 October 1962 is the closest, so far as is known, that any British Prime Minister has come to activating the UK's nuclear forces. (Hence that senior Whitehall figure describing it even in the 1990s as '*the* defining moment' of the postwar period in nuclear terms.)

From the exercise codenamed 'Micky Finn II' undertaken the previous month (it was confined to September 20–22 and did not run on into the Cuban crisis) we can gauge the nuclear strike capacity of Bomber Command in the autumn of 1962. 'It was', as the post-exercise report put it, 'designed to exercise fully the Alert and Readiness Plan, including the dispersal of the MBF [Medium Bomber Force], under conditions of "No Notice" [i.e., the bolt from the blue].'[189] On 20 September, 112 V bombers went to alert condition 2 at 6.00 a.m., moving to alert condition 1 at 8.11 on the same morning – a position they held until 5.30 on 22 September.[190]

From the review conference Cross and his commanders held at RAF North Luffenham on 15 November 1962, we know that under 50 per cent of the V force 'was at readiness' during the Cuban crisis, though all but one of the sixty Thor missiles (operated jointly under a dual-key system with the Americans) were 'made serviceable and ready' at the same time.[191] Exercise Micky Finn, however, suggests that had Macmillan authorized the next stage of alert procedure during Cuba, Cross could have mobilized a substantial number of nuclear-armed aircraft on the simple transmission of the codeword 'Framework'.[192] Indeed, he told the Vice Chief of the Air Staff on 31 October that he had had 'everything ready to bring 75 per cent of the aircraft in the Command to readiness', but he 'could not give the order for fear of the effect it might have (if it became known) on the very tense negotiations being carried on by Mr Kruschev [sic] and Mr Kennedy'.[193]

There is an antiseptic quality about occasions such as Cross's Cuba debriefing with his commanders, as there is about the sparse record of '*the*

defining moment' in, for example, the files of No. 1 Group Headquarters (to which the orders were transmitted alerting the bases in Lincolnshire, Britain's 'Bomber County').[194] This is how it reads in No. 1 Group's 'Operations Record Book' for October 1962:

II. *Alert Condition 3, 27th October, 1962*

(a) As a result of the Cuban crisis and the political situation BCOC [Bomber Command Operations Centre] initiated Alert Condition 3 (precautionary alert) at 1300 Z on 27 October 1962. All key personnel were required to remain on stations and Operations Room staff to be available at short notice. Although no generation of aircraft was ordered, some preparations were made to ensure rapid generation if necessary. All measures were to be unobtrusive.[195]

Plainly, Macmillan's Tuchmanesque instructions to Pike had been fully conveyed to the nuclear bases. Two more paragraphs complete the operational record of the crisis:

(c) An increase in the number of aircraft from 6 to 12 on QRA [Quick Reaction Alert] was ordered by Bomber Command at 1547 Z on 28th October 1962, to be effective as soon as possible after 0800 Z on 29th October 1962.
(d) Alert Condition 3 was cancelled at 0900 Z on 5th November 1962. QRA states returned to normal.[196]

But what did this actually mean on the ground in Lincolnshire?

Len Scott discovered it directly from Air Vice-Marshal Arthur Griffiths who, in October 1962, was a Vulcan squadron commander at RAF Waddington near Lincoln. He told Scott in 1993,

'I spent most of that period on Quick Reaction Alert in a flight hut on "B" Dispersal at RAF Waddington. My Vulcan was parked about 20 yards away, fully fuelled, and loaded with a nuclear weapon. All the switches in the aircraft were set for a rapid start on the four engines, the aircraft was locked, and I carried the key to the door on a string around my neck. My crew and I were not permitted to leave the dispersal, so food was brought out to us, and we slept fully-clothed on camp beds. Although we were nominally at 15 minutes' readiness, we could have been airborne day or night within half that time.'[197]

Griffiths' testimony is significant. Under the QRA procedure imple-

mented at V bomber airfields in February 1962,[198] between three and nine aircraft could be placed on pads at the end of the runway and prepared for take-off, complete with H-bombs, in fifteen minutes. This was a state of readiness which did not depend on dispersal and a shift from alert condition 3 to alert condition 2.

While Arthur Griffiths sat in his hut just north of Lincoln that morning, why didn't the Chiefs of Staff prepare to forsake their suite in the Ministry of Defence in Whitehall and race down the A4 to Corsham, taking the Prime Minister and his War Cabinet with them once the full Cabinet authorized a 'Precautionary Stage' when they had met on the Sunday afternoon? As far as we know, neither Macmillan – nor any other Prime Minister since – has ever set foot in 'Turnstile'.[199]

Sir Frank Cooper is of the belief that nobody has 'been there apart from the Ministry of Works and possibly the Cabinet Office'. He recalls that the Chiefs 'never liked the idea of rushing to a bloody quarry . . . people disappearing to the West Country. And nobody really believed that, if the worst came to the worst, this thing was going to work from there in any event. They just didn't see that they could operate efficiently.'[200]

The files support Sir Frank's recollection and add another twist. Six months post-Cuba, the Chiefs of Staff Committee pondered the problem of exactly when to go 'underground'. They had commissioned a briefing on it from their commanders-in-chief. The commanders reminded them in March 1963 that Macmillan's directive the previous year had laid down that 'Turnstile' was

(a) To act as the seat of Government in the period of survival and reconstruction.
(b) To be an alternative centre to London for authorising nuclear retaliation.

But

It is fundamental to all TURNSTILE planning that if its location and purpose were known to the Russians it would almost certainly be destroyed. If its communications were used for operational purposes it is considered that both the location and function of TURNSTILE would be known within a day or so at the outside. It seems essential, therefore, that no plans should be made for the exercise of operational control from TURNSTILE in the pre-attack period . . . A conflict . . . arises because the Commanders-in-Chief can only exercise their post-attack responsibilities from TURNSTILE, and cannot be expected to move there at the moment of attack.[201]

It is not known how (if ever) this dilemma was resolved, though the commanders-in-chief recommended that the already agreed principle 'that control should remain in Whitehall for as long as possible' should mean that everyone should stay in Whitehall 'throughout the Precautionary Stage'.[202] It is difficult to reconcile this with the central nucleus of government running for the cars to Corsham only once a tactical warning had been received with missiles and aircraft already detectable on the radar screens.

Significantly, the Chiefs and their commanders confronting the 'Turnstile' dilemma is but one element of a post-Cuba rethink of 'War Book planning' ordered by Macmillan.[203] Within an hour or two of Khrushchev's climbdown on Sunday 28 October 1962 the chiefs at their meeting with Thorneycroft recognized that the missile crisis had exposed a significant gap in UK planning. They acknowledged that 'Detailed contingency plans existed for the action to be taken in the event of a NATO alert or Berlin crisis. Plans had also been made to meet many other situations in which the United Kingdom was likely to be directly involved.'[204]

But

> Little consideration had . . . so far been given to the precautionary measures which it would be prudent for the United Kingdom to take in circumstances such as these when there was a confrontation between the United States and Russia, in which the United Kingdom was not directly involved.[205]

There it is in a nutshell – a demonstration that Allen's Law operated at the British end of the Cuban missile crisis. It also explains why Macmillan and Home treated it very largely as a diplomatic crisis from Monday 22 October to lunchtime on Sunday 28 October (hence their almost joint-management of it in Cabinet and Whitehall). Though by the following day, had Kennedy made a move against Cuba, the crisis could well have turned into a transition-to-war question as foreseen by the War Book. It is, as we have seen in earlier chapters, quite often useful and valid to see the conduct of the premiership as a variant of 'structured busking' (to borrow a phrase of George Bain's).[206] But had the Cuban crisis persisted for another twenty-four hours, the response of the inner core of British government could well have become rather more structured than improvised.

It is plain from records which only reached the PRO in 1998 that Macmillan, in the aftermath of Cuba, brooded on the planning gap identified by the Chiefs of Staff during their Sunday afternoon meeting

with Thorneycroft. As the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Burke Trend, put it in a minute to Thorneycroft:

> After the Cuba Crisis the Prime Minister directed that the [Cabinet's] Home Defence Committee should review the state of Government War Book planning in order ensure that it was sufficiently flexible to enable us to react quickly and appropriately to a sudden emergency, in which we might have no more than two or three days' warning of the outbreak of war.[207]

A major concern was the need to have World War III emergency powers in place if a crisis should, Cuba-style, come out of the blue and take the UK swiftly to the nuclear brink.

As a result of the review a fierce Emergency Powers (Defence) Bill, 'more drastic than the Regulations in the Second World War', as its framers put it,[208] gave the state the power to break itself up into ten bits or 'Regional Seats of Government', each under the charge of a minister acting as a 'Regional Commissioner' possessing 'such wide powers, particularly financial powers, as to amount to a voluntary abdication by Parliament of the whole of their functions for the period of the emergency'.[209] (Other matters than the financial catch the eye when reading the draft Bill, such as those giving the regional commissioners vast powers over property and 'any class of person so specified' under the proposed defence regulations. Sanctions against malefactors under the regulations could include a sentence of death by the courts, with appeals to 'not less than three persons who hold or have held high judicial office'.)[210]

Not surprisingly, ministers decided it would be unwise to put this Bill to Parliament in peacetime as it 'has always been a politically unattractive proposal'[211] and because the 'political unity which Parliament would display in emergency would be lacking in peace; and the Bill would provoke highly critical debate', as the post-Cuba review put it in the briefing papers prepared for the ministerial group.[212]

A change was made, however, to the ability of the Prime Minister to act alone in a sudden emergency as described by the review. 'The Government War Book', its compilers noted,

> at present assumes that the Precautionary Stage will be instituted by decision of the Cabinet. It seems possible however that, if news were received at night or over the weekend of a sudden deterioration in the international situation which seemed likely to call for urgent Government War Book action, the Prime Minister might

wish to institute the Precautionary Stage on his personal authority without waiting for the Cabinet to come together.[213]

Macmillan decided to take this power unto himself through a process of self-authorization without even waiting for the ministerial group on the 'Post-Cuba Review of War Book Planning' to meet[214] – another example of a premier simply adding to the reach of his office on his own authority without wider ministerial, let alone Cabinet, approval. When the post-Cuba ministerial group under the Home Secretary, Henry Brooke, finally met on 30 July 1963, they simply 'took note' that Macmillan had already 'authorised' this accretion of prime ministerial power.[215]

In examining the Cuban crisis I have concentrated on high policy-makers, their decision-taking processes and the nuclear weapon. But the World War III plan contained much more than this, including an 'evacuation policy' which involved dispersing 9.5 million people from 'priority classes' (largely women and children) away from nineteen population centres (the big cities, naturally) in the pre-attack phase.[216] It is not clear from the record if this was considered – let alone prepared – as the missile crisis approached its peak.

Cuba is rightly seen as *the* moment since 1945 when the UK came closest to a nuclear brink. But the records show there was one other occasion when British intelligence suggested that the Soviet Union might be about to take imminent and substantial military action against British forces – a warning given with a level of urgency not matched at any stage of the Cuban missile crisis.

This was at the climax of the Suez affair on 6 November 1956. The warning is preserved in the papers of General Sir Charles Keightley, Commander-in-Chief of the combined Anglo-French Forces. It was flashed to all his commanders on land, on sea and in the air, to Whitehall, and to RAF Bomber Command's Headquarters. It read as follows:

ONE. INFORMATION HAS BEEN RECEIVED THAT RUSSIA MAY INTERVENE IN THE MIDDLE EAST WITH FORCE.

TWO. ACTION WILL BE TAKEN FORTHWITH SO THAT ALL AIRFIELDS ARE AT THE MAXIMUM STATE OF PREPAREDNESS FOR AN ATTACK AGAINST THEM. IN PARTICULAR THE GREATEST POSSIBLE DISPERSION OF AIRCRAFT WILL BE ACHIEVED AND MAINTAINED.

THREE. NAVAL AND ARMY FORCE WILL ALSO TAKE APPROPRIATE ACTION TO MEET THIS THREAT.[217]

We know from intelligence material passed to the Queen that on 6 November 1956 it had been 'reported that jet aircraft have been overflying Turkish territory. These aircraft are assumed to be Russian reinforcements for Syria and Egypt.'[218] Two days later Her Majesty was informed that 'it now appears from the evidence available that there is no truth in recent rumours of Russian air movements over Turkey and Syria'.[219]

From JIC records it seems that Keightley's alert was based on an 'unconfirmed report' emanating from the Joint Intelligence Committee (Middle East) based in Cyprus that eighty MiGs 'were to arrive at Damascus and Aleppo' in Syria.[220] It is plain from the Queen's Suez intelligence briefings that scouring the airwaves for evidence of 'large scale Soviet preparations to intervene by force in the Middle East' remained a priority for British signals and other forms of intelligence for at least ten days after the invasion had been halted.[221]

By an intriguing and faintly alarming coincidence (if you consider Eden's health and state of mind during the Suez crisis, which we shall examine in detail in chapter 9) the V force became fully operational only in October 1956,[222] just weeks before Keightley flashed his 'maximum state of preparedness' message back to London.[223] As Scott and Twigge put it: 'Ironically, Britain's nuclear ascendancy accompanied her political decline: October 1956 not only witnessed the attainment of Britain's atomic ambition but the diplomatic disaster that was Suez.'[224]

The Suez crisis was the central element in the Eden premiership and its eventual destroyer. It will be discussed in detail in the chapter devoted to his stewardship. It produced a spate of inquests that ran on deep into the Macmillan premiership, some of which had to do with the likelihood of future limited wars, the UK's readiness to fight them[225] and Whitehall's capacity to manage them.[226] The capabilities of individual premiers as war or near-war leaders will be considered in the next part of the book. But it is necessary here, in analysing the job of Prime Minister itself, to draw up a set of performance indicators for premiers as limited-war leaders against which those individuals can be judged.

I think the essential requirements can be reduced to six:

1. The 'War Cabinet' should have as close and constant a relationship with the full Cabinet as possible. As Hankey put it when designing the breed, 'All

decisions of a "War Committee" should be communicated as soon as possible to the full Cabinet, those of a more secret character, on which the success of operation or the lives of men may depend, being communicated verbally. The experience of the [Great] War showed that for the smooth working of Cabinet Government it was essential that the general results of the War Committee's deliberations should be known to the Cabinet. Otherwise suspicion and friction are apt to be engendered.'[227]

2. The War Cabinet should consist of no more than six constant ministerial attenders. For the efficient conduct of affairs, diplomatic or military, it needs to meet regularly and have a bias towards the taking of decisions rather than deferring them. The War Cabinet needs to have adequate military, Civil Service and Diplomatic Service back-up, an efficient advice system and a constant flow of high-quality intelligence assessments from the Joint Intelligence Committee.
3. The War Cabinet should take pains to avoid the 'tunnel vision'[228] and technical 'overload' that can afflict small groups directed towards a single overriding purpose under conditions of great stress.
4. There needs to be a constant awareness of the needs, priorities and attitudes of allies (or potential allies) and the politics of those international organizations in which, to whatever extent, the conflict is being monitored or played out.
5. Full, accurate and timely disclosure on matters affecting the conflict or near-conflict should be made to Parliament, the media and the public.
6. Ministers in the War Cabinet should remember at all times, as a thoughtful airman put it over twenty years ago, that the essential nature of armed conflict is 'to destroy things and kill people',[229] and that the highest duty on politicians in authority is, therefore, to ensure that all steps that can be taken to avoid war – whether through early preventive action, quality diplomacy or high-grade intelligence – are taken.

There is a gap in those half-dozen criteria (and in my treatment of the transition to World War III) – declarations of war, or rather, the lack of them. This was an absence which struck me in the aftermath of the Falklands War when I discovered what had transpired in the Home Office (which deals with matters of the royal prerogative) on Falklands Saturday, 3 April 1982, a few hours before the House of Commons debated the crisis.

There was a flurry of anxiety in Queen Anne's Gate that morning because Home Office officials, thinking ahead as their profession required them to do, thought ministers might wish to declare war on Argentina; the invasion of the Falklands could only be seen (from London, at least)

as a piece of straightforward aggression by one state against the territory of another. The civil servants did what the British official does best: they looked for the file to see how to do it. But they could not find it.[230]

Britain, after all, had not declared war on anyone since doing so against Siam in January 1942.[231] Ever since, British forces, when engaged in operations outside the UK's jurisdiction, have operated under that mystical but mighty entity, the royal prerogative.[232] But the declaration the officials were seeking, naturally, was not that of 1942 but that of 3 September 1939, when Britain declared war on Germany.

Home Office people do not give in easily. The Cabinet had decided the previous evening that a task force would be sent to the South Atlantic. The civil servants really needed that bit of paper. An official of the Public Record Office was reached at home. The official repaired to Kew. The shelves were searched. Still nothing.[233] The file was eventually found a dozen years later (I had been inquiring after it for years) in time to be shown to my students on one of our regular familiarization trips from Queen Mary and Westfield College in the Mile End Road to the PRO in December 1994.[234]

I have not seen it published in a book before. Here it is. Just two sides. Drawn up by the Foreign Office Legal Adviser, Sir Gerald Fitzmaurice, at the request of the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, on the day of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, 23 August 1939:

Mr Harvey [Halifax's Private Secretary to whom Fitzmaurice's reply was sent].

The Secretary of State's enquiry about how we declare war. The method of procedure is to deliver a declaration of war to the diplomatic representative in London of the enemy Power or Powers at such hour as may be decided upon by the Cabinet and to obtain a receipt recording the time of delivery. The declaration is delivered by a special messenger who should take with him the special passports covering the enemy representative, his family and personal staff and his diplomatic staff and their families. These are now being drafted on the assumption that war would in the first place be only declared on Germany and the Secretary of State would have to sign them.

It is not possible to state definitely at present what the terms of the declaration of war itself would be as these must depend upon circumstances. It is quite likely that our declaration of war might be preceded by an ultimatum which would be delivered in Berlin. This might e.g. take the form that if by a certain time the German Government had not given an assurance that they would proceed no

further with their violation of Polish territory the Ambassador had been instructed to ask for his passports and that His Majesty's Government would have to take such steps as might seem good to them. In such a case our actual declaration of war on the expiry of the time limit would take the form of notifying the German Embassy that no satisfactory reply having been received from the German Government, His Majesty's Government considered that a state of war between the two countries existed as from a certain time.

I understand that the declaration would be drafted in consultation with the Dominions Office.

Once the declaration has been delivered a lot of consequential results follow, such as informing the other Government Departments that war has been declared and giving the same information to the diplomatic representatives in London of non-enemy Powers and so forth. Standing drafts for all these purposes exist.[235]

This, by any standards, is a collector's item, and not just because of its awesome significance when the time came eleven days later for war to be declared on Germany. Savour the understatement and the Pooterish attention to procedural detail. Fitzmaurice added an afterthought: 'Cabinet has to approve draft Dec[n] [Declaration].' Halifax, for his part, penned on the document an almost casual note to his Permanent Secretary, Sir Alexander Cadogan: 'You might see this. I presume that if and when the case should arise we shd have to concert with the French.'[236]

Why was this extraordinary historical artefact mislaid for over fifty-five years? Because, as the outer cover of the file and the top right-hand corner of the document make plain, on 12 September 1939 it was consigned to an FO category known as 'General and Miscellaneous' and not copied to the Home Office.[237] Mercifully, neither Mrs Thatcher nor her Cabinet thought of declaring war over that tense weekend in the spring of 1982, partly because they were advised by the Department of Trade and Industry that the Trading with the Enemy Act would come into force if they did, which would cause chaos in the UK's economic relations with Argentina long after what was certain to be a short war.[238] I have since ensured that the file will be to hand in any future contingencies which may require it, for I sent a copy, at his request, to the then Secretary of the Cabinet, Sir Robin Butler. He, in turn, forwarded copies to the permanent secretaries of the Whitehall departments concerned with war-making.

It was intriguing to discover in a No. 10 file from July 1951, re-reviewed and released once the Cold War was over, the complicated briefing which underlay the decision *not* to declare war as part of the United Nations'

action against North Korea (and China after November 1950, when Chinese troops arrived in force on the Korean peninsula). After two discussions in Cabinet, the problem was remitted to a committee of officials. In essence, the difficulty arose because conflicts such as Korea, as Brook put it in his brief to Attlee, could 'be considered as police actions or war'.[239]

Brook explained:

[the] problem is of practical importance and urgency because, if the Government decided that all such conflicts should be regarded as international police actions rather than war, important parts of our domestic law would need to be amended if the Government were to be able to exercise on such an occasion all the powers which would be available to them in a state of war.[240]

In a draft Cabinet paper attached to this minute, Brook, summarizing the work of the official committee, declared it was 'arguable that under the United Nations Charter war is outlawed and that any conflict in which we may be involved in pursuance of our obligations under the Charter should, strictly, be considered as an international police operation rather than as war'.[241]

The same paper made it plain just how convenient it was to be able to declare war under the royal prerogative without the formal sanction of the legislature (unlike, as Brook pointed out, the United States): 'Much of the Prerogative and common law, as well as some statutory provisions which would have to apply in a major conflict, have as their fundamental basis the defence of the Realm; and to endeavour to change this fundamental basis to a conception related in the main, not to the defence of the Realm, but to some supra-national idea of universal peace, might well raise legal doubts and complications the extent of which it is difficult to foresee,' the draft paper explained.[242]

A human, and somewhat alarming, question arises from the prerogative powers a Prime Minister possesses, not least because of a premier's capacity to authorize a nuclear strike or a government's capacity to deploy troops in action without consulting Parliament. The question is, what if a Prime Minister goes bananas (as the Chief of the Air Staff said of Eden in July 1956)?[243] This is particularly alarming in the nuclear contingency where time and other pressures would be at their most intense.

Sir Frank Cooper has described this as an area beset by 'lovely constitutional problems'.

'You've got to be quite clear about this,' he said. 'No minister can give

an order to the Armed Forces. The Prime Minister can't give an order, nor can the Secretary of State for Defence. They can give a direction saying X should be done. They can approve a recommendation, but it's not an order. The only people who can legally give orders are the military.'[244]

Sir Frank's attention to 'these important constitutional niceties', as he called them,[245] arose in the context of a long interview with Tom Dibble and myself about the Falklands War. The conversation continued like this:

HENNESSY: The only exception, and we're on a different area now, is the launching of the nuclear weapons. Only the Prime Minister can do that.

COOPER: Well, he can give authority to launch.

DIBBLE: That, in effect, must be the same thing.

COOPER: But it's not. It's terribly important. An order given by a politician . . . to a military commander is not a legal order.

HENNESSY: So, if the Prime Minister said 'Let the Trident off' and the CDS [Chief of the Defence Staff] thought that this was crackers . . . and they're in PINDAR [the Ministry of Defence's bunker] and the Prime Minister's got the [launch] codes, can the CDS say 'Right, no'?

COOPER: I believe that would be the giving of authority [by the Prime Minister]. And if the CDS said, 'I'm not going to do it,' he [the CDS] would have to go.[246]

At this point we reverted to the Falklands:

HENNESSY: If Margaret [Thatcher] had said to Terry Lewin [Chief of the Defence Staff] 'I want a V-bomber with a WE 177 [hydrogen] bomb on it and go and drop it on Argentina, and I'm authorizing that', Terry Lewin could have said privately to himself, 'She's out of her mind and I do not transmit the signal to [RAF] Strike Command.'

COOPER: I think anybody would say: 'I'm not prepared to do that . . . there is no military justification.' And then they'd have to sit down and work out whether you would do it or maintain a position that there's no military ground for it and it would mean killing hundreds of people.

HENNESSY: Thousands.[247]

There it is. Only the Prime Minister can authorize the use of nuclear weapons; only a figure in military command can give the order to do so. The Chief of Defence Staff, the nation's top officer, could refuse to convert prime ministerial authority into such an order. Though Sir Frank Cooper

made it plain that during the Cold War the military had pondered not so much on the need to restrain a premier but 'whether, however dire the circumstances, the Prime Minister would be willing to give the political authority. It has always been seen more by the military in that light . . .'[248] I have put that question directly only to two British Prime Ministers – Alec Home and Jim Callaghan. Home said: 'Terrible, isn't it, the thought; but reason, cold reason doesn't operate in those circumstances quite often. And I'm not sure what cold reason would tell you either if they [the Russians] were on the march.'[249]

I asked Jim Callaghan would he – could he – in the direst of circumstances have fired a Polaris missile? 'If that had become necessary and vital,' he replied, 'it would have meant that the deterrent had failed, because the value of the nuclear weapon is, frankly, only as a deterrent. But if we had got to that point, where I felt it was necessary to do it, then I would have done it. I've had terrible doubts, of course, about this. And if I had lived after pressing that button, I could never have forgiven myself.'[250]

Unknown to Callaghan, or any of the UK's 'nuclear premiers', there was one moment during the Cold War when, had the Soviet Union failed to be deterred, the British war planners at least would have failed to notice. It was in June 1963 during, ironically enough, the post-Cuba review of readiness procedures. The Russians' 'window of opportunity', as it was described to me by a long-serving civil servant on deterrent matters, had to do with a hot (as opposed to a cold) war. During that last over of the Lord's Test Match against the West Indies, when Colin Cowdrey came in with a broken arm and he and David Allen had to hold out against Wes Hall in full cry if the match was to be saved, every single screen of the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System was displaying the live broadcast on BBC Television.[251] When I was told this awesome official secret (of which I am sure there will be no trace in the records) some ten years after the end of the Cold War, I found the humanity of it – and the sense of priority shown – comforting and reassuring.

We must now turn from the awesome question of what British Prime Ministers might have done (once they became nuclear armed, and cricket permitting) to the rather more prosaic matter of what all eleven of them actually did across a wide range of activity when holding the highest executive office in the land at various times since 1945.