The core executive: the Prime Minister and Cabinet

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> " The office of the Prime Minister is what the holder chooses and is able to make of it "
>
> H.H. Asquith (1926)

Learning objectives

- To describe the development of the office of Prime Minister.
- To identify the nature of prime ministerial power and the significance of the individual in the office.
- To describe the development and role of the Cabinet.
- To assess different explanations of the location of power at the heart of British government.

Introduction

The fount of policy making in Britain has always been the executive. Initially the crown was all-powerful, but then the powers of the crown came to be exercised by bodies on behalf of the crown. The king's justice came to be dispensed by his courts. Generating measures of public policy moved to the king's ministers, especially in the eighteenth century with the arrival of the Hanoverian kings, who had little interest in domestic politics. As we have seen (Chapter 15), the monarch moved from being at the heart of public policy to being, by the twentieth century, above the political fray, giving assent to what is decided but not interfering in the process. Political power came to be exercised by the king's ministers, the leading ministers drawn together in a Cabinet and headed by the king's principal, or prime, minister. Though political power passed to the Prime Minister and Cabinet, the form of monarchical government remained and continues to provide the legal framework within which government is conducted.

The emergence of a powerful Prime Minister and Cabinet was marked in the nineteenth century. Collective responsibility became a convention of the constitution. Although the legal authority of ministers rested on their position as servants of the crown, their political authority came to rest on the fact that they commanded a majority in the House of Commons. After the 1840s, the monarch's choice of ministry was constrained by the votes of the electors. The head of the party commanding a majority in the House of Commons was invited to become Prime Minister and, by the very reason he became Prime Minister,

was able to exercise considerable power through the party's majority in the House. By virtue of the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty (Chapter 14), the outputs of Parliament were binding and could be set aside by no body other than Parliament itself. Whoever commanded a majority in the House of Commons could thus wield considerable power. The Prime Minister and Cabinet came to form the heart of government – the core executive – in the United Kingdom. Though recent pressures – the hollowing out of the state and multilevel governance (discussed later) – have led to the core executive operating in a more crowded and fragmented political environment, the Prime Minister and Cabinet remain at the heart of British government.

The Prime Minister

The first person generally held by historians to be the first Prime Minister was Robert Walpole (1721–41). As Stephen Taylor has written,

> Robert Walpole is one of the most remarkable figures of modern British politics. He is commonly regarded not only as the first prime minister, but also as the longest serving holder of that office, his twenty-one years far exceeding the tenure of any of his successors. He was the dominant figure of the early Hanoverian period.
>
> (Taylor 1998: 1)

He also came to live in 10 Downing Street, a house given to him by George II. However, the term 'prime minister' had been employed before, and it was not one that Walpole favoured. The term entered common use following Walpole's tenure, but not until the twentieth century was it referred to in statute. The formal title held by the king's first minister was First Lord of the Treasury, a title still held by the occupant of 10 Downing Street.

Walpole established the basic features of the office, and under him one can see the essential constitutional division between the monarch and the monarch's first minister: the former remained as head of state, but the latter became the head of government. For another century the monarch was to exercise the freedom to select the Prime Minister, but it was the selection of someone who was to head the King's government. The Prime Minister had arrived. Since Walpole's lengthy tenure as the king's principal minister, the office has undergone some significant change. The office itself has also seen an array of office holders (Englefield et al. 1995). Up to 2017, 52 men and 2 women have been appointed Prime Minister. Some have held the office on more than one occasion. William Gladstone, for example, held the post on four separate occasions. Lord Derby and the Marquess of Salisbury each held it on three separate occasions in the nineteenth

century, as did Stanley Baldwin in the twentieth. Some have been short-lived premierships. The Duke of Wellington's second term in office lasted less than one month (17 November to 9 December 1834). In the twentieth century Andrew Bonar Law served for the shortest period of time – 7 months, from October 1922 to May 1923 (he was dying from throat cancer) – and the longest serving was Margaret Thatcher: a total of 11.5 years, from May 1979 to November 1990.

Some prime ministers have gone down in history as major figures: William Pitt the elder (the Earl of Chatham), William Pitt the younger (Prime Minister at the age of 24), William Gladstone, Benjamin Disraeli, David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill among them. Others, including some of the early occupants of the office, have faded into obscurity and some never really emerged from it. Seven prime ministers have died in office, though the last was Lord Palmerston in 1865. Of the seven, one was assassinated (Spencer Perceval, in 1812). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was not uncommon for the Prime Minister to sit in the House of Lords. The last to do so was the Third Marquess of Salisbury, who left office in 1902 (being succeeded by his nephew, Arthur Balfour); since then, the convention has been that prime ministers must sit in the House of Commons. Most prime ministers have entered office having served an apprenticeship in other senior ministerial offices. A few have entered No. 10 with no previous ministerial experience, including the first Labour Prime Minister, J. Ramsey MacDonald, in 1924 as well as two of the most recent prime ministers – Tony Blair in 1997 and David Cameron in 2010.

The Prime Minister heads the government. To understand the premiership, it is necessary to look at the powers that inhere in the office, as well as the constraints that operate. However, while necessary, it is not sufficient. To understand how those powers are deployed, it is necessary to look at who holds the office.

The office of Prime Minister

In the eighteenth century the person holding the premiership had little by way of a formal office: that is, a significant body of administrative support. The position became more significant in the nineteenth century with the development of a unified ministry, ministers becoming bound by the convention of collective ministerial responsibility. However, the body at the heart of government – the Cabinet – suffered from a lack of basic organisation. It was a collection of senior ministers, coming together for meetings; members took it in turn to be the host, and the implementation of decisions was dependent on the individuals attending to remember what had been agreed. Civil servants had to approach ministers to see if they knew what had been decided. The waiters variously leaked what had been discussed, and it was not unknown for some members to be asleep when important decisions were taken.

The situation changed notably in the twentieth century with the creation in 1916 of a Cabinet Secretariat and the appointment of a Cabinet Secretary (Seldon 2016). The impetus for the change was the need for efficiency in time of war, but the structure was maintained in peacetime. The use of the Secretariat initially attracted criticism.

> The criticisms primarily grew out of the fact that the attachment of the Secretariat to the Cabinet had been carried out by Lloyd George and that he had then tied that body to his own person, thus effectively increasing his own power vis-à-vis the other members of the Cabinet.
>
> (Carter 1956: 202)

The Secretariat served to ensure the recording and coordination of decisions, operating under the person who chaired the Cabinet – the Prime Minister. The position of the Prime Minister was also strengthened in 1919 with the creation of a unified civil service, under a Permanent Secretary as its head. A regulation 'laid down that the consent of the Premier (which in practice meant the head of the civil service) would be required in all departments to the appointment of permanent heads and their deputies' (Blake 1975: 46–7). It is a power that was to become a particularly important one under some later prime ministers, notably Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and David Cameron.

Over time, Downing Street has expanded. In addition to the private office, linking the Prime Minister to Whitehall, the PM's Office has acquired a political office, linking the PM to the party, and a press office, linking the PM to the media. It has also acquired a body of policy advisers. Prime Ministers variously appointed advisers, or drew on the advice of the Cabinet Secretary or other senior civil servants. In 1970 a small body of advisers – the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS), commonly known as 'the think tank' – was established (Blackstone and

Plowden 1990; Waldegrave 2015: 107–15). It comprised some political appointees and seconded civil servants to advise the Cabinet on policy issues. It answered to the Cabinet through the Prime Minister but came to be overshadowed by a body of advisers answering solely to the PM, the No. 10 Policy Unit. The CPRS was wound up in 1983. The Policy Unit comprised a body of high-flying political advisers, including some policy specialists, though under David Cameron it was staffed by civil servants, the Prime Minister drawing for political advice on a team of special advisers. Under Theresa May, it drew on figures from a range of outside bodies, such as think tanks and business, and was headed until 2017 by John Godfrey, formerly corporate affairs director of Legal and General. It was organised thematically, covering topics such as social justice and security.

Margaret Thatcher also appointed a Chief of Staff. Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Theresa May also did so, though each entrusted the holder (or holders – Theresa May, for example, initially appointed two Joint Chiefs of Staff) with differing degrees of power. Under Tony Blair, the Chief of Staff was especially important and was empowered to give instructions to civil servants (a power rescinded by Gordon Brown). Under Theresa May, the two Joint Chiefs, Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill, were reported to exercise considerable power, including as gatekeeper to the PM, as a result of enjoying the trust of the Prime Minister. Both resigned in the wake of the 2017 general election, Timothy having been accused of influencing the content of an electorally unpopular election manifesto.

Tony Blair also created various units, such as a Performance and Innovation Unit, Delivery Unit and the Forward Strategy Unit, which were formally housed in the Cabinet Office but in many cases reported directly to the Prime Minister (see Barber 2007). They were designed to enhance joined-up government. Gordon Brown rescinded some of the changes introduced by his predecessor but retained some units to provide advice. David Cameron proved less prone to utilise such units, establishing only one, an Implementation Unit, designed to monitor progress of departments in delivering the commitments embodied in the Coalition Agreement. Theresa May adopted a different approach and created seven Cabinet Implementation Taskforces (see Table 19.1 under 'Cabinet'), composed of ministers, and with her chairing three of them.

The powers of the Prime Minister

The Prime Minister is the most powerful person in government, but exercises no statutory powers. Rather, the powers exist by convention. The PM's power as the monarch's first minister confers considerable sway not only over Cabinet and all ministers, but also over the civil service, a raft of public

bodies, and people seeking preferment through the award of honours. The principal powers can be listed as follows (see Figure 19.2).

Appoints, shuffles and dismisses ministers: The Prime Minister chooses who else will be in government (see Berlinksi, Dewan and Dowding 2012: 37–42). A new Prime Minister appoints over a hundred ministers. Which ministers will form the Cabinet, and their ranking within Cabinet, is a matter for the PM. The Prime Minister can also move or dismiss ministers. Some may be deemed to have earned promotion and others not to have lived up to expectations. Appointing and moving ministers may be undertaken not only for the purposes of reward (or indicating dissatisfaction in the case of demotion or dismissal) but also to reflect the PM's political values. Appointing ministers sympathetic to a particular philosophic strand within the party may demonstrate the PM's desire for that philosophy to dominate in a particular ministry. Margaret Thatcher, for example, appointed neo-liberal supporters to head the key economic ministries. When David Cameron became Prime Minister in 2010, his capacity was constrained by the fact of a Coalition Government, Liberal Democrat ministers being nominated by the Deputy Prime Minister (Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg) and the Prime Minister consulting the Deputy Prime Minister on other appointments.

Figure 19.1 David Cameron and Nick Clegg
Source: Press Association/Nick Ansell

Appoints, shuffles and dismisses ministers

Chairs the Cabinet

Controls Whitehall

Dispenses honours and public appointments

Figure 19.2 Principal powers of the Prime Minister

Chairs the Cabinet: The PM not only decides who will be in the Cabinet, but also decides when it will meet, what it will discuss and what it has decided. The Cabinet normally meets once a week, but under some PMs it has met more frequently. Under Tony Blair, it rarely met more than once a week, and even then, it was for a brief meeting, sometimes lasting less than an hour. Gordon Brown was keen to place more emphasis on the role of Cabinet and, in order to distinguish his approach from that of Blair, moved Cabinet meetings from Thursdays to Tuesdays. Brown also variously held Cabinet meetings in different parts of the country, a practice continued by David Cameron and Theresa May. The creation of a Coalition Government in 2010 also enhanced the status of Cabinet as the body for clearing major government policy.

The agenda is determined by the PM. The inclusion or exclusion of certain issues can be politically contentious. The manner of discussion is also influenced by the PM. Some premiers encourage free-ranging discussion; others prefer more concise contributions. Cabinet under John Major was said to resemble a seminar. Under Tony Blair, the items tended to be for report rather than discussion. It is rare for votes to be taken. The PM normally sums up a discussion and it is the PM's summary that forms the basis of the minutes. The summing-up may not necessarily reflect the full tenor of the discussion and may not always coincide with some ministers' recollections of what was said, but it is the Prime Minister's summary that counts.

The PM not only decides the composition of Cabinet but also what Cabinet committees will be created. The Cabinet, a large body meeting once a week, is not in a position to transact all the business of government. Most policy proposals are considered by Cabinet committees. Only if there is disagreement in committee (and if the chair of the committee agrees) is an issue referred to Cabinet. The PM decides who will chair the committees as well as who will serve on them. Which minister is appointed to chair the most committees is often taken as a sign of which minister enjoys the PM's confidence.

Controls Whitehall: The Prime Minister not only decides who shall be the ministerial heads of departments, but can also create, abolish or merge departments, as well as determine who shall be the civil service heads of those departments. The structure of government is a matter for the PM, and some have created giant departments. Under Gordon Brown, a massive department, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, was created, with no fewer than 11 ministers. It remained the largest Department under the Coalition Government formed in 2010, but with only seven ministers. Responsibility for transport policy is sometimes included in a large department, such as the Department for the Environment, and at other times is handled by a free-standing Ministry of Transport.

The senior civil service appointments are also the responsibility of the Prime Minister. (Since 1968, the PM has also held the title of Minister for the Civil Service.) The PM used to leave this responsibility to others and promotion was usually on the basis of seniority. More recent Prime Ministers have taken an interest in who occupies the top positions. Margaret Thatcher ensured that some senior civil servants were promoted over the heads of more senior officials because they were seen to be capable of effective policy delivery. Tony Blair was also keen to press for civil service change in order to enhance policy delivery and to combat what he termed 'departmentalitis' – the tendency for ministers and officials to act in the interests of their department rather than deliver what the PM wanted (see Chapter 20). This led David Cameron as Prime Minister to pursue the cause of civil service reform.

Dispenses honours and public appointments: The PM formally advises the monarch on who should receive particular honours and who should be appointed to public posts in the gift of the crown. The range of honours and appointments is substantial. It encompasses peerages. Though proposals for cross-bench (that is, not party affiliated) peerages are now made by an independent appointments commission, the PM can still determine who shall be elevated on a party basis. A PM can appoint ministers from outside Parliament and make sure they are offered peerages, thus ensuring they are within Parliament, as well as determine who shall hold various public appointments, including the heads of the security services, the armed forces and the BBC. Even when appointments are formally in the gift of other ministers, the PM may intervene to make sure a favoured candidate is appointed. The Prime Minister's patronage extends even to certain professors (regius professors) at Oxford and Cambridge universities and bishops of the Church of England. The archbishops and bishops of the Anglican Church are crown appointments, with two names put before the PM by the Crown Nominations Commission whenever there is a vacancy. The PM traditionally picks the first name. Margaret Thatcher reputedly refused one nomination, but the convention since 2007 has been that the first name is approved.

These are the main powers, but they are not the only ones. One particularly important power until 2011 was to advise the monarch as to when a general election should be held. Until 1918 this was a decision taken by the Cabinet, but from then until 2011 the final decision rested with the Prime Minister (Hennessy 2000: 68). A parliament was limited to a maximum term of five years, but within that period the PM could ask Her Majesty to call an election. This was seen as a useful political weapon, but it was ended by the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, providing for a fixed term of five years. However, the Act did include provision for an early general election in one of two circumstances (see Chapter 16). In

April 2017 Theresa May obtained the necessary majority in the House of Commons to hold an early election in June.

The PM's political capital is also enhanced by other aspects of the office as well as by the fact of being party leader. As head of government, the PM attends various international gatherings, including heads of government of the leading economic nations. This not only gives the PM a voice in international deliberations but also raises her political profile. She can be seen to be striding the world stage, on behalf of the United Kingdom, in a way no other minister can. The Foreign Secretary or Chancellor of the Exchequer play essentially supporting roles when the Prime Minister is present to represent the UK.

The fact that the PM is head of government, and holder of an office held by a number of political greats, also enhances the media attention accorded the office holder. A report from outside 10 Downing Street is more likely to be carried by the broadcast media than one from outside a government department. Even if the report is of Cabinet proceedings, it will be broadcast in front of the place where the Cabinet meets – 10 Downing Street. There is no other obvious place. The backdrop of the Cabinet Office in Whitehall would have little resonance. The development of a rolling 24-hour news media increases the media focus on No. 10. Other developments also result in the PM being seen as standing apart from the rest of government. Security considerations mean that she travels with a security escort, setting her aside from others. Though some senior ministers have security protection, it is not on the scale accorded the Prime Minister.

These are all features deriving from the Prime Minister's status as Prime Minister. However, she also has political clout by virtue of the political position that propelled her to office and which she retains after she has entered No. 10: that of party leader. As party leader, she commands both a party apparatus, especially important when it is a Conservative Prime Minister, and can draw on the support of her parliamentary party. MPs want their party to succeed, and it is the party leader who is crucial in delivering success. This can have its downsides for the PM if success is not forthcoming, but if it is (and if the party's standing in the opinion polls is strong) then the Prime Minister is usually unassailable within the party.

The Prime Minister is thus a powerful figure, standing at the apex of government. The powers that inhere in the office are considerable. However, the way in which those powers are exercised will not necessarily be the same under succeeding prime ministers. To understand how the powers are wielded, one has to look at *who* is Prime Minister.

The person in No. 10

The reasons why people become Prime Minister vary from PM to PM. The skills necessary to exercise the powers of the office also vary. One way of looking at why politicians become Prime Minister is to look at their purpose in being in office. Some seek office in order to achieve a particular programme of public policy. Some enter No. 10 out of a sense of public duty or simply because they are ambitious for office. To give some coherence as to the motivation for entering office, a fourfold typology of prime ministers has been created (Norton 1987, 1988). The four types of prime ministers are *innovators*, *reformers*, *egoists* and *balancers* (Box 19.1).

The categories shown in Box 19.1 are ideal types and some prime ministers have straddled categories or moved from one to the other: Churchill, for example, was a very different Prime Minister in peacetime (1951–5) from the one he had been in wartime (1940–5). He had been an innovator in wartime, having a very clear understanding of what he wished to achieve, and in peacetime was a balancer, keen to maintain social stability and having little comprehension of domestic policy. Some commentators viewed Edward Heath as straddling the categories of reformer and egoist. David Cameron may sit astride the categories of reformer and balancer, one commentator identifying him as 'one of life's satisfiers rather than maximisers' (Montgomerie 2012: 21). Theresa May straddles the categories of reformer (delivering on a policy determined by electors in the 2016 EU referendum) and innovator (pursuing her own brand of Toryism).

How the Prime Minister operates in office will thus vary from PM to PM. So too does the extent to which they achieve their goals. They may know what they want to achieve, but that does not guarantee that they will get their way. 'The key issue of what it is that leaders do . . . is not so much about *what* decisions are made but rather *how* leaders reach a position to make the decisions, and *how* they maintain that position' (Foley 2013: 32). Prime ministers need a range of skills in order to get what they want (Norton 1987). They have the powers of the office, but some may be more proficient than others in the exercise of those powers. Some PMs have been able to appoint ministers who have delivered what is expected of them. Some have been good in their management of government; others have not (see Berlinski, Dewan and Dowding 2012: 89–108). Sir Anthony Eden, for example, was notoriously bad in his

Figure 19.3 No. 10 Downing Street

Source: dominika zarzycka/Shutterstock.com

BOX 19.1

Types of prime ministers

Innovators seek power – they fight to become Prime Minister – in order to achieve a particular programme, one that they have crafted. If necessary, they are prepared to push and cajole their party into supporting them in carrying out the programme. A leading example is Margaret Thatcher. She embraced a neo-liberal philosophy and pursued it with great vigour, sometimes in the face of much opposition from within her own party. She had a clear future goal.

Reformers seek power in order to achieve a particular programme of public policy, but one essentially dictated by the party itself. Prime Minister Clement Attlee led a reforming postwar Labour government, but under him the programme that was carried out was that embodied in Labour's 1945 election manifesto, *Let Us Face the Future*. David Cameron arguably falls under this heading, but is distinctive in that the programme was not one imposed by the party but by an agreement reached by the two parties to the coalition formed in May 2010. Similarly, Theresa May has been distinctive for pursuing a policy dictated by voters in the 2016 referendum on membership of the EU.

Egoists seek power for the sake of having power. They are principally concerned with the here and now of British politics, operating in order to maintain their occupancy of No. 10. They will take whatever action they consider necessary to protect their position. Harold Wilson was a good example of an egoist, variously contending with what he saw as attempts by other ministers to oust him. Tony Blair also falls primarily in this category. His period as Leader of the Opposition suggested he may be an innovator, but once in office his prime goal, especially in his first term, was to continue his tenure of office. Gordon Brown also falls principally into this category. Though he entered office with policy goals, his principal focus once in office was to maintain power.

Balancers seek to maintain stability in society. They are concerned with the current state of society, seeking to ameliorate tensions and avoiding policies that may prove socially divisive. They fall into two types: those who seek power and those who are conscripted; the latter are usually compromise choices for party leader. Balancers by their nature tend to be Conservatives, such as Harold Macmillan, but the category also includes Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan. Both Macmillan and Callaghan were power-seekers. An example of a conscript was Sir Alec Douglas-Home (then the Earl of Home) chosen by the Queen, after taking advice, in preference to power-seeking rivals.

Figure 19.4 A unique occasion when the Queen sat in on a Cabinet meeting

Source: © Jeremy Selwyn/Evening Standard/PA Archive/PA Images

management of his ministers. Some know when to provide leadership and when to go ahead with something – and when not to go ahead with a particular policy. For much of her premiership, Margaret Thatcher demonstrated effective political antennae. As one of her Cabinet colleagues put it, she knew what she wanted to achieve, but she also recognised a brick wall when she saw one (former Cabinet minister to author). If there was a clear obstacle, she sought to work round it (as on limiting the powers of the trade unions) or, if necessary, abandoned the policy (as on post office closures). Others have sometimes just ploughed on.

Some prime ministers have adopted an oratorical approach in order to get their way, an approach favoured, for example, by Tony Blair. Others have tended to focus on detailed policy reflections and seeking to impose their decisions on Cabinet, an approach taken by Edward Heath, Gordon Brown and Theresa May. They have also differed in the extent to which they have left ministers to get on with their jobs or sought to micro-manage the affairs of government. Some have proved good at seeing backbenchers regularly in order to ensure they remain supportive of the government's aims; others have tended to distance themselves from their supporters, sometimes – as in the case of Edward Heath (Norton 1978) – with disastrous consequences for their continuation as party leader.

The powers of the Prime Minister are thus substantial, though how and why they are utilised will differ from one Prime Minister to another. The extent to which a Prime Minister achieves desired outcomes will also be dependent on others. The occupant of 10 Downing Street does not live in a vacuum. The Prime Minister has to work in a political environment that includes a large number of political actors, and their number – as we shall see – has increased in recent years. One of those actors is the Cabinet.

The Cabinet

The King used to appoint people to key offices, such as Chancellor, Treasurer and Secretary of State. They came to meet in a council of the King, the Privy Council, though the number of people invited to it was such that it became too large for the purposes of maintaining secrets and moving quickly. In the latter half of the seventeenth century the principal ministers came to be drawn together in the Foreign Committee of the Privy Council: this in time came to be known as the junto, or Cabinet Council, or Cabinet (Macintosh 1977: 35–7). By the end of the century, such a body was meeting frequently. Some historians identify the appointment of Whig leaders in 1694, when there was a Whig majority in the Commons, as constituting the first modern Cabinet. The Cabinet developed in the eighteenth century,

and under the Hanoverian kings, it met regularly without the King being present. There was also a smaller inner or working group of lords or an inner cabinet and at times, especially when the King withdrew from Cabinet, the influence of the Cabinet declined. Under George III the term 'Cabinet' came to be employed for the inner cabinet. Royal appointment was the crucial feature. 'Once a Cabinet was appointed and given royal support, it could normally rely on a majority in both houses and a victory at the next general election' (Macintosh 1977: 63). The Cabinet came to work as a distinct body, but the members were still chosen by the King.

The political developments of the nineteenth century changed fundamentally the nature of politics. The extension of the franchise and the growth of mass-membership political parties served to transfer power from crown to Parliament and, within Parliament, to confirm the supremacy of the House of Commons. The outcomes of general elections came to determine which party was in power and, hence, which party leader was to be Prime Minister and form a Cabinet. The Cabinet could not necessarily take the House of Commons for granted, though by the end of the century the hold of party on the House had grown. By the twentieth century, political control in the House was essentially top-down rather than bottom-up. The convention of collective ministerial responsibility had also developed: ministers were bound by the decisions taken by Cabinet. This applied to all ministers and not just those who formed the Cabinet.

The Cabinet, as we have seen, was not a highly organised body prior to the twentieth century. When the Cabinet developed as a recognisable body, the practice tended to be to keep minutes, but the practice was not maintained during the nineteenth century. As we have noted, the Cabinet met regularly at dinner, with members taking it in turn to be host. These were not the most efficient means of despatching business. One member thought 'we should have no Cabinets after dinner. We all drink too much wine, and are not civil to each other' (cited in Gilmour 1971: 221). Sleeping was common and it is claimed that most members were asleep when the decision to invade the Crimea was taken. There were problems with maintaining secrecy, not least as the body grew in size (to about 15 members by 1850) and because waiters would hear what was discussed. The meetings themselves could be fairly discursive as there was relatively little business to discuss. 'The pressure of government business was slight. . . . Even under Rosebery, at the end of the century, a large part of a Cabinet session could be spent discussing the exact text of one of Juvenal's satires' (Daalder 1964: 27). There was no infrastructure. Ministers had their own departments. There was no dedicated support structure and no consistent records were kept. Implementation rested on ministers' recollections of what had been decided. As one commentator, himself later to be a Cabinet minister, recorded 'The Lord of Chaos himself

could hardly have devised more suitable arrangements for the furtherance of his own objectives' (Gilmour 1971: 222).

Some structure was provided, as we have seen, by the creation in 1916 of a Cabinet Secretariat. This ensured there was administrative support and a means of ensuring decisions were recorded and transmitted to departments. The functions of the Cabinet were also authoritatively delineated two years later in the report of the Machinery of Government Committee (see Le May 1964: 237–42). These were listed as (a) the final determination of the policy to be submitted to Parliament, (b) the supreme control of the national executive in accordance with the policy prescribed by Parliament and (c) the continuous coordination and delimitation of the authorities of the several departments of state. The Cabinet is thus, formally, the collective body that determines the policy of government and has the machinery to ensure that its writ runs throughout Whitehall. It operates within limits set by Parliament, but that is a body in which it usually enjoys the support of most MPs. Meetings of the Cabinet are chaired by the Prime Minister, but the conclusions, as summarised by the PM, are deemed to be those of the Cabinet.

Though the work of the Cabinet was not unduly onerous in the nineteenth century, it became notably more demanding in the twentieth. There were particular demands placed on it in wartime: the need for secrecy and despatch led to the creation of inner, or war, Cabinets. The main permanent development in peacetime occurred after 1945. The state sector expanded considerably and more demands were made of government. The business of government grew, making it difficult for the principal policies to be decided in a body meeting only once or sometimes twice a week. The use of Cabinet committees became more extensive. Committees were variously employed in the nineteenth century and the first permanent committee – the Committee of Imperial Defence – was created in 1903; it was also the first to have a secretariat. Many committees were established in the First World War, but the number receded in peacetime: in an average year, about 20 would be in existence (Gordon Walker 1972: 39). The number burgeoned in the Second World War, but – unlike in the aftermath of the First World War – the basic structure was retained in peacetime. 'Attlee was thus the first Prime Minister to have in peacetime a permanent structure of Cabinet Committees' (Gordon Walker 1972: 41). The structure was maintained under succeeding prime ministers. The extent of the committees, both in terms of number and activity, was such that from the Attlee Government onwards there were concerns as to the sheer volume of work being undertaken by committees and the consequent problem of overload. In 1951 there were 148 standing committees and 313 ad hoc committees (Hennessy 1986: 45). In 1967 the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, enhanced the status of the committees by saying that a matter could only be taken from committee

to Cabinet with the agreement of the committee chairman. Previously, any member of the committee could insist a matter dealt with in committee be considered in Cabinet.

The stress on Cabinet committees, however, was to decline towards the end of the twentieth century. The number of committees came down under Margaret Thatcher (just over 30 standing committees and just over 120 ad hoc committees in the period up to 1986) and also under Tony Blair. By March 2017, under Theresa May's premiership, there were only 5 Cabinet Committees and 11 sub-committees, plus 7 Implementation Taskforces (Table 19.1). Also notable was the number chaired by the Prime Minister.

There has been a greater reliance on bilateral meetings, or ad hoc meetings with senior ministers, or the Prime Minister determining the matter without recourse to Cabinet. Some commentators viewed this as confirming a trend towards prime ministerial government and away from Cabinet government.

Despite the perceived emphasis on the role of the Prime Minister, the Cabinet nonetheless remains a core component of British government. The functions ascribed to it in 1918 remain relevant and, in practice, are complemented by important political roles. The principal roles are essentially five (Figure 19.5).

Approves policy: Although policy does not originate in Cabinet, it is nonetheless the body, operating through its committees, which approves the policies that are to be laid before Parliament. Ministers serving on Cabinet committees do not necessarily agree proposals without commenting on them and sometimes inviting the minister to come back with a reworked policy. The Cabinet's Parliamentary Business and Legislation Committee is especially important for determining which measures shall be laid before parliament in the next session of Parliament. During the Labour Government of 1997–2001, there was a Devolution Committee, central to drawing up measures to give effect to the Government's policy on devolution. The then Cabinet Secretary, Sir Robin Butler, was later to say 'I have always held out that the operation of the Devolution Committee which Lord Irvine chaired after the 1997 election, was a model of how cabinet committees ought to work' (Butler 2009: 61). The committee resolved most issues, which were then reported to Cabinet.

| Approves policy |
| Resolves disputes |
| Constrains the Prime Minister |
| Unifies government |
| Unifies the parliamentary party |

Figure 19.5 Principal roles of the Cabinet

Table 19.1 Cabinet Committees and Implementation Taskforces, March 2017

Cabinet Committees (chair in brackets)
Economy and Industrial Strategy Committee (PM)
Economy and Industrial Strategy (Airports) sub-committee (PM)
Economy and Industrial Strategy (Economic affairs) sub-committee (Chancellor of Exchequer)
Economy and Industrial Strategy (Reducing Regulations) sub-committee (Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy)
European Union Exit and Trade Committee (PM)
European Union Exit and Trade (Negotiations) sub-committee (PM)
European Union Exit and Trade (International Trade) sub-committee (PM)
European Union Exit and Trade (European Affairs) sub-committee (Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster)
The National Security Council (PM)
The National Security Council (Nuclear Deterrence and Security) sub-committee (PM)
The National Security Council (Threats, Hazards, Resilience and Contingencies) sub-committee (PM)
The National Security Council (Strategic Defence and Security Review Implementation) sub-committee (Home Secretary)
The National Security Council (Cyber) sub-committee (Chancellor of the Exchequer)
Parliamentary Business and Legislation Committee (Leader of the House of Commons)
Social Reform Committee (PM)
Social Reform (Home Affairs) sub-committee (Home Secretary)

Implementation Taskforces (chairs in brackets)
Childcare (Secretary of State for Education, Minister for Women and Equalities)
Digital Infrastructure and Inclusion (Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport)
Earn or Learn (Secretary of State for Education, Minister for Women and Equalities)
Housing (Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government)
Immigration (PM)
Tackling Extremism in Communities (PM)
Tackling Modern Slavery and People Trafficking (PM)

Resolves disputes: There are sometimes clashes between departments. A dispute may sometimes go to the Prime Minister, but the role of Cabinet is to act as an arbiter. This is a role usually carried out by the Cabinet Office. For example, if there are differences between some departments as to the stance to be taken in international negotiations, the Cabinet Office seeks to iron out the differences and ensure – in the words of the then Cabinet Secretary Sir Gus O'Donnell – 'that the government goes with a single position' (O'Donnell 2009: 152). However, serious policy disputes between ministers have to be ironed out in Cabinet or Cabinet Committee. As another former Cabinet Secretary, Lord Wilson of Dinton, put it:

There is still an enormous amount of decision-taking that is circulated to Cabinet or circulated to Cabinet committees and where someone is unhappy they have the opportunity to bring it up and for a discussion to take place, and that does happen.

(Wilson 2009: 60)

One of the committees created under the Coalition Government in May 2010 was a Coalition Committee, established in order to resolve disputes between the two parties forming the Coalition Government, though in practice it rarely met. One occasion when it did was in 2012 over the issue of reform of the House of Lords.

Constrains the Prime Minister: Although the Prime Minister chairs the Cabinet and usually achieves desired outcomes, there are occasions when members may not be prepared to go along with the PM. As a former Cabinet Secretary put it, 'Prime ministers are only as powerful as their colleagues allow them to be. . . . We are always fundamentally in a position where if cabinet ministers wish to assert themselves then the power of the prime minister will be checked and balanced in that way' (Lord Wilson of Dinton, in *Political and Constitutional Reform Committee* 2014: 22). Even powerful prime ministers such as Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher could not always get their way with Cabinet colleagues. Thatcher was notable in that she sometimes summed

up discussions at the beginning. This could be portrayed as a sign of a dominating Prime Minister, but it was just as much a sign of weakness. She could not be certain that ministers would agree with her and so she had to try to steer them in the direction she favoured. Tony Blair kept meetings short, reducing the opportunity for discussion, but there were occasions when he ran into opposition from members. Thus, for example, the lead headline in *The Independent on Sunday*, 8 May 2005, was 'Cabinet defies Blair in power struggle'. Even the most persuasive of premiers cannot always ensure that the Cabinet will go along with the policy favoured by No. 10.

Unifies government: The Cabinet formally has responsibility, as we have seen, for coordinating government. The Cabinet Office is the key body for monitoring what goes on in Whitehall and ensuring that Cabinet decisions are relayed to officials. However, there is also an important political dimension. The Cabinet is the body through which the Prime Minister can reach out to the rest of government. It is essentially a means of conveying the collective will of government and not only informing departments, but, in effect, enthusing them. An astute Prime Minister can work through Cabinet to lead rather than direct.

Unifies the parliamentary party: The Prime Minister can work through Cabinet to reach the rest of government, but can also work through Cabinet to reach the party in Parliament. Some commentators, such as Professor George Jones, have described the Cabinet as a committee of Parliament. It is not a committee of Parliament – it is a committee of government – but it comprises parliamentarians. Cabinet ministers remain within Parliament and see backbench members on a regular basis. Ministers have offices in the Palace of Westminster as well as in their departments. Some Cabinet ministers may also have their own power-base within the House. They may have drawn together like-minded MPs, be it by deliberate action, or by simply attracting support from MPs who share their views. Cabinet discussions can help ensure that ministers feel that they have been involved in deciding a policy. They are thus willing to embrace the outcomes of Cabinet deliberations, taking those decisions back to party colleagues and persuading them to support them. In the 2010–5 Parliament, this unifying role extended to the two parties forming the Coalition Government.

The Cabinet may thus be seen as a buckle between party leaders and Whitehall and between party leaders and Westminster. The extent to which it is an effective buckle depends in large measure on the extent to which it is fully utilised.

Under the Blair premiership in particular, it was open to accusations that it was not being fully utilised. Cabinet meetings were short and, according to one member, achieved little. 'Occasionally, people would express concern, or a little doubt about an issue raised, but only in a very mild way and others

rarely took up such comments' (Short 2004: 70). Another, David Blunkett, wrote of Cabinet committees: 'Some are more useful than others. Where something has to be collectively agreed, then they are worthwhile, but where it is just a rubber stamp or where people just read out their departmental brief, then they are a complete waste of time' (Blunkett 2006: 564). According to James Naughtie, 'No Prime Minister since the nineteenth century has spent more time avoiding formal meetings with cabinet colleagues than Tony Blair' (Naughtie 2001: 104). He was seen as distancing himself, not only from Cabinet, but from the civil service and Parliament (Norton 2008: 92–100). His premiership seemed to epitomise the presidentialisation of British politics. Though Cabinet and Cabinet committees retained relevance – they were still the sites on occasion of collective deliberation – the Cabinet system has given way to a debate over the extent to which power in British government is concentrated in No. 10 Downing Street.

Presidential government?

The debate as to whether Britain has prime ministerial or Cabinet Government is not new. It was being hotly debated 50 years ago (see Norton 1982: Chapter 1). What is remarkable is that some commentators thought that there was anything approaching government by the Cabinet (see, for example, Jones 1965; Brown 1968; Gordon Walker 1972). By its nature, a body of over 20 people meeting once and sometimes twice a week is not in a position to engage in policy making on a consistent basis. The Cabinet can give assent to policy proposals, its committees fulfil important tasks of scrutiny and approval, but it is not a body for the initiation or formulation of measures of public policy. Some prime ministers have been more dependent on their Cabinets, or some of their Cabinet colleagues, than others, but the Prime Minister has usually been the central figure of government. If the PM has been overshadowed in government, it has not usually been by the Cabinet but by one or more senior members of the Cabinet.

The thesis of a presidential premiership in UK government has grown in recent years. The thesis has been challenged, but not on the grounds of a powerful Cabinet but rather because of a more crowded political environment. The Prime Minister has had to contend with more powerful political actors. The territory in which the Prime Minister's writ runs has contracted. The Prime Minister operates in a shrinking world.

Presidential or constrained?

The thesis of a *presidential premiership* rests on the Prime Minister becoming more detached from Cabinet, party and Parliament and operating as if the occupant of the office is elected directly by the people (see Foley 1993, 2000, 2004). 'The office of Prime Minister', according to Sue Pryce, 'particularly since the time of Harold Wilson in the 1960s, had developed to take on "presidential" characteristics, with the premier behaving more like the single head of government than the collegiate chair of Cabinet' (Political and Constitutional Reform Committee 2014: 15). The PM acts as the embodiment of the national will and intervenes within government to ensure a particular outcome is achieved (Thomas 1998: 79). Detachment, or what Bennister has termed 'institutional stretch', is not confined to the UK (Bennister 2007: 2–19), but under Tony Blair, it was arguably taken to unprecedented levels (Norton 2008, 2018). Though Gordon Brown and David Cameron sought to be more collegial than Blair, decision making has remained heavily concentrated in 10 Downing Street. The PM is surrounded by key advisers, who are personally appointed by her, and thus owe their positions to her. She may occasionally consult with senior ministers, or with a particular senior minister, but it is usually the Prime Minister who determines the policy to be pursued; that policy is then announced or reported to Cabinet before being put in the public domain. The style of government under Tony Blair was characterised as 'sofa government', comprising informal meetings with other senior ministers and/or key advisers. David Cameron was to find himself more constrained by the imperatives of a coalition government, but No.10 has remained the heart of governmental decision making.

However, the thesis has not gone unchallenged. The Prime Minister is dominant within British government, but not all-powerful, and the territory within which she is powerful is becoming smaller. The occupant of Number 10 is constrained to some degree within government and, increasingly outside government.

Constraints within government: The Prime Minister may exercise considerable powers. Ministers are dependent on her for their positions, and some commentators see them as agents of the Prime Minister. We shall examine the claims of a *principal–agent* relationship in the next chapter. However, there are other studies that suggest that policy-making power is not concentrated in Downing Street. The *baronial* model posits that much policy making is done by senior ministers. No statutory powers are vested in the Prime Minister, or in the Cabinet. The powers are vested in senior ministers. Though the Prime Minister may take an interest in particular sectors, she has limited time and is usually not a policy polymath. The

number of officials working in Downing Street is small (not least in comparative perspective). That, as Professor Robert Hazell observed, 'makes it difficult for the Prime Minister himself to lead on more than a very few policy areas, because he just does not have the staff support to enable him to do so' (Political and Constitutional Reform Committee 2014: 33). As a result, senior ministers are often left to generate policy initiatives within their departments. Again, we shall examine this model in the next chapter. We shall consider it alongside the *bureaucratic* model, which identifies the capacity of civil servants to shape policy outcomes. There are various means available to officials to influence what a minister sees and considers. Civil servants carry out the decisions of ministers, but they may have a considerable influence over those decisions. Indeed, in some cases, it was argued that 'in certain departments, for example the Home Office, it appeared that officials effectively ran the department, and ministers were seen as obstacles to its smooth running' (Richards and Smith 2002: 61). Claims of excessive civil service influence became pronounced on the part of some Conservatives under the Coalition Government formed in 2010, prompting the Government to announce proposals in 2012 for a reform of policy making within Whitehall, including hiving off some policy advice to think tanks and universities.

The essential point is that the Prime Minister does not exist in a vacuum, and though some decisions may be taken unilaterally, nonetheless she has to work with ministers and officials in order to deliver public policy. The different parts of government normally work together, but there may be times when they are not in harmony. The Prime Minister may face resistance within Cabinet. Particular Cabinet colleagues may refuse to go along with a particular proposal. When David Cameron was contemplating announcing an 'emergency brake' (when migration by EU nationals reached unacceptable levels) as part of his attempt to renegotiate the UK's membership of the EU, he failed to carry the support of Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond and Home Secretary Theresa May and, as a consequence, dropped it from his speech (Prince 2017: 321). The PM may be advised by the Cabinet Secretary that a particular proposal may not work or may best be achieved by some other means. As former Cabinet Secretary, Lord Wilson of Dinton, put it: 'I think you may take it that we have all of us, in our time, had to be firm' (Wilson 2009: 59). There may be times when the Prime Minister may not be able to take Parliament for granted. All prime ministers from Edward Heath to David Cameron suffered one or more defeats in the House of Commons (and considerably more in the House of Lords); Margaret Thatcher's Government actually lost a bill – the Shops Bill in 1986 – when 72 Conservative MPs voted with the Opposition to defeat it. The Prime Minister may be able to achieve what she wants by adopting a detached and confrontational stance, but it is difficult to maintain that

approach indefinitely without inciting a backlash. The Prime Minister is an integral part of government rather than a free-standing and all-powerful office standing apart from it.

Constraints outside government: However, perhaps the most powerful constraint on the Prime Minister in the twenty-first century is the fact that her capacity to achieve desired outcomes is limited by policy-making power becoming more dispersed. There has been what has been termed a 'hollowing-out' of the state (see Rhodes 1997: 17–18). Whereas policy-making power was previously concentrated at the centre – that is, within the core executive at the heart of a unitary nation state – it is now shared among a number of bodies at sub-national, national and supranational level.

Prime Minister and Cabinet

Cabinet Secretary Sir Gus O'Donnell in evidence to the House of Lords Constitution Committee 2009:

I worked with John Major who had a very collegiate style. He used the Cabinet committees in that way. Tony Blair, when he came in in 1997 – not that I was there at the time – had a strong emphasis on stock takes and delivery. He wanted to get specific deliveries on things like literacy and numeracy, specific items. That was his very big emphasis. With Gordon Brown coming in as Prime Minister, it is difficult to separate him coming in from global events. It has been dominated by an economic agenda and that has worked mainly through the National Economic Council. What this tells me is that it is partly the style of the Prime Minister, partly events. This is what I mean about being flexible.

(O'Donnell 2009: 154)

Some policy-making competence has been transferred to elected bodies in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. Some has passed to other bodies at national level, including regulators and the courts. The courts are now important actors in determining whether provisions of UK law are in conflict with European law or with the European Convention on Human Rights. Some passed upwards to supranational bodies, such as the institutions of the European Union. The government also operates as but one of several participants

in international gatherings such as the meetings of leaders of the key economic nations (G7, G20, the World Trade Organisation). The capacity to achieve desired outcomes is also increasingly limited by globalisation, reducing the barriers that each nation can erect to protect its own internal economic activity. The Prime Minister cannot dictate the flow of global markets. In short, policy is made by different bodies and at different levels. Various terms have been utilised to describe this, but the most commonly used phrase now is that of 'multi-level governance' (see Bache and Flinders 2004).

The importance of this for British government is that, whereas the Prime Minister has been described (albeit ironically) as 'first among equals' in Cabinet, in international gatherings she is not first among equals, but at best an equal among equals. If anyone is pre-eminent in such gatherings, or first among equals as heads of government, it is the President of the United States. While in Cabinet the Prime Minister is dealing with members who are appointed by her, in summits of heads of government she is dealing with members who have their own national power base. Other than in bilateral meetings, she can find herself in a minority. Decisions may be taken with which the Prime Minister disagrees, but which she may find it politic to go along with. Prime Minister Theresa May was sometimes portrayed as cutting an isolated figure in meetings of EU heads of government after the government announced its intention to trigger the process for withdrawing from the EU.

The consequence of these developments for the Prime Minister is encapsulated in the title of a study by Professor Richard Rose (2001), namely *The Prime Minister in a Shrinking World*. The world is getting smaller in terms of communication and economic developments. There is a growing interdependence and a growing trend towards seeking to address global problems through international meetings and agreement. When policy competences were concentrated in national government, the Prime Minister could exercise considerable power in determining outcomes. In the twenty-first century she has to try to accumulate more powers to the office in order to cope with a rapidly changing political environment, one in which the PM's political writ does not run as far as it once did. It is thus possible to characterise the Prime Minister as having to run in order to stand still. Given the extent and speed of globalisation, it may be seen by some as a losing battle. The world may, in Rose's terms, be shrinking: a corollary is that so is the Prime Minister's kingdom.

Chapter summary

The Prime Minister stands at the apex within British government. The occupant of the office leads the Cabinet and heads the party that usually enjoys a clear majority in the House of Commons. A strong Prime Minister may thus be in a position to achieved desired outcomes. However, the extent to which prime ministers actually achieve what they want varies. Prime ministerial power is variable and not a constant. Power may 'zig zag' from one premier to another (Blick and Jones 2010) as well as within a premiership.

The extent to which prime ministers can achieve their goals depends in part on who the Prime Minister is: what they want to achieve, and their skills in getting their way, will – as we have seen – vary from premier to premier. The political climate, not least the relationship between different political bodies, can change. A Prime Minister may enjoy a good parliamentary majority and be returned at the next election with a small and potentially difficult majority. Events at an international or national level may blow a government off course. John Major as Prime Minister led his party to victory in 1992, but with a much-reduced majority: the same year, his Government was forced to withdraw from the European exchange rate mechanism, triggering a collapse in confidence in the Government's ability to handle the economic affairs of the nation. A 'no' vote in Denmark in a referendum on the Maastricht treaty emboldened Conservative MPs opposed to the treaty to try to defeat passage of the bill to give legal effect to it in the UK. His premiership, according to Foley, 'suffered all the classic symptoms of a process of leadership decline within a parliamentary democracy' (Foley 2013: 151). Shortly after becoming Prime Minister, Gordon Brown was seen as a powerful Prime Minister, riding high in the opinion polls. His popular support plummeted later in the year when he decided not to call a general election. He reclaimed some support for his initial response to the global 'credit crunch' in 2008, but that then receded as the UK economy went into recession. His premiership 'became disfigured by crises of instability, disorganization, and disillusion' (Foley 2013: 311). David Cameron led his party to electoral success in the 2015 general election, but the following year the outcome of the referendum on membership of the EU – which resulted in his call for a 'Remain' vote being rejected – led to his resignation.

Prime ministerial power thus varies not only from premier to premier but also within a premiership. There were times when Margaret Thatcher was dominant as Prime Minister and at other times, as during the Westland crisis in 1986 or in her last year in office (1989–90), when she was politically vulnerable. Tony Blair, similarly, was usually powerful but nonetheless experienced phases when he was politically weak. He was also at times constrained by his Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown. 'For such a so-called presidential figure Blair was blocked in key areas. The Chancellor carved out a measure of autonomy hardly ever achieved by a minister' (Kavanagh 2007: 7). David Cameron exercised the powers of the premiership, but was limited in the 2010–5 Parliament by having a Deputy Prime Minister who, as the leader of the other party in coalition, could – and did – block proposals unacceptable to Liberal Democrats (Clegg 2016: 77). Cameron had to play a balancing act between his coalition partners and his own backbenchers (Norton 2015: 467–91). Theresa May was viewed as a powerful and commanding figure in 10 Downing Street after she took over from Cameron in 2016 but was seen to be fighting for her political life after she failed to lead her party to victory in the 2017 General Election.

The variability of prime ministerial power was well expressed in 2009 by former Cabinet Secretary, Lord Wilson of Dinton:

> You may have times, as we had times, when prime ministers have been so strong that their colleagues accepted anything they wanted to do; they had a parliamentary back bench which was supportive of whatever they did; public opinion was happy; the economy was going well. Their ability to get their way was therefore unparalleled, but that does not alter the fundamental fact that if circumstances are different and a prime minister is in a weak position, his cabinet colleagues are debating the issues strongly, it is not possible for the prime minister to have his way and we are not in a country where the prime minister is a president and can just say 'This is what happens and this is what goes'. We are always fundamentally in a position where if cabinet ministers wish to assert themselves then the power of the prime minister will be checked and balanced in that way.
>
> (Wilson 2009: 57)

The variability of prime ministerial power is exacerbated by international developments, over which the Prime Minister may have little or no influence. The Prime Minister can be and frequently is powerful, but ultimately is dependent on what one Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, summarised as 'events, dear boy, events'.

Discussion points

- What are the main tasks of the Prime Minister? To what extent have they changed in recent decades?
- To what extent does it matter *who* is Prime Minister?
- Does the Cabinet still have a significant role in British government?
- What are the principal constraints on prime ministerial power?
- Has the United Kingdom seen the growth of a 'presidential' Prime Minister?
- To what extent is prime ministerial power variable?

Further reading

There are various books on prime ministers and the premierships. Among the most recent are Goodman (2016), focusing on the role of the PM in foreign policy making, Blick and Jones (2010), Leonard (2005), Ellis and Treasure (2005), Rose (2001) and Hennessy (2000). There is also a useful report on the role and powers of the Prime Minister from the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee of the House of Commons (2014). Foley (1993, 2000, 2004); Goodman (2016); and Norton (2018) examine the presidentialisation of the premiership. For a comparative study, see Helms (2005). On the premiership of Tony Blair, see Blair (2010); Powell (2010); Beech and Lee (2008); Seldon (2007a, 2007b, 2004); Riddell (2005); Beckett and Hencke (2004); and Rentoul (2001). Campbell (2007, 2011, 2012a, 2012b) also gives a fascinating insight into what went on in Downing Street under Blair. On the Brown premiership, see Seldon and Lodge (2010), and on the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government under David Cameron, see Beech and Lee (2015); Hazell and Yong (2012); Heppell and Seawright (2012); Lee and Beech (2011); Seldon and Snowden (2015); and Seldon and Finn (2015). On the premiership of Theresa May, see Prince (2017). On multilevel governance, see Bache and Flinders (2004). There is no one good recent work on the Cabinet: valuable material on Cabinet and relations between ministers and the PM may be found in the diaries of former Cabinet ministers, such as Clegg (2016), Clarke (2016), Johnson (2016), Waldegrave (2015), Biffen (2013), Straw (2012), Hain (2012), Waddington (2012), Darling (2011), Mandelson (2010), Blunkett (2006) and Short (2004).

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Useful websites

No. 10 Downing Street: www.number10.gov.uk

Ministerial Code: www.gov.uk/government/publications/ministerial-code

Previous prime ministers: www.number10.gov.uk/history-and-tour/past-prime-ministers/

Political and Constitutional Reform Committee, House of Commons – 2014 report on role and powers of Prime Minister: www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmpolcon/351/351.pdf

Appendix

Prime ministers since 1900

Marquess of Salisbury (Con)	1895–1902
Arthur J. Balfour (Con)	1902–5
Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman (Lib)	1905–8
Herbert H. Asquith (Lib)	1908–16
David Lloyd George (Lib)[1]	1916–22
Andrew Bonar Law (Con)	1922–3
Stanley Baldwin (Con)	1923–4
J. Ramsay MacDonald (Lab)	1924
Stanley Baldwin (Con)	1924–9
J. Ramsay MacDonald (Lab/Nat Lab)[2]	1929–35
Stanley Baldwin (Con)	1935–7
Neville Chamberlain (Con)	1937–40
Winston Churchill (Con)	1940–5
Clement Attlee (Lab)	1945–51
Winston Churchill (Con)	1951–5
Sir Anthony Eden (Con)	1955–7
Harold Macmillan (Con)	1957–63
Sir Alec Douglas-Home (Con)	1963–4
Harold Wilson (Lab)	1964–70
Edward Heath (Con)	1970–4
Harold Wilson (Lab)	1974–6
James Callaghan (Lab)	1976–9
Margaret Thatcher (Con)	1979–90
John Major (Con)	1990–7
Tony Blair (Lab)	1997–2007
Gordon Brown (Lab)	2007–10
David Cameron (Con)[3]	2010–6
Theresa May (Con)	2016–

Notes:
[1] Led Conservative-dominated coalition from 1918
[2] Led Conservative-dominated coalition from 1931
[3] Led Conservative-dominated coalition 2010–5

The Cabinet, June 2017

- Prime Minister, First Lord of the Treasury and Minister for the Civil Service – Rt Hon Theresa May MP
- First Secretary of State, and Minister for the Cabinet Office – Rt Hon Damian Green MP
- Chancellor of the Exchequer – Rt Hon Philip Hammond MP
- Secretary of State for the Home Department – Rt Hon Amber Rudd MP
- Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs – Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
- Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union – Rt Hon David Davis MP
- Secretary of State for Defence – Rt Hon Sir Michael Fallon KCB MP
- Secretary of State for Health – Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP
- Lord Chancellor, and Secretary of State for Justice– Rt Hon David Lidington CBE MP
- Secretary of State for Education, and Minister for Women and Equalities – Rt Hon Justine Greening MP
- Secretary of State for International Trade, and President of the Board of Trade – Rt Hon Liam Fox MP
- Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy – Rt Hon Greg Clark MP
- Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs – Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
- Secretary of State for Transport – Rt Hon Chris Grayling MP
- Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government – Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP
- Lord Privy Seal, and Leader of the House of Lords – Rt Hon Baroness Evans of Bowes Park
- Secretary of State for Scotland – Rt Hon David Mundell MP
- Secretary of State for Wales – Rt Hon Alun Cairns MP
- Secretary of State for Northern Ireland – Rt Hon James Brokenshire MP
- Secretary of State for International Development – Rt Hon Priti Patel MP
- Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport – Rt Hon Karen Bradley MP
- Secretary of State for Work and Pensions – Rt Hon David Gauke MP
- Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster – Rt Hon Sir Patrick McLoughlin MP

The following also attend Cabinet:

- Chief Secretary to the Treasury – Rt Hon Elizabeth Truss MP
- Lord President of the Council, and Leader of the House of Commons – Rt Hon Andrea Leadsom MP
- Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Chief Whip) – Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
- Attorney General – Rt Hon Jeremy Wright QC MP
- Minister of State (for Immigration), Home Office – Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP