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The Return of Cabinet Government? Coalition Politics and the Exercise of Political Power

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Abstract

It is often said that political power in the UK is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the Prime Minister and a cadre of unelected advisers, prompting many commentators to announce the demise of Cabinet government. This paper will seek to determine whether or not the advent of coalition government is likely to prompt a return to collective decision-making processes. It will examine the peculiarities of coalition politics, continuities and ruptures with previous government practice and, finally, ask whether or not the return of Cabinet government is realistic or even desirable.

Résumé

On dit souvent que le pouvoir politique au Royaume-Uni est concentré entre les mains du Premier ministre et d'une élite composé de conseillers privés, ce qui a amené certains commentateurs à annoncer la fin du gouvernement collectif par le « Cabinet ». On cherchera à déterminer si l'avènement du gouvernement de coalition favorisera le retour des processus décisionnels collectifs. Seront examinées les particularités de la politique de la coalition, les continuités et ruptures avec la pratique du gouvernement précédent. Enfin, on se demandera si le retour du « Cabinet government » est réaliste, voire souhaitable.

The existence of the Cabinet, its duties and powers shall not be defined by law.

The Prime Minister shall not be required to consult the Cabinet or to gain its approval for any decisions that he or she takes, however important.

The Prime Minister may take decisions alone or with any ad-hoc group of ministers and advisers that he or she determines. A sofa may be set aside in Downing Street for informal decision-taking meetings.

(Stuart Weir and Stuart Wiks-Heeg, *The Unspoken Constitution*,
London: Democratic Audit, 2010)

The situation described above refers to the constitutional arrangements of the United Kingdom in the year 2010. It is a situation in which the Prime Minister wields considerable power, being under no formal obligation whatsoever to consult the democratically-elected members of Cabinet before taking decisions. Instead, the Prime Minister can take decisions unilaterally or with the help of any other person of his or her choosing, regardless of whether or not they have been elected by the British people. This is not to suggest that the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom is omnipotent: the Prime Minister's decision-making capacity is in reality constrained by the extent to which any particular policy or decision is considered to be acceptable to the majority of members of the House of Commons.¹ Indeed, the above quotation is necessarily exaggerated – it is an excerpt from a parody of the British constitution. Nonetheless, it does allude to a certain reality and challenges the very notion of 'Cabinet government' according to which government policy is meant to be formulated in consultation with all of the elected members of Cabinet who are expected to share collective responsibility for it.

Concerns about the decline of Cabinet government in the UK are not new. Vernon Bogdanor notes that already in 1889, the journalist John Morley wrote, "*The flexibility of the cabinet system allows the prime minister to take upon himself a power not inferior to that of a dictator, provided always that the House of Commons will stand by him*".² However, in recent years concerns about the decline of Cabinet government have become particularly ubiquitous, especially under the premierships of Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair. The strong personalities of both these leaders, combined with their determination to carry through their 'conviction politics', sometimes meant that consensual decision-making processes were overridden. It is often argued that as power has come to be more concentrated in the hands of the Prime Minister, the power and influence of the Cabinet has been correspondingly reduced.³ Nevertheless, it is questionable to what extent the power of Cabinet has actually been displaced in favour of the Prime Minister: Kavanagh and Seldon argued in 2000 that

¹ Indeed, should a Prime Minister lose the support of the majority of the House of Commons, he can be removed by a vote of no confidence, as was the case with Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan in 1979.

² Cited by Vernon BOGDANOR, lecture delivered at Gresham College, 19 November 2009. Available at: <<http://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/british-prime-ministers-from-attlee-to-blair>>, consulted 10 February 2011.

³ Michael FOLEY, *The British Presidency: Tony Blair and the politics of public leadership*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000, p. 310.

“*Britain has an under-powered, rather than an over-powerful premiership*”.⁴ If the power of Cabinet has been weakened in the UK, it is perhaps more likely that this has occurred in favour of a number of unelected actors in the policy-making process – policy advisors, ‘spin doctors’, think tanks etc. – rather than in favour of the Prime Minister alone. Whatever the case, it is hard to refute the notion that Cabinet government is no longer the dominant mode of governance in the UK. Yet, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government which came to power in May 2010 has promised to change this state of affairs as part of its grand plans to revitalise democracy. Just before coming to power, Conservative MP William Hague declared, “*David Cameron and all of us around him are determined that Cabinet Government will be restored*”.⁵ The peculiar configuration of a coalition government may indeed make such a restoration possible. Given the increased importance of the Deputy Prime Minister (currently Nick Clegg), there is less chance of the personalisation of power which might encourage unilateral rather than multilateral decision-making. Indeed, the crossbench peer, Lord Butler, suggested “*that the Cabinet Office can no longer be a 'prime minister's department' in the situation of the coalition, because who then supports the Deputy Prime Minister?*”.⁶ Yet, even if decision-making becomes more consensual, this does not necessarily mean that it will become more democratic. It may be that unelected officials will continue to play a pivotal role in the policy-making process. The aim of the present study will be to analyse how exactly the advent of coalition government has altered the way in which political power is exercised with regard to Cabinet government. In order to determine whether or not change is likely, it will first be necessary to briefly examine the decline of Cabinet government under the previous administration.

The Blair Premiership: The decline of Cabinet Government

Strengthening leadership at the centre was a key plank of Tony Blair’s modernization programme as Labour Party leader from 1994-1997. In a (successful) attempt to marginalize left-wing elements within the Party and to make Labour seem credible to business, the power of Tony Blair himself and his close aides (Gordon Brown, Robin Cook and John Prescott: the “Big Four”) was massively increased at the expense of the Shadow Cabinet and the National Executive Committee.⁷ The power and influence of the trade unions over the party leadership had already been substantially limited by the introduction of ‘One Member One Vote’ under John Smith (party leader from 1992-94) which reduced the relative weight allocated to the union vote in the electoral college.⁸ Given the difficulties in reaching consensus with the wide range of interests represented by the NEC, the unions

⁴ Dennis KAVANAGH and Anthony SELDON, *The Powers Behind the Prime Minister: The hidden influence of Number Ten*, London: Harper Collins, 2000, p. xvi.

⁵ William HAGUE, “The change this country needs”, speech delivered 27 February 2010. Available at: <http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/02/William_Hague_The_change_this_country_needs.aspx>, consulted 10 February 2011).

⁶ Lord BUTLER of BROCKWELL, Lords Debate, 6 July 2010: Column 151.

⁷ Paul ANDERSON and Nyta MANN, *Safety First: The Making of New Labour*, London: Granta Books, 1997, pp. 50. The NEC is the governing body of the Labour Party, bringing together representatives from across the Labour movement. Its membership is therefore considerably more diverse than that of the Parliamentary Labour Party.

⁸ For more details, see Keith ALDERMAN and Neil CARTER, “The Labour Party and the Trade Unions: Loosening the Ties”, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 1994, vol. 47, n° 3.

and the shadow cabinet, Blair preferred to develop policy in consultation with a close-knit inner circle of advisers including, among others, the “Big Four”, Alastair Campbell, former political editor of the *Daily Mirror*, and the diplomat, Jonathan Powell, who would become Blair’s Director of Communications and Strategy and Chief-of-Staff respectively.⁹ Very soon, the Party was organized along a “unitary command structure”, as recommended by Blair’s polling strategist, Philip Gould, in a leaked memo entitled *The Unfinished Revolution*.¹⁰ It was exactly this kind of command structure that Tony Blair was to carry over into 10 Downing Street once he became Prime Minister in 1997. This time, Blair and his aides largely followed the advice of Peter Mandelson and Roger Liddle who, in their book outlining Labour’s strategy for government, insisted that, in order to be successful, Blair would have to “*get personal control of the central-government machine and drive it hard, in the knowledge that if the government does not run the machine the machine will run the government*”.¹¹

On becoming Prime Minister, Blair indeed came to assume increasing personal control over the machinery of government, most strikingly symbolized by his relationship with Cabinet Office and Cabinet itself. The website of Cabinet Office explains that it “*sits at the very centre of government, with an overarching purpose of making government work better*”.¹² With this aim in mind, it claims to simultaneously support the Cabinet and the Prime Minister, “*helping to ensure effective development, coordination and implementation of policy and operations across all government departments*”.¹³ It also “*lead[s] work to ensure the Civil Service provides the most effective and efficient support to Government to help it meet its objectives*”.¹⁴ Its original purpose was to serve as the institutional expression of collective government in which policies are formulated in coordination with the Prime Minister, the Cabinet and the civil service¹⁵. It is often suggested that the key function of Cabinet Office is thus to act as an “honest broker” between the different institutions and departments of government. Yet, under the New Labour administration, Kavanagh suggests that it became something of “*an arm of the centre*”, exclusively serving the interests of the Prime Minister.¹⁶ Indeed, shortly after Blair became Prime Minister, the remit of Cabinet Office was changed from that of providing “*an efficient, effective and impartial service to Cabinet Committees*” to “*driv[ing] forward the achievement of the government’s agenda*”.¹⁷ As Cabinet Office increasingly came to support the Prime Minister himself, the less able it was to support the Cabinet as a whole or the civil service, thus undermining the principle of collective government. According to Blick and Jones, this trend did not begin with the arrival of Tony Blair in office, but it accelerated in the 1990s.¹⁸ By 2002, the Cabinet Office’s Public Service Agreement¹⁹ had dropped any references to collective decision-making,

⁹ ANDERSON and MANN, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹¹ Peter MANDELSON and Roger LIDDLE, *The Blair Revolution: Can New Labour Deliver?*, London: Faber and Faber, 1996, pp. 235-6.

¹² <<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/content/about-cabinet-office>>, consulted 17 February 2011.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Andrew BLICK and George JONES, written memorandum submitted to the House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution, Fourth Report of Session 2009-10, *The Cabinet Office and the Centre of Government*, London: The Stationary Office, 2010, p. 175.

¹⁶ Dennis KAVANAGH, evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution, *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹⁷ Dennis KAVANAGH and Anthony SELDON, *op. cit.*, p. 309.

¹⁸ Andrew BLICK and George JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

¹⁹ Introduced in 1998, Public Service Agreements set out official targets for various government departments.

establishing its principal objective as being, “*To support the Prime Minister in leading the Government*”.²⁰ Even though the objective of supporting the Cabinet was added again in 2006, the notion of collective decision-making has still not been restored.²¹

The decline of collective government decision-making in consultation with Cabinet over recent years has led a number of commentators to note that the UK has been progressively moving from a system of Cabinet government to one of prime ministerial or even presidential government whereby the Prime Minister ceased to be simply *primus inter pares* (first among equals) and assumed a great deal of personal power.²² As we noted above, such concerns are not new. However, they were heightened following the breakdown of post-war consensus politics at the end of the 1970s in favour of the so-called “conviction politics” of the Thatcher and Blair governments. The desire of both leaders to carry out their radical programmes often led them to sideline Cabinet in favour of bilateral decision-making processes with trusted aides. Both Blair and Thatcher limited the number and length of Cabinet meetings and often took major decisions without consulting Cabinet members. For example, in 1986 Thatcher did not consult the Cabinet over her decision to allow US aircraft to use UK military bases to launch their attack on Libya. Blair reduced the length of Cabinet meetings to less than an hour (in the past, they often lasted for two hours or more), rendering them “*too brief... to be effective decision-making forums*”.²³ The length of Cabinet meetings was lengthened under Brown and dissent was more readily expressed²⁴ but perhaps this was as much a reflection of his weaker political position than of a genuine desire to restore collegiate decision-making practices.

According to John Rentoul, one of Blair’s biographers, “*Blair’s management style ushered in a new low in the history of Cabinet government in Britain [...] Blair’s Cabinet rarely engaged in meaningful debate about policy*”.²⁵ There are a considerable number of examples of Blair failing to consult the Cabinet on important policy decisions, notably that to allow the Bank of England to raise interest rates. It is often suggested that Blair even failed to adequately consult Cabinet about the decision to invade Iraq in 2003. However, the Butler Report into the military intelligence which was used as justification for the Iraq invasion suggests that this was simply not the case. The report concludes that there was “*no lack of discussion on Iraq*”, noting that the Cabinet discussed policy in this area as a specific agenda item twenty-four times.²⁶ Nonetheless, consultation is not the same thing as meaningful debate. Clare Short, Secretary of State for International development from 1997 until her resignation in 2003, informed the Chilcot Inquiry²⁷ that she was prevented from prompting a Cabinet debate on the Attorney General Lord Goldsmith’s legal advice on the war three days before it

²⁰ Andrew BLICK and George JONES, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

²¹ *Ibid.* See also Cabinet Office, *Business Plan: 2011-2015*, November 2010. Available at <<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/cabinet-office-business-plan.pdf>>, consulted 17 February 2011.

²² E.g. Michael FOLEY, *op. cit.*

²³ Dennis KAVANAGH and Anthony SELDON, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

²⁴ Andrew RAWNSLEY, *The End of the Party: The Rise and Fall of New Labour*, London: Penguin, 2010, p. 463.

²⁵ John RENTOUL, *Tony Blair, Prime Minister*, London: Warner Books, 2001, p. 540.

²⁶ Lord BUTLER of BROCKWELL, *Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction*, London: The Stationary Office, 2004, para. 609.

²⁷ The Chilcot Inquiry was launched in July 2009 to consider “*the UK’s involvement in Iraq, including the way decisions were made and actions taken, to establish, as accurately as possible, what happened and to identify the lessons that can be learned*”. At the time of writing, the Inquiry is still sitting.

commenced.²⁸ She claimed that the cabinet had been “*mised*” concerning the case for war since it had not been given the opportunity to examine all the evidence available, including advice from Foreign Office legal advisers.²⁹ She claimed that, contrary to what Tony Blair claimed in his own evidence to the Inquiry, there was “*no substantive discussion*” in Cabinet about the Iraq War. More generally, she said, “*Cabinet doesn’t work that way, and didn’t under the whole of the time I was in government, the way that, according to our constitutional theory, it is supposed to work. I mean, the meetings were very short. There were never papers. There were little chats about things, but it wasn’t a decision-making body in any serious way, and I don’t remember at all Iraq coming to the Cabinet in any way whatsoever at that time (in the months leading up to war)*”.³⁰ The Butler Inquiry corroborates Short’s evidence, noting that “*quality*” papers on the Iraq situation were written by government officials but that they were simply not discussed in either Cabinet or the Cabinet Committee.^{31,32} Consequently, the Inquiry noted that this hindered the ability of the Cabinet to “*prepare properly*” for such discussions.³³ Another problem for Cabinet, according to Robin Cook, Foreign Secretary and Leader of the House of Commons, was that it had simply “*lost the habit of dissent*”, having become all too-used to simply agreeing with the Prime Minister.³⁴

In preparing for war, Blair clearly preferred to rely on sources of expertise other than the Cabinet. Indeed, according to Cabinet Secretary Sir Gus O’Donnell, Blair deliberately avoided discussing the issue in Cabinet, fearing that details would be leaked to the press.³⁵ He instead relied on a close circle of advisers. The number of Cabinet meetings on Iraq was outweighed by the number of meetings attended by a small number of key ministers, officials and military officers.³⁶ In preparing the case for war, it seems Blair relied as much on media experts such as Alastair Campbell as on intelligence officials. Campbell even chaired a key intelligence meeting, overseeing the transformation of the intelligence claim that the Iraqi military *may* be able to deploy weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes to *could* and finally *are able to* deploy.³⁷ In exercising the military offensive on Iraq, Blair relied on an extremely limited War Cabinet involving two intelligence chiefs, a top military chief, Alastair Campbell, Jonathan Powell, David Manning (Blair’s senior adviser on foreign policy) and Sally Morgan (one of Blair’s closest political advisers).³⁸ Just two Cabinet members were in attendance (Geoff Hoon, Defence Secretary, and Jack Straw, Foreign Secretary), yet it seemed that the War Cabinet was as superfluous to the decision-making process as the regular

²⁸ Clare SHORT, oral evidence submitted to the Chilcot Inquiry, 2 February 2010, pp.28-9. Available at: <<http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/44771/20100202am-short-final.pdf>>, consulted 17 February 2011.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³¹ Cabinet Committees are small groups of specialist ministers brought together to discuss issues of importance to Government. Their collective decisions are binding across Government. These committees have become increasingly important as the workload of Cabinet – the supreme decision-making body in government – has become greater.

³² Lord BUTLER of BROCKWELL, *Review of Intelligence*, *op. cit.*, para. 610.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Robin Cook, quoted by Peter HENNESSY, “Rulers and Servants of the State: The Blair Style of Government 1997-2004”, *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 58 n°1, 2005, p. 14.

³⁵ Sir Gus O’DONNELL, evidence submitted to the Chilcot Inquiry, 28 January 2011, pp.16-17. Available at: <<http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/51849/20110202-odonnell-final.pdf>>, consulted 17 February 2011.

³⁶ Lord BUTLER of BROCKWELL, *Review of Intelligence*, *op. cit.*, para. 609.

³⁷ Ian BYRNE and Stuart WEIR, “Democratic Audit: Executive Democracy in War and Peace”, *Parliamentary Affairs* Vol. 57 n°2, 2004, p. 458.

³⁸ Andrew RAWNSLEY, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

Cabinet, with most important decisions being made before the War Cabinet even met.³⁹ Perhaps more important to Blair (and subsequently Brown) were unelected special advisers who played an important role in preparations for the Iraq invasion.⁴⁰

The number of special advisers increased from 38 by the end of the Major government to 74 by July 2009.⁴¹ The two most influential special advisers in the Blair government were without doubt Campbell and Powell who were granted the power to give orders to professional civil servants. They frequently wielded as much, if not more, power over key policy decisions than ministers themselves and were even allowed to attend Cabinet meetings. Foley has argued that the new importance accorded to media presentation in the New Labour government helped to legitimize the role of media advisers such as Campbell at the expense of the formal Cabinet.⁴² It would, however, be an error to assume that these advisers are all “spin doctors” – only about half of them deal with communications, presentations and speeches.⁴³ For Sir Richard Wilson, former Cabinet Secretary (1998-2002), they play a “useful” role, acting as ministers’ “political eyes and ears”.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, as unaccountable officials, concern has been expressed that they may undermine the principle of collective ministerial responsibility according to which ministers are accountable before Parliament for their actions. If decisions are taken by special advisers, these lines of accountability are evidently blurred. It is also important to ensure that special advisers do not come to play a more significant role than the democratically-elected members of Cabinet, as appeared to be the case in the Iraq war episode.

If the Prime Minister has indeed come to assume Presidential functions in the sense that he or she is the head of a personalized executive, these problems of accountability are all the more pressing: the UK does not have the same formal constitutional safeguards as the United States against the abuse of executive power, such as the Supreme Court’s power to strike down legislation which it deems to be in breach of the constitution. Nonetheless, the extent to which the British Prime Minister has assumed presidential functions is highly questionable. As Richard Heffernan has argued, there are a number of key differences which remain between the two functions, notably the fact that the practice of British government is based on the notion of collegiality according to which ministers are not personally responsible to the Prime Minister but rather collectively responsible before Parliament.⁴⁵ Whilst Prime Ministers have enormous powers of appointment, they are “*never as free in practice as they are in theory*” to appoint who they want, in contrast to American presidents.⁴⁶ For example, no matter what disagreements there may have been between Tony Blair as Prime Minister and Gordon Brown as Chancellor, the former could never have removed the latter without threatening his own political power. Moreover, no matter how much collective forms of decision-making may have been

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Ian BYRNE and Stuart WEIR, *op. cit.*, p. 457.

⁴¹ House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁴² FOLEY, *op. cit.*, p. 315.

⁴³ Sir Richard WILSON, speech, “Portrait of a Profession Revisited”, 26 March 2002. Available at: <<http://www.civilservant.org.uk/srwspeech0302.pdf>>, consulted 17 February 2011.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Richard HEFFERNAN, “Why the Prime Minister cannot be a President: Comparing Institutional Imperatives in Britain and America”, *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 58 n°1, 2005: 53-70.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

circumscribed in recent years, British Prime Ministers, as first among equals, are only as powerful as their Party and their government allow them to be.⁴⁷ Should they lose their parliamentary support base, they may be forced from office as was the case of both Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair (even if the ousting of the former was considerably more brutal than that of the latter). As Heffernan notes, “*While Prime Ministers can assert their preferences, compromise is often the name of the game. They can, of course, successfully lead and instruct, but must sometimes coerce, cajole, entreat, and perhaps plead with colleagues to pursue some matter*”.⁴⁸ This would suggest that the power of a British Prime Minister is not as great as the presidentialisation theses may lead us to believe. However, this is not to overlook the fact that there are strong and weak prime ministers. The extent to which a strong prime minister may dominate the executive is indeed great, particularly where he leads a strong Parliamentary majority, as was the case with Tony Blair following the 1997 General Election. In such a situation, we have demonstrated that Cabinet government may find itself considerably weakened, even if it is not dispensed with altogether.

Coalition Government: The beginning of a new era in politics?

The new Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government led by David Cameron and his Deputy, Nick Clegg, came to power promising to carry out “*fundamental political reform*” to fix Britain’s “*broken*” political system.⁴⁹ With this aim in mind, it has drawn up legislation to reform the electoral system, to extend devolved powers to Scotland and Wales, to further reform the House of Lords and to render democracy more participative. The list of promised reforms is long, yet it largely excludes any promises to reform the way in which political power is exercised by the Prime Minister. No specific promise has been made with regard to the restoration of Cabinet government. Nevertheless, the Coalition’s *Programme for Government* does promise to limit the number of special advisers which, as we noted above, was one of the factors undermining collective cabinet governance under the Blair administration. In addition, the Draft Cabinet Manual, drawn up in December 2010 by Gus O’Donnell, in an attempt to commit to paper the mysterious workings of British democracy, highlighted the importance of collective Cabinet responsibility and the need for Cabinet to be formally consulted on most aspects of government policy with the exception of the Budget and quasi-judicial decisions taken by individual ministers (such as decisions to grant planning permission).⁵⁰

The very fact of coalition government may go a long way to ensuring that Cabinet government is respected. Indeed, the Coalition’s *Agreement for Stability and Reform* emphasizes the need to

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*

⁴⁹ HM GOVERNMENT, *The Coalition: Our Programme for Government*, 26 May 2010. Available at <http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg_187876.pdf>, consulted 23 February 2011.

⁵⁰ CABINET OFFICE, *The Cabinet Manual – Draft*, December 2010, pp. 53-60. Available at <<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/cabinet-draft-manual.pdf>>, consulted 23 February 2011.

“foster collective decision making and responsibility”⁵¹ – practices which may be described as the hallmarks of Cabinet government. The document notes the agreement to share power between the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister, notably with regard to ministerial appointments. In order to ensure policy agreement across government, a Coalition Committee was established, co-chaired by David Cameron and Nick Clegg. This committee exists in order to resolve disputes which have not been settled at any of the Cabinet Committees appointed to examine specific policy issues, ensuring that collective agreement is reached. These Cabinet Committees are also appointed jointly. Nick Clegg chairs the Home Affairs Committee which has an extremely wide remit covering constitutional and political reform, migration, health, schools and welfare. Yet, whilst Liberal Democrat MPs are represented on all Cabinet Committees and, of course, on Cabinet itself, the balance of power is skewed in favour of the Conservatives. Whilst the Liberal Democrats have proportionately more Cabinet seats than they have overall in the House of Commons (22% of all seats in the former compared to 16% of all seats in the latter), only four out of the twenty-one ministers who attend Cabinet are Liberal Democrats. In addition, Liberal Democrats are responsible for running just three government departments out of a total of eighteen. Nonetheless, the cross-party nature of decision-making should help to ensure that the Prime Minister is less capable of imposing his will on the rest of government. Importantly, Cameron’s political position is considerably weaker than that of Tony Blair when he came to power in 1997 on a landslide victory which granted him a majority of 178 seats in the House of Commons. Even so, the two premiers share a great deal in common which may mean that change will be more difficult to implement in practice than in theory with regard to how political power is exercised.

Plus ça change...

Just like Blair, Cameron found himself charged with the role of rebranding his party. Whereas Blair had sought to purge the Labour Party of its image as a working-class, pro-union, “tax and spend” party, Cameron sought to purge the Conservative Party of its image as the “nasty party”⁵², attempting to show that it cared about social and environmental problems. Just as for Blair, Cameron’s personal image as young and dynamic was essential to this rebranding, ensuring that he would be personally associated with the new Party. This probably helped to strengthen the position of both men as party leaders.

Their strength also derived from their leadership style which tends to involve placing trust in a close circle of advisers who are often personal friends. Elliott and Hanning note, “*Cameron may have been open-handed in his distribution of shadow Cabinet jobs, but in the construction of his private*

⁵¹ HM GOVERNMENT, *Coalition Agreement for Stability and Reform*, May 2010. Available at <http://astrid-online.com/Dossier--R3/Documenti/Stability-Reform_may2010.pdf>, consulted 23 February 2011.

⁵² The term was coined by Theresa May, former Conservative Party Chairperson, at a speech delivered at the 2002 Party Conference.

office he appointed only those he trusted".⁵³ Indeed, Cameron's top advisers both as Party leader and now as Prime Minister include old friends from either Eton and/or the Conservative Research Department (where he worked from 1988-1992) such as Ed Llewelyn, Cameron's Chief-of-Staff, and Kate Fall, his closest aide. Trusted advisers such as these form part of what has been described by *Conservative Intelligence*⁵⁴ as "Cameron's West Wing"⁵⁵ in reference to the American-style system of government which is seen to work like a corporate machine with a rigid line of command going straight to the top. The key figures in "Cameron's West Wing" are less likely to be Cabinet ministers than personal advisers, strategists and media and communications experts. In Opposition, Cameron was consequently accused of "leadership by inner circle", with Kenneth Clarke (formerly business spokesman, now Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor) going so far as to suggest that he often sidelined the Shadow Cabinet, preferring to keep colleagues "informed" rather than consulted.⁵⁶ It is perhaps a little early to say definitively whether Cameron has carried this leadership style over into government but some early signs would suggest at least some continuity with the past.

Many of the special advisers Cameron employed in Opposition now work within Number Ten, suggesting that he has no intention of parting from his close coterie. The Coalition's Programme for Government promised to reduce the number of special advisers.⁵⁷ Yet, their number actually increased by 17% between June 2010 and March 2011.⁵⁸ Just as under Blair, certain unelected advisers would appear to have a special influence on policy as members of Cameron's 'inner circle', notably Ed Llewelyn, Jeremy Heywood, Permanent Secretary (the senior official within Downing Street) and Steve Hilton, political strategist. Together with the Chancellor, George Osborne, a personal friend of the Prime Minister, they "*effectively run Number Ten*".⁵⁹

In addition to the continued reliance on special advisers, the practice of sidelining Cabinet seems to have been continued. For example, the Government's decision to cut child benefit for higher-rate taxpayers was announced by Chancellor George Osborne at the Conservative Party Conference without Cabinet having first been consulted. The Work and Pensions Secretary, Iain Duncan Smith, was reportedly not consulted in advance of the announcement which is said to have been finalised between Cameron and Osborne on the eve of the Conference.⁶⁰

⁵³ Francis ELLIOTT and James HANNING, *Cameron : The Rise of the New Conservative*, London: Harper, 2009, p. 299.

⁵⁴ Conservative Intelligence is an on-line blog dedicated to keeping Conservative supporters up-to-date on the inside workings of the Conservative Party. See <<http://conservativeintelligence.com/about-us>>, consulted 23 February 2011.

⁵⁵ See <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/thetorydiary/2009/07/david-camerons-west-wing.html>, consulted 23 February 2011.

⁵⁶ Kirsty WALKER, "Ken Clarke accuses David Cameron of 'sidelining' the Shadow Cabinet", *The Guardian*, 9 March 2010.

⁵⁷ HM GOVERNMENT, *The Coalition: Our Programme for Government*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁵⁸ INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNMENT. Available at <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/2395/special-advisers-the-great-cull-or-stealthy-rise/> (consulted 16 October 2011).

⁵⁹ Anthony SELDON, "Inside Cameron's Number 10", *Parliamentary Brief*, April 2011. Available at <http://www.parliamentarybrief.com/2011/04/inside-camerons-number-10#all> (consulted 16 October 2011).

⁶⁰ Andrew GRICE, "Tories in turmoil as child benefit backlash gathers strength", *The Independent*, 6 October 2010.

The peculiarities of coalition politics

The very practice of coalition government has meant that there has been difficulty reinstating the position of Cabinet and promoting collective responsibility in the policy-making process. Whilst collective responsibility is encouraged within Cabinet Committees, their collective decisions being binding across government, collective Cabinet responsibility may be explicitly set aside when disagreement arises over major policy decisions.⁶¹ The existence of party differences may thus pose a threat to the very notion of collective cabinet responsibility. Indeed, it is extremely difficult to foster a culture of collegiality between two opposing parties. This is perhaps why Cabinet Committees have proliferated – it is likely to be easier to reach consensus within these smaller cross-party committees than within Cabinet itself. Yet, whilst these committees have experienced something of a revival, they are not used to resolve serious differences in coalition politics but rather to resolve more mundane interdepartmental problems.⁶² Rather, the Coalition Committee referred to above was established to manage coalition issues but, one year after the coalition came to power, it had met only twice.⁶³ Cabinet reportedly meets more frequently than during the Blair years and there have been attempts to reinforce (or perhaps to reinstate) the collegiality of the Cabinet system as a whole, notably by circulating papers well in advance of Cabinet Committee meetings to enable prior consultation between committee members.⁶⁴ Yet, practice so far would suggest that the most important decisions taken by the coalition are actually taken outside the formal machinery of Cabinet government.⁶⁵ Most significantly, “*all the big coalition issues*” are reportedly decided in weekly bilateral meetings and telephone calls between the Prime Minister and his Deputy.⁶⁶

Indeed, in order to ensure the survival of the coalition, Cameron and Clegg have done all in their power to present a united front, putting party differences behind them. Of course, the Prime Minister’s power has to some extent been curtailed as he is forced to seek compromise with his partner: although he remains the legal head of government in possession of a significantly greater number of powers than his deputy, he is obliged to consult the latter over ministerial appointments and, most importantly, over the direction of policy. Consequently, Cameron claims that he was forced to compromise on immigration and welfare, whilst Clegg claims that he convinced him to dilute his proposed NHS reforms.⁶⁷ Clegg’s compromises have probably been greater. Most notable was his support for the Conservative proposal to increase the cost of university tuition fees only months after coming to power, thus effecting a significant U-turn on a key Liberal Democrat manifesto promise and prompting much uproar within the ranks of his own party and supporters. It is not surprising that Clegg has often been depicted as the weaker partner in the relationship. Compromise has been made at

⁶¹ HM GOVERNMENT, *Coalition Agreement for Stability and Reform*, *op. cit.*

⁶² CONSTITUTION UNIT, *The Inside Story: How Coalition Government Works*, June 2011. Available at <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/research/coalition-government/interim-report2.pdf> (consulted 16 October 2011).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁷ Robert WINNETT, “Liberal Democrats forced David Cameron to compromise on benefits”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 June 2011.

considerable political expense for the Liberal Democrat leader – Clegg’s popularity ratings reached an all-time low in June 2011⁶⁸ whilst in May his party lost the local council elections in Sheffield, Clegg’s own parliamentary constituency. Yet, together with Cameron, Clegg represents a formidable political force: each leader is ultimately dependent on the other for his political survival – they are thus bound together in a symbiotic relationship. Given the capacity of the duo to claim to be representing a wider cross-section of interests than any single party, they can claim more legitimacy than many leaders. This is perhaps the most striking feature of coalition politics: their potential to reinforce the joint power of the two leaders, allowing them to develop a sort of power duopoly or joint premiership which might prove to be even more powerful than that of most recent Prime Ministers. Indeed, according to a recent study of the operation of coalition government, it “*has behaved in a majoritarian way towards parliament*”.⁶⁹ In pushing through a number of extremely unpopular policies, it has demonstrated considerable inflexibility in face of opposition from both the official Opposition and even from members of the coalition parties. Paradoxically, whilst the power of the Prime Minister has been somewhat diluted as he is forced to reach agreement with his Deputy, the power at the very centre of British politics has been reinforced, leading to an unprecedented degree of backbench rebellion.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, Cabinet has been rendered somewhat superfluous since it is agreement at the very centre of power – i.e. between Cameron and Clegg – which appears to count above all else. Paradoxically, it is the very success of coalition politics that could ultimately spell the end of Cabinet government.

Cabinet Government: No longer fit for purpose?

Perhaps, in the final analysis, concerns about the decline of Cabinet government miss the point. Such concerns tend to suggest that Cabinet government, underpinned by the principle of collective ministerial responsibility, is the hallmark of good governance. They fail to recognize how the practice of government has evolved over recent decades, making the exercise of political power a much more complex affair than it once was.⁷¹ According to Weir and Beetham, Cabinet is both too small and too large to be effective: “*modern government is simply too vast and complex an operation to be encompassed by a small group of politicians meeting weekly. At the same time, the cabinet is too large and unwieldy a group to be able to take effective decisions*”.⁷² Indeed, it might seem wholly unrealistic to expect the small group of ministers represented in Cabinet to even be fully aware of the complex workings of government outside their own departments, let alone to take decisions on its behalf. The sheer size of government has grown massively since the early days of Cabinet government

⁶⁸ Julian GLOVER, “David Cameron's popularity rating drops while Liberal Democrats' slumps”, *The Guardian*, 20 June 2011.

⁶⁹ CONSTITUTION UNIT, *op cit.*, 8-9.

⁷⁰ Philip COWLEY and Mark STUART, “A Coalition with Wobbly Wings: Backbench Dissent since May 2010”. Available at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/41616403/A-coalition-with-wobbly-wings-Backbench-dissent-since-May-2010> (consulted 5 February 2011).

⁷¹ See, for example, Dennis KAVANAGH, David RICHARDS, Andrew GEDDES and Martin SMITH, *British Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

⁷² Stuart WEIR and David BEETHAM, *Political Power and Democratic Control in Britain: The Democratic Audit of the United Kingdom*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 133.

under Lloyd George (Prime Minister, 1916-22). It not only includes a greatly extended civil service but also a vast number of “quangoes”, quasi non-governmental organizations charged with carrying out specific administrative tasks at arm’s length from government.⁷³ Cabinet is also in many ways too large a body to take effective decisions, especially in the case of a coalition government where dissent is likely to be even more common. Consequently, the smaller Cabinet Committees which have proliferated under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat administration may prove to be more effective decision-making bodies than Cabinet itself. Another problem with Cabinet decision-making is that individual ministers may be more interested in working as ambassadors for their own department than as colleagues.⁷⁴

The decline of Cabinet government should not therefore necessarily be a cause for concern. However, it is important that this trend is not matched by a corresponding increase in the power of the Prime Minister, as appeared to be the case under the Blair/Brown administrations. Equally, it should not be matched by an increase in the power of unelected and unaccountable advisers. The reality of modern government means that a multiplicity of actors will inevitably be involved in the policy-making process. What is important is that all of these actors can be held to account for their actions. The new coalition government in the UK would be well-advised to follow the recommendation of the House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution that “*where structures of power have shifted, structures of accountability [should be] adjusted accordingly*”.⁷⁵ This would be an appropriate addition to the Coalition’s programme for democratic renewal and constitutional reform.

⁷³ It was estimated that in 2009 there were almost 1,200 quangoes in Britain. *Guardian Datablog*, available at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2009/jul/07/public-finance-regulators>>, consulted 23 February 2011.

⁷⁴ WEIR and BEETHAM, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

⁷⁵ House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

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