

All power to 10 Downing Street: Johnson's first major reshuffle and the perils of presidentialism



Despite ups and downs in prime ministerial power over the years, the general tendency has been to expect the prime minister to do more than in the past, writes [Archie Brown](#). He traces this tendency back to Margaret Thatcher's premiership, which gave a huge impetus to the idea that political power belongs to the prime minister rather than to the government. He explains how an expansive interpretation of this idea was taken several steps further in Boris Johnson's first significant cabinet reshuffle.

Creeping presidentialism has been a recurring phenomenon in British government over the past forty years. It became more pronounced during the prime ministership of Margaret Thatcher and her example influenced subsequent understandings of what the role of head of government in the UK involved. But an expansive interpretation of the prime minister's role was taken several steps further in the [February 2020 reshuffle](#).

There is nothing new about tension between a prime minister and a Chancellor of the Exchequer, nor is there any novelty in the staff of 10 Downing Street believing they should be more fully controlling government policy than they are. What is, however, radically new is the attempt to merge 10 Downing Street and Treasury policy-making teams by foisting on a Chancellor of the Exchequer advisers who have been chosen by an unelected 10 Downing Street aide.

Strong ministers in the past have made clear that they were running their departments and that they would resist the importunities of 10 Downing Street officials. When Margaret Thatcher added a foreign policy adviser and a defence policy adviser to the prime minister's personal staff, Michael Heseltine, as Secretary of State for Defence, forbade his officials to take the defence adviser's calls. Gordon Brown, as chancellor, stymied two Number 10 economic advisers by keeping Treasury officials away from them and starving them of information. Brown had no difficulty either in seeing off Blair's desire to take Britain into the common European currency.

The breakdown of collegiality in the Blair-Brown relationship was troublesome for ministers who wished to remain on good terms with both and was hardly a model of good governance. But that does not constitute a case for more monolithic government, nor does it mean that the man or woman in 10 Downing Street knows best. No prime minister – still less, a premier's unelected aides – was ever chosen because that person was believed to have a monopoly of wisdom.

Normally, a minister widely regarded as having been successful, does not have to fear dismissal, even if that person is not an acolyte of the prime minister. But this Cabinet reshuffle has contravened that convention. Julian Smith, as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, is the most obvious case in point. He was highly regarded by those most affected by his department's decisions – the contending parties in Northern Ireland (who usually agree on little) and also by the government of the Republic of Ireland. They all believed he was doing a good job.

I began these remarks with Margaret Thatcher, for she was both a centralist and a power amplifier. Her style of rule gave a huge impetus to the idea that political power in Britain belongs, above all, to the prime minister rather than to the government or cabinet. The length of time Thatcher spent in 10 Downing Street, the extent to which she stamped her personality and policy preferences on the government, and the fact that she led her party for fifteen years and was prime minister for eleven and a half has had a lasting impact on perceptions of the prime minister's role.

The political commentariat has largely bought into the Thatcher and post-Thatcher interpretations of the powers that belong to the prime minister individually and they, in turn, have influenced assumptions within the political class about what prime ministers are *entitled* to do. Such has been the change in the terms of political discourse that even senior Cabinet ministers have treated, and spoken of, the prime minister as their 'boss' in a way barely conceivable for their counterparts in the governments headed by Clement Attlee, Winston Churchill (even within the War Cabinet, and certainly in his peacetime premiership), Harold Macmillan, Harold Wilson or James Callaghan.

Thatcher's leadership style influenced expectations of British party leaders, including leaders of the Labour Party. There was a direct link between the governments headed by Thatcher and by the second longest-serving post-war British prime minister, Tony Blair. Margaret Thatcher's closest aide was her private secretary, Charles Powell, of whom her foreign policy adviser, Sir Percy Cradock, said it was sometimes 'difficult to establish where Mrs Thatcher ended and Charles Powell began' and that Powell 'frequently overstepped the line between the official and the political domains'.

His younger brother, Jonathan Powell, was Tony Blair's chief of staff and, though a political appointee, he was (along with Alastair Campbell) accorded the right to give instructions to civil servants in a break with traditional (and subsequent) constitutional procedure. Jonathan Powell's capacious notion of the powers a prime minister was entitled to wield undoubtedly owed a good deal to the example of the Thatcher administration and to the experience of his elder sibling. Before Blair entered 10 Downing Street, Powell voiced his preference for a 'Napoleonic system' of government, one in which 10 Downing Street would not put up with ministers 'who pay fealty to their liege but really get on with whatever they want to do'.

Yet even Margaret Thatcher – not to speak of Tony Blair, faced by the countervailing power of Gordon Brown – did not always get her way within government. Faced by Heseltine's resistance, she had to give up on the idea of having a defence adviser in 10 Downing Street; that official's duties were simply added to the portfolio of the foreign policy adviser who came to Number 10 from the Foreign Office. And even though she gradually replaced the most self-consciously 'One Nation' Tory ministers by those she deemed to be more 'Thatcherite', her style of rule eventually disillusioned even those whom she had promoted. It was, above all, lack of support from her own Cabinet which forced her resignation from office in November 1990.

The more problems are referred to the prime minister, the more decisions he or she is expected to make personally, the less time that leader has to weigh the pros and cons, and the more *de facto* power devolves to the premier's principal aides. Unsurprisingly, they are the people most eager to concentrate ever more power in 10 Downing Street and the most enthusiastic advocates of dominating prime ministers. Thus, Jonathan Powell wrote that 'The little secret of the British constitution is that the centre of government is not too powerful but too weak', and he saw as a problem something that should be welcomed: the fact that a prime minister needs to use persuasion to get his or her way and can only lead a government 'by building coalitions of support and by carrying his colleagues with him'.

The Powell view was shared by prime minister Theresa May's unelected aides, Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill, who wielded great power behind the scenes until the 2017 election outcome so weakened May's authority that she was forced to part company with them. Earlier, the first minister to resign from May's government in 2016, Jim O'Neill, expressed astonishment that 'the whole cabinet was petrified' of 'two unaccountable people'.

The 2017 election was meant to do for Prime Minister May and her aides what the 2019 election did for Boris Johnson and his principal adviser – to strengthen the control of 10 Downing Street – and it did the opposite in May's case. In a fleeting reference to the flaws of the election campaign in her speech to the Conservative Party annual conference in 2017, May noted that it had been 'too presidential'.

If a prime minister feels no need to persuade cabinet colleagues of the merits of a case, but can issue orders to them, as an American president (especially one as overweening as Donald Trump) may do, that is very convenient for the prime minister's aides who will often be the progenitors of the policy proposal. When a domineering prime minister acts as if he or she is indeed the 'boss', rather than captain of a team, a likely outcome is self-censorship on the part of senior colleagues. In the absence of intra-governmental challenge to the views of a prime minister's coterie, we get 10 Downing Street groupthink and policies which have not received the critical scrutiny they require.

During Margaret Thatcher's premiership, Geoffrey Howe noted that in Whitehall and Westminster, discussion would always come round to the question, 'how will this play with the prime minister?' Thus, policy proposals, and objection to policies, became based less on how ministers saw the merits of the case than on their acceptability to the top leader. Such self-censorship is the common currency of politics in authoritarian regimes and it is not conducive to good policy outcomes.

Acquiescence with the accumulation of ever more power in a premier's hands owes much to an assumption that the only way to effect great change is through having one person driving it through in the way Thatcher led the 1979-1990 government. Yet the government headed by Attlee from 1945-51 changed at least as much as did the Thatcher government – in a different direction – though Attlee's style was utterly different. He neither hogged the limelight nor tried to dominate his ministerial colleagues. If there was one area in which he had greater influence than any other, it was defence. But he did not try to usurp the authority of departmental ministers or claim a special prerogative for the leader. As he told the Labour Party conference in 1948: 'Whilst every Minister is responsible for his own departmental decisions the collective responsibility both in home and foreign policy is with the Cabinet. We share the blame or the credit for every action of the Government'.

Curtailling the powers of departmental ministers or sidelining them does not mean that more radical change can be brought about, merely that is less likely to have been carefully thought through. Yet, the more widely it is taken for granted that prime ministers will take all the big decisions, the more they are emboldened to act on that assumption. Decisions are then made by that leader and a coterie of placemen and placewomen rather than through a more collective and collegial leadership exercised by politicians of standing within their party and the country. There is much to be said for a government that can get things done. The mistake is to conflate this with the more complete domination within cabinet, parliament, party and country of one person at the top of the political hierarchy.

Pulling rank should not be confused with political leadership, for leadership, as distinct from power, is most evident when, as Adam Smith observed, all members of a group are on an equal footing, but there is 'generally some person whose counsel is more followed than that of others'. And in a democracy, a more collective leadership is not only normatively preferable to placing ever more decisions in one person's hands, it is also less prone to costly error.

About the Author



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