

A Prime Minister's Department might strengthen accountability and capacity in British government, but can also have serious repercussions



Patrick Diamond discusses Boris Johnson's decision to establish a Prime Minister's Department in response to the Sue Gray report. He highlights some key drawbacks of such a move, including the creation of a more 'congested centre', leading to chaos at the heart of government.

In desperate search of a political alibi, Boris Johnson has promised to respond to the damaging revelations in Sue Gray's report by undertaking wholesale reform of Number 10, establishing a 'Prime Minister's Office' that is directly overseen by a permanent secretary. The implication of Johnson's announcement is that there has been a glaring absence of structure and leadership in Number 10, leading to acute policy drift, but also damaging breaches of the law, notably the now infamous Downing Street parties during lockdown.

In fact, Johnson's Number 10 has long been under scrutiny. Since the departure of his chief strategist, Dominic Cummings in November 2020, a damaging sense of stagnation has set in. There is unease that on crucial policy agendas such as levelling up the UK, little progress has been made while Number 10 has failed to pursue delivery on public services. The Gray report noted that leadership in Downing Street was 'fragmented and complicated...and this has sometimes led to the blurring of lines of accountability'. [According to the report](#), Number 10 had expanded significantly in recent decades to become, in effect, 'a small government department' but without adequate leadership and oversight. Johnson's style implies that Number 10 has been allowed to operate rather like a medieval court without clear lines of authority and accountability.

While we might reasonably doubt the seriousness of Johnson's commitment to reforming British government, his announcement takes us one step closer to the formal establishment of a Prime Minister's department in the UK. This decision is, of course, a knee-jerk reaction to a crisis threatening the very survival of Johnson's premiership. Yet the determination to establish a PM's department 'in all but name' deserves to be properly debated on its own terms.

Since he became PM, Johnson is known to have cultivated a more presidential style in Number 10, where the centre exerts greater direct control over line ministries and political advisers. It has even been suggested that Johnson aspires to an '[imperial premiership](#)'. The PM has asserted unprecedented control over the Treasury (even approving the appointment of the Chancellor's personal advisers), colonised the Cabinet Office to provide additional prime ministerial advisory capacity, and has removed dissenting voices from the permanent civil service.

It must be said that Johnson is not the only PM to become dissatisfied with the weak support structures provided by Number 10. His predecessors, including Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair, and David Cameron, all sought to build up the capacity and powers of the PM's office, creating an assortment of strategy, delivery, implementation and policy units at the centre. An all-party commission chaired by the former Conservative Minister, Nick Herbert, recently advocated establishing a PM's department to centralise control over the Whitehall machinery. Johnson has shown he may now be prepared to take that unique step.

The House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee [have argued](#) that a PM's Department might serve to strengthen accountability and capacity in British government. Yet the Committee also acknowledge that a PM's Department would have serious repercussions and potentially, major disadvantages.

The first point is that Number 10 would become increasingly bureaucratic, while there is the danger of a more 'congested centre'. Too many advisers speaking on behalf of the PM could lead to inaction and even chaos at the heart of government. Number 10 has long been valued for its ability to move quickly, displaying political agility during governing crises.

Secondly, the centre of British government is already a politicised set of institutions. There are currently more than 50 politically appointed special advisers employed in 10 Downing Street, the highest number ever. The danger is that a PM's department is used as the mechanism to appoint an even greater number of advisers, thereby creating more layers of politicisation in British government and marginalising permanent officials.

The third drawback of a PM's department is that with the present arrangements, the centre is flexible and can be adapted to suit the style and personality of a particular prime minister. A department of the PM would institutionalise these support structures, making government at the centre more rigid and less able to evolve as new governance challenges emerge.

In the end, the discussion about a PM's Department is a debate about how power works in British government. Those who support an enlarged Number 10 and a PM's department tend to believe that policymaking and implementation are best undertaken using traditional levers of command and control. This approach can work during major crises, while it can drive major government priorities, such as the roll-out of vaccines during the pandemic. But it is unlikely to yield long-term and sustainable policy change. On the other hand, those who see government as closer to a network will favour a more collaborative style of leadership that is concerned with cajoling a flotilla of agencies and departments to achieve shared goals while addressing public problems. In backing a PM's department, there is a risk that Johnson lumps British government with structures at the centre that are ill-equipped to deal with the challenges of our age.

About the Author



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