

Britain's centralising state makes it vulnerable to clientelism and cronyism



Bradley Ward and **Joseph Ward** argue that processes of centralisation under the Johnson government constitute an acceleration of, rather than a divergence from, extant British governance patterns, providing fertile ground for the clientelism and cronyism that has pervaded the current government.

Boris Johnson has faced persistent criticism during his tenure as Prime Minister for furnishing trusted friends, colleagues, and political allies with preferential treatment.

Commentators have pointed to the [unlawful](#) use of a fast-track 'VIP lane' to award COVID-19 contracts to companies with [close political connections](#) to the Conservative Party; the acceptance of donations from wealthy oligarchs by [Johnson](#) and [several members of his Cabinet](#); and the mishandling of the [Owen Paterson scandal](#), in which the government attempted to [overhaul the Committee on Standards](#) in response to their recommendation that Paterson be sanctioned for breaching MPs' code of conduct. In recent weeks, concerns have been amplified by Johnson's embroilment in the ongoing '[partygate](#)' scandal. The Prime Minister initially responded to alleged parties at No. 10 during lockdown by instructing a senior civil servant to investigate, who was then forced to resign after evidence emerged that he had been [responsible for hosting one of the events](#).

In the view of many commentators, these developments provide strong evidence of a worrying slide towards cronyism and clientelism at the heart of government. They are perceived to be part of a broader pattern of centralisation which has seen Johnson consistently undermine parliament and cement his grip over central government. Liz David-Barrett, for instance, has asked whether we should be watchful of '[state capture](#)', a form of systematic corruption in which narrow interest groups attempt to gain an undue influence over public policy by disregarding and rewriting the rules. Others have voiced a concern about '[democratic backsliding](#)', a process in which leaders such as Johnson are democratically elected before undermining the features of democracy from within by weakening the judiciary, challenging basic political rights and civil liberties, and subtly reforming the electoral process to [manipulate the vote](#).

Few commentators, however, have sought to place recent events within the legacy and context of the British state. In [a recent article](#), we aim to address this oversight. Utilising the concept of 'executive centralisation', we assess whether Johnson's first 18 months as Prime Minister should be seen as a continuation or a departure from previous administrations. In distinction from some of the existing commentary, our analysis indicates that the processes of centralisation under the Johnson government constitute an acceleration of some extant patterns in British governance.

Two particular trends identified in the article help to explain the clientelism and cronyism afflicting the current government. The first is the gradual centralisation of power around the Prime Minister that has taken place since the Thatcher period. Thatcher bolstered central control by enforcing stricter management of the party, Cabinet, and senior civil service, and by pursuing a more interventionist approach towards local government. Blair's '[control freakery](#)' saw the continuation of many of these tendencies. He maintained a firmly top-down approach to party management, displayed an [aversion](#) to parliamentary scrutiny, and expanded his network of special advisers to consolidate central control over government communications. As part of its wider programme of cuts to public expenditure, the Coalition Government also sought to strengthen the capacity of the Cabinet Office to coordinate and control the spending of government departments and [non-departmental public bodies](#).

The second trend is the blurring of the contours between the public and private sector. In particular, Blair introduced several initiatives that aspired to create a '[Civil Service open to the public, private and voluntary sector](#)'. New Labour remoulded government in the image of the market by introducing 'New Public Management' techniques, as well as launching of a No. 10 'Delivery Unit' to coordinate the centre's priorities across government. In addition, departmental boards were encouraged to improve performance by procuring the expertise of '[non-executive directors](#)' drawn primarily from business backgrounds. Finally, 'Private Finance Initiatives' were rolled out to offset underinvestment in public services by securing investment from the private industry for public infrastructure projects.

Johnson's premiership has continued and accelerated many of these trends. The No. 10 Delivery Unit has been reintroduced and support for Brexit has been a key indicator in the appointment of non-executive directors, who have seen their influence enhanced. The pandemic, meanwhile, has provided a golden opportunity for the further integration of business interests into the delivery of public services. As the chief executive of Serco – the company tasked with delivering the test-and-trace service – told his staff in a [leaked email](#), the pandemic has 'gone a long way in cementing the position of the private sector companies in the public sector supply chain'.

A centralised governance structure alongside a close proximity between the public and private sector is conducive to 'state capture' and 'democratic backsliding'. The intertwining of these two conditions provides fertile ground for the clientelism and cronyism – or the [sleaze and corruption](#) as the Labour opposition have labelled it – that has pervaded the Johnson government. Tony Blair, it should be remembered, was also condemned for appointing friends and close colleagues to key government posts whilst he was Prime Minister, leading the Committee on Standards in Public Life to make several recommendations which sought to [limit his ability to make personal appointments](#). Despite introducing a series of reforms to lobbying regulation whilst he was Prime Minister, David Cameron found himself the [subject of a Cabinet Office inquiry](#) in 2021 after lobbying on behalf of a finance company that employed him as an adviser. The founder and CEO of the firm, Lex Greensill, had been appointed by Cameron as an adviser whilst he was Prime Minister, a role which afforded Greensill an 'extraordinarily privileged' relationship with government, according to the Cabinet Office report.

This analysis casts doubt on the notion that these practices are unprecedented in British politics or that they are contingent on Johnson's personal leadership. Recent developments have arguably exceeded the scale of previous episodes, but they will not necessarily be consigned to the dustbin of history on Johnson's departure. As long as a pattern of executive centralisation and the blurring of the public/private boundary persists, British politics will remain vulnerable to a culture of clientelism and cronyism.

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