



Patrick Dunleavy

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Stارmer's core executive reveals a centralisation of power

New data on the Government's cabinet committee system shows a dramatic centralisation of authority by Keir Starmer. While "positional power" in the committee structure is only one source of ministerial influence, Patrick Dunleavy shows that the changes have brought more power into the hands of Starmer, his "alter ego" Pat McFadden, and a few other top ministers.

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As Leader of the Opposition Keir Starmer built an unmatched reputation as a "control freak", and his term as Prime Minister has shown no diminution of that zeal to centralize power. Being premier makes things trickier though, since there are only so many hours in the day and the workload of Cabinet, No.10 issues and summitry to handle is unremittingly heavy. PMs who seek to control government coherently (as Johnson and Sunak in different ways singularly did not do) need a trusted ally as Chancellor of the Exchequer as well as an extra pairs of hands to strengthen their leadership.

Another control freak, Theresa May, famously sought to [micro-manage everything](#) herself through No 10 and pursued a "divide and control" policy elsewhere in her cabinet. She tried to operate for years with four different centres of foreign policymaking (FCO, departments for development and Brexit, and a big Cabinet Office role for her) and two business departments). May assigned her Business Secretary some important positional power in cabinet committees (as Figure 1 below shows).

Starmer's right hand men

Starmer's solution focuses on [Pat McFadden](#) (a veteran of Blair's 10 Downing Street machine) who as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (a marginal role normally) has been made web-controller of the cabinet committee system. Figure 1 shows that in Starmer's machine McFadden now chairs

two committees and sits on five more, while the PM himself chairs five committees. The pair do not control two committees, Europe (chaired by Lammy), and “Future of Work” (chaired by Angela Raynor) – plus (as usual) the lesser committee controlling Parliamentary timetabling.

Figure 1: The shares of positional power in the cabinet committee system under Kier Starmer, compared with Theresa May (in 2016)

Role	% of positional power	
	Starmer 2024	May-16
Chancellor Duchy Lancaster (McFadden)	11.1	2.9
PM (Starmer)	10.9	10.3
Chancellor of the Exchequer (Reeves)	10.4	5.9
Foreign Secretary (Lammy)	9.1	4.3
Home Secretary (Cooper)	8.2	7.0
SS Defence (Healey)	6.8	4.4
Deputy PM and HCLG (Rayner)	5.4	4.8
Second division		
Post Master General (Thomas-Symonds)	4.9	3.0
SS Energy (Miliband)	3.2	
Attorney General (Hermer)	2.8	2.3
SS Northern Ireland (Benn)	2.5	1.9
SS Business/Trad (Reynolds)	2.2	7.4
Lord Chancellor Justice (Mahmood)	2.1	3.0
Leader of House of Commons (Powell)	2.0	1.7
Minister of State Education/Women (Dodds)	1.8	
SS Health Social Care (Streeting)	1.8	3.0
SS Science, Innovation and Technology (Kyle)	1.8	
Periperal		
Leader of the House of Lords (Smith)	1.4	0.9
Chief Secretary Treasury (Jones)	1.4	2.8
SS Scotland (Murray)	1.4	2.1
SS Wales (Stevens)	1.4	1.6
SS Culture, Media Sport (Nandy)	1.0	3.3
SS Environment, Rural Affairs (Reed)	1.0	3.0
SS Education (Phillipson)	1.1	3.3
SS Work and Pension (Kendall)	1.1	3.2
SS Transport	0.7	3.1
Other international departments		6.4

Notes: The 2016 data are taken from [Dunleavy \(2018\)](#), derived from [Allen and Siklodi \(2016\)](#). The 2024 data are computed from the [government release](#). Committee weight = $[100 \times (\text{N of Cabinet members} / \text{total N})]$. Member points = $[\text{Committee weight} / (\text{N} + 1)]$. Chair points = $2[\text{Committee weight} / (\text{N} + 1)]$. The Figure shows each Cabinet minister’s % share of the sum of all these weights..

The Paymaster General is not a member of full Cabinet. Analiese Dodds is only a Minister of State in Education, but she sits in Cabinet as Minister for Women.



To get any policy changes through, Ministers' proposals must go through cabinet committees too.



The index used in Figure 1 is a measure of “positional power” that is the influence that comes from holding positions within the cabinet committee system, especially being a chair of committees (able to set timetables and sum up the “sense of a meeting”), but also being a regular member on these key bodies where most final decisions are made. This is only one kind of ministerial power, of course. Ministers heading up departments have a lot of “baronial” control in “owning” their issue area, controlling information, and operating staff and budgets. Yet to get any policy changes through, their proposals must go through cabinet committees too.

The index here was first developed [by me] for the Major government, when the UK operated a much larger system of cabinet committees and sub-committees, and a major problem was how to assess ministers' influence in a multi-tiered structure. Since then, the number of committees has been cut back to just 10 and flattened by removing all permanent sub-committees. But under Johnson and Sunak virtually every minister was listed as a member of virtually every committee, devaluing completely the usefulness of committee placements in assessing positional power. Starmer has ended this period of confusion decisively, by now listing under each and every committee only its *permanent* members, with a note mantra that: “Other Ministers will be invited according to the agenda”.



A top elite of ministers with a commanding role in government co-ordination has emerged comprising Starmer, McFadden, Reeves at Treasury, Lammy at the Foreign Office, and Home Secretary Yvette Cooper.



The implications have been dramatic, as Figure 1 shows. A top elite of ministers with a commanding role in government co-ordination has emerged comprising Starmer, McFadden, Reeves at Treasury, Lammy at the Foreign Office, and Home Secretary Yvette Cooper. On the fringe of this top group are Deputy Prime Minister Raynor, and the Defence Secretary, John Healey – often a lesser role in a Labour government.

If the one committee Raynor chairs (“Future of Work”, a vague thematic topic) ends up meeting infrequently, the Deputy PM would fall back into parity with the “second division” of key spending ministers in Figure 1 that includes David Miliband (Energy), Hilary Benn (NI), Wes Streeting (Health), and Shabana Mahmood (Justice). The Science and Technology committee is also a close rival to Raynor’s one, and it is chaired by the PM.

The “second division” ministers also include the little-known Paymaster-General Nick Thomas-Symonds (Starmer’s second “gofer”), who sits on all five committees not covered by McFadden or PM; the Attorney General (Lord Hermer, a long-time Starmer ally) and the Leader of the House of Commons. Together with Starmer and McFadden (and the Lords’ leader) this “PM’s bloc” across the cabinet committee system controls an astonishing 33 per cent of all positional power, as Figure 2 shows. This is up from less than 18 per cent under May. In addition, the Chancellor and Chief Secretary form a substantial Treasury bloc. So long as the PM and Chancellor remain buddies, they control 45 per cent of positional power, up from a quarter under May.

Figure 2: Blocs with positional power in 2024 and 2016

Cabinet blocs	% of positional power		% points change
	Starmer 2024	May-16	
PM bloc	33.1	17.5	15.6
Treasury bloc	11.8	8.7	3.1
Top five ministers	49.6	35.4	14.2
Top ten ministers	72.7	53.7	19

Notes: PM bloc = PM + CDL + PMG + AG + LHC+LHL; Treasury bloc = CEX + Chief Secretary. For who is in the top 5 and 10 ministers see Figure 1.

The marginalization of other ministers

Where does this leave the mass of ordinary “spending” ministers in the cabinet system now? Of course, they can act as “barons” still within their own departments, but in committee terms, they are now in the “third division” in Figure 1, sitting on just a single cabinet committee each. So, when they do turn up at (say) the Home Affairs committee, they are temporary incomers – unlikely to be up to speed on what previously happened or on other related issues, and outside the personal interactions that permanent members can foster across every meeting.

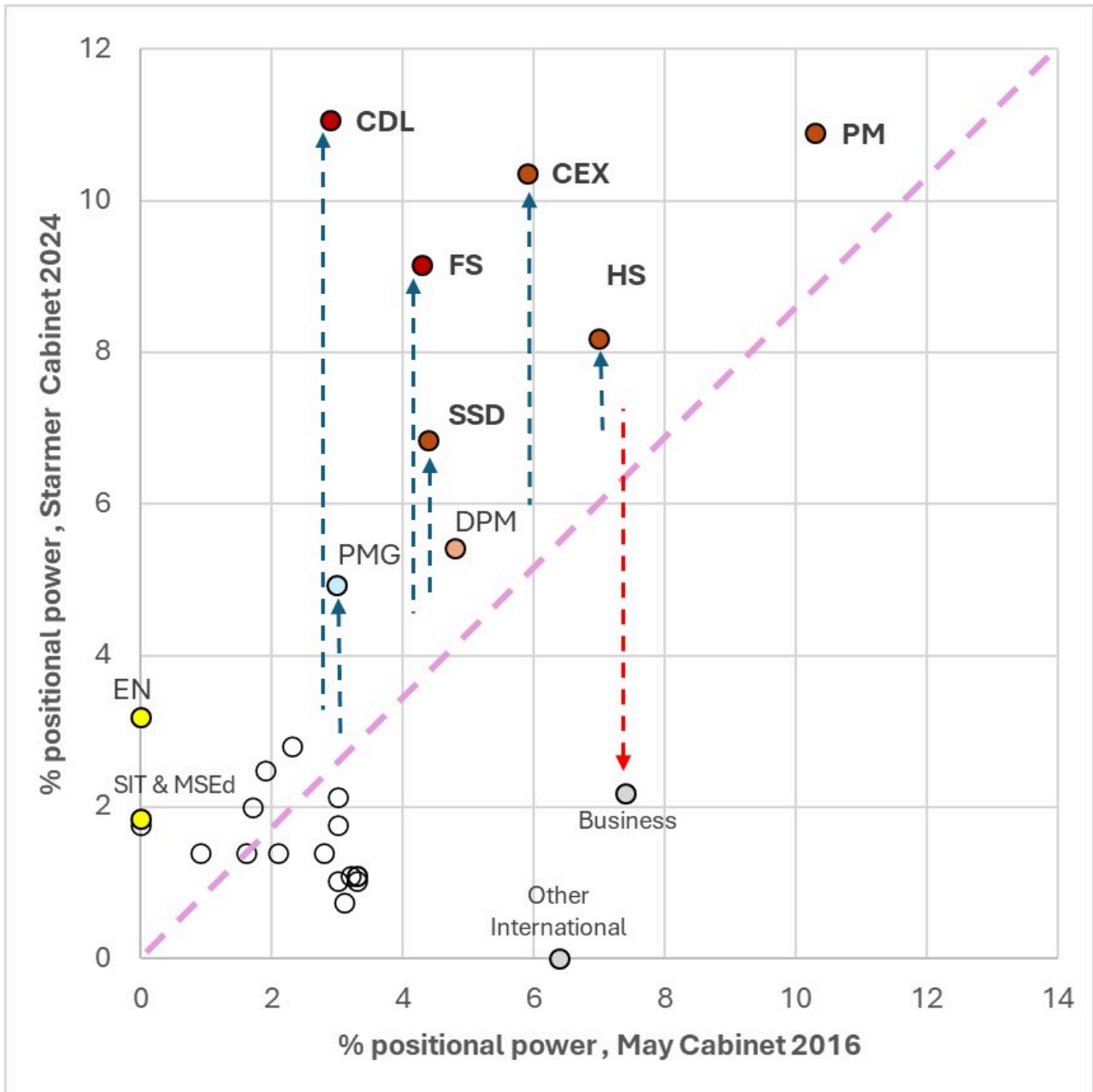


The top 10 ministers in the Starmer rankings control nearly 70 per cent of “positional power”.



Figure 2 and chart in Figure 3 demonstrate that the top five ministers under Starmer control half of the positional power in the cabinet committee system, and all of them have been boosted (blue arrows) since 2016 – especially the McFadden’s CDL role, and the Foreign Secretary (now running both overseas development and European policy again). The Defence Secretary has also rise because of Ukraine. The top 10 ministers in the Starmer rankings control nearly 70 per cent of “positional power”. Who lost out? Well, almost everyone else compared to 2016. The only especially spectacular change between the two dates is shown by the red arrow – showing the move away from the prominent position of the Business Secretary in 2016, which did not last long.

Figure 3: Some of the major changes in ministers’ positional power from 2016 to 2024



Notes: The current key core executive key roles are shown dark orange, and the two marginal members lighter. New roles in Starmer’s government are shown in yellow. All other roles are the white blobs.



Starmer’s centralised core executive is a dramatic change even from the relatively centralized May Government, but one that has yet to prove its worth.



McFadden has also recently moved to marginalize the innovative and distracting “Mission Boards” promised in Labour’s manifesto, in which some poorly informed commentators **invested such hopes**. The new committee list gives no members for them, and only remarks that they cover “growth, clean energy, safer streets, opportunities and health”, and are chaired by “the respective lead Secretaries of State [*Reeves, Miliband, Cooper, presumably Phillipson, and Streeting*] with a remit to drive progress”. McFadden is deputy-chair of all five, rowing back a Starmer pledge in June 2024 that he would chair all the boards.



Critics warn that departing from large-majority Cabinet decision-making generates huge risks.



Centralisation of power might backfire

Starmer’s centralised core executive is a dramatic change even from the relatively centralised May Government, but one that has yet to prove its worth. Collective cabinet government is a resilient norm (as the spending ministers’ recent last minute **letters to Starmer** about budget cuts showed). Some commentators have rashly advocated that Starmer formally **operate with an inner cabinet** (like the Cameron-Clegg government). But critics warn that departing from large-majority Cabinet decision-making **generates huge risks**. Sue Grey, the PM’s initial Chief of Staff, has already had to resign, after she and McFadden both **ignored warnings** to strengthen integrity measures. Their and Starmer’s astonishing complacency precipitated the ministerial freebies/“sleaze” disaster that dominated weeks of prime time media.

The PM’s new CoS **Morgan McSweeney** is a close McFadden ally, backing the move to sideline Mission Boards, so co-ordination may improve. Yet given the **huge damage** already done to Starmer’s and Labour’s poll standings by the **rows about freebies/“sleaze”**, plus Reeves’ high-handed **axing of winter fuel payments**, the inner core of actors had better pick up their game quickly if an already tarnished government is to have any hope of recovering some forward momentum.

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About the author



Patrick Dunleavy

Patrick Dunleavy is Emeritus Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the London School of Economics, and a Fellow of the British Academy and the Academy of Social Science.

He co-edited (with Mark Evand and John Phillimore) *Australia's Evolving Democracy: A New Democratic Audit* (LSE Press, 5 December 2024). His recent articles (all OA) cover reorganizing the UK core executive, and (with Helen Margetts) the third wave of digital era governance and the political economy of government IT.

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