

Australian PM John Howard had what Tony Blair clearly lacked: he knew how to use the Cabinet to control his Treasury rival

Aug 3 2012

Mark Bennister's comparative study of John Howard and Tony Blair's "predominance" offers some fascinating insights into modern prime ministerial leadership, finds Jill Rutter. The book includes a wealth of comparative detail for students of government organisation.



Prime Ministers in Power: Political Leadership in Britain and Australia. Mark Bennister. Palgrave Macmillan. March 2012.

Compared to the very well studied U.S. Presidential leadership campaigns and time in office, there is a rather impoverished literature about Prime Ministerial life and leadership in the UK and Australia. In *Prime Ministers in Power: Political Leadership in Britain and Australia*, Lecturer in Politics at Canterbury Christ Church University [Mark Bennister](#) is attempting to rectify that by looking at how Tony Blair and John Howard - two multiple election winning Prime Ministers – who both dominated their parties and politics for much of their time in office – marshalled resources to achieve that popularity and political predominance.

I wanted to review this book, not as a political scientist, but as a long serving civil servant who had worked in No.10 under a less predominant prime minister – John Major. I was also interested in what made John Howard, who, as Bennister makes clear, elevated ordinariness into high political strategy, such a durable political survivor.

For the general reader, the need to assert that “leaders matter” may come as something as a surprise, but of course to those who have made a career of academic politics, this will be very familiar territory. And there is a lot of rather forbidding jargon – not least the emphasis on “mediatisation” of politics and its role in increasing the “autonomy” of Prime Ministers. For the British reader there is nothing new about the Blair Prime Minister-ship; Bennister relies entirely on secondary sources and anyone who has hung on the biographies, journalistic accounts and the



Campbell diaries will find nothing new. Australian students will no doubt find themselves in the same position on the Howard premiership.

But this is where the comparative frame comes into its own – and that is what makes the book worth reading. Blair and Howard operated in contexts that were much more different than the shorthand of the Westminster model allows: a much smaller House of Representatives (by a factor of six); and a much more powerful party with a well organised caucus: more loyalty in Australia with rebellions practically unknown, but much more willing to “spill” leaders not up to the mark. They were ideological opposites (in theory at least). John Howard had been Treasurer under Malcolm Fraser and had had an earlier unsuccessful go at being leader, before the party turned to him in desperation in 1995 after Alexander Downer’s brief and hugely unsuccessful tenure as Liberal leader – in stark contrast to Tony Blair’s leadership by virtual acclamation but lack of prior Ministerial experience. Both battled against a Chancellor/Treasurer with increasingly obvious ambitions to replace them sooner rather than later, but John Howard managed to suppress and ultimately outlast Peter Costello.

Within that it becomes clear that Howard and Blair achieved their predominance in very different ways. Howard devoted far more time to party management. Blair’s real connection to the party came through the annual party conference where he could display his oratorical skills and emotional appeal. But in both cases, they could only exercise their personal leadership with the continuing permission of their party. Both Howard and Blair adopted strategies to try to connect directly with the public to by-pass the more conventional media – with Howard preferring talkback radio to overcome his comparatively untelevisual presence and connect directly to his constituency of “mates”. But whatever their gripes about the media, it is clear from Bennister’s book that the media is a key factor in increasing the autonomy of the prime minister.

The most interesting sections for any student of modern British government are the chapters on the Cabinet and “controlling and strengthening the centre” (though these are separated by the chapter on party management). Here the contrasts between the two are stark. Whereas Blair governed around and despite his Cabinet, preferring to operate through bilaterals and avoiding formal Cabinet discussion, John Howard governed through Cabinet and the powerful subcommittees – not least the National Security Council – he chaired. “Cabinet government functioned under Howard: formalities were adhered to and debates were robust, helped by heightened security around deliberation”. Bennister notes the dearth of insider accounts as leaks were rare. These formal processes were enhanced because John Howard had what Tony Blair clearly lacked – good people management skills. And Howard used the Cabinet to control his Treasury rival. Those who hanker for the return of real Cabinet government will be interested in how Howard used it to enforce collegiality – and achieve control.

The Australian premier can already draw on a much stronger institutional back up than British prime ministers with the existence of a formal Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Strengthening

the centre – but in an ad hoc way with the addition of advisers and creation of dedicated units, not least the strategy and delivery unit, was a feature of the Blair prime ministership, but never quite managed to give Blair the resources to match those available in the Treasury to support Gordon Brown. But his lack of experience meant that it took him his first “wasted” term before he started to work out what he needed to make the centre work for him. The more experienced John Howard moved very rapidly to assert control of the bureaucracy, using DPMC. Shortly after taking office he sacked 6 departmental heads. He also introduced a new dual top of the office – with a political appointee as Cabinet Secretary, heading up a newly created Cabinet Policy Unit, sitting alongside the civil service head of DPMC taking notes in Cabinet.

So there is a wealth of comparative detail for students of government organisation. But for practitioners it is ultimately frustrating – because while this shines an interesting spotlight on how prime ministers can use power and stay in power, it offers no thoughts on which of these Prime Ministers was more effective in achieving his policy objectives. It is about power, but not power for a purpose. It would be useful if academia could look at that too – until then, think tanks including the Institute for Government will try to fill that gap.

Jill Rutter is a programme director at the Institute for Government and a former civil servant. [Read more reviews by Jill.](#)

Related posts:

1. [Book Review: Blair’s Just War: Iraq and the Illusion of Morality, by Peter Lee \(10.1\)](#)
2. [Success, celebrity, and getting results: how British politicians are turning to American presidents for tips \(8.6\)](#)
3. [Book Review: Everyday Life in British Government by R.A.W. Rhodes \(6.7\)](#)
4. [How has the British political system developed? A new guide for students \(6.5\)](#)
5. [Book Review: Whoops! Why Everyone Owes Everyone and No One Can Pay, by John Lanchester. \(6\)](#)

This entry was posted in [Australasia and Pacific](#), [Britain and Ireland](#), [Jill Rutter](#), [Palgrave Macmillan](#), [Politics and International Relations](#) and tagged [academia](#), [Australia](#), [Britain](#), [John Major](#), [political culture](#), [politician](#), [politics](#), [think tanks](#), [Tony Blair](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). [Edit](#)