

## Book Review: Accounting for Ministers: Scandal and Survival in British Government 1945-2007

by blog admin

May 10, 2013

*Accounting for Ministers* uses the tools of modern political science to analyse the factors which determine the fortunes of Cabinet ministers. Utilising agency theory, it describes Cabinet government as a system of incentives for prime ministerial and parliamentary rule. **Lord Wilson** has reservations about the attempts to analyse the rich, complex, impossible lives of Ministers with the methods of political analysis used in this book but nevertheless finds it a useful addition to the sum of political knowledge.

**Accounting for Ministers: Scandal and Survival in British Government 1945-2007. Samuel Berlinski, Torun Dewan and Keith Dowding. Cambridge University Press. 2012.**

### Find this book

Do not read this book if you are looking for titillating holiday reading about the private lives of Ministers. That is not what it is about. It is an ambitious academic attempt by two political scientists and an economist to answer questions about Ministerial tenure in the UK by analysing a large data-base of information about politicians over the period. To what extent does a Minister's length of time in office depend on characteristics that are fixed when they are appointed? What effect do political events, in particular calls for the resignation of a Minister, have upon their tenure? What do the data on Ministerial careers say about the nature of accountability in British politics, and the relationship between Ministers and their Prime Ministers?

I read it through the prism of my own experience as a civil servant who worked with Ministers (including two Prime Ministers) for over half the period. I found myself wanting to leap in regularly and say: "Hold on a second, what about..." or "Isn't there a key point..." or occasionally just "No!". I have reservations about attempting to analyse the rich, complex, impossible lives of Ministers with such equations as:

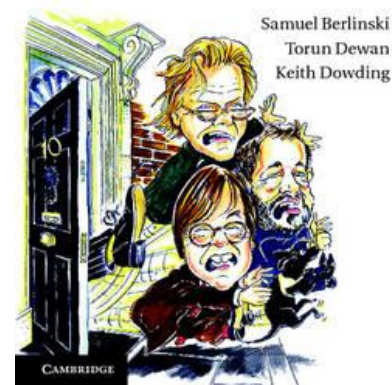
$T_{igf} = \alpha + X_{ig}\beta' + Z_{ig}\gamma + B_{g}\delta' + P_{g}\lambda' + \epsilon_{igf}$  where  $T_{igf}$  is the spell of minister  $i$ , in government  $g$ , at the time of failure  $f$  etc

And yet I found the book intriguing as well as frustrating.

The analysis of Ministers' characteristics is interesting though not perhaps as earth-shaking as the authors imply. They must have put huge effort into it. One learns for instance that Cabinet Ministers are older, on average by some nine years, than junior Ministers (p. 65). But it is not unusual in any profession for people at the top to be older than those still climbing the ladder. We are told that, in terms of survival, nothing much distinguishes the cohort of Ministers who have been to public school from those who have not (p. 72). After the first 18 months or so in office, those with Oxbridge backgrounds appear to be more durable but the authors cannot distinguish whether this is due to their education, their underlying ability or other factors such as socialisation (p.72). So far, so mildly interesting.

### Accounting for Ministers

*Scandal and Survival in British Government 1945-2007*



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The authors are surprised to find that Ministers who have previous experience of serving in office are some 40 per cent more likely to lose office than those who enter government without such experience (p.74). But is this really surprising? Most Ministers in these highly pressured jobs begin to tire after, say, 7 or 8 years. It does not seem all that unusual for people in their later years to be more likely to leave than those still in hot pursuit of their ambition. The one finding which really does stand out is that, after roughly two months in office, female ministers have a higher chance of survival than their male counterparts. Whereas 75 per cent of women in government survive a full five-year term, just over 60 per cent of their male colleagues do so (p.74). The authors do not explore the reasons for this but it is an intriguing insight.

The analysis of resignations similarly contains nuggets. The authors have identified 91 'forced exits' over the period (p. 121): that is to say, Ministerial resignations which took place quite separately from reshuffles and Elections and without the planning of the Prime Minister, because the Minister decided to quit or was forced to do so by controversy or scandal (p.117). One winces as the proximate reasons for these forced exits are squeezed into eight categories: personal error, departmental error, sexual scandal, financial scandal, policy disagreement, personality clash, performance and 'other controversy'. But in real life Ministers often leave government for a mix of reasons. Where, for instance, would you put Profumo? The authors coded him as personal error because he had admitted to the Chief Whip that he had misled Parliament (p. 131). So I am wary of the resulting analysis. Even so, it is interesting that it suggests that by far the largest reason for forced exits was policy disagreement; that forced exits for policy disagreements were much more likely in Labour governments; and that the largest number of forced exits, for whatever reason, took place under Mr Blair (22) compared with Mr Major (16) and Mrs Thatcher (13) (p. 128-9).

There is similar intriguing analysis of the effect of resignation calls on Ministerial tenure. The likelihood of a Minister losing office prematurely roughly doubles if he or she faces one resignation call and roughly quadruples with a second resignation call (p. 165); and the likelihood of a Minister being forced out of office by a resignation call is higher if other Ministers of the same government have already faced similar calls (p. 168). Working inside government one knows all too well the feeling when the political world and the media have begun to smell blood around a Minister or government. It is fascinating to see this confirmed by this analysis.

So why my frustration? For all sorts of reasons. For instance, I am irked by the theory that the relationship between Prime Ministers and their Ministers is one between principal and agent (since when did agents sack their principal as Ministers did with Mrs Thatcher? and what about the important role of backbenchers?). I found twenty pages on the style of successive Prime Ministers flat-footed and not really integrated with the rest of the analysis. There were hypotheses and occasionally plain errors which betrayed an ignorance of how governments work. I longed for this analysis to be enriched by a historian or student of government who could throw light on the real life behind these conclusions. But I do not want to be churlish. I applaud the effort and technical ability of the authors and, for all my reservations, think their book is a useful addition to the sum of political knowledge.

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**Lord Wilson of Dinton GCB (Richard Wilson)** served in the Civil Service for 36 years in a number of departments including 12 years in the Department of Energy where his responsibilities included energy policy, nuclear power policy and privatising Britoil. He worked in the Cabinet Office under Mrs Thatcher from 1987-90 and after two years in the Treasury was appointed Permanent Secretary of the Department of the Environment in 1992. He became Permanent Under Secretary of the Home Office in 1994 and Secretary of the Cabinet and Head of the Home Civil Service in January 1998. On retirement in 2002, he became Master of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and held that position for ten years. [Read more reviews by Lord Wilson.](#)