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## **ANALYSING POLITICAL POWER**

**Patrick Dunleavy**

*with Ian Byrne and Bernard Steunenberg*

Power denotes a capability on the part of its holder to get other people to change their behaviour in ways they would have preferred not to do, had they not been subject to power. To have power is a 'dispositional' thing: it describes a potential that has not yet been realized but which will come about under normal circumstance. Dispositional qualities like this are famously elusive and tricky to grasp in research terms. Many past political analysts have argued that the only way to spot power is to see it being implemented, and they have hence equated power with its exercise. But if I say 'This Ming vase is fragile', I do not mean that the vase is already broken or that it is certain ever to break – only that it has a disposition to break under certain circumstance (Morris, 2002, Ch.3). And so it is with power – it is a much more hypothetical and counterfactual concept than some one actor or some group getting their way by stamping roughshod over another actor or group.

An actor has power *over* others *to* bring certain things about. At its broadest, the concept includes both the ability to change others' behaviour, and the ability to achieve certain outcomes. This capability to achieve outcomes may be based upon the actor's own resources, or the resources of other people whom I can influence or constrain to do what I want. Key resources are a position controlling key decision-making points, a reputation for influence, the loyalty or support of other people, possession of key information, or controlling large wealth and income. But simply having resources is also not the same as having power. Actors can expend resources unskillfully, in ways that create more enemies or resistance rather than facilitate achieving the actor's goals. Nor is power to be equated with being successful or getting what you want. Oftentimes people are 'lucky' because they get what they want without having to take any action to influence others, and without having to mobilize or expend resources (Dowding, 1991). For their own reasons, other powerful actors

or groups may bring about an outcome favourable for me without my having to try. Just because someone or some group is successful in benefiting from decisions does not establish that they brought those decisions about, or that they could have done so if they wanted to. Perhaps they were just lucky, in the right place at the right time with the right interests to benefit from others' actions. Equally sometimes, in a 'no win' situation, everyone loses and nobody benefits – but there can still be power relations between these 'losing' actors in terms of distributing relative costs among themselves, or unequally sharing the pain (Dowding, 1996).

Determining who has power is a tricky exercise. Simply asking people involved in decision-making situations whether they have power or not is of little use in advancing well-based political science knowledge. Most people in relatively senior positions like to think that they are their own person, and not a creature of someone else's will, so that those subject to power may under-report the fact. At the same time powerful people themselves rarely admit that they are able to influence or control others, lest it become a focus for resentment or detract from their public image. People or groups who are in conflict with each other behind closed doors inside government may also go to extraordinary lengths to keep their disagreements secret and to represent the internal political debates as more balanced, collegial and well-tempered than they actually are. Senior people in government usually believe that their side or their generation is running the shop better than their predecessors or adversaries. And when problems or crises occur, people inside government blame external factors or the flow of adverse events far more than the opposition parties or external observers, who blame the internal dispositions of governmental actors far more for mistakes.

But equally it is little use to forswear knowledge derived from studying decision-making situations, and to retreat instead into inferring power from people's outward resources or their public reputations for influence. In 1998-9 UK newspapers and TV channels sponsored elaborate 'power list' exercises in which panels of 'experts' (mostly members of 'the great and good') were asked to rank 'who has power in Britain', spanning across the worlds of politics, public administration, business, entertainment, and social life. In both years Tony Blair was ranked first, but with the second slot occupied by overseas businessmen, Rupert Murdoch in 1998 and Bill Gates in 1999. Gordon Brown was rated fifth and then fourth, (this change precipitated by the sudden disappearance from the cabinet of Peter Mandelson, previously ranked second in power terms). Soap stars and celebrities ranked above many members of the cabinet in both lists. The pluralist objection to all such exercises is that they confuse public reputations for wealth, status or influence with political

power itself. For pluralists the presence of Gates or Murdoch in high positions under different lists in one year but not the next might reflect little more than their being talked about a lot as successful, whereas the fact that holders of the government posts ranked top or near top even in this method suggests a consistent importance of office-holders – their undisputed involvement in making salient decisions.

Of course, the eclecticism and variability of the power lists capture the shifting influence of wider contexts and circles of influence in shaping what the British polity can achieve. Gates and Murdoch may soar or fall back in particular year's rankings but the influence of financial markets and major business figures or corporations in structuring government policy is fairly clear. Equally a struggle for influence between United States, European and wider world governments and actors to influence public policy and political elites has been a recurring feature of UK politics. Normally these linkages are rather remote and general influences, but on occasions (like the 1996 Westland affair) the disputes within the heart of British government arguably reflect or parallel the wider struggles of corporations and blocs of nations (Dunleavy, 1995b). The context of power is also strongly influenced by changes in the external context, such as 'globalization' changes in the world economy and alterations in the UK's relative economic and trade positions viz a viz other countries.

Few of these qualifications or subtleties ever appear in empirical discussions of the allocation of political power in contemporary Britain. Instead most journalistic and historical discussion focuses down on a long-established and largely rhetorical controversy about 'cabinet government' versus prime ministerial 'control'. Protagonists in these ritual debates normally offer only generalized 'evidence' about the resources of the Prime Minister, cabinet colleagues, top civil servants and Whitehall departments, plus multiple anecdotes about the 'exercise of power' and the triumph of this person over that on such and such an occasion. Sweeping statements are the norm, often tending towards on-phrase summaries of complex situations, such as the growth of a 'British Presidency' (Foley, 2000). In this literature 'power' is seen as unproblematic and is commonly never even defined. Judgements about the distribution of power typically proliferate in many directions, often phrased in rather broad-brush ways that create as many problems as they seem to resolve. For instance, Margaret Thatcher is conventionally portrayed as a powerful Prime Minister who easily dominated her cabinet and parliamentary party. But she (eventually) was forced out of office and into effective retirement in autumn 1990 by a revolt of her own cabinet and MPs against her continuing premiership (Jones, 1995; Smith, 1995). That is, Thatcher's demise as PM

resulted from a simple withdrawal of support by the very people whom she was supposed to have so cowed and subordinated. The fragility of power is also well illustrated by Peter Mandelson's roller-coaster career. These cases highlight the dangers of assigning power or influence too unconditionally or too broadly than this conundrum? Carefully analysed, even the power of a dictator may be seen as based on maintaining winning coalitions, although the dictator often has the ability to continually shift the composition of the winning coalition to suit their own purposes (Dowding, 1991).

In the new Labour governments the difficulties in assigning power to actors at the heart of government spiral round and round a new focus, the apparent problem that both the Prime Minister Tony Blair and the Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown are widely seen as simultaneously exercising high levels of influence over government policy. A specific trigger for this speculation has been the by now reasonably well-attested story that in the early summer of 1994 Gordon Brown agreed not to run against Tony Blair for the post of Labour party leader in return for a pledge that Brown would become and remain Chancellor in a Blair-lead government. This part of the deal is acknowledged, but less established is the supposed 'secret clause' that Brown would in due course inherit the leadership mantle from Blair when he stepped down, after perhaps two terms in office (Naughtie, 2002). This Blair-Brown pact is widely seen as explaining the special pre-eminence of Gordon Brown, his evident status as far more than just another (potentially dispensable) senior cabinet minister within new Labour's ranks. His prominence also underpins the rise of the Treasury under his leadership to something like an alternate power centre to 10 Downing Street within British government. The Chancellor's perceived success in handling the economy (see Chapter 14), and his steady pursuit of a distinctive constituency of support within the cabinet, the Parliamentary Labour Party and the trades union movement have given added currency to the notion that he is politically untouchable as heir apparent to Blair.

The Blair-Brown axis raises important problems. There have been almost continuous tensions between the top three positions in British government (PM, Chancellor and Foreign Secretary) stretching back to the middle 1980s and encompassing amongst other incidents the forced resignation of Margaret Thatcher, two Chancellors (Nigel Lawson forced out in 1989, and Norman Lamont in 1993) and two Foreign Secretaries (Geoffrey Howe, reshuffled in 1989 and finally forced out of a 'Deputy PM' role a year later, and Robin Cook, reshuffled in 2001). This history of conflict makes the Blair-Brown axis seem inherently tension-prone and unstable. How can these two key actors both be powerful at once? Surely one must be down if the other is up, on a simple 'see-saw' model of power? Or if one has a larger slice of the

cake of policy influence, must that not necessarily imply that a smaller slice remains for the other?

In fact because the determination of public policy is always multi-causal, there is ample scope for both Brown and Blair to accrete influence at the same time. They could jointly claw power away from other actors in the political system, such as cabinet ministers, civil service departments, or other tiers of government, in order to centralize influence within 10 Downing Street and the Treasury. And power is not necessarily a fixed sum or cake to be divided. Blair and Brown might simultaneously accumulate power if their government is run more successfully than previous administrations, if the capability of the UK government machine as a whole is expanding through new Labour's greater skill in governing and making choices. Finally they might just be beneficiaries of a more favourable (lucky) world economic and political environment, which enhances the apparent effectiveness of UK government. For instance the transition to a low inflation regime in the late 1990s across most advanced industrial economies after decades of acute inflationary pressure substantially eased some of the 'governability' problems that had plagued their predecessors.

To illuminate these and other issues of ascribing power in contemporary Britain I consider two topics in more detail: power and institutional positions, specifically within the cabinet committee system, widely seen as critical for governmental co-ordination and priority-setting; and some recent rational choice models which show why there will be limits on either the Prime Minister's (or the Chancellor's) abilities to shape policy in line with their preferences.

### **Power in the cabinet committee system**

If it is not to run erratically from one problem or policy extreme to another, every system of government must have some internal sifting and balancing mechanisms – some ways of bringing together and comparing different considerations so as to reach a resolution of priorities. Any successful national leadership must be able to adjudicate between different sectors of government and their attendant political and social interests. In presidential systems like the USA an elected chief executive colonizes the central administration with political appointees and answers to a separately elected legislature with real control over the budgetary purse strings and the legislative timetable. US public policy thus emerges out of public compromises between multiple actors (Cameron, 2000). In European parliamentary systems by contrast the executive emerges from the legislatures, so no separate majorities

could seem feasible. However, with elections conducted by proportional representation no one party can usually command a majority on its own, and hence processes of majority coalition formation and maintenance between parties determine who is to be in government and what policies are to be followed (Tsebelis, 2002, Ch. 4).

In Britain there is no equivalent either to the US separation of powers or the European inter-party negotiations for balancing out policy. Whatever sorting and sifting of options occurs, and whatever adjusting of policy to meet different interests is achieved, typically must be orchestrated within a single party government. This task is made pretty difficult because the executive normally commands a clear House of Commons majority, dominates all the budgetary and legislative levers at once, and operates with a reasonably strong and distinctive partisan ideology and history of governing. Meetings of the full cabinet were historically important as the primary focus for internal balancing in the nineteenth century, a role that persisted through to the inter-war period of the twentieth century. Today these weekly cabinet sessions perhaps remain important in concerting ministers' behaviour, securing a measure of unity and coherence in policy making at senior level, and in coordinating a response to periodic major governmental crises. But in the post 1945 period a system of formally constituted cabinet committees, which had emerged earlier, became much more important in determining how virtually all detailed public policy is made. In 1992 the then PM John Major finally acknowledged the committees' importance officially. He got rid of the pernicious doctrine of complete secrecy which had previously surrounded their operations, and instead began publishing a full list of the committees and their ministerial members and chairs (Dunleavy, 1995a).

This change lifted a tiny part of the veil of official secrecy, which surrounds so much central policy-making in Britain. It allows us to generate a few hard data which are relevant for analysing the distribution of positional power. Policy-making inside government is like a lottery process in one small respect – you have to be in it to win it. Where the institutional channels for making certain decisions are carefully specified and designated for people holding particular positions, we can be reasonably confident that people not holding those positions are out of the loop. Looking at which ministers sit on which cabinet committees can generate potentially important insights into who has the capability to influence policy, and who does not. Not all those holding positions relevant for decision X may actually mobilize resources to try and influence its outcome on issue X. And even amongst those who do mobilize, some may be more skilled and resourceful than others, and these actors will win while others lose. So knowledge of who holds what positions cannot tell us who is powerful

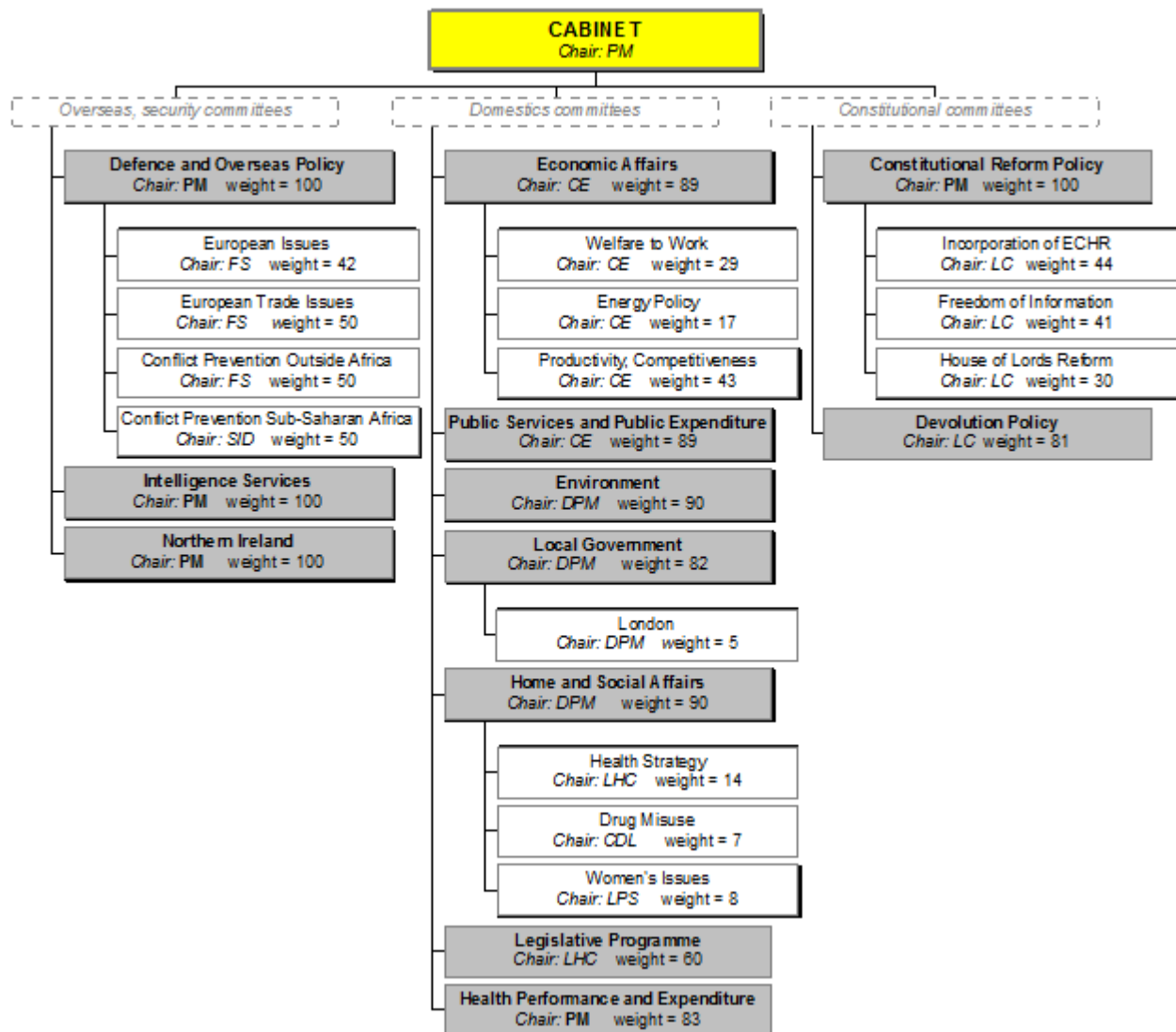
within the involved group. But it can tell us a much more limited thing: we can be reasonably certain that people *not* holding any of the relevant ministerial and committee positions, *not* sitting around the relevant table for issue A, will also not be powerful in that area. Notice too that this claim does not imply that committees are the *only* venues in which discussions can take place. Of course, many prior discussions take place before cabinet committees meet – such as discussions between the key departments, ‘bi-laterals’ on spending issues between the Treasury and spending departments, and interventions by Downing Street. But at some stage all the threads of these diverse forms of discussions have to run together in a cabinet committee decision. A cabinet committee place is thus a passport to involvement not just in the committee meeting itself but to the preparatory work which leads up to it.

It is for this reason that Prime Ministers spend so much time thinking about the personnel permutations open to them for staffing different kinds of ministerial posts and installing people on committees. There are two key kinds of people on cabinet committees: ministers from relevant departments, whose presence is essentially mandatory because their brief falls within the committee’s purview; and non-departmental ministers chosen by the PM to balance the committee and to look after his or her interests there, sometimes seen as ‘fixers’ and often including the committee chair. The main roles here are positions like the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (an empty title disguising a co-ordinating role fixed by the PM) and in the past ‘minister without portfolio’; plus people the PM uses to co-ordinate the government’s legislative programme and organize Parliamentary business, such as the Leader of the House of Commons, chief Whip and leader in the Lords. Occasionally departmental ministers whose briefs are fairly peripheral to a committee may nonetheless be drafted onto it to give more weight to some position that the PM favours.

Figure 18.1 shows that there are three main types of committees. (i) *Full committees* stand out because they are just below the cabinet in importance and all or virtually all their members are ministers in the cabinet. Very few if any members are junior ministers. The top-level full committees are chaired by the PM and have very few members (less than eight). The more normal full committees are chaired by the PM or other senior ministers and have a wide range of departmental or functional ministers attending and are much larger, with between 12 and 20 members. (ii) *Sub-committees* pre-process issues for the full committees. They all report to a full committee, which may modify or overturn their positions before they get to cabinet. Sub-committees may involve junior ministers who are not of cabinet rank, usually people called ‘ministers of state’ or ‘parliamentary under-secretary’. Sub-committees



**Figure 18.1: The Cabinet committee system in May 2001**



are generally fairly flexible bodies, with new ones forming more rapidly than changes in full committees occur, to reflect new issues. Older sub-committees may drift on for some time without meeting very often before being terminated. (iii) 'Symbolic' sub-committees may be semi-permanent, addressing an issue which Whitehall's departmental structure may otherwise tend to fragment, but not very often or very vigorously. The fewer the number of cabinet rank ministers who sit on a sub-committee, and hence the more its membership consists of junior ministers, the lower its status and the more remote it usually is from the key political issues of the day. The three sub-committees of the Home Affairs committee and the London sub-committee seem to fall into this third and least important category.

Comparing across May 1992, when John Major first published the cabinet committee lists and May 2001, Tony Blair's system just before the general election, allows us to see how much the set-up of committees had changed in ten years. Figure 18.1 shows that Blair operated with considerably fewer full cabinet committees, 12 to Major's 16, but the same number of sub-committees, 14 in both years. Two thirds of the full committees were the same in 2001 as nine years earlier. Some 1992 bodies disappeared, for instance, covering Hong Kong which has since been handed over to China. Others were merged, for instance, two legislation committees became one, and the previous nuclear weapons committee was re-absorbed into the wider Defence and Overseas Policy committee. And some committees were split – the 1992 Domestic and Economic Policy Committee chaired by the PM was replaced by two committees covering Economic Affairs and Public Services and Public Expenditure (PSX), both now chaired by the Chancellor. The PM's committee places (all of which are chair positions) greatly reduced, from nine under Major to just five under Blair, chiefly because Blair had John Prescott as Deputy Leader of the Labour Party and Deputy Prime Minister to consider. He allocated Prescott three cabinet committees and one sub-committee to chair, all relevant to his brief covering environment and local government. But Blair also used as chairs of committees or sub-committees the Lord Chancellor, the Foreign Secretary, the Leader of the Commons, the Secretary for International Development, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and the Lord Privy Seal (see Figure 18.1). Chairing was quite a widely distributed role then, with eight people in the cabinet of 23 having this experience.

The most important aspect of these changes, however, is how they affected the standing of senior ministers within the cabinet committee system. Here we need to be able to control for the varying importance of the different committees and sub-committees. A basic method for assigning differing weights to them was developed by Dunleavy (1994, 1995a). Committees are assigned a starting weight of 100 and sub-committees a starting weight of 50 points, and this score is then reduced in proportion to the presence of junior members on the committee. The total weight for each committee is divided evenly amongst its members, with an extra share being assigned to the chair. Figure 18.1 includes the resulting weights for each committee and sub-committee.

To see how these scores were derived, and the implications for ministers' positional power rankings, consider four examples. The Defence and Overseas Policy Committee in 2001 scored 100 points, each of its seven cabinet members receiving 12.5 points and the PM (as chair) 25 points. The Local Government committee included a few junior ministers and so scored 82 points because it had a couple of junior ministers on it: each of its 17 members

receiving 4.3 points and the Deputy PM (as chair) 8.6 points. The European Issues Sub-Committee started at 50 points, but with three junior ministers out of its 19 members scored 42 points; each member got 2.1 points, with a double ration for the Foreign Secretary as chair. The least important sub-committee was that for London. Again it started at 50 points, but with 10 junior ministers and only one cabinet-rank member (the Deputy PM in the chair), its final score was just 5; each ordinary member thus attracted a weight of only 0.4 points. This approach uses the limited information we have about cabinet committees to control for the fact that some are clearly much more salient than others. It is the simplest feasible scheme, has a clear rationale and when applied in a consistent way it can be used to compare how the system has operated over time.

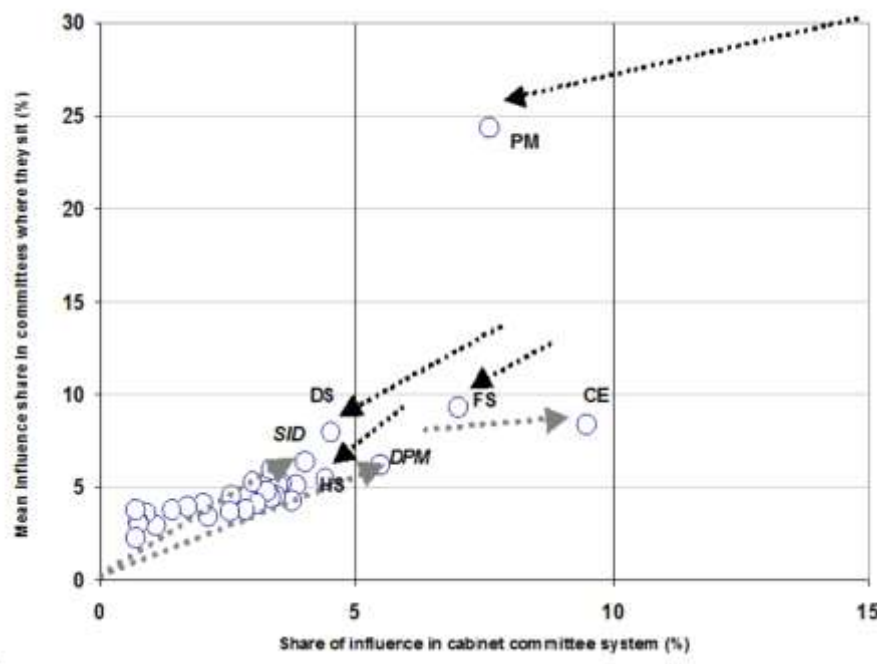
Looking across the scores which ministers received from all their committee positions, Figure 18.2 shows their relative positional influence on two dimensions:

- what proportion of all cabinet committee system point weights each minister controlled; and
- what each minister's average point weight was on the committees where they sat.

When the first results for 1992 under the weighting scheme above were published, they were quite controversial (Dunleavy, 1994, 1995a). They suggested that the Prime Minister accounted for less than 15 per cent of the scores in the committee system as a whole, although well ahead of his nearest rival, the Foreign Secretary on 9 per cent of all scores, and the Chancellor in fourth place on less than 7 per cent. However, the analysis also showed the PM had an average of 28 points for all committees where he sat, more than three times greater than the levels for any other cabinet minister, so that he was clearly far and away the most influential person in cabinet.

Applying the same method in 2001 Figure 18.2 shows that there was a dramatic change in the pattern of scores under Labour. Tony Blair's share of the points across the whole cabinet committee system shrank dramatically to less than 9 per cent. At the same time Gordon Brown's share of total points rose dramatically, giving him the largest personal share of any cabinet. The PM still remains much more influential on those committees where he sits than anyone else, but in terms of presence across the committee system as a whole he is clearly ranked number 2 to the Chancellor, who chairs two new and powerful committees. The arrows in Figure 18.2 show how the PM's and the Chancellor's positions under Labour differ from those of nine years' earlier. They seem to offer striking confirmation of the importance of the Blair-Brown pact and of the extent to which Brown's status has risen as a

**Figure 18.2: Two measures of cabinet ministers' positional influence in May 2001. Arrows show changes in the positions of major actors between 1997 and 2001.**



result. Nor is that all – for the other three ministers in the cabinet’s top five ranks under Major (the Foreign Secretary, Defence Secretary and Home Secretary) also posted significant declines in their shares of cabinet committee system points in 2001, further enhancing the Chancellor’s new prominence. In addition the Treasury second-in-command, the Chief Secretary, was in the 2001 cabinet. In fact he moved into the top ten ministers in terms of shares of points across the committee system as a whole, giving the Treasury far more prominence than before, and more than one in seven of the available committee points.

But looking a little closer also shows some changes which reflect different Labour priorities in government. Other shifts suggest a sophisticated Blair style of cabinet management which perhaps hoodwinks the Chancellor by appearing to give away more influence than it actually does. Historically Labour assigns less of a priority to defence than have the Tories. And some part of the declines recorded for the PM, Foreign Secretary and Defence Secretary reflects the arrival on the Defence and Overseas Policy committee and its sub-committees of Clare Short, heading the Department for International Development, set up by Blair in 1997 to reflect Labour’s stronger emphasis upon overseas aid to developing countries. John Prescott’s role as Deputy PM also accounts for much of the remaining changes, as he became the fourth member of the cabinet in terms of sharing points across the committee system. It might be debated to what extent Blair can rely on Prescott for

unswerving or unconditional support, although in practice he has seemed very close to the PM on most issues.

But Blair also clearly took steps to give himself eyes and ears on the domestic committees and sub-committees where he did not sit. The new junior post of ‘Minister of State in the Cabinet Office’ was created for Lord Falconer, a close personal friend of Blair, who moved straight into ninth rank across all ministers, despite being outside the cabinet. The PM could also rely on the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. Table 18.1 shows that the effect of Blair’s jugglings was to reduce considerably the loss of positional influence apparently implied in Figure 18.2. Indeed if it is legitimate to count the Deputy PM as squarely in the Blair camp, then the PM’s bloc’s share of the points across the cabinet system as whole did not shrink but slightly grew under Labour. Elsewhere the Lord Chancellor (Lord Irvine, a close career and personal friend of Blair’s) and Chief Whip moved up the rankings of ministers appreciably, to eleventh and twelfth places in the rankings, putting their normally low salience posts above all the major departmental ministers. Adding them in as well would take the PM bloc’s share to over a quarter of all cabinet committee system points in 2001, up considerably on 1992. Of course Major had allies in his cabinet, but amongst ministers who had their own independent personal and political basis for being there, and who seemed much less dependent on him for their positions chairing committees. The Chief Whip under Major was also less prominent in terms of his position. On this basis, the PM’s personal involvement has declined, but the presence of his wider ‘bloc’ is not much changed. Blair wields his influence more at one remove, where Major seemed to have felt more that he needed to be present in person at committees.

Apart from Prescott, the heads of most major Whitehall departments lost ground somewhat under Blair, because the top positions in the cabinet committee system were carved up between the PM’s allies (including the parliamentary/legislative ministers) and the Treasury. The Department of Trade and Industry secretary moved downwards sharply, falling from eight in importance in 1997 to fifteenth in 2001. An exception was the Secretary of State for Social Security, who acquired some new prominence (again reflecting a pattern typical of previous Labour governments changing over from the Tories, for whom this welfare state role was less important). The biggest loser in the new cabinet structures was the Secretary of State for Scotland, whose rank plunged from tenth in 1992 to twentieth in 2001 on the weighting system used here. This change reflecting the Scottish Office’s much reduced role because of legislative devolution to Scotland. By contrast, the Welsh Secretary actually acquired more points share in 2001, although moving down the ranking of ministers slightly.

**Table 18.1: How the PM's and the Chancellor's blocs matched up in 1992 and 2001**

|  | % of all points in the cabinet committee system |      |                     |
|--|---|------|---------------------|
|  | 1992  | 2001 | Change 1992 to 2001 |
| Chancellor alone                                       | 6.4   | 9.5  | +3.1                |
| All Treasury ministers                                 | 10.7  | 13.8 | +3.1                |
| PM alone   | 14.9  | 7.6  | -7.3                |
| PM bloc (includes CDL in 1997, and MSCO + CDL in 2001) | 19.3  | 14.5 | -4.8                |
| PM bloc + Deputy PM                                    | 19.3  | 20.2 | +0.7                |
| PM bloc + DPM + LC +CW                                 | 24.2  | 26.9 | +2.7                |

Notes: MSCO is the Minister of State, Cabinet Office; CDL is the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster; LC is the Lord Chancellor; CW is the Chief Whip.

Of course, this analysis provides only a starting point for discussion. The precise scores given here can easily be varied by changing the starting weights assigned to committee or sub-committees, and by assigning a greater or less weight to committee chairs viz a viz ordinary committee members. But notice that the *patterns* shown here are very, very resistant to change. If you want to increase the positional power of the PM you have to weight full committees as more than twice as important as sub-committees and also increase the weight of committee chairs to more than twice that of ordinary members. But these same changes will benefit all the other top five ministers as well as the PM, and strengthen the power of the Chancellor in 2001 and his increase in influence relative to the PM. Similarly, it is possible to pick on any particular minister's ranking in positional terms and dispute it. But however you score these positions the scope for changing any minister's relative position against others is really quite small.

In sum, the cabinet committee data give an important insight into Blair's leadership style. They unequivocally show him conceding a far greater role to his Chancellor on domestic policy issues than his Conservative predecessor. Blair restricted his own committee system activity in 2001 to three key committees with tiny memberships that he must chair (Defence and Overseas Policy, the Intelligence Services, Northern Ireland) and two others: Constitutional Reform Policy, and a special case committee on Health Performance and Expenditure, carved out of the Chancellor's public expenditure domain in 2000 because of its central political significance for new Labour's election pledges. For the rest Blair seems to rely more than Major did on trusted allies and agents to chair and to nudge policy in the

‘right’ direction, and to give a committee presence to his influential Downing Street special advisors and larger Number 10 staff.

The data on committee allocations are not much help if we want to go further, and to understand how influence is distributed amongst those clearly involved in decision-making. To understand these wider aspects we can turn to what we know about the UK core executive’s internal operations in a general way, and consider how rational actor models may help us shed more systematic light on what is going on.

### Thinking about power using rational choice models

Why does not the PM decide every contentious issue in government? Since they appoint and can dismiss every minister, why are their preferences not just simply decisive, sweeping through and over-riding the views of other ministers? Of course the PM’s involvement may be limited for logistical reasons. There are only so many hours in a day to master information and decide upon policy options, and there are multiple competing demands upon his or her time, especially in the fields of foreign affairs and overseas summitry. But with the burgeoning Number 10 staff to assist him, why should Blair not have been able to extend his competence ever more widely, using them to pre-process issues for his attention and then to police what ministers and Whitehall departments do about implementing a wide range of decisions he wants to see go through?

One obvious constraining possibility is the rivalry between PM and Chancellor. Perhaps Blair has been thwarted in his efforts by the growth of Treasury influence? Public expenditure control requires Treasury involvement in almost all major policy choices and the Blair-Brown pact has given the Chancellor an unassailable political position. But if Brown has in fact been guaranteed a ‘reserved area’ of mainly domestic policy to influence, then the same questions apply equally to him. Why are there limits on Treasury control? Why cannot his officials simply refuse to fund any scheme with which Brown disagrees, keeping the money tap turned off until departmental ministers come round to his way of seeing things?

To understand some of the limits on Prime Ministerial and Treasury power some simple rational choice models can help. At their foundation is the idea that decision-making entails ‘transactions costs’ for those who take part. To launch an issue or try to change or defend their policies, any minister or actor must take risks of failing, losing reputation and incurring penalties (such as seeming weak and ineffective, or even risking losing office altogether). Win or lose, those senior actors who decide to get involved in any given policy

scrap must also immediately run up costs in marshalling information, trying to justify more funding, writing policy documents, and lobbying potential allies in Whitehall, the cabinet and the parliamentary party. None of these activities comes cheap in terms of information, time, reputation and other political resources. The longer an issue drags on, the more these downside cost factors and political risks will rise.

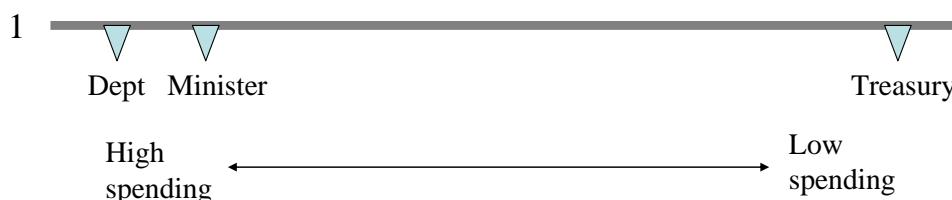
In fact the whole UK policy system is structured to take advantage of this feature of rising transactions costs over time. Issues or initiatives start off in departmental or inter-departmental working groups of officials before they migrate from the network of 'official' committees into the cabinet committee system involving ministers. No department can manage this transition without the agreement and active support of their departmental minister. Since most major and many quite minor policy initiatives require public spending or changes in the law, departments are also rarely in a position to change things on their own. They have to take their case and make it work before a sceptical Treasury anxious to curtail the growth of the department's spending, or make cutbacks, or at the least secure important efficiency improvements in return for more funding. Often too the department and its minister must argue for parliamentary time and priority with an even more sceptical set of ministers managing the government's legislative and parliamentary processes. Behind all these interactions lies 'the shadow of the Prime Minister', as Albert Breton (1998, Ch. 4) describes the PM's role in the Westminster systems as the ultimate core executive tie-breaker, the person who can knock together the heads of recalcitrant parties, enforcing a final deal on everyone.

Yet despite the strong concentration of resources in the PM's hands described in detail in institutional accounts, there are significant limits on the premier's ability to get their way because other actors are 'first movers', and they can perhaps settle issues early on before they ever get bid up to the PM. Perhaps the most important and pervasive policy scrutiny process in British government is that where departments seek budgetary approval for new or existing programmes from the Treasury. Both sides know that if they cannot reach agreement between themselves in bilateral discussions, then the unresolved issues will have to be referred up to the Public Services and Public Expenditure (PSX) committee of the cabinet, which is chaired by the chancellor and mostly includes non-departmental ministers. Issues that PSX in turn cannot determine will generally go to the Prime Minister to resolve. (There is a notional recourse to a full cabinet vote as well, but the PM very rarely allows this option to be activated). However, bidding up issues from bilateral discussions between the Treasury and the department to the PSX committee or to the PM carries transactions costs for both



### Figure 18.3: THE UK CORE EXECUTIVE BUDGET PROCESS

*The department and the Treasury try to resolve their disagreements in bilateral bargaining*



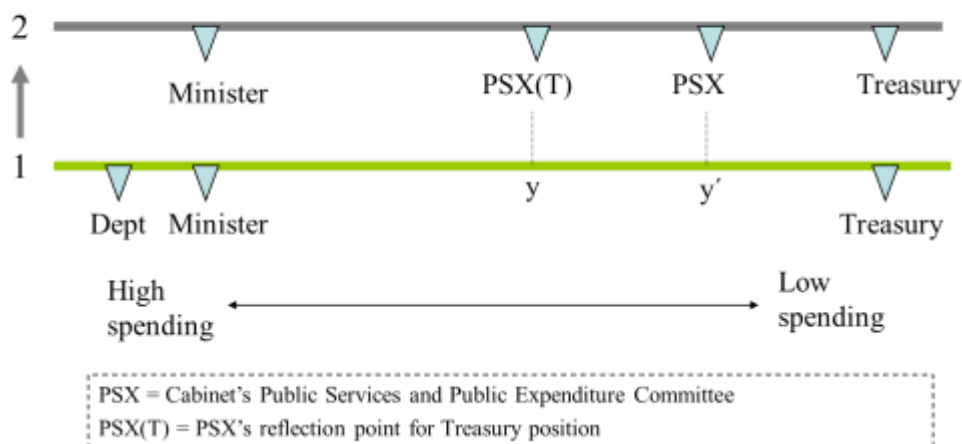
sides, in terms of extra preparation, disapproval from top government personnel if trivial issues are added to their workload unnecessarily, and risks that the policy decision will go off in directions that the department or Treasury may not like.

We can look at this process in stages using some simple diagrams. Figure 18.3 shows the opening stage of the budgetary process. Both the department and the Treasury define their ideal positions on a dimension running from high to low levels of spending. We can assume that the department officials are generally keen to spend more and the Treasury to spend less on a programme. The civil servants in the department are limited in what they can propose by the attitude of their minister, whose agreement is essential before the issue can go into the budgetary or cabinet systems for processing. We show the minister's optimum position here as next to the department's, but to the right and hence a bit closer to the Treasury position. (Of course, different situations could easily arise, some of which I diagram below). A large gulf still separates the minister's proposal from the Treasury's ideal point however. In negotiations they will almost certainly split the difference between them if they can. But whereabouts exactly?

To formulate a realistic position both the minister and the Treasury will try to anticipate what will happen if they do not reach an agreement but instead the issue gets bid up to a higher level in the cabinet committee system. Figure 18.4 shows that at stage 2 their divergent views would go to the PSX committee to resolve, which as drawn here has a more centrist ideal point between the minister's and the Treasury's positions, but more towards the Treasury end of the dimension. (This position would actually be that of the crucial deciding member of the committee - which might be the chancellor who is chairing it, or of the member of the committee most in the middle in this controversy, but we need not go into such complications here). Given his or her position is a long way from the PSX point, the

**Figure 18. 4: THE UK CORE EXECUTIVE BUDGET PROCESS**

*The issue is bid up to the PSX committee in stage 2*

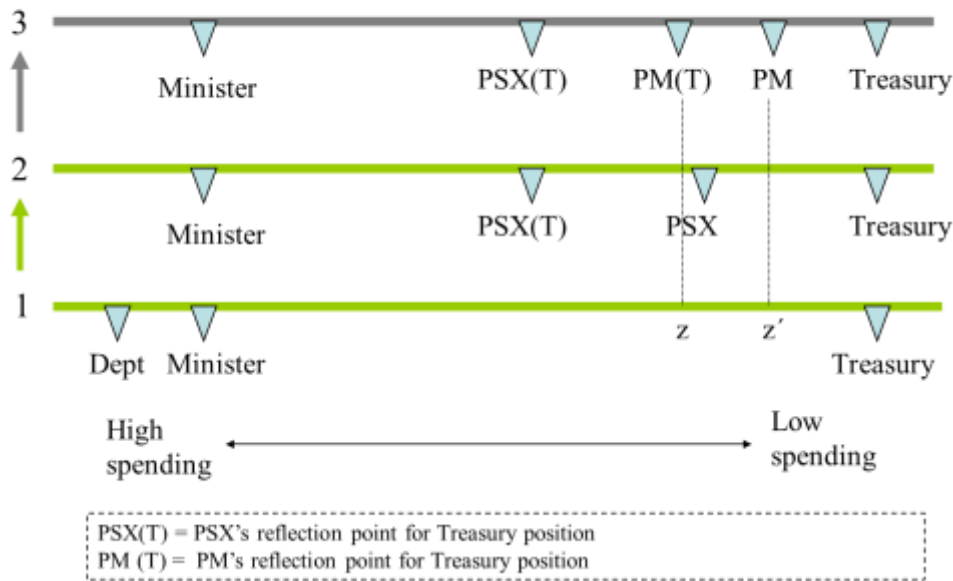


minister clearly has to compromise, to try and offer the PSX committee a settlement that they will find just a little bit better than the Treasury's position. A rational minister will pitch her or his case to the committee just to the right of the PSX (T) position, a very important location which has a special name. It is the committee's 'reflection point' for the Treasury, defined as being the same distance to the left of the committee's ideal point as the Treasury's demand is to the right of it. Remember that the PSX committee wants to get as close as it can to its ideal point. A bid to the right of the PSX (T) reflection point would still involve more spending than the committee really wants to approve. But the committee will prefer this outcome to making the deep cuts which the Treasury are holding out for. Notice too that in negotiating to the right of PSX (T), the departmental minister can also know that the worst outcome they can finish up with is a settlement at the committee's ideal point PSX. The minister will never risk getting an outcome at the Treasury's position so long they are willing to compromise. The Treasury may try to combat departmental concessions, by moving its own position closer to the PSX ideal point. If both the departmental minister and the Treasury can successfully anticipate where the PSX committee stands they will realize that they should settle within the range  $y$  to  $y'$  shown on the lower scale.

Perhaps the Treasury could force the issue even higher, however, beyond the PSX committee and up to the Prime Minister to decide. To justify this risky step, and to get the PM's attention, the issue would have to be a significant one in expenditure terms or one with considerable political implications. But if the Treasury knows that the PM's ideal point is closer to their position than the committee's is then they might be prepared to bear the costs of this course. Figure 18.5 shows a situation where the PM is indeed keener to hold down

**Figure 18. 5: THE UK CORE EXECUTIVE BUDGET PROCESS**

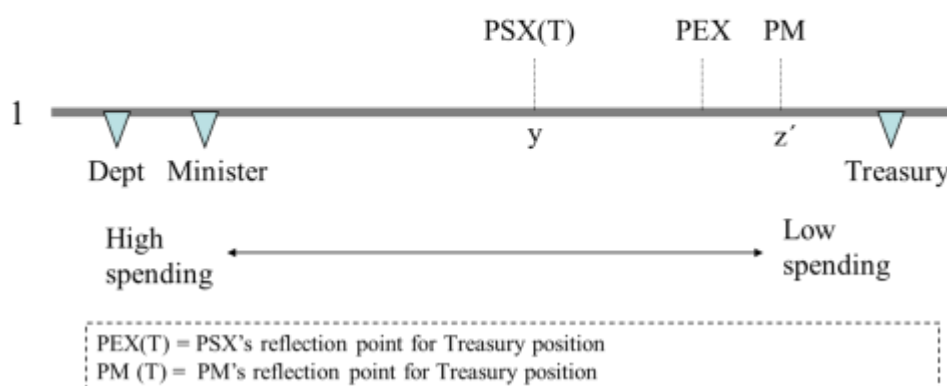
*The issue is bid up to the PM by Treasury in stage 3*



spending than the PSX committee. So the departmental minister will have to make more concessions, pitching his or her bid at a point closer to the PM's optimum than the Treasury's position. So the final proposal from the minister would be to the right of the PM's reflection point for the Treasury, somewhere between the point PM (T) and the PM's optimum on the stage 3 dimension line. Again the Treasury could only counter this move by converging its own position towards the PM's optimum point. If the departmental minister and the Treasury had both been able to anticipate that the issue would be bid up all the way to the PM, and to accurately identify where the PM stood on the issue, they would have negotiated between them within the range  $z$  to  $z'$  shown on the original bargaining line at the bottom of Figure 18.5.

There are good reasons to believe that the elite actors in the cabinet and in Whitehall will be able to anticipate pretty well how the PSX committee and the PM are likely to react on any spending issue. Cabinet colleagues will know the PM and other PSX committee members well at a personal level and have ample opportunity to study their views and reactions. The civil servants in the department and Treasury will also know in detail what is the balance of political and social or economic benefits and costs in each issue area. So if all the actors involved hold the positions diagrammed here, then right from the earliest stages of bilateral bargaining between the minister and the Treasury both sides will know that the range of potentially viable solutions is that shown as  $y$  to  $z'$  in Figure 18.6. In other words if actors

**Figure 18.6: THE UK CORE EXECUTIVE BUDGET PROCESS**  
*The next round if departments and the Treasury can correctly identify the positions of the PM and the PEX committee*



behave rationally, and prefer to get the closest possible outcomes to their position, then the range of feasible solutions runs from the PSX (T) point at the high-spending end to the PM's position at the low-spending end.

Notice where this leaves the PM though – occupying an ‘extreme’ position within the feasible range, which is highly unlikely to be reached. The PM will not get exactly what he or she wants on this issue unless the Treasury insist on bidding the issue all the way up the cabinet committee hierarchy. Until the last possible moment the Treasury must be determined to defeat and humiliate the departmental minister, whatever the transaction costs and other risks involved. Such a protracted struggle is unlikely to occur frequently. Far more commonly the departmental minister and the Treasury will do a deal somewhere in the range from  $y$  to  $z'$  in their early bilateral discussions, so that the decision will become a *fait accompli*, never to trouble the PM's busy agenda. Because other actors have strong ‘first mover’ advantages, the PM may get something of what they want some of the time. But they will very rarely exercise the unfettered and detailed ability to fix policy claimed by the exponents of ‘prime ministerial dominance’ arguments.

This point could be firmed up further, and generalized beyond the budgetary process to apply to all kinds of policy discussions and debates within the core executive, for example, by looking at situations where the Prime Minister's influence may be cut out altogether or severely reduced. The diagrams considered so far assume that ministers adopt positions close to those of their departmental civil servants. But what if they do not? If the PM appoints the ‘wrong’ person to head up a Whitehall department, someone out of sympathy with its basic mission, the results can be disastrous for the government. Where the wrong person is picked,

the normal weak checks and balances of the cabinet committee system can be completely short-circuited, as two demonstrate. In the early 1980s Margaret Thatcher put her ideological mentor, Sir Keith Joseph, in charge of the Department of Industry for two years, even though he opposed all state intervention in the economy and kept holding seminars with his civil servants on whether to close down the department. His stance did not prevent policy interventions from occurring as the economy sagged and unemployment soared, but it did rob departmental policy of much of its coherence. Later on in the decade Thatcher repeated the mistake when Nicholas Ridley was made Secretary of State for the Environment and made no secret of his disdain for green issues, before abruptly exiting from office after a separate row over his anti-EU remarks.

A second main source of difficulty for Prime Ministers arises from the multi-dimensionality of politics, the fact that most policy problems are not just about one thing, but instead involve several connected aspects (see Dunleavy, 1995b for a case study). The paradox for a Prime Minister is that the more influence she has on where policy is fixed, the less difference she can make by intervening personally to decide anything. A Prime Minister confronting such problems, and able to find out what they were, will try to combat being pushed to the sidelines in various ways. For instance, a PM could do what Blair has done, developing a strong staff in 10 Downing Street, and trying to make the perennially useless (or perennially constrained) Cabinet Office better at shaping policy options and generating strategies or implementation ideas. Like Blair too, he or she could appoint trusted colleagues to sit on cabinet committees as their eyes and ears and tied votes, and use patronage or other incentives they control to persuade ministers to move policy closer to the premier's ideal point. We might think that an intelligent and middle-of-the-road premier like Blair, instinctively inclined to 'third way' solutions and able to grasp a lot of policy information, might have more personal influence in changing policy formation than someone who adopts cruder or more extreme positions, like Margaret Thatcher. But no such effect is obvious empirically. And even if we could reliably establish such variation in the capabilities of individual premiers, it might not make a huge impact. There are only so many issues that a PM can intervene on, and they can never be more than a fraction of the flow of business through the cabinet committee system, forcing him or her to radically prioritize his or her time and effort.

It is also no accident that so much of this section has focused on budgetary issues. Any PM struggling to get their policy preferences enacted against a Chancellor of the Exchequer with different views will face an uphill struggle in the cabinet committee system,

even in finding out what ministers and departments have agreed with the Treasury. But on issues where he disagrees with Gordon Brown, Blair must face a very substantial extra burden because he has conceded so much additional positional advantage to his rival, so much extra weight within the committee places and rankings. The Chancellor also derives immense reputational advantage from the widespread talk about the Blair-Brown pact, which makes him seem politically invulnerable, as no doubt its leakers intended. Departmental ministers have stronger incentives to get on well with Brown since they know that he will be there for the long run, and perhaps will inherit the premier's mantle at the end of his chancellorship. So this theoretical analysis in terms of rational choice models provides strong circumstantial reasons for believing that perhaps the empirical changes captured in Figure 18.2 above are real ones. These changes almost seem to signal a 'split premiership', with Brown in control of much domestic policy and Blair confined to foreign affairs and the few domestic policy issues which he can take directly under his wing, such as aspects of health service modernization, and educational policy change.

The PM has a last power which can be used *in extremis* to enforce their will, but again not without costs. This source of influence is their veto-power, their capacity to intervene late on to stop progress towards an outcome they oppose, a capability much discussed for other chief executives like the US President (Cameron, 2000). Even if Number 10 and the PM have not been extensively involved in an issue early on, they may still be able to halt initiatives they find objectionable, spotting and stopping deals which have already been done between the department and the Treasury, or between the department and the guardians of the legislative programme. This 'last mover' competence seems dramatic. But it also entails costs for the PM to intervene to scrap the progress made on a new spending programme or new legislation, and instead send the issue back to the drawing board. Often the government *has* to do something about pressing issues that will not go away and cannot be delayed, so it will face political costs if it does nothing (Thompson, 1995; Keliher, 1995). And other actors may easily anticipate the threat of a Prime Ministerial veto by placing their proposals just within the bounds of acceptability – for example, choosing an outcome that is just better for the PM than the policy status quo. A premier who then aborts progress has to live with an even less satisfactory status quo. So even the veto power may be a more limited resource for the PM than institutional accounts normally acknowledge.

## Conclusions

Writing just after the English civil war in the mid seventeenth century, the philosopher Thomas Hobbes argued that a powerful person needs friends and servants, wealth to buy friendship and service, a reputation for being powerful to attract the adherence of people needing protection, and success to seem lucky or wise (either of which will tend to make opponents back off from open conflicts with them). In the more settled institutional context of contemporary British government, presence on the right committees and agenda control over their business are current corollaries, along with relevant ministerial roles. Both Blair and Brown can use institutional and political resources to 'buy' friends and maintain thriving factions in partial tension and conflict across the Labour government and the wider Labour movement. The importance of allies within the heart of government arises from the detailed budgetary and policy-making arrangements within the core executive. We have shown that important mechanisms are in place which inherently limit the influence of any given position to control policy-making at different levels or different sectors of the overall decision-making system. On their own the PM and Chancellor control only narrow strategic bridgeheads within the committee system. But with organized blocs they may operate a controlling duopoly for now, and muster resources for a possible future showdown, a polite undercover civil war between the 'royalist' Blair and the 'puritan' Brown for the soul of the Labour movement.

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### *Further reading*

Two good short books analysing the concept of power are those by Dowding (1996 or 1991). Morris (2002) provides a longer and wordier account and makes mistakes later on, but chapters 2 to 11 are helpful. The best empirical coverage of where power lies within the core executive can be found in Rhodes and Dunleavy (1995) which includes several useful case studies of limits on the PM's power, especially Jones (1995), Keliher (1995), Thompson (1995) and Dunleavy (1995b). It also has a chapter on how to measure influence in cabinet committees, Dunleavy (1995a); or alternatively see Dunleavy (1994). The best coverage of more conventional literature on who has 'power' in Britain, none of which even seems to define 'power' before starting, is given in Weir and Beetham (1999), chapters 6 to 8. For rational choice approaches there is currently no UK work. But Breton (1998), Ch.4 is a Canadian's analysis which applies to the UK, and Cameron (2000) uses a similar approach to that here to look at US Presidents' influence over Congress.