

The PM and the centre of UK government from Tony Blair to David Cameron. How much will change in the transition from single-party to coalition government?

May 21 2010

With a strong Commons majority behind the government, [George Jones](#) and [Andrew Blick](#) argue that whether the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition operates in a different style from its Labour predecessors will depend strongly on how David Cameron controls the central machinery of power in British government. Recent history gives us the best pointer we have to what may lie ahead.

The behaviour of David Cameron as Leader of the Opposition suggested that his personal disposition if he became premier would be to minimise the role of Cabinet. His model for much of his political style appears to be Tony Blair, and Blair was the most interventionist prime minister since Lloyd George. Blair strongly preferred operating in small informal fluctuating groups – “sofa government” and “denocracy” – rather than through the collegial processes of cabinet government.

Blair’s centralized style

Blair’s style of governing required an increase in his administrative resources. He expanded his staff at No 10 in the Prime Minister’s Office, and fused it with an extended Cabinet Office to form in effect a “quasi-Department of the Prime Minister”. The size of the Cabinet Office grew from about 650 in 1998 to 1,790 in 2004: its peak was 2,020 in 2002. Its proliferation of units, taskforces and czars had to be accommodated in buildings stretching out from 70 Whitehall along Horseguards to Admiralty Arch.

Under Thatcher and Major the staff at No 10 serving the prime minister had numbered around 90 people; by 1998 they had risen to 121; and by 2005 had peaked at nearly 226. Within this group a big increase took place in the special advisers serving the prime minister.

Major had 8: Blair in 1998 had 16, rising to a peak of 28 in 2004. In the Cabinet Office beyond No.10 staff serving the prime minister rose to the high 500s. Thus Blair had 782 staff under him in both the Prime Minister’s Office and the Cabinet Office – a Prime Minister’s Department in all but name.

The way Blair absorbed and commandeered the Cabinet Office can be seen in the changing terms of reference of the Cabinet Office during his period. The traditional role of the Cabinet Office was to provide support for collective government, serving the prime minister in his capacity as chairman of the cabinet. From 1998 a succession of official definitions of the roles of the Cabinet Office diminished its task of supporting collective decision making, by 2002 eliminating any mention of cabinet and collective. The MP Kelvin Hopkins noted in 2005 that “Cabinet Office targets seem to relate almost entirely to the Prime Minister and not to supporting the Cabinet as such.”

Blair downplayed not only cabinet processes but the House of Commons too. He moved the Chief Whip out of the splendid set of offices in No 12 Downing Street to rooms accessed through the Cabinet Office overlooking the lower part of Downing Street. Into the Chief Whip’s offices he put his Chief Press Secretary, Alastair Campbell, showing he regarded the media as more important than the House of Commons. Campbell by Order in Council was given legal authority to issue instructions to civil servants, as was Jonathan Powell, who was Blair’s Chief of Staff.



Photo courtesy of WEF via Flickr

The trio of Blair, Powell and Campbell headed a virtual Prime Minister's Department, assisted by Cabinet Secretaries, amongst whom Andrew Turnbull, who held the post from 2002-5, was particularly supportive of this administrative objective.

Brown at No. 10

When Gordon Brown became Prime Minister in 2007 he promised a different approach: to restore collegial processes. For a time the number of staff in the Prime Minister's Office and in the Cabinet Office fell, but Brown's reputation as a "Stalinist" centraliser soon proved well-founded. Brown's special advisers shot up from 18 in 2007 to around 25 in 2010. The Cabinet Office lost some units and the numbers there fell to just under 400 staff serving the Prime Minister in the Cabinet Office and Prime Minister's Office combined, but he continued and in some ways intensified the style of Blair.

The civil service head of the Prime Minister's Office under Brown was Jeremy Heywood, and he became a permanent secretary – symbolic in Whitehall that there was a separate quasi-Department of the Prime Minister. Although Brown rescinded the Order in Council that gave some of his staff legal authority to instruct civil servants and moved the Chief Press Secretary out of No 12, he himself took over number 12 where he built the "hub", a large room in the middle of which he sat surrounded by the most important of his aides.



Coalition government

But the advent of a Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government creates pressure towards greater collegiality. If the government is to hold together, No.10 must take account of the views of Liberal Democrat Cabinet members. Equally, if Cameron is perceived as neglecting the majority Conservative component of his government then he will provoke resentment within his own party. These dual tendencies could increase the importance of the PM operating in an inclusive fashion.

There will be significant barriers preventing Cameron freely from utilising some of the powers associated with the office of Prime Minister. For example, his right to hire and fire ministers from the Liberal Democrat contingent in his Cabinet will presumably be severely restricted.

At the same time it should not be supposed the premiership will necessarily be at the mercy of circumstances and it may be possible to play countervailing tendencies off against each-other to the advantage of No.10. It may be that key decisions come to be taken, not so much in full Cabinet or its more regular sub-committees, but in some kind of formal or informal bipartisan 'inner Cabinet', or in bi-laterals between Cameron and Clegg. Nonetheless Cameron cannot ignore the necessity of some degree of group involvement.

And collective responsibility may have its advantages. The Liberal Democrats are likely to seek to distance themselves from some of the policies of the government in which they are participating, such as financial retrenchment measures. If the principle of collective responsibility is applied thoroughly, with major decisions being fully discussed in Cabinet forums, then it will be harder for the Liberal Democrats to disassociate



themselves from what the government does. Instruments of control wielded under Blair, such as No.10 staff, may become instruments of collegiality, helping to facilitate rather than bypass Cabinet government.

Finally the coalition government may be [stronger in Parliament](#) than many commentators assume. And it is never wise to under-estimate the concentration of executive power in the hands of ministers in UK government, nor to lose sight of the significant patronage powers that any incumbent of No 10 can wield. If the new government works well at its heart it may endure and perhaps help set a new paradigm as its two chief protagonists claim so hard and so insistently to be doing. But much will depend upon wider circumstances beyond Whitehall and Westminster, including the level of popularity of the new government and the parties within it; and the economic performance of the UK.

George Jones and Andrew Blick are the authors of the new book, [Premiership: the development, nature and power of the office of the British Prime Minister](#). Prior to the election, they commented on the [UK premiership](#) on this blog.