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Tony Blair and John Howard:

**Comparative Predominance and 'Institution Stretch' in the UK and
Australia**

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Tony Blair and John Howard:

Comparative Predominance and ‘Institution Stretch’ in the UK and Australia

Abstract¹

It has recently been argued that the UK premier enjoys a level of executive power unavailable to US presidents, but how does he or she compare to another prime minister operating within a broadly similar system? Commonalities of intra-executive influence and capacity exist under the premierships in the UK and Australia. Discrete institutional constraints and deviations are evident, but trends and similarities in resource capacity can be clearly identified. These include: the growth of the leaders’ office, broadening and centralising of policy advice and media operations, strengthening of the role and function of ministerial advisers. I contend that this amounts to ‘institution stretch’, with new structures, processes and practices becoming embedded in the political system by the incumbents.

This article concentrates on the (formal) institutional and structural resources available to the prime minister and provides a timely comparative analysis of capacity within the Blair and Howard administrations, encompassing their ten years in office. The experience of these two prime ministers demonstrates that while ‘institutional stretch’ has occurred, these agents remain contingent on other (personal) factors to maintain predominance.

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We still know little about what prime ministers do, how they do it and indeed why. We know they are dependent on others. We know they are constrained by the environment they work in. We also know that they are powerful, influential actors. Understanding of prime ministerial power has tended to be trapped in the traditional debate of cabinet government against prime ministerial. This peculiarly British argument has given way to a more contemporary academic divide between analysis of presidentialism and core executive dependency.

This article adds a uniquely comparative angle.² It has recently been argued that the UK premier enjoys a level of executive power unavailable to US presidents, but how does he or she compare to another prime minister operating within a broadly similar system? This article argues that prime ministerial predominance (the marriage of personal and institutional capacity) can be identified and compared in two similar political systems: Britain and Australia. These two countries, with obvious similarities in models of governance, lend themselves well to comparison as stable and mature parliamentary democracies, with moderately bipolar party systems.

I concentrate on the institutional and structural resources available to the prime minister and provide a timely comparative analysis of capacity within the Blair and Howard administrations, encompassing their ten years in office. The experience of

² Comparative literature in this area is relatively sparse. Notable works include Poguntke and Webb (2005) and Helms (2005). Helms concurs 'Sophisticated studies on prime ministerial leadership styles, in particular those trying explicitly to develop an internationally comparative perspective, have remained rather thin on the ground' (2005, 18).

these two prime ministers demonstrates that while 'institutional stretch' has occurred, these agents remain contingent on other (personal) factors to maintain predominance.

The article sets out a brief synchronic framework of comparative analysis, placing the research within the context of the current literature, then moves on to analyse the institutional resources currently available to the present incumbents in the UK and Australia, exploring each of four aspects (as legal head of government, as cabinet manager, as controlling and strengthening the centre, as setting the media and party agenda). Finally I draw some broad conclusions.

Analysing prime ministers

Recent academic debate has divided British prime ministerial analysis into core executive dependency (Rhodes and Dunleavy 1995; Rhodes 2000; Bevir and Rhodes 2006; Richards and Smith 2002; Smith 1999, 2003) and presidential approaches (Foley 1993, 2000; Mughan, 2000; Poguntke and Webb 2005). Rhodes stresses the constraints on prime ministers as dependent actors with limited opportunities to shape or steer, only to 'persuade' (in Weller et al 1997, 222).³ For Foley however, the prime minister is not so constrained and the dynamics of personal leadership can have an impact on the formal support structures as well as the wider electorate: 'the old moorings of institutionalisation have been stretched in response to the new context of personalised public leadership' (Foley 2000, 341).

³ Bevir and Rhodes, specifically counter the presidential argument, in relation to the UK, pointing to the 'ever more pervasive and complex patterns of dependency constraining the prime minister' (2006, 686).

My comparative analysis draws from both the core executive model and the presidentialised model, indeed many characteristics overlap: they are not mutually exclusive. There are strong elements of the core executive model that resonate, but not all actors are equal or have equal resources. There are also strong elements of the presidentialisation thesis that can be applied to contemporary prime ministers in particular spatial leadership characteristics (the propulsion of leaders into the public arena, away from government and party) or the concept of leadership 'stretch' whereby the influence and authority of a prime minister is beyond the systemic (Foley 2000).

Prime ministerial predominance enables the prime minister to lead, if not command, the core executive and direct if not control its policy development. Predominance arises from the prime minister's ability to access and utilise personal and institutional power resources (Heffernan 2003).

Predominance grants the prime minister the 'potential' for leadership within the government, but only when personal power resources are married with institutional power resources, and when the prime minister is able to use both wisely and well (Heffernan 2003, 350).

Heffernan (2003), analysing the British context, identifies personal power resources as: reputation, skill and ability; association with actual or anticipated political success; public popularity; and high standing in his or her party. Institutional power resources Heffernan characterises as: being the legal head of the government; agenda setting through leadership of the cabinet and cabinet committee system and Whitehall;

strengthening Downing Street and the Cabinet Office (the centre); agenda setting through news media management.

Heffernan has developed his framework based on the British premier, but his work does provide a comparative basis for understanding prime ministerial predominance in these two countries. This article focuses on the institutional (or formal) resources in the two cases comparing and contrasting institutional power resources. We can see from this comparative analysis that institutions have been stretched by the incumbents over time, to the extent that capacity has increased for the contemporary and established prime minister in the UK and Australia. Yet still power remains contingent on the personal resources.⁴

Prime minister as legal head of the government

The British prime minister is 'universally reckoned to be the most powerful single individual in the British system of government' (King 1985, 1), often more 'authoritative than any President' (Heffernan 2005, 69). The Australian prime minister has tremendous authority merely by holding office (Jaensch 1997). The two have different constraints (federalism, powerful Australian Senate, size of parliament, differing modes of leadership election and so on). This article is concerned more with the institutional commonalities between the two cases: constitutional arrangements (written or unwritten), leave much to tradition and convention, cabinet contains only

⁴ Comparative work using Heffernan's personal power resources is beyond the scope of this article and will feature in my further research.

parliamentarians, and the prime minister is free to set the political agenda (Weller 1985).

The prime ministership is a 'highly dynamic office' (King 1985, 6), it is flexible and depends on agency (the incumbent prime minister) and structural (institutional constraints) factors. Power varies from prime minister to prime minister and fluctuates within a prime minister's period of office (Smith 1999, 73). Indeed, clarity regarding the role and functions of Australian prime ministers is as hard to find as in Britain.

The role of the Australian Prime Minister has sometimes been seen as merely that of a chairman of a committee. At other times that role has been seen as a presidential one (Lucy 1993, 138).

The existence of a relatively recent written Australian constitution does not assist, as the prime minister is not mentioned, and therefore is unable to rely on it for any formal power (Lucy 1993; Weller 2003). The key to power and predominance, as with the British premiership, lies in the discharge of informal resources, and the management of dependency relationships alongside formal structural resources.

The leadership resources available to a prime minister (nominally residing in a Westminster system of government) tend, in the absence of any statutory obligation, to be related to prerogative, patronage, and the power to set the government's agenda.

The Prime Minister's roles as Head of Her Majesty's Government, her principal adviser and as Chairman of the Cabinet are not defined in legislation.

These roles, including the exercise of powers under the royal prerogative, have evolved over many years, drawing on convention and usage, and it is not possible precisely to define them (House of Commons Debates 2001).

As legal head of the government the prime minister is able to make use of royal prerogatives.⁵ By convention and usage over time these formal powers can be more precisely identified as including the power to: appoint and dismiss ministers; summon, prorogue and dissolve parliament; appoint and regulate the civil service; allocate and reallocate portfolios; regulate government business; create cabinet committee; reorganise central government; confer honours; make treaties; declare war; deploy armed forces on operations overseas (Heffernan 2005, 33; Smith 1999, 75; and Smith 2003, 62). Without any formal constitutional constraints the British prime minister is free to exercise these prerogatives with limited parliamentary accountability (prime minister's questions in the Commons once a week, written parliamentary questions to the prime minister, and appearances before the Liaison Select Committee).

However, the war on Iraq sparked a debate on usage of the royal prerogative. Blair was not obliged to take a parliamentary vote on sending troops to Iraq, but chose to voluntarily place a substantive motion before the House of Commons. Leaving aside the various political reasons surrounding this decision, the result of the vote was only advisory as the royal prerogative could still have been exercised. Debate has since focused on explicitly removing the declaration of war and deployment of armed forces

⁵ See House of Commons Public Affairs Select Committee Report 2003 on the Royal Prerogative.

from the royal prerogative and vesting the powers in parliament (*The Guardian* 23 August 2005; House of Commons Debates 21 October 2005). This debate highlighted the extent to which monarchical power (particularly the ability to declare war) had passed (almost unnoticed) to the prime minister.

Similarly in Australia the prime minister's activities are based on practice, convention and choice (Weller 1992). The prime minister cannot rely on the constitution for any power that other ministers lack (Lucy 1993, 138). The constitution technically gives power to the Governor General to appoint ministers and dissolve both houses; however in practice this falls to the prime minister to advise the Governor General.⁶

Prime ministerial prerogative also emerged as an issue in Australia in May 2003, in relation to the case of Governor General Hollingworth. Howard chose not to exercise his power to advise the Queen that the Governor General should be removed from office, following a report which found Hollingworth, in his former role as Archbishop of Brisbane, had allowed a known paedophile to continue working as an Anglican priest. The subsequent furore (and inevitable departure of Hollingworth) raised questions relating to the prime minister's sole power to recommend Governor General appointments (and indeed removals) to the Queen, and whether this was an appropriate method of selection for the position (Williams 2003).

⁶ Section 61 of the constitution: 'the executive power of the Commonwealth is vested in the Queen and is exercisable by the Governor-General as the Queen's representative, and extends to the execution and maintenance of this Constitution, and of the laws of the Commonwealth.'

The power of patronage, it is argued, helps a prime minister to cement his or her position and to bring ministers or others into line on issues of policy (Weller 1985).

The power to appoint is wide and vast, dependency relations are very much the result of the power of the prime minister to appoint and dismiss ministers, advisers, committees, and commissions. The exercise of this power by Blair has been routinely attacked and ridiculed by a personality obsessed media (with cries of 'Tony's cronies'). Similarly Howard, using his patronage powers to strengthen and support his position, has 'pursued a highly personalised approach to government appointments, particularly departmental secretaries and diplomatic appointments' (Tiernan 2006, 25). He too has been accused by his political opponents of providing 'jobs for the boys and girls'.⁷

Whilst the two leaders have had their patronage appointments criticised, a divergent level of constraint has developed in the UK. Some powers of patronage for the British prime minister have been reined in with several new bodies now increasingly involved in public appointments.⁸ This process is without parallel in Australia (where cabinet still has the final say on most major public appointments) and is likely only to accelerate in the UK in the wake of controversy surrounding party donations and peerages.

Although ill-defined and often latent, prerogatives and conventions place the prime minister in a 'structurally advantageous' position within the core executive (Smith 1999). Placed at the very top of the most important institutional hierarchy (Heffernan

⁷ The ALP unsurprisingly used the 'jobs for the boys and girls' claim as a campaigning tool in the 2004 election, suggesting that 'the Howard government's record of more than 120 appointments over eight and a half years is well beyond acceptable community standards' (ALP 2004).

⁸ These bodies are the Commissioner for Public Appointments, House of Lords Appointments Commission, and Judicial Appointments Commission.

2003), the prime minister can shape the government with legal authority derived from the crown.

Controlling and strengthening the centre

Prime ministers require structural support, of a bureaucratic and political nature. The growth of administrative and policy capacity directly answerable to the prime minister has been evident under Blair and Howard. Patronage enables a prime minister to surround him or herself with key political confidants, creating an institution of gatekeeping and dependency networks. The trick is then to establish and embed this institution over time.

Blair transferred his team in opposition into government creating powerful advisory positions for Alistair Campbell (Chief Press Secretary), Jonathan Powell (Chief of Staff), Sally Morgan (Political Secretary), Anji Hunter (Special Assistant) and David Milliband (Head of Policy) (Kavanagh and Seldon 2000). He has since created strong advisory positions in foreign affairs, strategic planning, and delivery, responsible directly to himself.⁹ The focus under Howard has less been on powerful individuals (like Campbell, Powell, or Mandelson) behind the prime minister, but on a coterie (or 'kitchen cabinet') of core confidants. Key individuals important to Howard have been Lynton Crosby (Director Liberal Party), Arthur Sinodinos (Chief of Staff), Tony Nutt (Private Secretary), and Tony O'Leary (Chief Press Officer). These individuals span most of Howard's period of office and have been an important source of continuity and

⁹ By 2003 some 27 advisers out of 81 who worked across all central government ministries in Whitehall were located in the Prime Minister's Office (Committee on Standards in Public Life 2003: in Heffernan and Webb 2005).

stability: a ring of advisers, all with the ear of the prime minister, protecting and defending their master.

The institutionalisation of this type of policy advice can be seen in the establishment of small policy units close the prime minister. Blair's policy advice units have been fluid, often disjointed and fragmented. The series of machinery of government changes made to the centre resulting in a 'department of prime minister in all but name' have been well documented (Burch and Holliday 2004; Hennessy 2000; Kavanagh and Seldon 2000).¹⁰ By his third term, the centre looked a little more coherent with a single strategy unit providing longer term policy advice to augment the policy directorate in Downing Street. Units and advisers still straddled the Cabinet Office and the Prime Minister's Office, but the arrangements became more embedded and policy advice more institutionalised without the creation of a formal prime ministerial department. The fluid nature suited Blair's style of operating in informal, small groups. However the exposure of this loose and unstructured style during the Hutton and Butler inquiries led to a tightening up of processes at the core. Blair was staunchly unapologetic about his commitment to a strong centre, and his emphasis on bilateral meetings with ministers.¹¹ This bilateralism reinforces the location of the prime minister at the centre of the core executive networks (Heffernan 2003, 360).¹²

¹⁰ 'There are now 190 staff in the Prime Minister's Office, compared to 130 in 1997, and more units in the Centre as a whole. At the same time, the Prime Minister's Office and Cabinet Office are more integrated and focused than before, with more staff working to the Prime Minister. The overall outcome is clearer lines of command and direction, and a strengthening of the position of the PM and his aides' (Burch and Holliday 2004, 12).

¹¹ See Liaison Committee 2002. In his first 25 months in office Tony Blair held a total of 783 meetings with individual ministers; over the same period John Major held 272 such sessions' (Kavanagh and Seldon 1999, 275).

¹² These spheres of contact with the dependent actors are well illustrated by Hennessy's circles of influence (see Hennessy 2000, 495-500).

In Australia the existence of a Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), established in 1971 and now expanded considerably (Yeend 1979; Weller 1993; Jaensch 1997), has of course negated the need to create even a virtual one! The head of PM&C (most notably Max Moore-Wilton, prior to the present Secretary Peter Shergold) proved to be a key figure, not only driving forward an energetic Public Service reform agenda, but providing key bureaucratic support to Howard (see Davis and Rhodes in Keating et al 2000). Increasingly policy is driven from this department. Taskforces are run from PM&C on a range of, mainly sensitive issues, so the prime minister and his department take the lead (for example on nuclear power, energy, and export infrastructure). Greater resources supporting the prime minister do not however necessarily mean better or more effective institutional capacity. Howard felt the need to establish a Cabinet Policy Unit (CPU) located firmly in the core of the core executive, soon after his election in 1996. This small unit has performed a pivotal role for Howard during his premiership, often acting as a key power broker between the prime minister and departments and as a key gatekeeper. The first head of the unit was a close Howard confidant, Michael L'Estrange, who also assumed the role of Cabinet Secretary, thereby splitting the traditional roles of Cabinet Secretary between a political appointee and a public servant. Essentially the Cabinet Policy Unit is a political unit placed at the heart of government, outside the jurisdiction of the Australian Public Service but under the *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1998*. It was initially located in PM&C, but now resides in the Prime Minister's Office. Staff are appointed by the prime minister and accountable directly to him (PM&C Annual Report 2000-01). Under its second head, Sydney businessman Paul McClintock, the unit took

on a strategic role driving forward whole-of-government initiatives and playing a greater coordinating role (Howard 2002). Ultimately the unit, which plans the agenda, lists the items and writes up cabinet decisions, is under the authority of Howard's Chief of Staff, Sinodinis (Kelly 2006).

The focus on whole-of-government policy and related delivery of centralised objectives are common themes to both governments. Howard issues a detailed Charter Letter to each minister setting out what the prime minister expects from the minister. The letter 'clarifies the government's main priorities, what it intends to achieve, how the department concerned fits into the agenda, and indicates any specific requirements for each portfolio' (Wanna 2007). Howard's Charter Letters are an established method of setting out his agenda, and latterly promoting a whole of government approach, which can then be implemented. Institutionally this has seen the establishment of the Cabinet Implementation Unit (CIU) under Howard. Howard recently spoke of the new unit.

The introduction of a Cabinet Implementation Unit which is designed in a systematic way to ensure that decisions once taken with great fanfare are not then forgotten and lose their lustre through lack of vigorous detailed implementation, so far has proved to be a valuable addition to my understanding of progress, and also that of Ministers and I think the initiative which has worked well, is one that is certainly here to stay (Howard 2005).

The establishment of the CIU in 2003 drew heavily on Blair's model of a Cabinet Delivery Unit focused on implementation, planning and review to ensure that decisions taken are followed through. Wanna acknowledges that such bodies, located in central government, may be part of a global trend, but the Australian model is different by design. Shergold rejected the Blair government's emphasis on measurable targets and chose to adopt a more collaborative approach to implementation review. The CIU is based in Shergold's own department and is run by public servants not political advisers. The CIU is not a political unit, as with the UK, but it can, according to Wanna, be seen as part of an evolving consolidation and institutionalisation of the cabinet process (Wanna 2006).

Despite having a dedicated department at his disposal, Howard's own office has continued to grow in size, following the trend set by his predecessors¹³. James Walter wrote in the 1980s that the institutionalisation of ministerial staffing was 'serving as another mechanism to assure prime ministerial preeminence', and the continued growth of the office since that time lends weight to this assessment (Holland 2002, 10). Staff numbers in Howard's office had grown to forty-one by May 2006. Of these twenty-eight were classified as advisers.¹⁴

¹³ Whitlam's office employed 21 staff, while Fraser's office had 23, despite his overall reduction in the number of ministerial staff. Hawke's office ranged from 16 shortly after the election that brought Labor to power, up to 24 by 1990. Under Keating the office had 30 staff, while under Howard it grew to 37, although Howard's ministry had only a marginally larger staff profile overall (Holland 2002).

¹⁴ Of these 41.3 staff Howard has 2 principal advisers, 3 senior advisers (PM), 7 senior advisers (Cabinet), 1 media adviser (Cabinet), 7 advisers, 8 assistant advisers, 7 EAOM, 6.3 secretaries (Senate Estimates 1 May 2006).

The focus on process, exemplified by Blair's 'command and control' structure at the centre (Hennessy 2000), can be matched by the focus on Howard's use of ministerial advisers. With a weak opposition and a distant parliament the Howard Ministry has accelerated the role of advisers providing a wedge between the inner cabinet, the public service and the legislature (this dislocation whereby ministers and the prime minister receive politicised advice has characterised the Howard government and came to a head in the 'children overboard affair'¹⁵. Weller (2002) termed ministerial advisers the politically dispensable, 'junkyard dogs' of the political system, convenient scapegoats who will take the bullet for their ministers and protect them from political fallout (Walter 2004; 2006). Since 'children overboard', calls for greater accountability and professionalisation of ministerial staff have been resisted (the UK adopted a code of conduct for special advisers in 2005). Indeed the trend under Howard has been away from greater transparency with even the names of ministerial advisers now removed from all publicly available lists (Walter 2006).¹⁶

An important structural point of difference has Australian ministers based, not in their department like British counterparts, but in their own parliamentary offices. This produces a clear divide between the political office (containing advisers, department liaison officers, and personal staff) and the bureaucracy. British ministers can be

¹⁵ The Children Overboard Affair was an Australian political scandal which arose in 2001 when the government claimed that 'a number of children had been thrown overboard' from a 'suspected illegal entry vessel' (or SIEV) which had been intercepted by HMAS Adelaide off Christmas Island. A subsequent inquiry by a Senate committee found that not only was the claim untrue, but that the government knew the claim to be untrue before the Federal elections, which were held one month later. See Weller 2002 and Keating 2003 for further details of the incident and the political fallout.

¹⁶ Tiernan (2006) puts the number of ministerial staffers under Howard at 384 in May 2005, up from 294 in May 1996. Under Blair the total number of special advisors rose from 38 in 1997 to 78 in 2005 (House of Commons Library 2005).

regarded as suffering from 'departmentalism' and 'remain like medieval barons presiding over their own policy territory' (Norton cited in Bevir and Rhodes 2006). Both employ an increasing number of ministerial staff location matters, but Australian departmental secretaries need to actively visit their ministers, while UK permanent secretaries are close at hand. Of course depending on your view, in Australia distance from the minister can either enhance civil service ability to give 'frank and fearless' advice or put ministers at the mercy of politicised advice. The lack of equivalent collegiality in the UK may be partly ascribed to the tradition of departmentalism that locates UK ministers firmly within their portfolio silos.

Managing collegiate resources: the cabinet

The weaknesses of cabinet are well established: too little time, too much information, too many busy people (Kavanagh and Seldon 2000, 321). Measured by frequency of meetings and papers received, the cabinet as a set of arrangements (Weller 2003) has steadily declined over time in the UK.¹⁷ Former Cabinet Secretary Lord Butler described Blair's approach to cabinet as reverting to the 18th century, when advisers would group around the monarch. It is perhaps more modelled on Thatcher, who took an apologetically strong approach to managing her cabinet business. She entered office promising not to waste time on internal arguments, and making it plain that she

¹⁷ During the late 1940s cabinet met for an average of 87 times a year with 340 papers being formally circulated in the 1970s, 60 times a year with 140 papers and by the 1990s no more than 40 times a year with only 20 papers (Lord Butler in the Times, 22 February 1999 in Heffernan 2003, 359). This trend has continued under Blair. From 1990 to 1997 John Major chaired 271 cabinets and 189 cabinet committees and had 911 recorded meetings with individual ministers. In his first two years Blair chaired 86 cabinets and 178 cabinet committees and had 783 meetings with individual ministers (Kavanagh and Seldon 2000, 286).

did not want cabinet by committee but government by herself in concert with selected ministers, brought together semi-informally (Young 1989). Formal cabinet under Blair in the first two terms tended to be a short, informal meeting to discuss the business of the day, involving stock-takes and lasting no more than forty minutes (Butler 2004b).¹⁸ Whether a weberian 'ideal type' of cabinet is desirable is open to question: 'If the principles of cabinet government were applied to the letter, the system would not merely be grossly inefficient, but truly not viable' (Blondel in Andeweg 1997, 64). Under Blair and certainly up to 2003, it had essentially been a political tool for avoiding conflict, and ensuring stability and cohesion within a single party setting.

Cabinet as defined narrowly as the weekly meeting of ministers can be both a source of strength and weakness for a prime minister. If debate, discussion and decision-making are absent, political battles will necessarily be played out in other forums and the propensity for disputes to spill out into the public arena is enhanced. The fallout from the Iraq war (and specifically the resignations of two cabinet ministers Robin Cook and Clare Short) meant cabinet assumed a more adversarial nature and consequently meetings lengthened as Blair's predominance waned. Recent cabinet disagreements over a full smoking ban (*Guardian* 27 October 2005), and education policy (*Sunday Telegraph* 18 December 2005) have exposed Blair's leadership to even greater scrutiny. With cabinet a product of the prime minister's style, the announcement that he will leave office before the next election was assumed to have

¹⁸ Michael Cockerell's (2001) illuminating BBC documentary *Cabinet Confidential* exposed the style of Blair's cabinet management.

eroded his authority even further.¹⁹ In May 2006, following the cabinet reshuffle, he issued letters to each Secretary of State outlining the government's agenda and the priority areas for each department. In contrast to Howard's Charter Letters, Blair published these letters and the ministerial replies on the Number 10 website. They were widely perceived as an attempt to claw back dwindling authority and publicly reassert his position, rather than establish a clear new process of central agenda setting on which departments would be judged. Furthermore Blair's attempt to leave his mark on government by establishing six policy groups (*Pathways to the Future*) almost fell when cabinet opposed him, only to back down after feeling the effects of his triumphant final party conference speech in October 2006.

Beyond the full cabinet there is however a vast and sprawling system of networks, committees and taskforces where most work is undertaken. Outside formal cabinet meetings Blair presides over an extensive committee structure which he dips in and out of, chairing fourteen of them himself.²⁰ In May 2005, Blair announced that the number of Committees would be streamlined (reducing the total from 61 to 44) with the expressed desire to give the committee system greater centrality and to reflect his own priorities.²¹ Cabinet committees enable non-cabinet ministers and officials to be involved in policy discussions: 'a passport to involvement' (Dunleavy 2003, 344). However, clearly some have much more importance than others. Dunleavy's study (2003) of cabinet committees showed the extent to which Blair conceded a greater

¹⁹ Blair gave an interview to the BBC's Andrew Marr, on the eve of the Labour Party's 2004 Annual Conference, in which he stated that he would serve a full third term if elected, but then stand down (bbc.co.uk accessed 16 Jan 2005).

²⁰ See Catterall and Brady in Rhodes 2000 on the development of Cabinet Committees in Britain.

²¹ Subsequently two more were added in Dec 2005 (PM press release 15 Dec 2005).

role on domestic affairs to his Chancellor than his predecessor (Dunleavy 2003, 351). The more hands-on approach by Blair to committees after the 2005 election redressed this somewhat (although it is evident that 'policy fiefdoms' were clearly divided between Blair and Brown (Hennessy 2005, 10)). It remains the case that the bulk of Blair and Brown's duopoly business is conducted through bilateral meetings. Any partial return to the use of Cabinet committees was subscribed to Deputy Prime Minister Prescott's keenness on them (Hennessy 2005, 10). Since the Hutton Inquiry exposed the ad hoc nature of Blair's informal style of government (the so called 'sofa approach'), with little formality and no recorded minutes, there has been much more minute taking (Butler 2004a; Hennessy 2005). Despite the institutionally complex system of formal committees at his disposal, Blair is still keen on the informal.²² Avoiding internal cabinet fallout and the power struggles that dogged the Major government has always been a priority, yet this served to stifle and homogenise collegiality in the largely subservient cabinet of the first two terms. As authority and control ebbed away post-Iraq, opposition within (and without) the cabinet was evident. Former senior cabinet ministers (such as Charles Clarke and David Blunkett) were only too happy to launch into print to describe cabinet internal differences.

Cabinet in Australia reflects the more institutional and collegiate approach evident in Australian political culture, though it has not received the same level of analysis as its British counterpart.²³ Big issues (such as military action in Iraq) are discussed at

²² Blair is on record as saying he expects to hear of any minister's concerns well before formal meetings (Liaison Committee 2002; Cockerell 2001).

²³ Work on the Australian core executive is sparse, although some material specifically on the Cabinet (Encel 1972; Weller 2007) deals with the institutional approach in much the same way as Burch and Holliday (1996). It is worth noting that the Department of Prime Minister and

length and over time and rugged debate is expected (Weller 2003).²⁴ Howard is a cabinet traditionalist and likes to use cabinet meetings as a sounding board, to test the public line on salient issues of the day, act as a pressure valve, and to bind colleagues into the party line (Tiernan 2006).²⁵ According to one senior source, the difficulties Blair faced in cabinet over Iraq (whereby cabinet differences were played out publicly) and the decision to have a referendum on the EU Constitution (the then Foreign Secretary Jack Straw admitted that the decision to have a referendum overturning previous policy had not been discussed formally in cabinet (*The Guardian* 20 April 2004)) could not happen under Howard.²⁶

Until procedures were streamlined in April 2002, allowing more time for strategic discussions, formal submissions to cabinet were long, detailed and tended to occupy most of the discussion time.²⁷ Howard was keen to avoid the style of cabinet management of his Liberal predecessor Malcolm Fraser. Fraser demanded that cabinet discuss and decide on every significant issue, the process became cumbersome; meetings were long and the workload huge. Ministers, under Fraser complained that the cost of his zealous adherence to collective cabinet decision-

Cabinet (PMC) does provide greater access and transparency than the UK Cabinet Office and Number 10. PMC's development and historical role is covered by Yeend (1979) writing as head of the department at the time. PMC publishes the *Cabinet Handbook* which is a comprehensive catalogue of the principles and conventions which govern the mechanics of the cabinet system in Australia.

²⁴ PM&C Annual reports the cabinet secretariat supported 57 cabinet meetings (including NSC and committee meetings) in 04-05. This compares with 120 in 97-98 and the high point of 141 in 99-00. Since the streamlining in 01-02 of cabinet submission which reduced full cabinet handling of many submissions, meetings have stayed constant at between 57 and 67 per year (PM&C Annual Reports).

²⁵ Private information, confidential interview 7 January 2004.

²⁶ Private Information, confidential interview 10 May 2004.

²⁷ Private information, confidential interviews 7 January 2004, 28 November 2006; see Howard 2002 background notes on cabinet procedures regarding move towards more a more strategic cabinet system.

making created 'government by exhaustion' (Weller 1989, 145). Howard himself had been part of Fraser's cabinet and came to office with a clear picture of how he wanted to manage it.

Cabinet support for Howard is organised, formal and important. It remains at the central apex of government. It has been streamlined and the committee structure is lean and focused.²⁸ Howard himself chairs four of the five cabinet committees including the key Expenditure Review Committee (ERC). Howard's role in budget formation is interesting to contrast with Blair's minimal role in financial matters. Howard is involved right at the start of the process in the senior ministers review (PM, Deputy PM, Treasurer and Minister of Finance only), which sets the framework on what the overall size of the budget is to be, what the emphases are to be, and what can be brought forward into the ERC.²⁹ The National Security Committee (NSC) has grown to rival the ERC as the most important cabinet committee. Howard regards the NSC (comprising of the six most senior ministers and the key agency heads) as 'one of the very significant successes' of his government in terms of governance arrangements (Howard 2005). Others have suggested that the NSC has been part of the trend of power centralising around the prime minister, consolidating his position as the unrivalled source of power and authority for national security policy making.³⁰ This cabinet system looks more like a collegial system, one where ministers are involved

²⁸ 'His [Howard's] new blueprint for government and especially cabinet is not likely to be ditched by his successors – Labor or Liberal – because it works too well. It minimises the opportunities for damaging differences, time consuming discussions between ministers, and leaks' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 16 August 2005).

²⁹ Private information, confidential interview 28 November 2006.

³⁰ Peter Jennings, Australia Strategic Policy Institute quoted in *The Australian* 'More Power to the PM' 29 October 2005.

and feel ownership of the process, though crucially are not permitted to develop a powerbase. Leaks are rare (although those that have occurred inevitably focused on the Howard-Costello relationship) and differences played out behind closed doors.³¹ The institution has been stretched to provide Howard with the authority of cabinet collectivity, new centres of power have arisen within the network (NSC and CPU) to increase capacity within the structure.

Importantly, Howard must work with a coalition partner in cabinet, and while the Nationals and Liberals have generally had a trouble-free relationship, events (sparked by the defection of Senator McGauran to the Liberals in January 2006) show the potential for dislocation between the two parties. In addition, in choosing his cabinet, Howard has needed to balance the usual political demands with those of state representation. (The disproportionate number of Scottish cabinet ministers over time suggests that regional balance has not been an issue for Blair!)

This power to appoint cabinet ministers is again a source of strength and weakness. The power of Brown to set the tone for all ministerial appointments to be considered as either Brownite or Blairite demonstrates the level of duopoly in the relationship. Blair may have the formal power to appoint, but he has a strong political constraint in the shape of his powerful chancellor. His reshuffles over the years have proved less than successful (the worst example being the June 2003 reshuffle that abolished the post of Lord Chancellor and gave birth to the Department for Constitutional Affairs), as he has tried to instigate machinery of government changes at the same time as

³¹ See *Australian Financial Review* 6 June 2005 on Singapore Airlines.

balancing personnel matters.³² Blair has lost key confidants from his cabinet (Mandelson twice, Blunkett twice, Byers, and Milburn), while Brown has remained along with Prescott (as the link to the party) and Beckett as the only survivors from his first cabinet. Indeed the strength of Brown and his obvious role as heir apparent is widely used as the key argument against the presidential narrative. Discussion of the personal relationship is well covered elsewhere (Seldon 2004, Naughtie 2001, Peston 2005, Rawnsley 2001). Bevir and Rhodes describe the relationship as one characterised by the 'court politics of the British executive', with the two major players battling over the political space, Brown having commanding the domestic, forcing Blair to focus overseas matters (Bevir and Rhodes 2006). According to this analysis of Blair and Brown, power is not concentrated in prime minister or chancellor, but contested and contingent. But power now lies beyond Westminster and Whitehall as Bevir and Rhodes acknowledge. The prime minister is in a unique position, with a resources advantage over court rivals and opponents. By reaching out directly to voters, Blair has attempted to transcend the frustrating constraints of office. When rivals do this they instantly become destabilising forces.

Howard has similarly maintained his faith in his Treasurer Costello as the heir apparent. The other constant cabinet ministers have been Downer (who has remained as Foreign Minister for the duration) and Ruddock. Howard's reshuffles have been fewer in number and more considered than Blair's (the most recent reshuffle sparking tension with the Nationals is an unusual departure for Howard). They have tended not

³² Seldon 2005 notes that Blair tends to leave reshuffle decisions to the last minute and consult only a very small number of trusted advisers, again borne out by the extensive post local election reshuffle in May 2006.

to be accompanied by large machinery of government changes. There is a smaller pool of aspirants to choose from, and mindful of the 1997 resignations, Howard has shown a marked reluctance to lose ministerial colleagues during his tenure.³³ Yet the relatively few survivors from his first cabinet demonstrates that Howard has found other ways to move colleagues on, and renew his team without damaging resignations.

Agenda-setting through the news media and party control

For Hennessy (2000, 483) and others (Riddell 2000) the intersection between media management and Whitehall came with the publication of the new *Ministerial Code Of Conduct* in 1997 and in particular the contentious *paragraph 88*.

In order to ensure the effective presentation of government policy, all major interviews and media appearances, both print and broadcast, should be agreed with the No 10 Press Office before any commitments are entered into. The policy content of all major speeches, press releases and new policy initiatives should be cleared in good time with the No10 Private Office, the timing and form of announcements should be cleared with the No 10 Press Office.³⁴

For many traditionalists, like Riddell, this represented 'the biggest centralisation of power seen in Whitehall in peacetime' (Hennessy 2000, 484). Arguably, however it was merely the transference of the strict command and control system of media

³³ His 'aversion to the removal of ministers' is said to relate to the 1997 so called 'travel rorts' scandal, when five frontbenchers and two staffers resigned over fraud allegations (Age 2005).

³⁴ The Ministerial Code replaced the *Questions of Ministerial Procedure*. See Baker 2000 for a full discussion of the genesis of the Code and the code itself.

management that had been conceived and put into practice in opposition by *New Labour*. Structural changes were swiftly implemented, with the creation of the Strategic Communications Unit (SCU) in Downing Street, accountable to the prime minister through the Chief Press Secretary, Alistair Campbell. The SCU replicated the Millbank system of strong central coordination and key headline messages that the *New Labour* elite had been familiar with in opposition (Kavanagh and Seldon 2000, 255). The focus on media relations translated into a big rise in the number of staff employed in the Press Office and SCU (Hennessy 2000, 485). The operations were designed to be highly efficient in both reactive and proactive relations with the media, being able to respond and set the agenda from the centre.³⁵ Although the obsession with 'spin' may have lessened over time and post Hutton, media management has now stretched the institutional mechanisms to the extent that communication strategy is an embedded function of the Blair government.

Institutionalised media management capacity is not as extensive and pervasive under Howard. However the media unit in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) is 'the largest ever assembled by an Australian prime minister'.³⁶ Whilst Howard has not employed a direct equivalent of the high profile Campbell with his powers to instruct civil servants, Tony O'Leary the most obvious (though little known) counterpart centrally coordinates the activities of thirty-four media staff serving the Ministry. Yet a comparison with the media management and response capacity developed under Blair, needs to predate the Howard era. The National Media Liaison Service (NMLS),

³⁵ For detailed information on the process see Kavanagh and Seldon 2000, 254-261, particular details of 'the Grid'.

³⁶ The Media Unit has a staff of eight, comprising a press secretary, a senior media advisor, a media advisor, an assistant media advisor, and four media assistants (Tiernan 2006, 17).

established in 1983 under the Hawke administration and then providing support to the Keating premiership, can be seen as the blueprint for the *New Labour* approach to centralised media operations. It monitored media from all sources around Australia and produced detailed briefings for ministers and parliamentarians efficiently and effectively (Holland 2002). Howard and the Liberals campaigned against the NMLS in opposition and disbanded it on entering office, outsourcing media monitoring (Barns 2005). The need for a similar coordinated and centrally directed unit has seen the Government Members Secretariat (GMS) grow in prominence under Howard. The unit channels government messages to parliamentarians reinforcing discipline and coherence. This helps to bind the parliamentary party together with the executive. Similarities are evident in the desire to coordinate messages, set the agenda and homogenise government pronouncements. Blair and Howard operate in different media climates. For Blair the relationship with the key print media titles (and their proprietors) is crucial, for Howard cultivating the regionalised print media is not so important, but his relationship with talkback radio has grown to define his media strategy in reaching beyond the Canberra press gallery.³⁷

Under Howard, the party in power *is* regarded as the government. With a smaller parliamentary party, discipline is important and with disputes confined to the party room, backbenchers have an important role in selling government policy.³⁸ The machinery is limited in its reach to the states, although the administration has placed a media officer in each of six ministerial offices, one in each state to coordinate and disseminate whole-of-government strategy (Holland 2002, 33).

³⁷ See Grattan (2005) for a full discussion of Howard's relationship with the Australian media.

³⁸ Private Information, confidential interview 20 January 2006.

Prime ministers in the UK and Australia are both products of their parties. The relationship with the party is crucial (Poguntke and Webb 2005) to understanding the ability and capacity of prime ministers to 'stretch institutions' and manage limitations and political constraints. Blair's party reforms established *New Labour* as an efficient, uncompromising election winning machine. The *New Labour* project was conceived in opposition and born of three successive election defeats. Discipline, subjugation to a charismatic leader, and constant adherence to the central message characterised the party reforms. It placed the two protagonists Blair and Brown in unassailable charge of the party in the pursuit and maintenance of power in office.³⁹ Blair's leadership was essential for the *New Labour* project according to the architects Mandelson and Little, and his personality in creating an unapologetically strong centre was crucial.

'Like Mrs Thatcher, Tony Blair has a clear idea of what he wants, he is impatient when others do not have the courage or imagination to go along with him, and he does not let up once he has resolved on a way forward'
(Mandelson and Little 1996, 238)

Blair has little direct accountability to the Labour party. Meetings of the backbench Parliamentary Labour Party are generally treated with disdain, and Blair has had little time for traditional Labour party structures (annual conference has been downgraded, decisions are routinely ignored and the ruling executive committee neutered). The consequence of this approach was supposed to lead to a greater strengthening of the leadership, and an elimination of the possibility of a Labour government suffering at the hands of its members. However, the weakening of party ties has dislocated Blair

³⁹ See Rawnsley (2001) and Naughtie (2001) for journalistic accounts of the Blair-Brown relationship.

from the party and a falling parliamentary majority has now made Blair more vulnerable to defeat in the House of Commons (Cowley 2005).

The comparative angle here has much to do with numbers. The Labour Party has 353 MPs currently and a majority of 65 out of a legislature of 646. The Coalition by contrast has 74 Liberal MPs and 12 National Party MPs out of 150 member lower house. Howard governs with a majority of 22 and until 2004 did not command a majority in the Senate. Discipline, under Howard, is therefore very important, MPs very rarely cross the floor to vote with the opposition. Any differences are thrashed out in the party room, which has consequently become an influential point of contact for Liberal MPs. It has even been known for decisions made in cabinet to be overturned after frank party room discussion. The parliamentary Liberal Party as with the ALP, has the power to elect its leader, whereas now all the main parties in the UK involve the wider party membership in leadership elections. (Although if Blair were unable to sustain the support of the Parliamentary Labour Party, he would find it almost impossible to remain in office, even though the leader is now effectively protected from challenges⁴⁰.) The impact of the party room means that Howard is 'less likely to run a one-man band' (Weller 2004, 639). Whilst the party is an important player, it is worth noting that parliament is in session for less than 100 days per year, while cabinet is constantly in session (Jaensch 1997, 167).

⁴⁰ The Labour Party's electoral college system for electing its leaders is marked by high entry costs (the high nomination thresholds, challengers must join in the first round, and MPs nomination and voting records are made public), which protect the incumbent from anything but the most serious of challenges (Quinn 2004, 139). Quinn argues that intra-party democratisation in the Labour Party has paradoxically increased leadership autonomy (Quinn 2004, 142).

Strong party discipline and a capacity to absorb the lessons of a long period in opposition have characterised both periods of office. Yet as Blair and Howard inevitably both approach the end of their tenures, cracks have appeared amid the political jockeying for position. Importantly the inheritors of the mantle will be faced with enhanced prime ministerial capacity and stretched institutions as the next prime minister builds on the legacy of the predecessor.

Conclusion

Predominance is defined by a combination of the use of personal and institutional resources. This article has considered the institutional capacity maintained and generated under Blair and Howard. These formal powers have been 'stretched' by the incumbents. In two political systems characterised by convention and tradition, the capacity to push the boundaries is enhanced. Constraints exist and have arisen over time (lack of Senate control, rebellious Labour backbenchers), but the ability to create new institutions (policy, delivery and media units) and shape existing ones (via patronage), with an array of advisers at the prime minister's disposal, has enhanced formal capacity. Incumbency, the formal authority derived from successive electoral victories, and weak political opposition are powerful determinants, common to both Blair and Howard.

Important points of difference do help us to understand how and why prime ministers act as they do. Institutionally the Australian prime minister is constrained by the federal structure and the need to negotiate with the states (which since 2002 have all been ALP controlled), accommodation of a coalition partner in government, and

accountability to the party room. These constraints have not encumbered Howard in constructing a powerful centre based on cabinet cohesion, stable and concentrated advice structures, and increased personal capacity. The existing institution of cabinet is the bedrock that has been stretched and shaped to reinforce a less charismatic but equally unyielding leader. The tradition of cabinet collegiality is a part of the Australian political culture, whereas the function of collegial government has long been in decline in Britain (if it ever existed). It is elsewhere that we find the institutional stretch under Blair. It is located more in the informal networks of decision-making, the fluidity of the centre, and the power of the duopoly with Brown which has created two distinct institutional clusters.

Within the institutional setting we can identify common trends, tighter and more responsive advice structures, centrally located media functions, patronage and dependency networks. All these add to prime ministerial capacity. These trends are not explained merely by more autocratic leadership styles and incumbency factors. The internationalisation of politics (especially since 11 September 2001), and the growth and complexity of the state (a fragmented state needs greater strategic coordination from the centre) have a causal role in explaining intra-executive predominance (see Poguntke and Webb 2005). In the face of this changed political climate, institutions have been stretched and moulded to fit a contemporary dynamic.

Predominance can of course ebb and flow and in looking at the comparative experiences of Blair and Howard we see that the institutional capacity of Howard has been embedded over time with a supporting department which gives the Australian

prime minister enormous power. Blair, by contrast, has meddled with the institutions, yet his agency has been continually frustrated. All prime ministers are contingent on a range of factors as the faltering of Blair's premiership towards the end shows. Prime ministers may be contingent on colleagues and other actors, but they are also contingent on the institutions at the core, and how far they can stretch them to accommodate determines continued predominance.

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