

Coalition government has created a new balance of power at the centre of UK government (but that shouldn't be a surprise)

Passing the first 100 days mark suggests to [Andrew Blick](#) and [George Jones](#) that the coalition government has begun to revive some earlier historical precedents in Cabinet government. Unlike his immediate predecessors, Gordon Brown and Tony Blair, because of the inclusion of Liberal Democrats ministers David Cameron has had to share power and work closely with his cabinet and the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, with major consequences for the role of 10 Downing Street.

The Prime Minister as a post has always been filled by one person, but the premiership as an institution has always been exercised by a group. Its fundamental role is to provide public leadership, which involves

- (a) giving strategic direction (setting the tone of government) and
- (b) making urgent responses to events, responses that other institutions and procedures on their own cannot, and giving government a public face.

Alterations in how these roles are allocated have tended to reflect two patterns of changes at No.10: 'zigzags' and 'institutional fusions and fissions'.

'Zigzags' are radical changes of style in the way the premiership operates following a handover from one Prime Minister to another, especially a transition from a more to a less domineering premier, or vice versa. Not every transition from one Prime Minister to another creates a zigzag, but it is still a frequent occurrence. Cases where a more assertive PM and No.10 were replaced by a less assertive one include Winston Churchill giving way to Clement Attlee in 1945, and Margaret Thatcher to John Major in 1990. Movements in the opposite direction can also be marked, for example, in the transition from John Major to Tony Blair in 1997.

Institutional fusions and fissions involve either adding to or splitting up the cluster of rights and people performing functions, centred on the individual who is Prime Minister. Notable occasions when new roles moved into the ambit of the premiership, include the PM obtaining the sole right to request a dissolution of Parliament in 1918; and the major surge in staff numbers that occurred under Tony Blair. When Blair succeeded John Major in 1997, the number of staff directly serving the premiership was in the low hundreds; by 2005-6 the figure had risen to 782 staff. Though the total has dropped subsequently, it remains historically high. The longer the premiership is supported by staff on this scale, and possessing the direct policy roles that were taken on from 1997, the more clearly the Blair period will clearly represent the beginning of a new phase for the office of the UK Prime Minister, rather than just an expansionist 'blip'.

The most important occurrence of fission, when roles moved out of the PM's orbit, came during the mid-nineteenth century when prime ministers ceased to exercise direct control over the Treasury. After the 1840s also the premiership moved away from being a departmental entity with specific roles and responsibilities, and a relatively large staff, towards having a more vaguely defined coordinating role, supported by only a small team of aides. From 2010 onwards David Cameron's Number 10 has also had to share functions with Nick Clegg that previous premiers exercised on their own, although there have been several experiences of coalition before, as we discuss below.

Ministerial roles across coalitions

One of the key rights long possessed by the PM and No.10 has been to nominate people for ministerial posts, and to remove them. Yet in a coalition there is greater than normal pressure to share this power. The tying of the hands of a coalition Prime Minister over the composition of the government applies to David Cameron, and in some senses has



been made stronger since it is set out in a published document, the [Coalition Agreement for Stability and Reform](#), published in May 2010. The appointment right previously possessed solely by the Prime Minister is now formally shared with another member of the government, the Liberal Democrat Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg. Though this power was always exercised by No.10 subject to political realities and constraints, the current shift is more definite, and has been formally defined.



Image Credit: The Cabinet Office

The fission does not end there as Cabinet Committees are appointed by the Prime Minister, with the agreement of the Deputy Prime Minister. In the present coalition, Chairmanship of the Home Affairs committee has been taken on by Clegg, which he explained to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (PCRC) in the House of Commons 'covers the broad waterfront of domestic policy'.

As well as a shift in the substance of the premiership, there is evidence of a change of style, perhaps even amounting to a case of the 'zigzag' phenomenon. Under Tony Blair, and then Gordon Brown, No.10 was not disposed to function in a collegiate fashion and utilise Cabinet, although the ability of Brown to override other ministers was to some extent compromised by his often weakened political circumstances. The Cameron No.10 will probably be obliged by the circumstances of coalition to operate differently, perhaps following the example of the exceptionally conciliatory Aberdeen. The experience of the Cameron premiership so far is already demonstrating that Cabinet is not the redundant historical anachronism as most scholars and commentators have regularly suggested. Instead it is potentially vital to the functioning of a government, particularly a coalition.

The existence of a coalition places a premium on the need to involve ministers from both parties in important decisions, if the government is to be internally cohesive and present a united public face. Collective responsibility also ensures that both parties are bound into the taking of unpopular decisions, particular over cuts in public expenditure. Sharing the power can mean sharing the blame.

Party realignments

Coalitions often come about at times when the party system is reconfiguring. The cause and effect flows here are difficult to disaggregate. The coalition exists solely because of Cameron's failure to win an overall majority in the Commons. If an agreement cannot be reached between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, for instance over how to campaign in the May 2011 referendum on adopting the AV electoral system, then there is an allowance to 'explicitly set aside' collective responsibility. [The Commons arithmetic is relatively comfortable at present for the government](#). But recent reforms mean that the timetable of Commons' business and the work of select committees may be harder for the government to control through the whips. However, it is worth noting that unlike previous coalitions, the current government has a single unified whipping system, rather than two separate systems.

However the various interactions are handled, the power of the Cameron premiership should be judged by how far he achieves his objectives. Cameron seems to be a highly pragmatic politician, making it hard to assess what are his underlying goals. Perhaps the best mark of success for the coalition government from Cameron's point of view would be for the Conservatives to win enough seats at the next general election (under whatever electoral system is in place) for him to be no longer dependent upon the Liberal Democrats in order to hold office.

But like Tony Blair before him, Cameron may be envisaging instead the forging of a new party, this time from a merger of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, rather than Labour and Liberal Democrats, as Blair contemplated. If Cameron were to take this option and seek such an amalgamation, he would be doing so from a stronger position than Lloyd George, who tried and failed to achieve such a change in the 1920s. A merger would probably be regarded more as a takeover of the Liberal Democrats by the Conservatives.

At present the coalition seems to be a genuinely bipartisan entity. If after 2015 or an earlier general election Cameron no longer needs Liberal Democrat support in the Commons, it is conceivable he might still choose to offer ministerial posts to certain Liberal Democrats, to widen the appeal of his Government in the country, claiming to representing the 'national interest'. There are several examples of this in the early part of the last

century.

In modern British history the establishment of many coalitions not strictly required by the Commons arithmetic suggests they have various attractions, and they can be made to work. Their viability is demonstrated by their frequent existence in pre-Second World War history at the UK level; in many other countries abroad, including most of western Europe; in local government in the UK; and at the devolved levels in Northern Ireland, Scotland (before 2007) and Wales. And they do not automatically make for a power-less Prime Minister.

Prime Ministerial Power

Other observers often claim variously that the premiership is becoming ever larger, ever more presidential, ever less collegiate, ever more powerful over time; or alternatively ever more overloaded, and ever less powerful over time. However, we find no such inevitable progressions. The premiership is like an elastic band that can be stretched to accommodate an assertive prime minister and relaxed for a less dominant figure. While there have been changes to the structure of the premiership, comprising the framework over which this elastic is stretched, there has always been some degree of flexibility. The premiership's role has fluctuated: at times dominant and at others less assertive, depending on contingent circumstances like the attitudes of ministerial colleagues, events, whether government policies are succeeding, the government's popularity, the party composition of the government, and the wishes of the prime ministers themselves. Above all the prime minister remains only as powerful as his or her cabinet colleagues let them be.

The power of No.10 is often portrayed as the ability to obtain the consent of others – getting them to agree to certain courses of action they would rather not adopt. Yet particularly within the executive, and in other arenas like Parliament, we argue that the best measure of power is whether particular policies once adopted achieve the objectives that were intended for them, whatever those objectives may be. This yardstick will apply to David Cameron's premiership as much as any other.

See also, Andrew Blick and George Jone's analysis in their 2010 paper for LSE Public Policy Group, [*The Centre of Central Government*](#).

and their book

[*Premiership: the development, nature and power of the office of the British Prime Minister*](#) (Imprint Academic, 2010).

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