

The Core Executive

The Political System of the United Kingdom

Intro

PM vs. Cabinet

Power Dependency

Conclusion



Current Events

- ▶ Former LibDem Leader Charles Kennedy dies aged 55
- ▶ Cameron's European tour/ECHR
- ▶ Child benefit conflict within Conservative party
- ▶ ...

Today: The Core Executive

- ▶ UK a parliamentary system
- ▶ Parliament dominated by government
- ▶ But government dominated by PM?
- ▶ Crossman (1963, 22-23): “We in England have a president as truly as the Americans” ?

Historical Development of the PM's role

- ▶ Office not created, rather evolved as consequence of sovereign's loss of power
- ▶ De facto control of parliament over finance after Glorious Revolution (1688)
- ▶ Lord Treasurer → Treasury Commission → "First Lord of the Treasury"



Robert Walpole, first PM

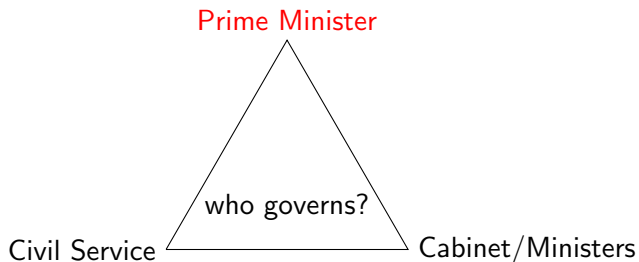
Historical Development of the PM's role

- ▶ (Georgian) Kings stopped attending cabinet meetings in early 18th century
→ Walpole (1720-42) as manager and chairman of cabinet, but denial
- ▶ Cabinet
+ PM government in the 19th century
- ▶ “Modern” PMs from the turn of the century (Parliament Act 1911)?

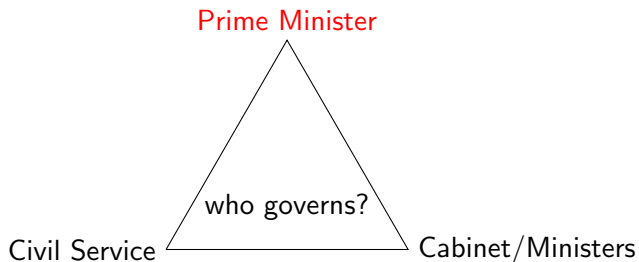


Robert Walpole, first PM

The Actors and the Question



The Actors and the Question



- ▶ No constitutional definition of the office(s)

The Prime Ministerial Thesis

- ▶ Academic discussion starts in the 1960s
- ▶ “Cabinet government in decline”
- ▶ “PM becomes focus of power”
- ▶ “Alien to the British constitution” – criticism from academics and politicians (insiders)
- ▶ “Strong” and “presidential” PMs?
 - ▶ Harold Wilson
 - ▶ Margaret Thatcher
 - ▶ Tony Blair



Harold Wilson (Lab), PM
1964-70, created Political Office at
No. 10, enlarged the Press Office

The Presidential Thesis

- ▶ Power within the central government increasingly concentrated in the office of PM?
- ▶ No. 10 a “Prime Ministers Department”?
- ▶ Institutional/constitutional changes under Blair (after 2001)
 - ▶ Short cabinet meetings
 - ▶ More resources, special advisers, tighter organisation at No. 10
 - ▶ Tighter control of civil service



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- ▶ Core of Presidential Thesis (linked to 2nd Blair term)
 1. Power-loss of cabinet & civil service
 2. PM: direct appeal to people and machinery
 3. PM: perceived to be above parties



PM vs. Cabinet: Criticism

- ▶ Presidentialism thesis ignores external constraints (e. g. EU, economy etc.)
- ▶ Focuses too much on (Blair's, Thatcher's) personality
- ▶ Highly selective (Thatcher ousted by her own cabinet, Blair a "lame duck" after Iraq and deal with Brown)
- ▶ Not really helpful in understanding what goes on within the core executive



The “Power Dependency Model”

- ▶ All actors in the triangle have control over resources
- ▶ To achieve their goals (and to do their job) they normally need to co-operate
- ▶ Personality may play a role, but it depends on external circumstances who gets what



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- ▶ So: Who has which resources?



Resources: PM

- ▶ Patronage – PM appoints MPs to government jobs
- ▶ Can restructure departments and administration; dismiss & re-appoint ministers
- ▶ Prime Minister's Office
- ▶ Bilateral co-operation and policy making with ministers
- ▶ Authority (but this depends!)
 - ▶ (Personality)
 - ▶ Party's political support (Thatcher's fall from power)
 - ▶ Electorate's political support (Blair as the magician)

Resources: Ministers/Cabinet

- ▶ (Cabinet a collective actor)
- ▶ Minister: Party's political support
- ▶ Department
 - ▶ Authority
 - minister's word is final within department
 - ▶ Control over department (bureaucratic resources including information)
 - ▶ But departments differ in importance/weight
- ▶ Embedding in policy networks
- ▶ Policy success (well. . .)



Credit: RHINO
NEAL <https://www.flickr.com/photos/rhinoneal/5684793169/in/photostream/>

Civil Servants



Source: natalie <https://www.flickr.com/photos/nataliejohnson/425810638/in/photostream/>

- ▶ Permanence and Knowledge
- ▶ Time
- ▶ Whitehall information networks
- ▶ Keepers of the constitution

Resource Exchange

- ▶ Blair couldn't dismiss Brown as Chancellor of the Exchequer because he was perceived as successful and well connected within the party
- ▶ Thatcher couldn't get rid off Lawson because he was successful
- ▶ Blair couldn't completely sack John Prescott ("Two Jags", "Two Shags", "Two Shacks", "No Jobs" etc.) in spite of various affairs and incidents
 - ▶ Because Prescott represented "Old Labour"
 - ▶ Because Prescott could broker deals between Blair and Brown
- ▶ Cameron/Osborne as a double act



Context

- ▶ Many degrees of freedom for PM because role not codified
- ▶ Thatcher and Blair:
 - ▶ could use external advisers, could operate outside cabinet
 - ▶ could make major (constitutional) changes because they were successful
- ▶ John Major perceived as weak – rather a negotiator than a leader
 - ▶ But remained PM for 7 years
 - ▶ Lost 1997 partly because of his party
- ▶ Cameron restrained by coalition and eurosceptics

Conclusion

- ▶ PM can be incredibly powerful
- ▶ Yet reliant on other actors' support
- ▶ PM's exact role malleable and subject to changing circumstances
- ▶ (A very British arrangement)

Class questions

- ▶ (Which of the theoretical perspectives discussed in Chapter 11 implicitly underlies Allen's proposals?)
- ▶ What changes to the current constitutional position of the Prime Minister does Graham Allen's Bill propose?
- ▶ What are the merits and drawbacks of Allen's Bill?
- ▶ What alternative methods are available to curtail Prime Ministerial power?