

‘The Modern Autocrat’: Myths and debates about the power of prime ministers

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This article disaggregates some of the debates that underpin claims that prime ministers have become too powerful. Since conventions are ambiguous and there is no constitutionally valid job description, prime ministers in Westminster systems can largely determine what they want to do and how they do it. They always did; the tests are political, not constitutional. The argument that prime ministerial government has replaced cabinet government presents a false dichotomy as prime ministers work through cabinet as often as they act individually. The idea that modern prime ministers seek power in a way that their predecessors did not ignores the evidence of history; the accusations are as old as the prime ministership. Technology indeed allows them to do things their predecessors could not, but the drive to power can be found in the history of prime ministers in every country and in every age.

The prime minister left Australia in April on a boat for the United States. While he crossed that continent by train, he instructed that no cabinet decisions be finalised until the draft proposal had been sent to him for approval. He sailed the Atlantic to Britain; there he made a series of decisions on behalf of Australia in the Imperial War Cabinet, often without reference to the Australian cabinet. His ministerial colleagues either read about the decisions in the press or approved them without information. He bought a shipping line for Australia and attended the international peace conference in Versailles where he made commitments on behalf of the country. Finally, he returned home on 23 August: not the same year he had left but a year later. He was overseas as prime minister for 15 months in 1918-19 (Weller 2009: 39-43).

That was exceptional, but also instructive. Billy Hughes may have been unusual in his cavalier disregard for usual practice and for the confidence he took to the Versailles conference as a national representative. He may have stretched the discretionary powers he had given himself to the limit, but he was able to do it. Those actions were an indication of the flexibility of the prime minister's powers and of the uncertain conventions that guided the operations of government. They provide the foundation for any discussion of the modes of prime ministerial authority, for if it was possible for him to act that way, it was possible for any prime minister at that time to do so. His extremes illustrate the powers available to prime ministers.

In this article I want to disaggregate some of the muddled debates that underpin the much-debated topic of too

powerful prime ministers and examine them one by one. This will provide an alternative understanding of the more obvious assumptions that are often made.

The Institutional Framework

The institutions provide the framework within which prime ministers must work. In part the institutions are legal constructs, set out in constitutions or enshrined in legislation, that determine the structures within which governments will work. Written constitutions, such as those in Australia or Canada, may be settled in their wording, or so hard to change that it is unlikely that they can be altered. But they still provide only a limited description of how the system actually works. The Australian constitution describes a monarchical system; prime minister and cabinet are never mentioned. The sections in the constitution on executive government are scant, even though everyone knew that these were the key institutions because they had been in operation in the colonial governments for decades. So in part their powers are also grounded in conventions. Their precise powers can vary from year to year because the operation of the institutions will often be adjusted for political advantage. The prime ministers of the new Commonwealth nations thus inherited the powers of the British prime minister (although not initially the unfettered capacity to run their own foreign policy; they were still seen as extensions of the British empire). Those powers still depended for their legitimacy and continuity on the support of a still non-democratic parliament and on their formal authority from the sovereign.

Of course the initial position changed. There never has been a rigid constitution; even if the words do not change, the interpretations do, and those changes will be contested. Universal suffrage and the growth of the size of the electorate alter the relationship between government and voters; but they do not circumscribe the powers of prime ministers nor define them. The position developed as a consequence of that initial inheritance, the actions of the prime ministers themselves and often just sheer luck (Strangio et al. 2016: 3).

On a day-to-day basis those conventions and informal practices engender uncertainty about what prime ministers can do. What is a convention? Sir Kenneth Wheare (1960) argued that a convention required a degree of acceptance. But conventions hold no legal status (or they would not be conventions). They can be regarded as embedded traditions, practices that both sides of politics regard as beneficial for the smoother running of government. The longer the existence of precedents, the more embedded the practices, and the greater is the cost of choosing to ignore them. Yet if the benefits to be gained from breaking or ignoring a convention are greater than the opprobrium for doing so, any side in politics will consider it. Because conventions are not laws, they cannot be enforced in a court. Because they are not written down and officially agreed, they will remain a matter of interpretation, even convenience. Even a codification of conventions (itself almost a contradiction in terms) could never be so inclusive that it will cover all possibilities. When prime ministers or other politicians chose to ignore a convention, they will argue that it did not really exist, or that it meant something else, or their critics were self-interested (for debate, see Blick 2016).

This political flexibility is essential anyway. Just as we would be horrified if we were required to live in the same way, and in the same conditions, as our grandparents, so we should be amazed if the practices of government had NOT changed over the last century. We want our leaders to take account of technology, new ideas, better modes of governing. To look back as though the past provided better or more principled politics (itself a myth) is to forget how tough, rigid and circumscribed life could be then. Traditions and practices mutate with the times. So too must our understanding of the activities of prime ministers.

The Lack of a Job Description

What is the job of the prime minister? There is no job description against which their activities can be measured. Prime ministers have always exercised such powers as they could, when they wanted to have an influence. That lack of precision provides scope for action; prime ministers often do whatever they see as necessary to win. Their critics want their power limited (Benn 1981; Walter and

Strangio 2007: 9-12). In some cases critics even suggest that prime ministers should not be permitted to take initiatives or to drive policy and that they should revert to what these critics claim were their original function: to ensure political and policy coherence among ministers (Blick and Jones 2010a: 176). In parliamentary systems, they argue, ministers should be the crucial agents for introducing new initiatives. Most of the time, of course, they are. Prime ministers will choose in which areas of activity they are involved. The rest will be left to their colleagues. The essence is how, where and why they choose to drive the government and what they then do about it.

With no definition of their role, there have been efforts to tease out informal understandings. The Canadian Privy Council Office (PCO 1977) divided the prime minister's activities into two categories: the prime minister's prerogatives and the prime minister's priorities. The first category includes all those tasks that come with the position: the selection of ministers, the chairing of cabinet, settling the administrative arrangements, answering questions in parliament. These were the responsibilities of prime ministers that ensured that the government ran smoothly and as a team. They can be described as the functions that make prime ministers the 'first among equals', with the emphasis on the 'equals'.

Prime ministers' priorities were all those areas in which they chose to become involved, the areas that mattered to them. Some, such as budgetary negotiations and international summits, are effectively *de rigueur*; prime ministers cannot avoid participation. Others, such as the establishment of policy priorities and government strategies, may be important for their government's success but are nonetheless choices. A few may be areas of personal interest – prime ministers say that they want to be education prime ministers or infrastructure prime ministers: Howard focused on industrial relations reform, Rudd on responding to climate change and Abbott on parental leave. The policy areas are those for which they hold great passion, the place where they want to leave a legacy. Where prime ministers intend to lead, they will be very much the 'first among equals'.

The concern here is to understand the powers and impact of prime ministers. That is a different enterprise from one that, starting with a political theory, asks what they *should* do, or should be *allowed* to do. Critiques of prime ministers often begin with a set of normative assumptions about what prime ministers should do, within established institutional settings and given conventions.

It is possible to identify five different lines of argument that provide often normative views of what prime ministers should or should not do.

A Proper Role?

First is the proposition that there is a set of proper functions that prime ministers should fulfil if they are to do their job responsibly. Prime ministers, according to these advocates, have grabbed more power than they should have. They are part of a collective government and should run it more collectively; they should concede more independence to their ministers; they should not get involved in the detail of policy.

In part these arguments are an exercise of advocacy: they are establishing normative expectations about the prime ministers' roles and assert that this is how governments *should* be run. They are espousing an essentially limited constitutional role for prime ministers. Their expectations are presented as obvious home truths: cabinet should decide; prime ministers should manage the cabinet and government systems but should not drive their own preferences; ministers shall be responsible for policy initiatives. Often these truths are expounded on the grounds that they once existed: the advocates want a nostalgic return to the 'good old days', when, first, cabinet government prevailed, and, secondly and crucially, when their countries were (apparently) so much better governed. Both propositions are highly contestable. Besides, they seldom ask who will tell prime ministers they cannot act in certain ways, nor do they ask what sanctions could exist to enforce a rule that seeks to constrain the most powerful person in the land!

Canadian Richard French (1979: 388) has categorised those advocates as the 'theorists', concerned with a proper role for leaders which, regrettably, they too often exceed. By contrast the second group were the 'pragmatists', who explored how prime ministers and cabinets chose to operate and then assessed their performance. The significant point is that nowhere in any of the Westminster systems is there a set of rules prescribing how prime ministers should proceed or what they should do. Any standards of behaviour or descriptions of powers must be developed by the observer; they may provide a measuring stick to assess performance, but the criteria have no constitutional status or political standing. When I asked one prime minister what were his priorities in taking office, he responded: 'I did what the job required'. There were perceptions, expectations, responsibilities and immediate demands, but no book of guidelines, and certainly no hard rules with sanctions to apply if they were ignored. It was always so.

Prime ministers determine what they want to do and what they can do. There will be political calculations, based on a deep understanding of what they perceive as possible in a political environment where they have struggled to the top and what the times demand. A prime minister

with a new electoral mandate sees the task differently from a person who has taken over a tired and divided government. The responsibilities look different too for the same prime minister at different points of a term in office. What appears possible to an optimistic neophyte may seem very different after ten years in office.

Therefore an understanding of the institutional environment will tell only part of the story. The prerogatives are continuing because they come with the position; the priorities will vary from year to year. The same prime minister in any given system will spend time on a range of different policy areas or problems, sometimes by choice, sometimes by necessity.

As ever, *Yes Prime Minister* summed it up epigrammatically. The prime minister was told: 'There are many things a prime minister can do. There are a lot of things others want him to do. But there are few things a prime minister must do'.

Declining Accountability to Parliament

Another form of comparison is temporal, both within and across systems. Whenever the role of prime ministers in parliament is raised, contrasts are made between modern prime ministers and William Gladstone who spoke often in parliament and spent far more time in the House of Commons than his modern counterparts (Grube 2013: 27-33). Of course! Speeches in parliament were the principal means, outside his legendary (often lengthy) public stump speeches, through which he could explain his views. Parliamentary proceedings were reported verbatim in newspapers. That is no longer so. Apart from question times and the odd dramatic occasion, the press are not interested in the proceedings of the Houses. By contrast Tony Blair spent little time in the Commons; he saw the action as elsewhere.

It is a misleading comparison. Prime ministers always have changed their mode of communications to the one best able to get the message across. With radio came the fireside chats. Television brought interviews or addresses to the nation. Prime ministers are always keen to speak directly to the people, without their views being 'interpreted' by journalists; talk back radio allowed them to respond live and without editing. Twitter accounts provide direct access to their followers, without need for any intermediaries, and in a form that allows them to be succinct, dogmatic, and brief. Critics complain that modern prime ministers do not take their parliaments seriously. The question surely is not whether Gladstone was a more responsible prime minister because he used the parliamentary forum, but what use Gladstone would have made of modern communications and how he would have

adjusted his style. Prime ministers still take parliament seriously, but use their time differently.

Centralisation

Another argument is that modern prime ministers centralise. They often do but that trend may be in part due to the technological ability to do what formerly was impossible. One example can make the point. In 1950 the Australian external affairs minister, Percy Spender, discovered that Britain was about to commit troops to a United Nations force in Korea. Determined that Australia not be seen as being dragged in by the tail, he wanted to announce Australia's commitment first. Prime Minister Robert Menzies was at sea, between Britain and New York. Left with the decision by a nervous acting prime minister Fadden, Spender released a statement announcing that Australia would respond positively to the United Nations appeal, with the condition that: 'The nature and extent of the forces will be determined after the conclusion of discussions which the prime minister will have in the United States.' Menzies was only told of the commitment when Spender contacted him on board ship on an insecure trans-ocean phone. Spender noted: 'He was obviously put out. He said little; and in the circumstances I could not say much, but even over the distance of some 12,000 miles, I was aware of the sourness in his voice' (cited in Weller 2009: 110-111). Prime ministers do not appreciate their countries going to war without their being told first. Is the incident an example of prime ministerial delegation or simply technological incapacity? It could not happen now with 24-hour contact possible, not only when prime ministers are at sea but also in the air. A Menzies with modern communications would have insisted on having the final decision. What has changed is what they *can* do, not what they might *want* to do.

Cabinet and Prime Ministers As Alternatives

Other arguments have also tended to develop dogmatic normative interpretations of what are essentially pragmatic practices. One contrasts cabinet government with prime ministerial government. The former, the argument implies, is collective, the latter personal. Prime ministers decide or cabinet decides. The two are seen as incompatible. Within that argument are assumptions about what constitutes 'proper' cabinet government: it is usually presented as a process in which cabinet maintains a continuing collective discussion of all the key issues of the day and makes all the decisions. In practice, prime ministers have always decided which issues will be discussed with their cabinet ministers (itself selective, since the cabinet often does not include 'all' the ministers) and which by a smaller group such as a war cabinet. On occasions prime ministers may make a 'captain's choice', a term used by Australian prime ministers to defend decisions where none

of their colleagues had been consulted and where they arrogated to themselves the right to do whatever they wanted. In between the two extremes is a wide range of circumstances. They include cases where everyone was consulted but in the knowledge that their leader's decision was already public and what was required was support, even acquiescence, rather than robust debate. On other occasions opinions may even be sought without any meeting being held at all, but the outcome is still regarded within the system as a collective decision. The debate on what constitutes a cabinet meeting and a cabinet decision is lively.

For prime ministers, cabinet fulfils two principal requirements. They want to ensure that there is a degree of coherence and consistency in government policies (the policy incentive) and they want to ensure they have the political support necessary to push through their ideas (the political incentive). To achieve these ends they need a degree of consistency in managing issues so that these two objectives can be satisfied, or at least balanced (the process incentive). In what meeting and through what process these outcomes are achieved are less significant than the outcome. Attendance may be small, in a war cabinet, or extensive, in full cabinet. Officials and advisers may or may not be present; it will depend on the national practices and desired processes. Often prime ministers will use cabinet to support a decision already made, sometimes even announced. To many practitioners the key issues in debates about collective decisions should be about consultation and participation, rather than exclusively about attendance at specific meetings.

In any case the choice is not a matter of either the prime minister deciding or the full cabinet determining government policy. It never has been an either/or situation but a range of processes through which prime ministers work with and around their colleagues to determine government directions. Sometimes cabinet nominally authorises, sometimes it is informed, sometimes its members will not like the decision but will acquiesce to the authority of their leader. They all represent cabinet government. However far back we go, this situation prevailed. Instead of trying to develop false dichotomies, we need to ask how and why prime ministers used what tactics to ensure policy, political and process outcomes, and what happened when they failed to do so effectively.

Power Hungry Prime Ministers?

A second fallacy is to assume that prime ministers have become more power-hungry, wanting to centralise authority for its own sake. Many of the critics complain that modern prime ministers (indeed almost all prime ministers) want to gather for themselves levers of power that their predecessors, proper seekers after consensus

and agreement, would never have pulled. Modern leaders, they assert, do not understand the constitution and practices of Westminster and seek to arrogate for themselves powers that are inappropriate. In summary, the ambitions and character of the leaders have changed.

There is no consistent evidence for such a proposition. The charge that modern prime ministers have been uniquely determined to control all the decisions of their government is simply historically wrong; accusations of similar practices have been consistent across the centuries, as long as heads of government were recognised as prime ministers. Nor is that surprising. Ambition and the search for power are common to every government everywhere. A Wolsey or a Cromwell, in service of their king, had the same political ambitions and skills that Machiavelli wanted, but could only write about. The question is always how they should be applied.

Just look at the records and descriptions of past prime ministers. Go back to the very first who is given that title, Robert Walpole. One ally stated in 1741: 'He did everything alone ... while those ciphers of the Cabinet signed everything he dictated ... without the least share of honour or power' (Blick and Jones 2010: 56). A critic complained that:

this minister having obtained a sole influence over all our public counsels has not only assumed the sole direction of public affairs, but has got every officer of state removed that would not follow his direction, even in the affairs belonging to his own proper department (Blick and Jones 2010: 56).

Similar comments have been made across the centuries. William Pitt's government in 1806 was described as 'a cabinet of cyphers and a government of one man alone'. The Duke of Wellington was seen as the 'sole minister and decidedly superior to all. Ministers dare not have an opinion, but must move to the right or the left as this dictator may think proper' (Blick and Jones 2010: 58). Lloyd George became 'virtually the president of a state'. Members of cabinet became 'not colleagues who can weigh decisions but subordinates who can accept them' (Laski quoted in Blick and Jones 2010: 59).

In Canada there are similar accounts of prime ministers doing as they pleased. Prime minister Robert Borden recalled of a cabinet meeting in World War I: 'The discussion was lengthy and eventually became so wearisome that I interposed, informing my colleagues that they had made me sufficiently acquainted with their views, that the duty of decision rested with me, and that I would subsequently make them acquainted with my conclusion' (Bliss 1994: 80). With R.B. Bennett, prime

minister in the 1930s, 'the story went round that when Bennett was seen mumbling to himself, he was holding a cabinet meeting. 'He was not above asking the opinions of others . . . he was only above accepting them' (Bliss 1994: 113). Gordon Robertson, later clerk of the Privy Council Office in Canada, explained what happened when Mackenzie King lost interest in cabinet in his later years:

More than once he left his ministers arguing over some point in a cabinet meeting while he went around the corner to his office in the East Block to have tea. Both he and his colleagues knew that they could reach no conclusion without him (Robertson 2000: 62).

In Australia colonial premiers were accused of being 'modern autocrats', even before federation was achieved (Weller 2009: 2).

Not every leader may be seeking to dominate all their colleagues. Some choose only those items where they are particularly interested. Others delegate, and become concerned only when crises emerge. However, few prime ministers can afford not to be concerned most of the time.

The 'good old days' when cabinet government really worked collegially were either in the distant past or when the speaker was in government. Some of Jim Callaghan's advisers told a parliamentary committee in 2010 that they worked for the last prime minister who practised cabinet government (See the evidence of Lords Lipsey and Donoghue in House of Lords Inquiry 2010: 46-47). Yet ten years earlier, John Macintosh (1962) and Richard Crossman (1963) had declared that cabinet government was dead and had been replaced by prime ministerial government. Crossman wrote before he became a minister but saw no reason to change his opinion based on his experience (Crossman 1972).

The key issue is not whether these portraits of driven leaders are accurate, although there is no reason to assume they are not. Rather they illustrate that prime ministers have always been accused of seeking to dominate their colleagues, of wanting to get their own way. Ministers are seen to acquiesce, not prepared to challenge their leader; those outside cabinet, whether civil servant or academic, still complain that ministers are too subservient, too cowed, and too self-interested to stand up against the leader.

Not all prime ministers seek to use their powers brutally; some may be more collective in their manner. However, a consultative approach may as often represent the velvet glove that camouflages a strong determination as be an actual devolution of authority. The more recent claims

about Blair's single-mindedness on action on Iraq, or about Abbott's 'captain's choices', however justified, are merely the last in a long line of accusations directed at premiers over 200 years. We should not muddle new ways of trying to exercise prime ministerial authority with the idea that prime ministers today want to wield power that their predecessors deliberately shunned as a matter of constitutional propriety.

It is ahistorical to imply that once, despite their records of often aggressive management, those earlier leaders were all great believers in collective government, rather than sometimes practising collective government as a means of gaining support for their preferred policies. Of course prime ministers differ in their approach and style. In Britain a Lloyd George was followed by a Baldwin, a Churchill by an Attlee. In Australia Menzies and Holt, and later Hawke and Keating, had very different styles. That is not a judgement on their effectiveness, or even their determination, but on their style and their methods. Just as there is no job description there is no formula for controlling cabinets; effective prime ministers all find their own style of management.

There is no unidirectional *trend* in growing ambitions. We cannot assume modern prime ministers have a desire to control that their predecessors lacked or deliberately chose to forego and that therefore the character of political leaders has changed for the worse in the last fifty years. There is no persuasive evidence that such a decline in the character of politicians has occurred. It is just that we, as do all our predecessors, judge our current politicians, struggling to solve the bitterly contested problems of the day, through jaundiced and self-interested eyes. Their predecessors are judged on their records, not by their daily struggles, by their necessary if slightly dubious compromises, by their ruthlessness and occasional betrayals. In their time they were seen as just as political, manipulative, hungry for control and for power. History often smooths out the anger.

What Has Changed?

What obviously has changed is the environment in which prime ministers work and the technology they can use both to oversee government and to communicate to the world beyond. The story is one of improved modes of interaction, of the ability to talk to colleagues anywhere in the world, to manage cabinet processes through internet links. Overlong cabinet submissions are prevented because an electronic template can prevent submissions from exceeding word limits. Technology provides tools for management that prime ministers of 50 or more years ago would have loved to use if they had been available.

Technology is neutral. The advantages that prime ministers notionally can gain from modern technology may be more

than offset by the increasing demands such technology places on them. The (comparatively) measured pace of the media fifty years ago is now a frenzied day-long demand for responses to every conceivable event. Prime ministers have become obsessed with winning the daily media round; they are required to have an answer to every query. They need help to just stand still, to retain the position of their predecessors as much as developing new capacities.

The discussion needs to be less about the vaulting ambition of prime ministers – that was always present, in some cases more nakedly evident than others – and more about their capacity to control and oversee their political machinery. Analysis needs to acknowledge the changes in their circumstances. They must deal with external crises like global financial crises, or changes in international leadership. Internally their capacity changes too over time; they may become more experienced, more skilful at the same time as becoming tired, distant and removed from public contact. They can run out of ideas. Once popular with the public their image later becomes jaded, as each election becomes harder to win.

So we can return to Hughes. If a prime minister then could act so wilfully, then the capacities to do so existed, even if they were not always exercised. It is absurd to see a trend. Rather there are opportunities for those who want to stretch their influence. I am not denying that with improved technology prime ministers have accrued additional capacity. I do argue that prime ministers have always sought to accumulate power and earlier prime ministers would have seized the opportunities that their successors have but which were never available to them. Power is there to be used and in our system, just by getting there, prime ministers have shown the capacity to find it and the ability to use it.

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On the Day Neil Armstrong Died

I sat on a patient sandstone rock
 (which I legally own) in my rebellious backyard
 Corridors of light opened & closed
 As the trees along the fence shuffled & shifted,
 Discomforting a yellow eyed bird.
 A dry leaf cracked as a skink
 Peered at me insolently before retreating.
 A waxing gibbous moon
 Watched me with her big stone eye
 With the courteous gravity of quiet dust.

RAE DESMOND JONES,
 SUMMER HILL, NSW

The Front Window

it is raining softly
 as an old Greek woman
 dressed in black walks
 along the path with
 a big brown paper parcel
 the spray tapers on
 the roof opposite like Durer's
 hands & i know if i take a rubber
 i can obliterate the world
 the old woman looks at me
 & her face is folded & cracked
 & her eyes are small
 I take the rubber
 & she looks down as she
 begins to disappear
 because she is heavy i rub harder
 & she becomes gradually faint
 & weak
 She drops the parcel &
 It splits on the wet ground
 & sets loose a swarm of angry
 bees
 their tails are fat &
 they beat against the glass & live
 although i rub them out one by one
 they are a plague

RAE DESMOND JONES,
 SUMMER HILL, NSW