

# CABINET GOVERNMENT: AN ELUSIVE IDEAL?

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This article will explore the proposition that cabinet government is dead by examining the different ways in which cabinet government is conceptualized and by suggesting that the lack of precision in the debates has undermined much of the criticism. It will seek to draw the strands of research together in a way that can emphasize how cabinet government has evolved while remaining at the core of government. The article will draw evidence from three countries, Australia, Canada and Britain, in each of which, despite the common heritage, cabinet has evolved in different ways.

Cabinet government is apparently dead. That seems to be a common diagnosis of the state of government in Britain and Canada. The incumbent prime ministers, Jean Chrétien and Tony Blair, have virtually dispensed with the support of cabinet and rule with fewer constraints than their predecessors. Cabinet has become little more than a cipher, held briefly each week more for the purposes of show than as a decision-making forum. Cabinet has been described as a focus group in Canada or as a reversion to a meeting of politicians discussing the political situation (in Britain). These two leaders can be seen as the epitome of prime ministerial power.

In Canada in 2001 Jeffrey Simpson published a book called *The Friendly Dictatorship*. He argued that Chrétien was merely the last, and most obvious, manifestation of dominant prime ministers able to govern in Canada with few limitations on their ability to get their own way. Cabinet had become little more than a focus group in which some ideas might be considered, but it did not meet for long and was not a deliberative or decision-making institution. Cabinet committees could decide on new policy initiatives, but they were not funded at that time. Rather they were put into a basket of new initiatives and the prime minister and the minister of Finance would determine at budget time which would be taken up. Within their portfolios ministers were left to their own devices, but wherever the prime minister wanted to become involved, he determined the direction and content of policy. Simpson argued that 'cabinet government presupposes collective decision making and responsibility, a collection of equals, with some inevitably being more equal than others because of the importance of their portfolios' (2001, p. 62). But the prime minister has become far too powerful for such a description to be applicable now. Simpson's polemic builds on the work of Donald Savoie, whose magisterial work, *Governing from the Centre: The Concentration of*

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*Power in Canadian Politics* (1999a), provides a detailed account of the growth in the power of the central agencies in Canada, and the significance of the Prime Minister and his office. Cabinet has a series of set agenda items: discussion, presentations, nominations and then the endorsement of committee decisions which are rarely disputed (Savoie 1999, p. 647). But it did no more. Savoie builds a case that these changes mean the prime minister is '*Primus*: there is no longer any *Inter* or *Pares*'.

A similar debate can be found in Britain, where Blair's cabinet still meets weekly but for shorter periods and with a more limited agenda than in earlier regimes. There are a number of standing items for cabinet but few policy issues brought there for decision. Cabinet government, say the observers, has declined under Blair. The prime minister makes the crucial decisions and the concept of collective debate has gone. Blair's biographer John Rentoul comments:

Blair's management style ushered in a new low in the history of cabinet government in Britain. That style was 'hub and spoke' rather than collegiate, reducing most meetings of cabinet to just forty minutes of approving decisions taken elsewhere, parish notices and short speeches either delivered by the Prime Minister or vetted by him in advance. (Rentoul 2001, p. 540)

Similar comments were made about the imperial style of Mrs Thatcher who did not welcome debate, but wanted decisions. Peter Hennessy claimed that 'she has put Cabinet government temporarily on ice'. (1986, p. 122)

But then there is the suggestion in many of these accounts that this state of affairs is an aberration. Hennessy goes on: 'the old model could be restored in the few minutes it takes for a new prime minister to travel from Buckingham Palace to Downing Street' (1986, p. 122). Rentoul too seems to believe that:

Cabinet government was not dead of course; it was only sleeping. It could clearly reassert itself if the Prime Minister's authority or popularity slipped, as it did over Thatcher. (Rentoul 2001, p. 640)

It was just that cabinet government did not operate under Thatcher and Blair, the two most dominant leaders their parties had seen in a century.

Thus this debate is not unique to any one country, even if each analysis tends to be; it cuts across nations. It raises questions of the degree to which it can happen in other countries with similar parliamentary and cabinet governments. By contrast, similar concerns are not so often expressed in Australia. That the prime minister is powerful and dominant is not in doubt (see, for example, Weller 1989), but there is little suggestion there that cabinet has been supplanted and little angst about the excessive power of prime ministers. The interesting comparative question is: why not?

There is nothing new in these analyses, in the sense that, even if the prime ministers seem to be dominating to an even greater extent than before, they reflect the continuing debate about the power of prime ministers and the degree to which they can call the tune. All the observers are able to give a

number of cases when prime ministers have chosen to become involved and where they have imposed their will. The capacity and power of prime ministers is not open to debate.

Most of these discussions then come to the core conclusion: that cabinet government is in decline, abeyance, sleeping or dead. Whether the prognosis is temporary or terminal is not settled. But they all also have an implicit assumption: that there is something identifiable called 'cabinet government' that can be identified and restored. Famously, George Jones described cabinet government in Britain as an elastic band; it could be stretched, but, as Thatcher's fall showed, 'the elastic will snap back on her' (cited in Foley 1993, p. 16). Like Hennessy and Rentoul, he implies a state of normalcy (to which the system snaps back) where cabinet government once again exists.

But what is cabinet government? It is difficult to describe any recognizable circumstance where it worked in a form that these critics would approve of. Nor are there working and historically accurate models against which performance can be judged. It can stretch from a set of arrangements within which almost anything goes to an ideal state that can never be achieved. Nostalgia for bygone systems may play a part. One account argued cabinet before 1916 was indeed 'a genuinely collective body' but at the same time 'cabinet was almost comically inefficient in its conduct of business'; such a system could not be maintained in the face of the demands of war and certainly could not run on that basis in the next century (Burch and Holliday 1996, pp. 12–13).

Cabinet government is often taken as given; even if not satisfactorily described, it is somehow recognizable when it exists. Analysis concentrates on the cabinet system, the cabinet environment, the core executive or some similar group of institutions. Definitions of cabinet government are often by default. A failure to allow cabinet to debate an issue or an independent decision taken by the prime minister without recourse to cabinet is interpreted as a decline of cabinet government. But the reverse is not derived from that: that cabinet government means that cabinet must discuss everything, or that no decisions can be made independently by the prime ministers.

This article explores the ways that cabinet government has been analysed by both academics and practitioners, and assesses whether these descriptions have an implicit model of normalcy. In particular it asks whether there have been trends in the decline of cabinet government or whether, in different ways determined in part by changing circumstances, prime ministers have always been able to determine how cabinet is run and usually got their own way whenever they chose to exert their influence. Then it asks how better to interpret the debate on the decline of cabinet government. We need to avoid the assumption that there is a zero sum game, that if prime ministers are powerful then cabinet has 'lost' influence. Prime ministerial influence and cabinet government are not polar alternatives. Prime ministers like Trudeau or Fraser both liked to debate and test arguments and to work through the cabinet as much as around it. But both still managed to get their own way.

We should not be overwhelmed by recent events, by being surprised by the management and practices of recent prime ministers. The argument that prime ministers are powerful and the cabinet has been relegated to become one of the 'dignified' parts of the constitution is scarcely recent, even if it is constantly rediscovered. The explicit theoretical debate began with John Mackintosh (1962; 3rd edn 1977) who emphasized that 'the country is governed by the Prime Minister who leads, coordinates and maintains a series of ministers'. The prime ministers on whose experience he drew were those who held office in the 1940s and the 1950s or earlier; Lloyd George and Chamberlain are described as dominant figures who almost did away with cabinet decision making. The thesis thus predates the 1960s and 1970s, yet often these are the very times to which commentators now look as a period when cabinet government flourished; that is, some years after cabinet had been declared comatose by Mackintosh and Crossman. Indeed arguments about dominant prime ministers can be found in descriptions of the governments of Gladstone and Peel. There are, it seems, various degrees of death and, at the least, a series of variations in practice over the decades. So can we find a suitable agreement on what cabinet government may be and hence take further the analysis of the way that we are governed?

### THE ACADEMIC DEBATE

It is difficult to extract any obvious approach to cabinet government from the available literature, primarily because the analysis of cabinet comes from several different angles at once. Each of the five identified below starts from a different set of assumptions about the significant features of cabinet, and derives the analysis from there and then makes judgements about its performance from its own criteria.

#### **Cabinet government as the focus for discussion of responsibility and accountability: a constitutional theory or legal approach**

Cabinet is seen as the focus for the application of two basic constitutional doctrines: collective and ministerial responsibility to parliament and the electorate. These doctrines may be described in normative terms, proposing what ministers should do, or in pragmatic terms, explaining how these ideas are applied. They are central to any analysis of the relationship between the executive and the legislature. This relationship has been a focal point for debate in Britain with its unwritten constitution (see, for example, Woodhouse 1994) but is as uncertain in Australia where neither the prime minister nor the cabinet is mentioned in the Constitution, and ministerial power is derived from section 64 (for a discussion, see Forrest and Reid 1989). In practice much of the debate is derivative and needs to be tightened (for an attempt, see Weller 1999). Mackintosh spends some time considering the links between the cabinet, the parliament and the crown. Encel (1974) is almost entirely concerned with party links and the meaning and practice of ministerial or collective responsibility; the actual proceedings of cabinet are

a black box, beyond scrutiny. French (1979) called these analysts 'theorists', interested in how governing ought to work (in contrast to the 'pragmatists' who were concerned to see that government worked better). The basic questions are: what is the meaning of constitutional and ministerial responsibility and how are they applied to cabinet? What impact do they have on the workings of cabinet? How is the executive held accountable to the legislature?

**Cabinet as a formal administrative institution, based on rules and routines: a public administration or positional approach**

Cabinet began as an informal meeting of ministers, but over the years the pressure of business and the demands on the time of ministers required that proceedings become more formal (Baker 2000; Weller 2001). The circulation and coordination of submissions, the development of cabinet handbooks that include the rules and conventions of cabinet have burgeoned, particularly after the establishment of a cabinet secretariat in wartime (the 1914–18 war in Britain; the 1939–45 war for Canada and Australia). Consequently promotion to cabinet brings expectations and duties for a new minister. Membership of cabinet shapes the roles and choices of ministers; expectations have been created by the historical development of cabinet rules. Prime ministers initially devised those rules and they can alter and adjust them, but do so with care. This approach is the traditional institutional study of the structure and organization of an established body. It leads to some fundamental questions. To what extent has the routinization and bureaucratization changed the way that cabinet works? Has it changed the manner and location of decisions? What impact do rules and routines have on outcomes?

An additional aspect is an analysis of the supporting departments or agencies that provide advice to the cabinet as a collectivity or to the prime minister. Does the prime minister need a department? Should the central agencies support the cabinet as a collectivity. The institutional arrangements vary from nation to nation; it is not significant (except in terms of political presentation) whether the supporting agency is called a Department (as in Australia) or an Office (Canada and Britain) (Weller 1983). The vital fact is what services they provide and to whom. There is no doubt that the support at the centre has grown, in both non-partisan officials and political appointees who have personal connections to the prime ministers. It is easy to assume that institutional existence means as a matter of course that the prime ministers have been strengthened (Savoie 1999a; Holliday 2000); but it is also possible to conclude there is still a hole at the centre, and that prime ministers often need more advice (Kavanagh and Seldon 1999). Solutions to the balance of power are invariably posed in institutional terms because they provide clear steps that can be taken. It is easier to propose institutional change than to exhort prime ministers to limit themselves or to play particular roles that are somehow seen as proper. Institutions provide potential and guidelines for how to act; they still need to be used.

**Cabinet as a forum for making policy decisions which require the best available information and coordination to ensure those decisions are well-informed: a public policy or functional approach**

Those who provide this emphasis are French's 'pragmatists'. Amid the furore of politics, cabinets are also the principal decision-making body in the polity, raising questions about their ability to collect and synthesize the necessary data, to determine priorities, allocate expenditure or work effectively in other areas. There is a concern about how to prevent fragmentation or excessive segmentation. Dell (1980) has questioned the notion of collective decision making, suggesting it is largely a fraud as most ministers have neither the knowledge nor the inclination to become actively involved in subjects beyond their portfolio. In response, Sir John Hunt argued that the inefficiencies were counterbalanced by the value of discussion as a means of ensuring support, with cabinet acting as the cement that held the government together (cited in Hennessy 1995). When central agencies seek to assist (Davis 1995) they are often accused of being over-powerful. Cabinet procedures will always in part reflect the working style of prime ministers, but the reflections of those who work for them are constantly thinking about ways they might be done better (Donoughue 1987; Blackstone and Plowden 1988; Hogg and Hill 1995). Lindquist and White suggest that in Canada too little attention has been given to the organization and running of cabinet as a complex organization, if it is to work more strategically (1997, p. 129). There are no Australian equivalents, but Weller (1989) seeks to explain how cabinet worked under Fraser, while Mills (1993) for Hawke, and Edwards (1996) for Keating, provide other insights. The questions arising from this body of literature are therefore: how is support for decision making organized? What advice is provided? To whom? How have those systems for advising cabinet as a collectivity been managed and to what effect?

**Cabinet as a political battleground, as a contest for position, power, policy and reputation and in which incentives and resources are the best means for explaining action: a political science approach**

This general area is where much of the debate on cabinet government takes place. One debate referred to the issue of prime ministerial government (Crossman 1963; Macintosh 1977; Weller 1985; Foley 1993, 2000). It examined the degree to which prime ministers increased their authority and usurped the influence of individual ministers. In Australia, Bunting (1988) proposes that as early as the 1960s cabinet had displaced ministers as the principal locus of decision-making. Others either assert that the proper term is 'ministerial government', at least in Britain (Jones 1979, p. 1) or that cabinet government is reasserted after the demise of a dominant prime minister such as Thatcher (Hennessy 1986). The organization of cabinet, the impact of federalism, access to ministerial positions, the use of cabinet committees (Mackie and Hogwood 1985), the provision of advice to the leaders or to the cabinet as a collectivity are all therefore weapons in the pursuit of influence and

advantage. Laver and Shepsle (1993) try to identify in schematic ways the forces that help set a cabinet agenda. The crucial questions are therefore: how has the balance of power in cabinets changed? Has the position of prime minister been strengthened? What are the resources and incentives that can be applied by the different actors?

The most sophisticated addition to the debate has been the two books by Michael Foley (1993, 2000) on the British presidency. Foley explores the 'stretching of the leadership' and the consequential relations between prime ministers and their colleagues. But it is, as his subtitle notes, a study of the politics of public leadership and elections. He is less concerned with the balance of the internal decision-making or the continuing functions of the cabinet system.

### **Cabinet as a system of government**

Rhodes (1995) developed the concept of the core executive to explain how cabinet decisions are made, drawing into the analysis those key advisers and civil servants who are often more important than junior ministers. He argues that: 'The label "cabinet government" was the overarching term for (some of) these institutions and practices but it is inadequate and confusing because it does not describe accurately the effective mechanisms for achieving coordination. At best it is contentious, and at worst seriously misleading, to assert the primacy of cabinet among all organisations and mechanisms at the heart of government' (1995, p. 12; see also Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990 for the first exposition of the core executive). Burch and Holliday (1996) too regard the cabinet as part of a set of interlocking institutions that need to be understood as a whole. They discuss the broader notion of the cabinet system as a set of arenas over which ministers and others fight for authority and influence. Here the cabinet is just part of, even if sometimes the key feature, that determines what happens in the system of governing. Decisions or, as Rhodes argues, the resolution of conflict may be undertaken in any part of that system, though Andeweg (1997) questions why the resolution of conflict, rather than, say, representation should be the primary function given precedence here. The principal questions in this approach are how the cabinet fits within the broader framework and what contribution it makes to decisions: that is, who coordinates and resolves conflict?

As an analytical device for understanding the centre of government, the concept of the core executive has value. But by incorporating the cabinet in the wider scenery as just one component, it ignores that fact that in many ways cabinet *is* different. Appointment to cabinet is the sign of success for ministers, particularly in Britain and Australia where there are tiers of ministers and only the senior sit in cabinet. It is the target of ambitions. Cabinet decisions, however they are made, have weight and legitimacy within the bureaucracy, greater than decisions emerging from other forums; they are the currency of government. If cabinet meetings had no practical or useful function they would be discontinued. But they are held, frequently and

without question. Why? Even if cabinet may now serve different functions from those of the 19th and 20th centuries – and what they may be is an empirical question – its existence remains important.

The different criteria may lead to different judgements about whether the cabinet is working well, and hence different conclusions about what is required for it to be improved. The constitutional theorists will explore the relations between cabinet and other parts of the political system: cabinet government in their view works to the extent the cabinet is responsible to and responsive to the needs of the broader political system. The public administration school will ask whether the rules are being applied, whether the institutional and supporting arrangements are adequate or effective. The public policy advocates will question whether the cabinet, as it is working, has the capacity to fulfil a range of functions that require a broader outlook; they may argue it should have a strategic or priority-setting capacity. The power realists will look at the political outcomes and ask whether the balance of power may be, or should be, altered. So 'solutions' to a cabinet that does not live up to expectations may be better rules, more sophisticated co-ordination and more effective accountability.

### IMPLICIT ASSUMPTIONS

The problems in determining what cabinet government is or what effective cabinet government would look like lie in the divergent expectations. There are times when there are hints at what might be entailed and some assumptions that can be derived from the accounts. Taking a couple of the categories can make the point.

The public administration approach suggests that cabinet government is alive when the rules of cabinet are being observed, when the items and policies are dealt with according to due process, whether it be in cabinet or around cabinet in committee. Cabinet procedures are provided in the *Australian Cabinet Handbook* or the British *Questions of Procedure for Ministers*; the distribution of responsibilities to cabinet committees determines which are the correct forums for debate. These handbooks establish the proper rules of engagement and should be honoured. Even though the rules are written and composed by the prime ministers, they create the framework for proper and conventional procedure and should be adhered to. But of course the rules have a primary purpose: they are composed by prime ministers and their officials so that cabinet can be organised the way they want it run (Baker 2000; Weller 2001). In June 2002, Chrétien published *A Guide for Ministers and Secretaries of State* (Canada 2002). Under the guise of a set of rules he clearly set out what the prerogatives and powers of the prime minister were. It is by no means a neutral document. In all countries the rules provide a base, but the prime ministers determine when they will be applied or relaxed. Their application can be as flexible as they like.

Those who see cabinet as an arena for power often see prime ministers as too powerful and imply that cabinet government requires the fulfillment



of particular conditions. Some of the possible conditions can be explored here.

'Cabinet government is the *full* cabinet at work'. This condition is perhaps most common. Peter Hennessy often implies that it could be done better. His assumption seems to be that cabinet government requires a discussion of the vital issues in a meeting of 'full cabinet'. In his discussion of the Suez crisis he asks 'if the full cabinet had balked' would events have been different (2000, p. 238). But the full cabinet was not asked. Callaghan was 'the practitioner of traditional Cabinet collegiality' (2000, p. 395). There is in his view something good and proper in the 'full cabinet' being involved: a greater store of wisdom, broader discussion or some other benefit. Savoie hints at the same idea for Canada. He notes that with the existing system of two cabinet committees 'about half the Cabinet has to accept what has been decided by a committee of which they are not members and based on discussions in which they did not take part' (1999a, p. 649). Talking of Britain, Rose argues that in the past, 'the full cabinet met once and often twice a week' and that 'it is politically significant that their frequency and length has been decreasing' (2001, p. 167). On these criteria the health of cabinet government can be tested by the frequency and comprehensiveness of 'full' cabinet meetings as they are the symbol of collective decision.

A second implicit condition is that, as 'ministers have the statutory responsibility' to make decisions, then it must be theirs to make, not the prime minister's. This view argues that, in a proper system of cabinet government, prime ministers hold the ring rather than become directly involved. Thus Jones notes the prime ministers' role 'is to help forge politically acceptable solutions and to relate policies together in an order of priorities by providing a coherent theme, tone or philosophy. His contribution is not to be a substitute for his ministers but a supplement... A prime minister cannot help cabinet colleagues arrive at a unified decision if he is a protagonist of a particular line' (1981, p. 219). So if prime ministers are driving the policy, perhaps with the ministers playing a secondary role, then cabinet government is in decline because prime ministers are taking over the proper ministerial responsibility. The best description of British government for Jones is ministerial government.

Yet none of these conditions applied consistently in any of the countries in the last century. No trend suggests that prime ministers have in the early decades been more likely to be restricted by their cabinet colleagues in battles they wanted to win. Their tactics may have differed but not the results. Not all prime ministers have been concerned to determine outcomes across the whole range of government activities; some are more intrusive and involved than others. But they usually know when they can win. Circumstances have changed: there is more direct media attention; more issues cut across individual portfolios; there are more international commitments as travel is easier. Further, styles will change from individual to individual. But if we ask whether cabinet government restricts and defeats

prime ministers on a regular basis, then it is difficult to find examples where that might have occurred.

Looking at the prime ministers in several countries from the first half of the century can illustrate the point. In Canada Robert Borden could recall in 1917: '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, p. 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, p. 113). Gordon Robertson, later clerk of the Privy Council Office in Canada, says that 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. (2001, p. 62)

At the least the prime minister's approval and consent was needed. King was always determined to get his own way. Later Robertson cited the view of Jack Pickersgill on Louis St Laurent:

As St Laurent hated to waste time, cabinet meetings were exceedingly business-like.... No minister was restrained from presenting his views for fear St Laurent might take offence, but I believe some ministers were restrained by the fear of appearing to be ill-informed or ineffective. More than any prime minister I have known, St Laurent dominated his cabinet, not by imposing his authority, but by his sheer intellect, his wide knowledge, and his unequalled persuasiveness. (cited in Robertson 2001, p. 100)

And this was a time when there were powerful regional ministers. Prime ministers could still determine what happened when they cared.

In Australia, Billy Hughes paid little attention to the views of his colleagues and in 1919 spent months overseas at the Versailles conference, where he spoke on behalf of his country, without regular reference to the ministers back in Australia. At the same time he wanted to know everything that went on there and suggested that no cabinet decision should be regarded as final until they had been run past him on the other side of the world. Later Menzies ran his cabinet with a degree of imperiousness perhaps typical of one who ruled for 17 years and was never challenged in that time; the verdict of Sir Paul Hasluck was similar to that of Pickersgill on St Laurent: he dominated his cabinet intellectually because he was the best informed person in cabinet (Hasluck 1980, p. 9).

In Britain, Lloyd George created the Garden Suburb to give him greater control over his government. Chamberlain brooked no opposition within

the cabinet and by one account almost dispensed with cabinet meetings. Churchill was capable of turning cabinet meetings into monologues when it suited him. Macmillan 'was a great one for bringing these broad themes to cabinet and for thinking aloud on them before his assembled colleagues. For him the full cabinet was a sounding board' (Hennessy 2000, p. 260). When Macmillan said that 'the cabinet left the whole management of this affair to me' we can be certain that he proposed that it should do so (Hennessy 2000, p. 255). Heath was said to have exercised 'overwhelming personal dominance' over his ministers (Hennessy 2000, p. 336). And so on.

To take one obvious implication: none of these leaders would have agreed that cabinet government required meetings all the time of the full cabinet. Full cabinets are essentially conveniences as cabinet serves many political and representational functions. In Canada its numbers once rose as high as 40 and cabinet has rarely been a decision-making forum; committees always did much of the work (Bakvis 2000). In Australia all ministers may have been members of cabinet before 1956 but since then (with the exception of 1972–75) cabinet has been in two tiers and varied in size. In Britain there are several tiers of ministers. Every prime minister in every country has chosen a number of subjects – war, security, nuclear policy, devaluations, budgets – which are discussed in a closed environment that will include crucial ministers and perhaps other advisers. None would regard such a tactic as a derogation of cabinet government.

Cabinet government has never been a synonym for *primus inter pares*. Prime ministers have always been able to win. Where they choose to exercise their authority depends on what they want. Savoie gives a concession in his analysis of Chrétien:

To be sure prime ministers do not always bypass their cabinets or only consult them after the fact. They pick and choose issues they want to direct and, in some circumstances, may decide to let the Cabinet's collective decision-making run its course. . . . These are the issues on which a prime minister may hold no firm view, and decide that it is best to keep one's political capital in reserve for another day and another issue. (1999a, p. 650)

It was ever thus. Prime ministers with great political standing and extensive interests (say, one that has won three elections in a row (Chrétien) or the party's two biggest ever electoral wins (Blair)) have a store of capital that is vast if they choose to use it. These debates reflect the obvious reality that the influence of prime ministers has varied over the decades. There have been powerful and weak prime ministers.

Other sets of implicit assumptions may readily be discovered. Some writers may wish one or all of these conditions to be met. But none is satisfactory. To explain cabinet government in these terms, implying there is a normatively correct way for it to work, has severe limitations because it sets practical standards for an organization whose existence is conventional and ever-changing.

Further, implicit in most assumptions is the belief that cabinet can and should limit prime ministers whenever they become too ambitious or authoritarian and that powerful and dominant prime ministers are incompatible with cabinet government. Yet there is a problem with this argument. The occasions in Britain which are usually given as the high points of cabinet government coincide with examples of prime ministers whose governments are in disarray, even near paralysis: the principal examples are the debates on *In Place of Strife*, the 1976 IMF intervention and much of the debate on the EC in the Major cabinet. In each case the prime minister was using the debate to maintain party cohesion. It is odd to laud such circumstances as those in which some ideal of cabinet prevails.

### A CHOICE OF TACTICS

Prime ministers' tactics change to suit circumstance and personality. The tactics can include:

- Control by debate at length. Trudeau and Fraser were both comfortable in cabinet debate; they liked issues to be thrashed out there and could be cutting in their questioning of ministers. But neither was prepared to let decisions run that they thought wrong. Cabinet debate did not mean that the prime ministers' views did not prevail, even where the numbers were against them. Even Major let 'people talk first, listening intently all the while and then expects everyone to agree with him (Foley 1993, p. 211). There is a difference between letting ministers talk it out as a means of keeping the party together and using cabinet as a seminar to discuss policy options before asserting their own decision determined beforehand; the former is an indication of weakness, the latter of style.
- Control by announcing the preferred outcome. Prime ministers can announce where they stand and let the ministers argue where they felt inclined, which might not be too often. Thatcher and Keating are examples in the modern era. They may not have had views on everything, but where they did their cabinets had no doubt where they stood. Whitlam chose to dominate some areas of policy and largely ignored others.
- Decision making by segmentation. Faced with a number of antagonistic and strong personalities, Attlee drove different policies through groups of ministers. As Hennessy has shown, nuclear policy was never divulged to all the cabinet. They did not need to know. War cabinets fit the same mould, whether Suez, Falklands or the Gulf. A full cabinet is not efficient.
- Control by intellect. Where the prime ministers were the best informed, the most experienced and the most intelligent, they could win arguments, or at least reduce the opposition to consent by silence (and fear) (St Laurent, Fraser, Trudeau, Menzies).
- Setting the tone. Some prime ministers may have vision, others want a cautious approach. Keating and Thatcher often fitted the former image;

Chrétien the latter. These general approaches may be taken as given in the choices that ministers take.

- Bi-lateral discussion. Mulroney and Chrétien like to talk to ministers one on one, particularly foreign affairs and the economy where they have a particular interest. Policy may be thrashed out in camera. Blair and Thatcher preferred to use 'groups which do not qualify as cabinet committees' (Hennessy 2000, p. 79). 'As a project-orientated prime minister he [Blair] is more inclined to create teams and units than set up a Cabinet Committee... more co-ordination is done outside the Cabinet system' (Kavanagh and Seldon 2000, p. 321). Decisions were made by ministers and officials in and around cabinet.

Again it would be possible to add to this list of strategic and tactical choices. All prime ministers in the last 100 years have used some or all of them to gain their way. Almost no prime minister has sat back to allow others to dictate; they are after all the leaders of the government. They are expected to set the terms of debate and in summing up to define the decisions. Indeed cabinet will often look for a lead. Winners are trusted, their political instincts admired as long as events and polls are going well. A prime minister who will not give a lead is likely to be weaker than one who lays down the law and then wins again.

There is nothing inherently superior or proper about any one of these tactics; they depend on personality and circumstance. Nor can they be classified as exclusively modern. Budgets were always determined by the prime ministers and their chancellor/treasurer/finance minister, with the level of cabinet participation limited at best. Foreign policy was always shared, with prime ministers being involved where they chose and representing their countries at conferences abroad. Cabinet never was intended to be democratic. As Graham White so colourfully has put it;

At first blush the idea that Canadian cabinets should be in the least democratic is as improbable as the notion that after ministering to the downtrodden of Calcutta, Mother Teresa spent her leisure hours on a supercharged Harley-Davidson riding with the local Hell's Angels chapter for a little mayhem and debauchery. (White 2001, p. 1)

Nor has the most recent *Guide For Ministers and Secretaries of State* (Canada 2002), released by Chrétien left any doubt about his perception of the powers and prerogatives of the prime minister.

What determines those tactical choices will, in part, be a matter of personality. The interests of prime ministers vary. Some care about a few things; others have broader agenda. Some concentrate on the big picture, the key initiatives and delegate the rest; others want to be constantly involved in detail. So will their approach to governing. But it will also depend on the lessons, both positive and negative, that people have learnt from the past. To take just two incumbents as examples: Chrétien is an instinctive and

pugnacious politician; he has vast experience; he was first sworn in as a minister on the same day as Trudeau and Turner, two of his predecessors, in 1967 (Martin 1995). But he is not comfortable having rambling policy discussions, reminiscent of a university seminar, which was the way Trudeau liked to run the cabinet. He prefers an efficient and speedy process and is less inclined to reflect on the possible outcomes, rather than the results.

Blair had never been in government, but he had immediate past models from which to select: the collegiate approach of two weak prime ministers in Callaghan and Major; or the directive lead given by Thatcher. Given those models, what leader would not look at the lessons and longevity of Thatcher and assume that here was a well-charted path to pursue?

These examples can readily be extended. Keating, believing that Hawke had become too cautious, wanted to lead from the front on those issues he cared about (and almost ignored those he did not). Indeed as Britain went from a directive to a more consensual leader in 1990, Australia went the other way in 1991. What mattered was that the new leader was not like the old, not that one method was proper cabinet government and the other not. Circumstances have changed. In each case prime ministers will learn to avoid any recent lessons that led to electoral defeat and see where the advantage lies.

The party and parliamentary circumstances will be crucial. Every prime minister in the last fifty years who relied heavily on cabinet has been in a parlous political situation, either in parliament or in the polls. Lester Pearson never headed a majority government. By contrast Chrétien has led his Liberal party to three consecutive majority governments, an achievement not performed since Mackenzie King in the 1930s and 1940s. His ministers give him immense latitude because his political instincts and fighting spirit has proved so successful. Winners are powerful. Similarly Blair has given Labour its two largest majorities. Callaghan and Major could be challenged from within the cabinet and party because they had little electoral standing and their governments were drifting

There is indeed a danger of arguing that cabinet government is discovered to be at its most powerful only when the government and the leader seems to be heading for defeat. If so, that is a dire prognostication for the success of cabinet government and it is not a state to which any prime minister would aspire. Nor for purposes of analysis is it a useful default mode for a normative notion of cabinet government. Again, to espouse cabinet government is not to describe which tactic should be used; advocating the application of 'true' cabinet government does not tell a prime minister how to govern.

Consequently the argument that cabinet is dead carries little weight because it lacks any precision. Cabinet, as evidence over the century shows, has been in a constant state of revision and evolution under different prime ministers and in all countries. But the debate raises a more interesting question: in what directions is cabinet evolving and with what effect? Has it retained some functions while developing others?

## CABINET GOVERNMENT AS A SET OF ARRANGEMENTS

The concept of cabinet government is too central to our form of government to be defined out of existence. What is required is a concept that can incorporate the different academic approaches, with their emphasis on accountability, rules, policy and power, and at the same time allows a degree of flexibility and evolution. It cannot be described institutionally or procedurally; there are too many variations in practice and no acceptable normative models against which to assess performance. It cannot refer to the level of collegial decision. Nor simply to the fact that power is shared, in some degree, between prime ministers and ministers. It should usefully be able to be applied comparatively.

Two definitions of cabinet government, provided in interviews with officials in Canada and Britain, provided a different emphasis:

- Cabinet government is the arrangements the prime minister makes to ensure that decisions are made in the interests of the general, rather than the individual minister, with a view to presenting a unified program for legislation and supply (Canada);
- Cabinet government is a shorthand term for the process by which government determines its policy and ensures the political will to implement it (Britain).

A former Australian secretary to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet argues that the cabinet has two main functions: policy coherence and political support (Keating and Weller 2000). Again all these definitions are process neutral. They accept the need for political support and for coherent policy, but appreciate the mix will change from time to time. How the prime ministers use cabinets to achieve these objectives will differ from person to person. Some take individual initiatives, others work through the cabinet. Some discuss in a meeting of ministers; others work in and around the cabinet itself.

The essence of the definitions is prime ministers always need support and policy coherence and must work to achieve it. They need ministers to take over the day-to-day running of departments. That sharing of power is the core element of a cabinet system. But again there is no prescription for the way and extent to which power and decisions must be shared. They always do so to some extent. For a long time Chrétien gives a degree of influence to his minister of finance, Paul Martin. Blair has given chancellor Gordon Brown extensive autonomy. For a time in Australia Hawke and Keating made a powerful duo. Howard must now work closely with Peter Costello. Martin, Brown and Costello are all seen as possible successors to the incumbents and have their own power base in the party. They held crucial economic portfolios that reflect their significance and have to be treated with care. Relations between the prime ministers and these colleagues are sometimes strained, but they can never be consistently ignored.

To what extent power is shared with other ministers depends on the interests of the prime ministers and the quality and standing of those other key ministers. In most cases ministers are required to get on with the job for which they have statutory responsibility. Sometimes, indeed, far from complaining about excessive interference, they complain of the difficulty of attracting the prime ministers' interest when they want to take an initiative. Some regard it as a sign of competence that they do not involve the prime ministers on day to day business. But they know that where the prime ministers share an interest they will be required to work in cooperation with them and they usually relish the opportunity to do so. But in each case the initiative will lie with the prime minister, not the minister.

Maintaining collective support is an end that can be achieved by a variety of means, of which debate and information exchange in cabinet has always been but one. Powerful leaders achieve it through their authority, of which there may be few public signs. There is too much activity for prime ministers to know all that is going on; they can take support for granted, for a time at least. But there is a need to avoid a problem of equating weakness with collective weight: often the times when cabinet government is regarded at its strongest, are when governments are in crisis and when prime ministers have limited political power because of internal or external constraints. It does appear to be perverse to advocate normatively a form of collective decision making that signifies a government under siege.

Cabinet remains a useful forum for maintaining that collective support; indeed that still seems the most persuasive reason for the regular meetings of cabinet, whether they are seen as a focus group or a political forum. Indeed these traditional political functions of cabinet – exchanging information, taking the political temperature, geeing up ministers, providing a sense of solidarity, setting the tone, emphasising the current issues and their resolution – can be undertaken almost independently of policy functions. Hence the fact that often when big issues came to cabinet, the intent was as much to solidify support as determine any direction. Every government seems to still use cabinet for these political purposes, as insurance and to lock in support.

But the pressure and complexity of modern government means that a weekly meeting of busy ministers no longer seems the best way to make timely and sophisticated policy. So prime ministers choose to work with the principal players in and around those regular meetings. The weaknesses of cabinet are, as Kavanagh and Seldon (2000, p. 321) note, well established: too much information, too little time, too many busy people. Modern practices take this pressure into account by segmenting and organizing the decision-making. The process may, *de facto*, now be closer to Dell's image of collective purpose, with crucial policy decisions made around the cabinet. Cabinet itself is used to forge unity and collective purpose, rather than decide on a course of action.

If that is an accurate diagnosis, then cabinet is simply evolving as it did a century ago. If it is a political forum, not a decision-making one, then there is



a logic in the regularity of meetings and the generality of the discussions. If decisions are taken elsewhere, in and around the system, in the prime ministers' offices, in the committees, that is a matter of efficiency and convenience. Cabinet is a working institution.

### WHAT DETERMINES THE VARIATIONS IN PRACTICE?

The variations cannot be explained by constitutional theory. Certainly observers make comments on what prime minister should do. 'The self-restraint of co-operative government... is part of the job description' (Rose 1980, p. 340). Prime ministers should not pursue their own policies; their role is to hold the ring. These prescriptions may suit some ideal of a prime minister, or fit a model of practice for cabinet governments. But prime ministers do what they can, consistent with the ability to maintain collective support. If they can take extensive power, they will as long as it is consistent with continuing support. In institutions that are constantly evolving it can only be expected. Noticeably even in countries that have a constitution, cabinet is not mentioned; it remains a conventional part of the political scenery.

But again there is a *caveat*. In the last decades prime ministers may have appeared to gain power, but it may be greater influence over less. The move to reliance on markets has been a bi-partisan shift, as governments deliver less, even while they commission and pay for more. Central banks have been given greater independence, currencies float, governments are signatories to international trade agreements or join free trade blocs, appeals to the European Union or the World Trade Organisation take some decisions out of the hands of national governments. Globalization changes the role that cabinets and leaders play.

In federal states there is recognition that cabinet may have a representational role and that many policies have to be negotiated with leaders at other levels of government. In Canada and Australia the premiers of provinces and states are significant figures in their own right. In time the leaders of Scottish and Welsh assemblies too will gain in status and become players with whom prime ministers must negotiate.

We need to be careful about assuming that all countries start from the same position. According to one comparative study (Andeweg 1997), Britain's cabinet system is already more segmented and less collective than those of Australia, Canada, Germany or The Netherlands. In those places the pressures on cabinet are often representational, whether of coalition or regions. In Britain the main interests are departmental.

But the crucial factors are the national political traditions and the way they affect the position of the prime ministers. In Canada cabinet has fulfilled a variety of functions, primarily that of representation of the provinces. With numbers rising to 40 at times, and with political objections to a division of the cabinet into cabinet and non-cabinet members, it has never acted as a decision-making forum (Bakvis 2000). Indeed it is often not expected to be one. In the PCO the culture requires that most issues be

negotiated outside the cabinet room. Bitter argument between ministers in cabinet is a sign that the PCO has failed. Ministers are not used to being directed by cabinet within their own portfolios. In the program review exercise in 1995, ministers fought to protect their departments from cuts; Ralph Goodale, Minister for Agriculture, asked the program review committee: 'What gives you the right to act as judges on what generations of other people have created? From what divine right do you derive the power to decide that 50 of my scientists will be without work tomorrow?' (Savoie 1999a, p. 180).

Ministers in Australia or Britain would not challenge the decision of a budget committee so passionately because their experience of a cost-cutting committee review is more regular; besides, the prime ministers give the committees that divine right (as Chrétien had done this time in Canada). So in that sense cabinet has never been the centre of decisions in Canada and the prime ministers have for decades, from John Macdonald onwards, shown both a detailed interest in the decisions of ministers and arranged the processes of government around the cabinet system. They have used different vehicles for decision as the issue and circumstances required.

Besides, the Canadian prime minister is invulnerable from internal revolt. Elected by convention delegates among whom MPs are a small minority, the prime minister does not owe his position to the parliamentary caucus. Ministers may wonder who the successor might be, but they can do nothing to influence the timing of that election, even if the prime minister is, according to the opinion polls, massively unpopular and leading the party to ruin. Both Trudeau and Mulroney decided when they would leave and both in effect handed a poisoned chalice to their successors. If a prime minister is constantly successful, as Chrétien has been, his position is much safer.

As both British parties move to leadership elections that are broader than just the parliamentary party, so they too will consolidate the position of the party leader. Those that do not elect can hardly remove. Even when it could, Thatcher's cabinet revolted only after the electoral college had required her to go to a second ballot. So prime ministers are becoming safer from internal revolt and their position is thus strengthened. But even without that change the conventions and practice of cabinet have always been in the hands of the prime ministers who exercised the power in ways that they saw best for the future of their government and for their own position. All the evidence suggests that cabinet government is a malleable institution and has been for a long time.

The exceptional case may be Australia. Again, like the Canadian leader, Australian prime ministers must deal with state premiers with an independent power base and different interests. They must negotiate with a Senate that has equal powers to the House of Representatives and in which no government has had a majority for over 20 years. The culture is different. Cabinet is a forum where rugged debate is expected. Central agencies are required to isolate the hard issues that need cabinet decision by determining

the facts and letting cabinet decide on the direction. Australian cabinet ministers know that cabinet committees have the support of the prime minister.

But more important Australian prime ministers still depend for their futures on the support of the parliamentary party and can be removed by a vote at any time in the party room (Weller 1993). As long as they win elections, or seem likely to win, they are secure. But there is a record of successful and unsuccessful challenges, even to prime ministers who have won three elections. Prime ministers must therefore be even more conscious of the opinions and standing of their cabinet colleagues. The rules of engagement are thus different.

### **CAN CABINET GOVERNMENT BE RECOGNIZED?**

These are variations to cabinet government; we cannot say that cabinet government exists in one place and not in another. Cabinet government can come in a number of forms, most of which are consistent with the circumstances we find in the countries under review. Cabinet government evolves to meet the challenges that emerge. Collective cabinet government might have been 'real' in the aristocratic clique of the late nineteenth century but that style could not survive war and the modern media. In each country the system has developed, become more bureaucratized, more fragmented, more managed, as much by necessity as by choice.

The idea of cabinet collectivity remains significant. Cabinet may be an ideal, or in the phrase of Seymour-Ure (1971), a principle; but its existence creates expectations for maintaining a minimum collective support. Meetings are still held because prime ministers see value, politically and organizationally, in such exercises. The ideal may be elusive, incapable of precise definition, let alone giving satisfaction, but it still stands as the core of the way that people perceive their system of government. All the accounts of cabinet government have in common is a sense of change in the face of the brute demands of decision-making. Under what circumstances could we really define cabinet government to be dead? To see the answer we can look either at countries where the language of collective cabinet is retained but dictatorship prevail and where there is no need to maintain the collectivity, or at the other extreme places where there is no collective input and where ministers make all the decisions. On this spectrum, none of the countries under review gets close to either extreme.

If then critics wish to declare cabinet government dead, it behoves them to identify the criteria they regard as essential to the proper working of cabinet government and the conditions to be satisfied before cabinet government can thrive. They should also explain why, under these conditions, government might be better and perhaps show by example when those conditions applied and with what results. That exercise would create normative criteria for good and effective government. But that they have failed to do. To state that prime ministers are as powerful as their ministers allow them to be is a truism that tells us little about the way government is, or should, operate; it

merely notes the need to maintain collective support. The death of cabinet government is assumed by an analysis of the activities of prime ministers. But ministers exert authority within their portfolios and there is no consistent trend to suggest that prime ministers determine everything; they are influential in those areas where they care to act, as they always were. The oft-cited ideals of cabinet government, under Pearson, Callaghan and Major, are often governments under stress with politically or personally weak prime ministers. The most frequently cited examples of cabinet government in action are often examples of prime ministers allowing lengthy debate as a means of sustaining collective support. The strategy had been determined in advance; cabinet was used to bring the dissidents to heel and lock them in. Until some defensible normative criteria to define cabinet government are developed, it is premature to describe as dead an institution that was never more than an elusive ideal and indeed may never have existed in the forms its advocates proclaim as desirable.

If cabinet government is more usefully interpreted as a set of arrangements in which the ministers hold the statutory power and prime ministers, with greater or lesser intervention, determine how the individual is fitted into the collective will, then cabinet government remains, consistent with the past in intent and outcome, but different in form. Prime ministers need to gain that collective support from ministers who have statutory authority and for that the cabinet and its environs remain a vital forum. Cabinet meetings are not always effective ways of determining policy, so those policy decisions have been hived off into more effective processes. Cabinet government is a working set of arrangements, not a set of rules or a given distribution of power. Just as it was unrealistic to expect the style of the 19th century to survive war and economic development, so the modern cabinet too has to evolve to meet the pressures on it.

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