

# How Does the Cameron-Clegg Relationship Affect the Role of Prime Minister?

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## Abstract

*Forming a coalition involves compromise, so a prime minister heading up a coalition government, even one as predominant a party leader as Cameron, should not be as powerful as a prime minister leading a single party government. Cameron has still to work with and through ministers from his own party, but has also to work with and through Liberal Democrat ministers; not least the Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg. The relationship between the prime minister and his deputy is uncharted territory for recent academic study of the British prime minister. This paper explores how Cameron and Clegg operate within both Whitehall and Westminster: the cabinet arrangements; patronage; advisory resources and more informal mechanisms. In what ways has Cameron's prime ministerial style been affected by the realities of coalition government? Specifically, is being prime minister radically different when leading a coalition government instead of a single party one? Both Cameron and Clegg possess institutional and personal resources and are dependent on each other, but Cameron remains the predominant resource-rich actor. At this early stage in the Cameron premiership we can observe that no formal, substantial change in the role of prime minister has been enacted. Cameron's predominance, by leading a coalition, is partially constrained by Clegg, but he too constrains Clegg. This prime minister, then, is predominant even when he is constrained in significant ways by the imperatives of coalition government. Cameron is no more constrained than a prime minister who is faced with a preeminent intra-party rival with a significant power base.*

David Cameron is not, thanks to the Conservatives' failure to win the general election in their own right, the party leader with an overall party majority in the House of Commons. He is prime minister, contrary to the manner prescribed by the British political tradition, only because the Conservatives formed a coalition with the third placed Liberal Democrats. No party leader in modern times has become prime minister by his party combining with another; a strong, single party government, even in the hung parliament of February to October 1974, has long been the principal foundation for the prime minister. Cameron has to work with and through Liberal Democrat ministers, not least the formal deputy prime minister, Nick Clegg. Cameron, to be an effective prime minister, has, to manage as well as work with and through (perhaps sometimes appease) senior Conservative ministers and his own backbenches. Most unusually he has also, to work with and carefully manage both Clegg and the Liberal Democrat party. The

established image of a strong, authoritative prime minister leading the government from the front is an image indelibly associated with the normal experience of Britain's parliamentary chief executive. Is being prime minister radically different when leading a coalition government instead of a single party one?

### **Intra executive politics within the coalition**

Executive-legislative relations remain (so far) spectacularly unchanged under the coalition, thanks to the preparedness of the Conservative- Lib Dem Commons majority to prioritise supplying and supporting the government over checking and balancing it. The government's parliamentary majority remains, as ever, the keystone in the government's arch so, even with this government being dependant on a majority composed of two different and distinct political parties (either of which have no national experience of working with the other), ministers still lead and the Commons (largely) follows. It is, however, in the emergent relationship between both coalition partners within the government where British politics has entered hitherto uncharted territory: there have been some small, subtle (and perhaps far reaching) changes enacted in intra-executive relationships. Such changes, inevitably, manifest themselves in changes in the role played by the prime minister.

It is worth noting at the outset that the task of exploring how Cameron (and Clegg's) government 'works' is complicated by the fact that it rarely leaks or briefs about 'process'; 'how' ministers work, not just what they do. Labour, even in spite of its obsession with news management (perhaps because of that obsession), endlessly, tirelessly did so. Blair and Brown's battles for ascendancy, exacerbated by their eager camp followers, were ceaselessly reported to favoured journalists, so an obsessive focus on 'process' resulted. Reporters presently ask questions, but insiders, ministers and special advisers alike, largely refuse to provide the answers. In terms of understanding how the government operates, while the coalition awaits its own Andrew Rawnsley (1998; 2010), we are currently very much on the outside looking in.

#### *The Cameron-Clegg relationship*

Both the Conservatives and the Lib Dems have made substantive policy concessions to the other; because neither can insist on any policy the other cannot accept both observe a 'self denying ordinance' to ensure they work effectively together. Glimpsed from the outside, the Cameron- Clegg relationship does not seem combative. Neither man, nor any surrogate, ever unfavourably leaks or briefs against the other; both recognise that their political and personal relationship is key to the coalition surviving (and thriving). The Cameron- Clegg relationship 'sets the tone for government at every level' (Laws 2010: 275). Both principals enjoy a convivial and trusting relationship, causing James Forsyth, Political Editor of *The Spectator* to muse that they 'have rather courted the jibes about Brokeback Mountain, turning up to parties together, ordering the same (non-alcoholic) drinks, wearing matching shirts and ties and texting each other as incessantly as a pair of love-struck teenagers' (*Daily Mail*, 8 August 2010).

Informality and personal warmth in the relationship may have come easily to two 43 year old leaders with a similar educational background. However personal relationships important as they are need to be understood within the context of the institutional arrangements. The US vice presidency might not, in the opinion of a past occupant, be worth a ‘pitcher of warm piss’, but the vice president is elected in his own right as part of a presidential ticket, holds a constitutionally mandated office and he or she will, should the president resign, be impeached or become permanently incapacitated, automatically succeed to the presidency. No rights or responsibilities are automatically conferred by being the British deputy prime minister. The ‘post’ has usually been a courtesy title provided by the prime minister to indicate a minister’s standing and seniority; recent examples include William Whitelaw, Michael Heseltine and John Prescott. Blair awarded Prescott the title merely to keep him ‘sweet’ and because he felt Prescott’s party status, being Labour’s deputy leader, ‘required’ it; Gordon Brown felt no such compulsion to similarly reward Harriet Harman, preferring instead to ‘reward’ the minister he most relied upon, Peter Mandelson, with the title of first secretary of state. The position of deputy prime minister has now been formalised. Clegg holds not only a title but a cabinet position with formalised powers. His position in the government- and those of other Lib Dem ministers- is not something Cameron can change; Clegg cannot be reshuffled or removed. This is, to say the least, an unusual experience in British politics. Nothing of its like has been seen since Churchill’s wartime coalition when the Labour leader, Attlee, held the same post and sat of right in Churchill’s cabinet.

#### *Making ministers and allocating portfolios*

The Cabinet Office document, *Coalition Agreement for Stability and Reform*, published in May 2010, establishes that ministerial posts are allocated “in proportion to the parliamentary representation of the two coalition parties” and that the “prime minister will make nominations for the appointment of ministers following consultation with the Deputy Prime Minister” (Cabinet Office 2010). Cameron has thus formally and substantively limited his prime ministerial prerogative to make ministerial appointments. He still, naturally, nominates Conservative ministers, but Clegg now nominates the agreed number of Lib Dem ministers. The Lib Dems, have some five seats in cabinet and twenty-four other ministerial posts, but they control none of the big spending departments, have no ministers in three major departments, and have to rely on junior ministers to be the Lib Dem voice in most departments (Paun 2010).

Not only has Clegg to agree to “changes to the allocation of portfolios between the parliamentary parties during the lifetime of the coalition” (Cabinet Office, 2010), but Cameron has also to accept that “no Liberal Democrat minister or whip may be removed on the recommendation of the prime minister without full consultation with the deputy prime minister” (ibid). This second requirement, in light of the fallout from business secretary Vince Cable’s unwise and vain boast that he was ‘waging war’ against Rupert Murdoch (when Cable, unusually, was not fired, but responsibility for media regulation was transferred from his department to the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS)), seemingly means Clegg has the practical power- in consultation with Cameron- to defend ‘his’ ministers. Cameron’s powers of appointment have been limited

by his coalition: Cable, clearly, would have been fired had he been a Conservative. Cameron and Clegg together took the decision to keep him on; this is because his position within the cabinet (if not necessarily the portfolio he holds) is in the gift of Clegg, not Cameron. Both reached the compromise: first, hiving off media competition policy to the DCMS; second, keeping a chastened (and, to all extents and purposes, now powerless) Cable temporarily within the cabinet.

The coalition, in order to maintain the agreed ministerial balance between the two partners, has also agreed to operate by a 'one-in, one-out' rule. For instance, when the Lib Dem David Laws resigned from the cabinet, he was replaced by the reshuffled Danny Alexander (who was then replaced by the promoted Michael Moore). The prime ministerial power of patronage has long been the essential resource binding ministers (and, crucially, would-be ministers and wanna-be-more-senior ministers) to him or her. Cameron, by having not only to consult- but also to 'agree'- with Clegg on ministerial appointments and portfolio allocation, has had this power significantly constrained by a new formal limitation. He remains free, however, to choose the Conservative members of the government. Both Cameron and Clegg, we can assume, respect each other's right to freely choose which members of their respective parties are to be in the government (and at what level in which post). Any practical restraint on their use of that unequally shared prerogative (Cameron nominates more ministers than Clegg) will be exerted by what their respective parties deem bearable, not by Cameron, nor by Clegg.

### *Cabinet and its committees*

It is well established that the full cabinet no longer plays any serious, meaningful role as a deliberative body charged with taking decisions (as opposed to the occasional collective discussion and, more importantly, the endorsement of the policy agenda of senior ministers). Cabinet, now at best a clearing house for information, is merely reported to by key principals. It can, occasionally, when meeting in the form of a political cabinet, provide a sounding board from which key strategists, foremost among them the prime minister, can bounce off ideas and be given advice. The coalition cabinet mood music was genial from the start, as one would expect from a new government, with Cameron considering himself the coalition's 'chairman' (Parker 2011). The contrast with the Blair and Brown cabinets was evident. Not only would this be a more collective cabinet by coalition necessity, but the lack of obvious leadership rivals meant a more convivial atmosphere. Clegg sits opposite Cameron in cabinet meetings, in the seat from where Brown eyed Blair. He has George Osborne on his right and Ken Clarke on his left (Laws 2010). Cameron is known to let discussion flow around the cabinet table and there are some small signs that the cabinet is willing to occasionally engage in some discussion of an issue and individual ministers are showing some willingness to assert themselves. Cabinet deals, brokered, if needs be, by Cameron and Clegg, have been struck. Generally, however, coalition ministers have surprisingly been on the same page; Cameron has apparently been heard to remark: 'I get far more trouble from Ken Clarke, Liam Fox and Iain Duncan Smith than I do from Nick' (Rawnsley 2010a).

We are led to believe that the full cabinet matters more under the coalition. A great play was made of the impending return of cabinet government, based on work undertaken by Ken Clarke's Democracy Taskforce, advised by former cabinet secretaries (Conservative Party Democracy Taskforce, 2007). But the exchange of cabinet opinion is not the same as the taking of a substantive decision on a subject. As the coalition has entered choppy waters differences between ministers have become apparent, although the policy disagreements that have leaked in recent times have focused on tensions in the Conservative camp (most glaringly between Cameron and Liam Fox on the strategic defence review and between Michael Gove and William Hague on Britain's response to the Libyan uprising) rather than between the two parties. It is worth noting, however, that under both Blair and Brown cabinet discussions (such as they were) were largely confined to ministers asking questions of the prime minister or of the relevant minister responsibly for the issue at hand. Rarely did ministers engage with each other over matters relating to a particular minister's brief. Cameron's cabinet meetings have sometimes seen ministers engage with one another (notably over the case for a Libyan no fly zone or NHS reform), but the long established bilateral dynamic of the prime minister being the 'centre' and other ministers being the 'spokes' remains in place, even if Clegg plays a far more central role than previous holders of his post.

#### *'Coalitionising' policy*

Cabinet, for some time now, has largely worked through its committees. This has not changed under Cameron. However the trumpeted return to a more structured form of cabinet government (Lord Butler, Hansard, July 2010) has seen a leaner cabinet committee system established; one with the bite to consider the real decision on key issues. Coalition government means government by committee. Cabinet committee meetings on important matters have usually been preceded by a meeting of the key principals led by Cameron and Clegg or their surrogates. Given the need for Conservative and Lib Dem ministers to have some form of 'ownership' of a policy, the cabinet system has to matter more than has been the case under past single party governments. For the coalition to work effectively it certainly requires a degree of collective discussion of key issues in cabinet committees, if not in cabinet, to ensure comity between Conservatives and Lib Dems. For the cabinet secretary, Gus O'Donnell, this means a

“completely different way of working. And that's because, as civil servants, we have out across the message that whenever a policy decision comes up we need to coalitionise (sic) it. That means very early on, it works across both political parties” (O'Donnell 2011).

Of course ensuring each party works off the same page and can claim ownership of important policy issues need not imply a return to older school notions of collective Cabinet or ministerial government, the practice called into question by both Blair and Margaret Thatcher.

The formal cabinet structures that were put in place in the *Coalition Agreement* put a 'coalition committee' at the 'top of the government's collective decision-making

machinery' (Paun 2010). Cameron and Clegg co-chair this committee which has "to manage the business and priorities of the Government and the implementation and operation of the coalition agreement" (Cabinet Office 2010a). It contains five Conservatives and five Liberal Democrats, including the most senior figures of each of the parties, and is charged with keeping the coalition on track when times get tough. Unresolved issues are expected to be referred to the coalition committee, but 'the use of this right will be kept to a minimum' (ibid). Referral to the coalition committee is thus a last resort when other committees- and Cameron- Clegg communications- fail to solve the matter. It is listed as meeting weekly, but '[i]n its first three months of existence it has apparently met just once, to resolve issues relating to the plans for structural reform of the NHS and the proposed boundary review for House of Commons constituencies' (Paun 2010). This indicates that other cabinet arrangements to resolve problems and potential conflicts between the coalition partners work well. It also demonstrates that ministers have, so far, established smooth and harmonious ways of working that have not needed the intervention of the 'court of last resort', the coalition committee. Cabinet committees have a chair from one party and a deputy chair from the other. Either the chair or deputy chair of a committee has the right to refer irresolvable policy disagreements to the coalition committee. The most important of these committees are the National Security Council, on which Clegg sits as Deputy Chair and the Home Affairs Committee, which Clegg chairs (without Cameron's involvement), with a broad remit covering constitutional, education, health, welfare and immigration issues. These committees meet weekly. In addition there is a 'Coalition Operation and Strategic Planning Group', which comprises the Conservatives Oliver Letwin and Francis Maude and the Lib Dems Danny Alexander, and Jim Wallace. This has however never met, supplanted by more informal troubleshooting arrangements.

### **Cameron as predominant prime minister?**

Any prime minister has a large political footprint. Elections are increasingly fought out between parties led by their leaders, so parties have significantly increased the purchase of the individual party leader over their programme and campaign pitch; this contributes to the power of the prime minister in government (and to that of the deputy prime minister). As the party leader's debates at the last election portend, the political purchase of the party leader is likely to increase, not decrease in the future. Cameron and Clegg both cast considerable shadows over their respective parties (but Cameron's is presently the larger). The notion that the prime minister should be powerful and authoritative- that any party leader, to be successful, has to be powerful and authoritative- is now a central feature of British politics. This is largely a response to trends in comparative party politics:

- The on-going personalisation of politics which places party leaders ever more centre stage, something prompted by the pathologies of news media reportage;
- The on-going decline in the electorate's ties to parties, something which makes parties 'sell' themselves by emphasising their leadership and the policy presented by that leadership (Poguntke and Webb 2005).

These, alongside other factors, have helped further root a leader-centric imperative within British politics. Parties have always had a pyramidal structure, but now more than ever they reflect a strict parliamentary hierarchy of (1) leader; (2) other senior leaders; (3) frontbenchers; and (4) backbenchers. This has copper fastened the long established centrality of the prime minister. It is now assumed he or she will be more than 'primus inter pares' and has to have more authority, influence and power than any other governmental actor. This never, it has to be said, makes any prime minister a 'president' (Foley 2000). The notion of presidentialisation was forever undone by the confirmation in recent ministerial (and prime ministerial) memoirs that infighting between Blair and Brown meant Brown often prevented Blair from pursuing his chosen agenda (Blair 2010; Mandelson 2010). No US president, unlike the British prime minister, can use a partisan majority to successfully lead their legislature; but no prime minister, as Brown proved under the one time 'president' Blair, can ever have the total control the president has over his or her executive (Heffernan 2005).

Cameron, having been a powerful and authoritative party leader in opposition, is eager to cast himself in the modern mould of leadership. Even friendly admirers consider him "ambitious, competitive, there's an element of selfishness, all the things which are important if you're going to be Prime Minister. Ruthless. He's got all of those..... David is a natural No. 1" (Mayer, 2008). Cameron, being prime minister, should have automatic possession of the following institutional power resources:

- Being the legal head of the government, having the right of proposal and veto, to appoint and delegate responsibilities to ministers and departments through the use of Crown prerogatives, and having the right to be consulted, either directly or indirectly, about all significant matters relating to government policy;
- Helping set the policy agenda through leadership of the government, bilateral negotiations with individual ministers, management of the cabinet and cabinet committee system and directing the Whitehall apparatus;
- Heading up a de facto prime ministerial department in Downing Street and the Cabinet Office; and
- Being able, through his or her party and the news media, to set the government's political agenda (Heffernan 2003; 2005).

These resources make any prime minister, even when leading a coalition, a unique, powerful Whitehall actor. Cameron, as with all prime ministers, would be a *predominant prime minister* (the 'stronger or main element' within the party, parliament and government), when able to marry his prime ministerial institutional power with the following personal power resources:

- Reputation, skill and ability;
- Association with actual or anticipated political success;
- Electoral popularity; and
- Having a high standing in his or her parliamentary party (less so the extra-parliamentary party) (Heffernan 2003; 2005a)

These resources empower the prime minister within both their party and government. Within parliament the ability to lead a partisan Commons majority confers considerably advantage; within the government ministers, whatever their career trajectory, are more likely to work to or otherwise defer to a prime minister who is *electorally popular* and they consider *politically successful*. This gives the prime minister a less fettered hand in the running of their government. Blair, in his pre 2003 heyday, possessed such power resources in abundance. He was, notwithstanding Gordon Brown's ability to often stymie him in many policy areas, mostly predominant as a result. Of course political 'skill in context' is crucial to the utilisation of resources, because these prime ministerial personal resources are contingent and contextual (Bennister 2009). They come and go, are acquired and squandered, won and lost. Cameron, like all prime ministers, will be predominant by being well resourced; he will be less predominant by being poorly resourced.

### *Is Cameron constrained by Clegg?*

Cameron, like any prime minister, is constrained by public and parliamentary opinion, the temporality of their power resources, the obligations of collegiality, and by limitations such as time, information and expertise. Cameron's opportunity to be a powerful and authoritative prime minister is, unusually, constrained to some extent by his relationship with Nick Clegg and the Lib Dems. Prime Minister Cameron is powerful, by simple virtue of occupying the office, but within the coalition he has to:

- Make policy compromises with his coalition partner, rather than pull his own party behind his own favoured policy agenda;
- Negotiate the peculiarities of having to manage the 'two-headed leadership' of the government;
- Accept that there are constraints on his ability to appoint and manage ministers; and
- Acknowledge, because the government has to operate not only intra-party, but also cross-party, that there is a new collective dynamic within the executive and specifically inside the cabinet system.

This reality, so far, has proven to be something to which Cameron has been able (happily) to accommodate himself to. His abovementioned *personal power resources* (his failure to win the election for the Conservatives or to subsequently improve on their electoral showing notwithstanding) are presently more in credit than debit. His *institutional power resources*, however, are partially compromised by his leading a coalition and by his relationship with Clegg. Cameron remains the legal head of the government, but his prerogatives to propose, veto and make ministerial appointments are, as we have seen, constrained by Clegg. Clegg, having a party based autonomy from Cameron, plays some part in structuring **the policy agenda through leadership of the government, bilateral negotiations with individual ministers, management of the cabinet and cabinet committee system and exerting influence over the Whitehall apparatus**. This policy agenda has already been structured to a considerable extent by the *Coalition Programme for Government*. Cameron's ability to **be able, through his or**

**her party and the news media, to set the government's political agenda** is also partially fettered by Clegg's ability - and that of 'his' ministers- to try to do likewise as Liberal Democrats.

These constraints are a subtle qualification of the prime minister's institutional power. Can Clegg, short of the radical step of pulling the plug on the coalition, further constrain Cameron? Not really. Clegg's powers are often informal. He is Lord President of the Council, a post usually held by the Leader of the House of Commons or Lords but, beyond the *Coalition Agreement for Stability and Reform*, little other formal light is cast on his role. He has (1) Privy Council responsibilities; (2) heads up the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister; (3) is responsible for the Cabinet Office's Political and Constitutional Directorate; (4) fills in for Cameron at prime minister's questions and (5) 'runs' the routine, mundane business of government in Cameron's absence. As deputy prime minister, Clegg presently possesses, then, the following institutional power resources:

- The ability to collapse the government by withdrawing Lib Dem support from the coalition;
- As Cameron's deputy he possesses the right to be consulted on ministerial appointments and can nominate, following consultation with Cameron, Lib Dem ministers; he has the right to propose (and perhaps veto) policy and, with other Lib Dem ministers, to amend policy; to stand in for the prime minister in his absence; and having the right to be consulted, either directly or indirectly, about all significant matters relating to government policy;
- Helping set the policy agenda through bilateral negotiations with the prime minister; chairing of cabinet committees; and having the right to see and comment on departmental papers presented to the prime minister; and
- Making use of a new, but limited (if expanding), deputy prime minister's office.

These resources, while more significant than those of any other minister, are weaker than those of the prime minister. In essence they enable Clegg to qualify Cameron's institutional power resources, rather than provide him with the means to pursue his own separate agenda. Clegg manages the government's constitutional reform agenda, but being without a full department of his own, he is unusual by comparison with other deputies (Paun 2010). The allocation of portfolios was not subject to agreement between the parties, apparently left to bilateral negotiation between Cameron and Clegg. Clegg may have weakened his (and his party's) position by avoiding taking a major portfolio, but it is hard to see that Cameron could have made him foreign secretary and he is likely to have turned down the graveyard post of home secretary (being chancellor, George Osborne's non-negotiable perch, was, naturally, out of the question). The realities of the coalition means Clegg has to be close to the action and have a strong domestic role; only by lacking a strict departmental role can he hope to play some role across the range of government policy.

*Clegg's power resources*

Clegg's principal resource, his trump card, is that the *Coalition Agreement* indicates that both prime minister and deputy prime minister 'should' have a 'full and contemporaneous overview of the business of Government. Each will have the power to commission papers from the Cabinet Secretariat' (Cabinet Office, 2010). The devil, as ever, is in the detail: the operative word there, one notes, is 'should'. The prime minister, it seems, has the greater institutional resource to enjoy such a 'full and contemporaneous overview' than those possessed by Clegg's (newly established) office. There is "an inherent asymmetry in the coalition — in numbers, resources, experience and preparation" (Riddell 2010). By the summer of 2010 Cameron had appointed some 15 Downing Street special advisers, but Clegg had only 4 (Guardian, 13 June 2010). Clegg, aware of the need to boost his political capacity, appointed a further 5 special advisers to his private office in October 2010. He remains, however, considerably outnumbered and out resourced having 'to cover ninety per cent of the policy remit of the Prime Minister with less than half the support' (Paun 2010). Locating himself at the centre may have been a strategic decision, but it has meant Clegg often lacks the necessary resources to play the role he needs to play there. He has also badly missed the advice of the absent David Laws, who left the cabinet following his failure to properly account for his parliamentary expenses. Laws' role as Clegg's 'deputy' has since been filled by the pedestrian Danny Alexander who's formative experience before entering parliament in 2005 was, alarmingly, being the chief press officer for the Cairngorm's National Park. Cameron remains the resource-rich actor in the executive; he has 175 staff at his disposal in the prime minister's office in contrast to Clegg's 13 in the office of the deputy prime minister (plus the 60 officials of the Constitutional and Political Reform Directorate) (Cabinet Office 2010b).

We may thus be able to identify a set of institutional resources for Clegg as the deputy prime minister, but Clegg can only be practically empowered within the executive should he be able to lay meaningful claim to similar resources to those of the prime minister:

- Reputation, skill and ability;
- Association with actual or anticipated political success;
- Electoral popularity; and
- Having a high standing in his or her parliamentary party (less so the extra-parliamentary party) (Heffernan 2003; 2005)

Clegg presently struggles to possess (let alone effectively use) these four resources. He retains the fourth resource at present, but since entering government he has been considerably weakened in the others by being hit hard by (1) the Lib Dem slump in the polls; (2) losing the Oldham East and Saddleworth and Barnsley by-elections; (3) taking the blame for 'Tory measures' such as the cuts and the hike in tuition fees; and (4) by enduring considerable liberal (small l) hostility born of 'his' decision to 'prop up' a Conservative government, something reflected in the dramatic collapse of the Lib Dems poll ratings. Cameron has been criticised by some for letting Clegg take the flak for breaking his party's promise on tuition fees, but Clegg, it would seem, has been more than prepared to do this. Clegg's problems are exacerbated by the irresolvable conundrum that he can (1) only operate in Whitehall- and extract policy concessions from

Cameron- by being emollient and consensual, but (2) can only secure electoral credit from past Lib Dem voters by being assertive and confrontational.

His problem, then, is that many Lib Dem voters think the Conservative brand has not been 'sufficiently decontaminated'. The few concessions- or policy victories- he might achieve within the cabinet system- and from Cameron- remain out of sight of the electorate. Clegg and other Lib Dem ministers cannot, for reasons of cabinet comity and the need to maintain the close working relationship between Cameron and Clegg and Conservative and Lib Dem ministers, 'run' against the government. Neither can they 'challenge the 'Conservatives' or trumpet their own party successes by distinguishing them from those of the government. Cameron, then, might find himself having to support and explain government policy not of his party's own making (the policy of Lib Dem ministers), but Clegg has the more unenviable task of explaining and defending Conservative policy. Cameron's approval rating now hovers around 40 percent after the post-election high of 60 percent, but Clegg's, however, has plummeted from a similarly post-election high level to a 20 percent approval rating. His party has plunged to an all time low of some 9 percent (YouGov, 22 March 2011). "When asked why his prophecy about becoming Britain's public enemy number one has not yet materialised, [George] Osborne jokes with colleagues: "I hadn't reckoned on Nick Clegg" (Parker 2011a). The Conservatives, it seems, receive whatever credit is given the coalition and the Lib Dems all of the blame.

*Cameron, while having to make concessions to and work with Clegg, is predominant*

Can Clegg then prevent Cameron, because he leads a coalition, being a predominant prime minister? Only partially because Clegg, short of the doomsday scenario of collapsing the coalition (or threatening to do so), can only significantly qualify the prime minister's institutional power, not permanently erode it. Any threat he might make to end the coalition cannot be made idly and can probably, for reasons of cabinet comity, be never made more than once. Cameron's own ability to call an early election will be tempered by the fixed term parliaments legislation, removing a well-established power to (theoretically) utilise the advantages of incumbency (Hazell 2010). The shift to fixed term parliaments, while appearing to limit the prime minister's prerogative power to devolve parliament, actually binds the coalition together and strengthens Cameron hand. Is Cameron predominant? Among Conservatives he is presently unchallenged. He has, for instance, no equivalent of Gordon Brown to contend with; something placing him in a more advantageous intra-executive position than Tony Blair; Osborne, Cameron's chancellor, is his closest supporter, not his wanna- be successor. Such is Cameron's command of his party, he would be wholly predominant were it not for the policy concessions he had to make to Clegg and his coalition partner. Such concessions, however, appear to be easily made by Cameron who seems not remotely concerned he cannot pursue the entire policy agenda he might personally favour. He is, then, in spite of Clegg, more predominant than not; he is, however, less predominant than he would be were he leading a single party government. Naturally, Cameron, like all prime ministers, probably thinks he is neither powerful nor sufficiently predominant.

## **Cameron going forward**

Cameron, a commanding figure in opposition, has belatedly discovered his lack of reach-and of grasp - across the governmental machine. In opposition, making the most of his electoral 'mandate' and the claim he could make the Conservatives electable, Cameron could (with Osborne and others) easily steer much of the party's policy and strategy. He did so in three ways by:

- Making political speeches setting out what the party was doing and, more importantly, what it intended to do;
- Issuing formal policy statements that he or his team had agreed with (sometimes imposed upon) shadow ministers; and
- Reinforcing the speech and statement message by means of news media events and briefings.

Thus Cameron's agenda was presented as the party's agenda. He continues, now he is prime minister, to operate in the same fashion, but has found that prime ministerial speechmaking, which can sometimes significantly help influence a departmental policy agenda, cannot always, by itself, set or implement that agenda. An opposition leader has only to control their party's message, as well as offer certain realistic promises; the prime minister, to effectively head up their government, has not only to construct a message but then deliver on it. Against the spending cuts agenda, the message is still struggling to be constructed and communicated.

In his first few months in Downing Street, then, Cameron vastly overestimated his personal ability to pull the levers of power. So much so, he failed to perceive the need to possess levers. Cameron was not able to act to set out a coherent prime ministerial platform in the short term, beyond public sector cuts and he lacked the ability Blair had to initiate policy. The prime minister to make most of his centrality within key governmental networks has to be as bilaterally effective as possible. He (and his team) must have the strongest grasp of policy possible. Such inability to control the political weather has seen Cameron deploy his now familiar apology strategy. Cameron has shown he is particularly adept at the textbook PR troubleshooting technique. 'Surveys consistently point to the premium consumers put on companies that listen to complaints, own up and to their mistakes, and rapidly try to put things right (Bale 2010: 387). So Cameron, in opposition was quick to apologise for the expenses scandal; for failure to predict the recession; for banking deregulation; and so on. In government, he has apologised for Bloody Sunday, for the bungled forest sell off, and for the initial mismanagement of in the Libyan crisis. Apologies can wrong-foot the opposition and present leaders as being in touch with the realities of government, '[b]ut apology is a coinage that gets debased through overuse. Do it too often and the public soon comes to believe the serial apologisers are alarmingly accident-prone' (Freedland 2011).

*Team Cameron*

Cameron's private office (known as Team Cameron in opposition when the political staffs of Cameron and Osborne were essentially fused) has undergone several changes since Cameron entered Downing Street. The close, but reportedly often antagonistic relationship between Steve Hilton (director of strategy) and Andy Coulson (head of communications) was resolved in Hilton's favour by Coulson's enforced departure amid the ongoing *News of the World* phone hacking saga. To replace Coulson, Cameron appointed a new head of political strategy, Andrew Cooper, as well as a new head of communications, the media professional Craig Oliver. While the Cabinet Office in which Clegg is situated may be trying to play catch up in terms of its resources, the prime minister has sought to bolster his own policy capacity. Cameron is establishing a new Policy Unit (or, in reality, re-establishing a powerful Policy Unit) which "will 'man-mark' their respective ministries and draw up policies for the second half of the current parliament, when the coalition agreement will have run out of specific policy road" (*Guardian*, 11 March 2011). Oliver is tasked with revamping No 10's Communications Unit. Cameron's closest adviser, Hilton, who with chancellor George Osborne is often the last person to whisper into the prime minister's ear, retains a roving role. Polly McKenzie remains a key player for Clegg, working closely with Hilton, as the most senior Lib Dem strategist in Number 10 (Seldon 2011). Cooper, Cameron's new long term strategist, is apparently to work "alongside Nick Clegg's top aide, Richard Reeves.....[and is charged with ensuing] that the party monitors how it is doing with women, working class voters, urban communities and, whenever necessary, drag the party and government to focus on these key groups" (Montgomerie 2011). Hilton, having been variously enabled to advise on (and often, with Cameron's blessing, to decide) policy, strategy and brand management, is said now to be "more focused on policy implementation or "getting things done" (Montgomerie 2011).

Cameron, it is rightly said, needs to achieve three main goals: "To force Whitehall to focus on the coalition's agenda; communication of big themes that no single Whitehall department owns; and an ability to rise above the day-to-day and achieve a longer-term strategic clarity. Andrew Cooper.....will be responsible for ensuring the prime minister hits long-term political goals" (ibid). To this end the task of the Policy Unit (headed up by former Cabinet Office civil servant Paul Kirby and staffed by head hunted civil servants and by special advisers) is to ensure the prime minister- or his surrogates- will be sufficiently briefed to be able to lead and direct collective policy discussions. The new team would ensure that Cameron (and Clegg - who also took part in interviewing appointees) is better informed at an earlier stage of the policy development. Making sure that departments understand the perspectives of both sides of the coalition is, according to Downing Street permanent secretary, Jeremy Heywood, a task better undertaken from the centre (Ross 2011). A fully effective Policy Unit (or some variant on it) has long been the principal means by which Downing Street shadows and impacts policy making in specific strategic policy fields, so it is no surprise that Cameron has finally seen the need to establish one. The surprise is that he thought he could manage without one for the first ten months of his premiership.

*Restoration of collegial government?*

Fraser Nelson claims that ministers are now more trusted by the prime minister: “The old days – where Number 10 and the Treasury tried to pull the strings of government and treated Cabinet members like puppets – are over.... Number 10 does not try to control everything, the Chancellor no longer seeks to stop everything. The whole government is of a fundamentally different character..... Cameron has found ministers he trusts, and asked them to get on with it. It's called Cabinet government, and it was the norm until 1997. It has just made a comeback. Ministerial initiatives (police reform, health reform, welfare reform, school reform) are welcomed, not crushed, by a Prime Minister and a Chancellor who have a shared objective (Nelson 2010). Has some degree of cabinet collegiality been restored? Perhaps, to some small degree, but not by much: prime ministerial-led bilateralism is not prime ministerial diktat, but neither is it, even when tempered by a deputy prime minister, a form of old school cabinet government.

Cabinet collegiality, certainly in the form misattributed to the supposed ‘golden age’ when ministers submitted papers on subjects beyond their departmental brief and cabinet met for hour on end debating- with a vote taken- the pressing issues of the day, remains a thing of the past. Cameron’s full cabinet is, as argued above, only a forum for the exchange of information. Committee deliberation is inevitably shaped beforehand by bilateral negotiations led by the prime minister in which Lib Dem ministers, especially Nick Clegg, have a greater autonomy than their Conservative counterpart but in which Cameron and George Osborne, always singing from the same hymn sheet, have considerable authority. Cameron, appearing before the Commons Liaison Committee, insisted that the process in setting the strategy for the Comprehensive Spending Review was ‘more collegiate and collective than it has been in the past’ (Liaison Committee, November 2010). But the pre-cooked nature of the negotiations was however shaped by ‘first about nine ‘quadrilateral meetings’ of Cameron, Clegg, Osborne and Alexander before nine discussions in Cabinet on the Comprehensive Spending Review’ (ibid.). Cameron has long had Blair-like inner circle tendencies. These are likely to be reinforced in coming years, with the ‘quad’ already becoming a key informal feature of the first year of government.

In opposition Cameron’s style of policy making was not remotely collegiate in the sense that shadow ministers were able to collectively decide policy or strategy. It was only collegial in that ministers and shadow ministers conferred with Cameron and the trusted George Osborne (Rawnsley 2009). This is still the case in government for the Conservative side of the coalition. It is, however, less so for the Liberal Democrat side where Clegg, speaking on behalf of ‘his’ ministers can make their case to Cameron. Of course, the weaker electorally or the less successful Clegg and his party are seen to be, the weaker he and it will be within the government. Lib Dems, faced with wretched poll ratings, are likely to have to cling on to their Conservative nurse for fear of something worse. Clegg being disempowered within government by being electorally unpopular need not necessarily empower his parliamentary party. The electorally weakened Lib Dems, barring any major unforeseen development, are in the coalition for the long haul. This means, provided Cameron is prepared to make the necessary compromises on policy that he can live with (and he is nothing but pragmatically flexible), that his *potential to be*

*predominant*, his being more than *primus inter pares*, should be unaffected by his being prime minister in a coalition.

*Back to the Blair model of Downing Street*

Individuals mattered more under Blair than the formal positions they held. Trusted advisers had the prime minister's ear and resources were directed towards communications and trying to ensure that Blair's 'writ' ran throughout Whitehall. That Cameron has slowly moved back to the Blair model is obvious in his communications operation, now led by Craig Oliver. This involves both special advisers such as Gabby Bertin, Alan Sendorek and Henry Macrory and a team of civil servants led by Steve Field and Jenny Grey (Montgomerie 2011). It is very much in the mould of both Gordon Brown's communications team and of Blair's operation post Alistair Campbell. Cameron's private office - and his revamped Policy Unit - is similarly very much in the Blair mould, being jointly led by a special adviser, Ed Llewellyn, who is Chief of Staff, working alongside the seemingly indispensable Heywood with Kate Fall performing the crucial 'gatekeeping' role. The early tendency for 'departmentalism' has already appeared to have run its course as Tom Kelly, Blair's press spokesperson and a former civil servant, notes: "it's all very well saying departments should do their own thing but in the end everything comes through the front and back doors of No10 and there is no alternative to a strong grip from the centre." (Daily Telegraph, March 8th 2011). Continuity is evident in the civil service with both Heywood and cabinet secretary Gus O'Donnell's enhanced roles in managing the central functions of government. O'Donnell's higher profile enabling him to battle to reassert the civil service ethos in Whitehall by promoting the Cabinet Office as a crucial player in the coalition: "I describe myself as the equidistant Cabinet Secretary between the two. From my office it is – and I've counted it – 50 paces to get to the Prime Minister's office and 50 paces to get to the Deputy Prime Minister's office. That's a very nice balance to have." (Daily Telegraph, 16 March 2011.)

Cameron is slowly, but methodically, moving toward aping Blair's much criticised form of 'sofa government'. His, however, is to be a much larger sofa which has more people sitting on it: Clegg, obviously, cannot be kept off said sofa and George Osborne, who is the most important man inside the Conservative Party beyond Cameron (Montgomerie 2011), permanently sprawls on it. Osborne who, as one "Downing Street insider" has confirmed, is "David Cameron's principal adviser" (Parker 2011a), is in attendance at all key Downing Street strategy meetings. Cameron and Osborne form the core of the Conservative inner circle and both convene daily meetings in No 10 at 8.30 for structure and 4.30 to review (ibid; *Guardian*, 9th March 2011; Seldon 2011). Presently Cabinet (or rather its committees) matters more under Cameron than under Blair or Brown, but Cameron's sofa is to be increasingly used to strategically direct the government, not necessarily to second guess or micromanage departmental policy; Cameron, one suspects, would like to use it to do both.

## Conclusion

Coalition government, in theory, implies a more inclusive and collective style of policy-making and decision taking. This is, however, not necessarily so in practice. Government, which remains hierarchical, has still to be steered and led: it falls, as ever, to the prime minister to both steer and lead. In this task, however, Cameron is assisted by Clegg. Clegg, to his certain discomfort, provides a useful ‘human shield’ for Cameron, drawing much of the public ire on spending cuts and as cover from Cameron’s right flank. Clegg’s personal power resources are in debit, and his considerable electoral problems mean he is the weaker of the two. Although he has bolstered his institutional resources, he is still hugely disadvantaged in comparison with Cameron. Cameron can still occupy the higher ground on international affairs and manage his more dominant public profile, being able to set the agenda of government. Without a department, Clegg has direct control over constitutional affairs only – an area of great importance, but with minimal public salience.

Cameron’s prime ministerial style continues to owe much to the fact that he thinks that not only has the party leader to be predominant, but the prime minister ought to be as well. Prime ministers have endlessly to fend off media scrutiny, work with intra-governmental rivals, manage their ministers and MPs, brush off the hostility of other parties and anticipate the reaction of the electorate. They necessarily work at being predominant. Some, like Gordon Brown, never quite manage it. For Cameron shoehorning the Conservative party into a coalition was an easy task; but he will have to work to maintain that coalition should sufficient Conservative MPs become unhappy at its policy direction. Keeping the Lib Dems on board, especially when their poll ratings continue to tank (and if the AV referendum is lost) is also a formidable challenge. So far, however, both sets of ministers seem part of the same solid team; with such focus being initially placed on arrangements between the parties has meant that relationships within the parties have proved surprisingly unproblematic.

A prime minister heading up a coalition government, even as powerful a party leader as Cameron ought not to be as authoritative as a prime minister leading a single party government. Yet the power of the prime minister always owes much to his or her informal, personal power resources which enable him or her to make effective use of their institutional power resources. This remains so under the coalition as under single party government. At this early stage in the Cameron premiership we can broadly observe that no formal, substantial change in the role of prime minister has been enacted. Cameron’s predominance, by leading a coalition, is partially constrained by Clegg, but he too constrains Clegg. We would expect any future single party government to enable a well resourced prime minister to revert to the ways of Thatcher and Blair. This prime minister, then, is predominant even when he is constrained in significant ways by the imperatives of coalition government. But Cameron, should he happily accept the policy compromises the Lib Dems suggest, is no more constrained than a prime minister who is faced with a preeminent intra-party rival with a significant power base.

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