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# Is cabinet government dead?

Eric Magee and Mark Garnett

In a Channel 4 documentary Nick Cohen argued that no one 'believes the prime minister is a prime minister in the traditional sense of *primus inter pares*. Margaret Thatcher felled that notion, and Blair finished it off....Like everyone else, I'd accepted the commonplace that cabinet government is dead, but it was nevertheless disconcerting to film ministers shuffling into No 10 for a cabinet meeting and shuffling out after 35 minutes – barely enough time to pass around the ginger nuts.' What is, or was, cabinet government and is Cohen correct about its death?

The modern cabinet has its origins in the nineteenth century. The extension of the vote to more and more people after 1867 resulted in refinements of the party system and governments reliant on a stable majority in the House of Commons. The leader of the majority party became the prime minister, who governed with the support of the cabinet, whose functions included policy-making and the coordination of government departments. This was the era of cabinet government when decision-making rested with the cabinet, chaired by the prime minister.

## Collective responsibility

The convention that all members of the cabinet are collectively responsible for its decisions and must therefore be unanimous in their defence of government policy arises naturally from the concept of cabinet government, and the need to present a united front both in Parliament and to the electorate. Once the cabinet had agreed a policy line, ministers were expected to raise no further objections — in public, at least. Equally, the convention suggested that individual ministers would not have to shoulder the responsibility alone if a policy failed. In extreme circumstances, if the issue was judged to be sufficiently serious, the whole cabinet would have to resign.

Initially, collective responsibility applied only to members of the cabinet, but during the twentieth century it was applied more widely to include junior ministers and parliamentary private secretaries. It has also been adopted by the shadow cabinet.

### Box 1 Key terms

**cabinet committee:** a group of cabinet members selected by the prime minister to discuss and decide on a particular issue or policy area before reporting to the cabinet. Cabinet committees may be either standing (permanent) or ad hoc (temporary).

**cabinet government:** the traditional view of the UK's constitutional arrangements on the location of power in government, which states that decision-making in the executive rests with the cabinet, chaired by the prime minister.

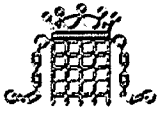
**collective responsibility:** a convention of the constitution which states that all members of the cabinet are collectively responsible for the cabinet's decisions and which demands that they adopt a public stance of unity on government policy, keeping secret any disagreements.

**core executive theory:** states that executive decisions are taken by a network of institutions operating at the heart of government, with the prime minister in a central position. The key elements of the core executive vary over time and according to the prime minister but they include cabinet committees, the Cabinet Office, the Treasury, bilateral meetings between the prime minister and the relevant cabinet minister, informal ministerial meetings and interdepartmental committees.

**prime ministerial government:** the theory that the prime minister has achieved a dominant and almost presidential position, to the detriment of traditional cabinet government.

Definitions adapted from A. J. Turner (2002) *UK Government and Politics, Essential Word Dictionary*, Philip Allan Updates





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### Cabinet committees

The character of cabinet government changed after 1945 as a result of the growth in both the volume and

#### Box 2 Departures from collective responsibility

**1975** The doctrine was suspended for the duration of the EEC referendum campaign and applied only to this issue. The prime minister, Harold Wilson, set out the 'unique circumstances' in a parliamentary written answer, which stated that 'those Ministers who do not agree with the Government's recommendation in favour of continued membership of the European Community are, in the unique circumstances of the referendum, now free to advocate a different view during the referendum campaign in the country. This freedom does not extend to parliamentary proceedings and official business.'

**1977** A free vote was allowed on the type of electoral system to be used in European elections. This is a less clear-cut example than the 'agreement to differ' in 1975. On both occasions the cabinet and the parliamentary Labour party were divided and it could be argued that an 'agreement to differ' was the only avenue open to Wilson and Callaghan to hold together a deeply divided party.



#### Box 3 Some resignations on grounds of collective responsibility

	Position	Reason
1986	Ian Gow, Minister of State in Her Majesty's Treasury	Disagreed with the government signing the Anglo-Irish Agreement
1986	Michael Heseltine, Secretary of State for Defence	The prime minister's handling of the Westland Affair
1989	Nigel Lawson, Chancellor of the Exchequer	The role of Sir Alan Walters and the prime minister's handling of economic policy
1990	Nicholas Ridley, Secretary of State for Trade and Industry	Controversial statements about Germany
1990	Sir Geoffrey Howe, Leader of the House of Commons	Disagreed with the prime minister's handling of policy on Europe

complexity of the work of government. With the creation of the welfare state, government became involved in the delivery of more and more services.

To deal with the increased workload a network of cabinet committees was developed. Increasingly, it was in these committees that policies were developed and decisions made. It was not long before the rule emerged that, if a cabinet committee reached a decision, that decision was presented to full cabinet for approval without further discussion. Only if a cabinet committee failed to reach a decision might the matter be resolved by the full cabinet.

Since the prime minister summed up the discussion, he or she had a decisive say in determining the 'collective' cabinet line. On controversial issues, a minister with strong dissenting views would either have to bow to the prime minister or resign.

Nigel Lawson, writing about the cabinet under Margaret Thatcher, neatly encapsulated the changing character of the modern cabinet: The least important aspect of Cabinet membership, certainly in Margaret Thatcher's time, were the Cabinet meetings themselves. The imprimatur of Cabinet was taken seriously, and there were occasional Cabinet meetings that really mattered, such as those that concluded the annual public expenditure round. But in general and for good reason, key decisions were taken in smaller groups — either the formal Cabinet Committees...or at still smaller informal meetings of Ministers which she would hold in her study upstairs. The Cabinet's customary role was to rubber-stamp decisions that had already been taken, to keep all colleagues reasonably informed about what was going on, and to provide a forum for general political discussion if time permitted.

*(The View from No. 11, Bantam Press, 1992.)*

### Bilaterals

Most modern prime ministers have resolved difficult problems in face-to-face discussion with the minister concerned. Margaret Thatcher favoured this method as does Tony Blair. In May 2002 a minister in the Blair government told Nick Cohen, 'We are supposed to discuss [policies] one-to-one with the prime minister and, when we get his agreement, then the cabinet endorses it.' Cohen went on to comment: 'As for Blair's one-to-ones, they are one-way traffic except when Gordon Brown is in the room.'



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### The centralisation of power

Mo Mowlam, in her book, *Momentum: The Struggle for Peace, Politics and the People* (Hodder and Stoughton, 2002), commented on her intense dislike of 'the centralising tendency and arrogance of No 10', adding, 'I think their lack of inclusiveness of the cabinet, MPs, party members and the unions leads to bad decisions. Try as I might, I got no indication that their views or behaviour would change.'

As early as 1963, the Labour minister Richard Crossman claimed that collective responsibility meant nothing more than 'collective obedience' to the will of the prime minister. Obviously, the extent to which prime ministers choose to exercise their power is largely dependent on their personalities. But the resources at the prime minister's disposal have grown significantly since 1963, and a domineering leader can now keep a close eye on all important areas of policy.

The Prime Minister's Office has grown from around 70 in 1964 to around 170 under John Major and over 200 under Tony Blair. Personal loyalty,

rather than a reputation for impartial judgment, often seems to be the key factor in these appointments. It has been argued that the gap between political appointees and career civil servants has blurred, with a number of political appointees working in units that were traditionally the preserve of the civil service.

Since the June 2001 general election there have been further changes to the organisation of No 10, the most significant of which was the merger of the Prime Minister's Private Office and the Policy Unit.

### Conclusion

Under Blair, the cabinet meets only once a week and meetings are brief. Cabinet committees are also less important under Blair, who prefers bilaterals. Some commentators argue that Blair behaves more like a president than a prime minister. But cabinet government has been decaying for a long time, and it can be argued that Blair is different from his predecessors only because he makes no pretence of governing like a prime minister from the late nineteenth century. Even John Major, who was seen as a more 'traditional' prime minister than Margaret Thatcher, ignored collective cabinet responsibility when he allowed his chancellor, Norman Lamont, to take the blame for the failure of policies which had been endorsed by all of his colleagues.

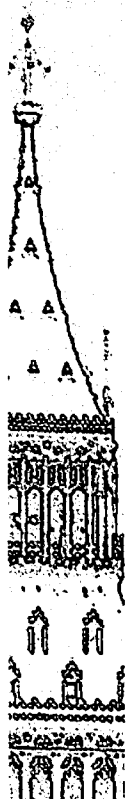
Blair's biographer, John Rentoul, summarised the nature of cabinet government under Blair as follows:

Blair's management 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 the Cabinet to just forty minutes of approving decisions already taken elsewhere...

It was not surprising, therefore, that Blair's cabinet rarely engaged in meaningful debate about policy. Nevertheless, the list of critical decisions not even reported to cabinet is startling, beginning with independence for the Bank of England, the postponement of joining the euro, the cut in lone-parent benefit and the deal on the future of hereditary peers...

Although a lot of the business of government continued to be done in cabinet committees, the key decisions tended to be 'bilateral', between Blair himself and key ministers.

(Tony Blair, *Prime Minister*, Little, Brown and Company, 2001.)



#### Box 4 Some failures to resign

**James Callaghan**, a member of Harold Wilson's cabinet campaigned against the government's plans to reform the trade unions in 1969.

**Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher** did not resign from the Heath government in the early 1970s, even though they opposed Heath's so-called U-turn.

**Geoffrey Howe** argued for joining the ERM in 1989 when it was not government policy.

**Michael Portillo** made a number of speeches in 1994 which did not appear to be in line with the policies of the Major government.

#### Box 5 Lord Butler on cabinet government

'During Attlee's premiership (and excluding the part years of 1945 and 1951) there was an annual average of 87 Cabinet Meetings and 340 circulated papers. The lowest year for circulated papers was 1949 when there were 252. By the early 1970s, when I first sat in the corner of the Cabinet Room as a Junior Private Secretary in Mr Heath's Office, there was an average of 60 meetings a year and 140 Cabinet memoranda per year.

'By the early 1990s, a significantly different pattern had emerged. There were, by then, no more than 40 meetings of the Cabinet per year (and, if statistics were kept of the length of the meetings, much shorter ones). More significantly, there was a marked reduction in the number of memoranda considered. In only one year of the 1990s were more than 20 memoranda circulated.'

Quoted in P. Hennessy (2000) *The Prime Minister, the Office and its Holders since 1945*, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press



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Whether the death of cabinet government is a regrettable development or not, it would be difficult to revive it. Ministers are too busy to take a detailed interest in the whole range of government policy. Nowadays it is difficult to hold them responsible even for decisions taken within their own departments, because most of these are devolved to their officials. Because of the media fixation with party leaders, the political fortunes of the whole party

depend almost entirely on the popularity of the prime minister. When this fades dramatically — as it did in the case of Margaret Thatcher in 1990 — the cabinet can still assert itself and force a change of leader.

At the time of writing, **Eric Magee** and **Mark Garnett** were members of the Editorial Board of *Politics Review*.

