

# Prime Ministers and the Media

*Issues of Power and Control*

Colin Seymour-Ure



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*For Alessio and Asha*

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350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA  
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK  
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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# Preface

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Most of the essays in this book are about subjects in which I have been interested for a long time, as the Introduction explains in greater detail. My debts of gratitude are correspondingly numerous and, to some extent, diffused by time. For funding and/or hospitality, once the idea for the collection began to take shape in the mid-1980s, I am grateful to the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington; the Australian National University; Carleton University, Ottawa; the Joan Shorenstein Center, Harvard University; the Canadian High Commission, London; and the Economic and Social Research Council (award number E00232197). Early versions of most of the chapters benefited from the opportunity to give lectures or seminars under the auspices of the institutions in that list, and of the European Consortium for Political Research, the Institute of Contemporary British History, the Political Communications Group of the Political Studies Association, the Reuter Foundation Programme at Oxford, the American Political Science Association, the Wissenschaftszentrum in Berlin, the London School of Economics and the Universities of Essex and Kent.

My colleague Graham Thomas generously read nearly all the book in draft; and I am very grateful also to the following for their comments on one or more individual chapters: Steven Barnett, Nick Garland, John Hart, Bill Jenkins, George Jones, Martin Rowson and Jeremy Tunstall. Others whose comments and encouragement about one or another topic have been much appreciated include Tony Barker, Richard Bourne, Mark Bryant, Dick Crampton, Virginia Crowe, Eric Einhorn, Bill Fox, Bob Franklin, David Goldsworthy, Peter Hennessy, Nick Hiley, Godfrey Hodgson, John Jensen, Tony King, Michael Lee, Peter Mellini, Ralph Negrine, Eric Neveu, Jane Newton, Pippa Norris, Barbara Pfetsch, Michael Rush, Maggie Scammell, Jean Seaton, Adrian Smith, Dominic Wring, and colleagues at the University of Kent in the Departments of Politics and International Relations and of History.

Warm thanks are due to the persons who agreed to be interviewed for the book, the great majority of whom, in contrast to the era when I was a graduate student, do not now mind that they are identified in footnotes. They include political correspondents back to the 1960s (such as the *Guardian* veteran Francis Boyd, and his contemporaries such as David Wood, Harry Boyne and Ronald Butt), and almost all the Downing Street Chief Press Secretaries since then or surviving at that time. Corresponding groups were interviewed in Washington at various times during the Ford, Carter, Reagan and Clinton presidencies, in Ottawa in 1961–2 and 1987, and in Canberra in 1981 and 1987.

I am grateful to Lord Hemingford and the Bodleian Library, Oxford, for permission to quote from the papers of William Clark; and to John Williams, Mrs E. F. Thomson, the Churchill Archives Centre (Churchill College, Cambridge) and Her Majesty's Stationery Office for permission to quote a letter from C. R. Attlee to Francis Williams. For permission to reproduce cartoons, thanks go to Steve Bell, Nick Garland and Chris Riddell, and to Atlantic Syndication Partners, Express Newspapers, Mirror Syndication and the Telegraph Group Ltd. For information about media peerages I am grateful to Steven Kennedy, Senior Library Clerk in the House of Lords.

Alison Chapman and Nicola Huxtable have given invaluable help in the preparation of the manuscript, especially the tables.

Last in these acknowledgements I pay special tribute to David Butler. His influence both set me on an academic career and spurred me to specialize in political communication and mass media. In 1962 I returned from an MA course in Ottawa, fully expecting to take up a deferred appointment as Assistant Principal in the Ministry of Agriculture. David, I suspect, was decisive in getting me a postgraduate studentship at Nuffield College. So but for him I might have ended up, figuratively speaking, not going gently to seed but with foot-and-mouth disease, incinerated on a pyre, with my feet sticking stiffly out of the smoke. (You retire from the civil service at age 60, so the dates are about right for the disastrous 2001 outbreak.) Some people say, of course, that this is what has been happening in academic life anyway.

Last of all I thank my wife Judy, as always, for her constant support.

*Canterbury*  
*New Year's Day 2003*

# Introduction: Prime Minister, Communication, Power, Control

---

This book is about prime ministers and public communication. Its themes are power and control. Some of the research dates back to 1962, when I started interviewing for a study of Westminster political correspondents. At that time ‘communication’ did not figure much as a topic in books and courses about British politics. ‘Media’, used to denote both technologies and the organizations employing them, had barely entered the popular vocabulary (and was always treated as a plural word). ‘The press’ implicitly included broadcasters. There were few if any undergraduate optional courses about politics and media, and certainly not whole degrees.

The growth of communication as a field of study in the last forty years is a major development in British political studies – a natural consequence of the spread of electronic media and of politicians’ access to them. It increasingly dawned on politicians from the late 1960s that the television studio was as much a debating chamber as the House of Commons and a far better way of reaching voters. Media, to put it glibly, used to be regarded as an instrument applied *to* politics: they have become part of the environment *within* which politics is carried on.

The early 1960s were a time, too, when the orthodox accounts of cabinet government were challenged. Too long snug between the pages of constitutional historians and lawyers, they were rudely disturbed in 1962 by the Labour shadow cabinet minister and former Oxford don, Richard Crossman. Crossman was a bewitching lecturer. His thesis that cabinet had been supplanted by prime ministerial government was delivered, with a conviction possibly strengthened by not yet having served in a cabinet, to a room of entranced graduate students. The lectures were published as a long introduction to Bagehot’s *The English Con-*

*stitution*.<sup>1</sup> They started an argument that was played out for some twenty years in text books, essays, exam papers, lecture theatres and the further reflections of Crossman himself (after actually being a cabinet minister under Harold Wilson).

The argument about prime ministerial power eventually became frustrating, because it concentrated on comparing the prime minister with his cabinet colleagues, it strayed into superficial comparisons with the American president, and there was little hard evidence. It soon went round and round. Questions about how much power would be appropriate for the tasks expected of a prime minister, or about how Downing Street and the cabinet office should be organized, were relatively neglected – partly, no doubt, because everybody outside Downing Street and Whitehall had so little to go on. Not until the 1980s and 1990s did these conditions change and a substantial new literature develop (see chapter 1). At the same time the broadsheet press began to take a more detailed interest than before in the workings of Downing Street. Parliamentary select committees became more curious too. The result was that during Tony Blair's premiership the organization and staffing of Downing Street were subjected to a continuing public critique on a scale inconceivable twenty years earlier, and Blair's pre-eminence was made plain. Blair, so it appeared, was a centralizing prime minister who, in Richard Rose's phrase, was a first without equal – not a first among equals.<sup>2</sup>

The growth of media and the growth of the premiership come together in a puzzle about the nature and extent of prime ministerial power. We tend to believe that media are powerful simply because they saturate our daily lives. It is the attitude of the mouse confronted by an elephant. Thus we may instinctively assume that the media have significant power over the prime minister's fortunes – for good or ill. More than in the days before media glut, the prime minister has to take into account the 'communication implications' of what he says and does and how he says and does it – and of where and when, and in whose company, and what he wears, and his body language in addition to his words. All can come under the media spotlight and all can affect his public image.

A paradox of media glut, moreover, is that the reality of the personal prime minister – the man his friends and colleagues know – is eclipsed

<sup>1</sup> Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, Introduction by R. H. S. Crossman, London: C. A. Watts, 1964. Crossman's lectures were delivered to David Butler's graduate seminar at Nuffield College, Oxford.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rose, *The Prime Minister in a Shrinking World*, London: Polity, 2001, p. 3.

by the unreality of the media version. The change is symbolized in the photograph in chapter 4 (figure 4.1) of Tony Blair giving a doorstep press conference outside Downing Street. Blair is distanced from the journalists by the intrusiveness of the technology which appears to bring him closer. In the same way security at Westminster or party conferences (places to which a graduate student had easy access forty years ago) distances and mystifies the person of a political leader.

None of that makes the prime minister a passive object of the media. Their very potential to harm him obliges the prime minister to use media as an instrument of his own power. Blair and his entourage put unprecedented efforts into nurturing key journalists, editors and proprietors, and into coordinating and trying to manage the news agenda, first in opposition and then in Downing Street.

Powerful media, then, mix with a powerful premiership. Which is the dominant force? How much did the efforts of the Blair 'spin machine' produce the desired results? In principle, the achievement of a landslide in 2001 almost identical to the 1997 general election victory could have been despite, not because of, all the news operations. The very complexity and pervasiveness of media, however, make questions such as those impossible to answer. Contrary to our instincts the impact of media is rarely that of the elephant treading on a mouse. The variables affecting people's attitudes and behaviour, whether as voters, taxpayers and motorists, or in their jobs, are subject to a multitude of factors. The direct or indirect influence of media can rarely be isolated.

In the musical about the New York underworld in the 1930s, *Guys and Dolls*, the gambler Big Julie wins at dice every time, because the dice are blank and he has scared everyone into agreeing that he has memorized where the spots were. Media do not give prime ministers such powers of control. I gave this book the working title of *Heads and Tales*, so as to emphasize the elements of chance which bedevil a prime minister.<sup>3</sup> 'Chance' is the product of all those variables which a prime minister cannot control or has not even discerned, and which may be more influential than those which he can. So press secretaries slave away, nuancing their stories; ghostwriters hone paragraphs for publication under the prime minister's byline; style advisers match his suit to the occasion. But all are ants beneath the hooves of history.

The relationship between the prime minister's public communication and the media through which he carries it out, on the one hand, and the effectiveness of his power on the other, is thus inherently unstable.

<sup>3</sup> Titles must clearly indicate a book's content, the publishers rightly say. *Heads and Tales* had to go.



A prime minister ideally wants *focused* power – in other words, control. His news operations pit him in a continuous struggle to be understood as he would wish. The same is true to an even greater extent of the American president (who features in several of the chapters that follow). From a distance the president seems uniquely powerful: directly elected, independent of Congress and his cabinet. Yet the constitution gives him almost no uncontrolled power, and his effectiveness depends heavily on uncertain powers of persuasion.

The prime minister's efforts to control his public communication cover, potentially, as wide a range as media themselves. The chapters in this book have been chosen to illustrate the sometimes elusive significance of places, persons, organizations and types of media. Except where it is obvious (chapters 1 to 3; chapters 6 and 7) the chapters stand by themselves. The three opening chapters develop some of the points made here, exploring the links between the prime minister's public communication and his power. Chapter 4 examines the distinctive impact of places – specifically capital cities – upon the communication patterns of the prime ministers or presidents who work in them. 'Harlots Revisited' (chapter 5) looks at the phenomenon of the frequently reviled 'media baron'. The example of Rupert Murdoch, most reviled of all in the last twenty years of the twentieth century, exemplifies the crude belief in the elephant theory of media power. The two chapters on the Downing Street press secretary (6 and 7) trace the attempts of prime ministers to meet the challenge of an expanding media (especially broadcasting) across half a century, and to control their public communication on a daily basis. Chapter 8 analyses the specific device of the prime ministerial press conference – a forum of exchange which British prime ministers were much slower to use than American presidents. The last two chapters – on political rumours and political cartoons – deal with peculiar kinds of communication which are exceptionally difficult to control. Rumours are harder to swat than houseflies. Complaining about cartoons plays into the cartoonist's hands.

This summary encapsulates the range and point of the selection but does not account for the specific choices. These require a personal explanation. The subject in general, as earlier indicated, goes back to my experience as a graduate student and a junior lecturer. (I started teaching an undergraduate option on political communication and mass media – presumably one of the first – in 1967.) A doctoral thesis on Westminster political correspondents proved too daunting in the early 1960s. Journalists lunched me in Westminster and Pall Mall and talked off the record, but in those days footnotes needed chapter and verse,

and so I wrote a tedious thesis about the press and parliamentary privilege. However, the subject of political journalism – increasingly viewed from the Downing Street press office perspective, not the journalists’ – remained a continuing interest, and I wrote about it in *The Press, Politics and the Public* (Methuen, 1968) and when working for the Royal Commission on the Press in 1974–6.

Purpose-built capital cities intrigued me from the time of a year-long visit to Ottawa – essentially then a company town – in 1961–2, when you could roam the corridors of the parliament buildings free and easy. But the broader implications of cities as news environments came much later. I learnt casually in 1995 that the White House in Washington had been located one-and-a-half miles from Congress by design, to symbolize the separation of executive and legislative powers. This, for some reason, I assumed almost no one else realized. To a student of political communication its implications were very exciting. Then I found everyone realized (in Cambridge, Mass., at least), but that made it none the less fascinating. Moreover 10 Downing Street (as chapter 4 suggests) is likewise such an epitome of the higgledy-piggledy British constitution. Earlier, in 1986–7, there had also been an experience with feral cats around the parliament buildings of Ottawa and then, to my delight, around those of Canberra. Far from exterminating them, the authorities looked on these cats benignly as one more element in the emblematic national patchworks which those cities had by then become – capital cities, not company towns, in which a cat may look at a king.

No one needs an excuse for studying media barons. If their influence were all it is sometimes cracked up to be (which I doubt), that would be reason enough. If it is not, then their eccentricities and occasional self-importance make them emperors with no more clothes than the girls on the inside pages of their papers. Similarly Tony Blair’s adoption of a form of traditional American presidential press conference – at a time when American presidents were using them less frequently than for seventy years – was a good reason to explore why British prime ministers had not done so earlier.

Political rumours tend to be about health, sex or money. As a student journalist I listened agog to a predecessor, infinitely wise with the experience of a few years in Fleet Street, retailing scurrilous rumours about royalty. Then in the 1964 general election everyone seemed to know about ‘the rumour’ – and that the authors of a campaign history had been threatened with legal action if they so much as mentioned it. The rumour was about Harold Wilson’s private life. How efficiently and privily, it struck me, do rumours work. Where rumours are a special kind of news, political cartoons are a special kind of comment. The two

topics match. Rumours are easily disregarded by the student of communication because there is no hard copy or tape, cartoons because of the false assumption that a humorous medium cannot have serious consequences. For researching cartoons I had the great advantage of being involved in the development of the impressively catalogued cartoon archive at the University of Kent.

Part of the strength and weakness of political communication as a field is its breadth: a political system *is* a system of communication. Any selection for a book such as this will be idiosyncratic. Academics too are ants beneath the hooves of history, each labouring with its own crumbs. So here is my sample.

# Public Communication and the Prime Minister's Tasks

---

Tony Blair's public communications, from the designer leisure wear to the designer accent and the designer press conferences, probably attracted more public interest than those of any previous British government. Apart from general claims that Blair was more concerned with 'style' than substance, much of the curiosity focused on the government's techniques of news management. 'Spin' – putting a tendentious interpretation on the news – and the 'spin doctors' who did it, became objects of suspicion and criticism in the later 1990s. The reason was partly a typical media obsession with media themselves: the dealings of Blair's press secretary Alastair Campbell with the Downing Street press corps were a recurring fascination. But the interest also reflected a growing curiosity about the links between communications and the prime minister's power. In what ways is public communication part of the prime minister's job? How far is it an instrument of prime ministerial power? How has it been treated in the literature about the prime minister?

The first three chapters of this book explore these questions. Chapter 1 starts by arguing the importance of the subject and examining its comparative neglect. The chapter then explores the prime minister's job description. Some of the prime minister's tasks involve public communication more or less as an end in itself: it is a form of accountability – of 'responsible government' in the literal sense of being answerable to the public, as in the theatricality of Prime Minister's Question Time. Other tasks involve communication as a means to achieve some separate goal, whether it be about American policy towards Saddam Hussein or the government's policy on the controversial MMR vaccination. Others again, such as chairing cabinet meetings, are supposed to be carried out in secrecy, with only the results (and by no means all of them) made public.

Chapter 2 discusses ways in which the prime minister's public communication fits in with his other resources. The prime minister's formal

powers often guarantee only the minimum of success: good public communication can produce something better. For instance the prime minister has the formal power to reshuffle his cabinet. But whether the reshuffle is seen as a sign of weakness or strength, and what effect it has on his standing in his party and the polls, may depend on how it is publicly presented.

Chapter 3 takes this analysis further. It argues that public communication is a key resource for turning prime ministerial *authority* into *power*. The power may not be great enough to achieve much of what the prime minister wants. But his communication resources are normally better than those of any rival, inside or outside his party. If he does not use them, he spurns a potentially crucial weapon. In the foreword to his autobiography John Major writes eloquently about the distorting pressures of media attention: negligible response time, reductive soundbites, ritualistic rhetoric (often misleading), skeleton reporting (even in the broadsheets), pressure to produce sensational stories.<sup>1</sup> Major's public communication was extremely unsuccessful, judged by the scale of his defeat in 1997. His complaint was no doubt bred of frustration: he had used his communication resources, but they were simply not good enough to get results. Blair, in contrast, was extremely successful, throughout his first term and beyond.

### Public Communication and Accounts of the Premiership

Awareness of public communication, both as a task for the prime minister and as a resource, grew with the rapid development of broadcast news media in the last thirty years of the twentieth century. In 1970 the group of political lobby correspondents covering Westminster and Downing Street (taking their name from the Commons lobby, to which they had privileged access) included only two broadcasters, one each for the BBC and ITN. From the 1980s, TV and radio channels proliferated and news was broadcast round the clock. By 2002, one-third of more than two hundred lobby correspondents were broadcasters.

Broadcast media had once been unobtrusively concerned just to report and interpret politics. Now they played an ever more substantial part in shaping the institutions and arenas within which politics is carried on. At the beginning of the new millennium the internet was having a similar effect. You could read or watch an interview with Tony Blair on the Number 10 website, as you might have done formerly in

<sup>1</sup> John Major, *John Major: the Autobiography*, London: HarperCollins, 1999, pp. xixff.

the papers or on TV. Politics was in an era of *electronic glut*. Almost everywhere the prime minister went became potentially a place for political communication. The 'publicity needs' of the prime minister's job grew correspondingly. Does the prime minister now do anything deliberate at all, without taking into account the communication implications? One simple measure of the development is the new prominence of the Downing Street press secretary. During the Thatcher era this hitherto unremarkable post changed from grub to butterfly. Bernard Ingham held it for eleven years and became an influential member of the prime minister's immediate entourage. Blair's press secretary, Alastair Campbell, elevated the job even further (see chapters 6 and 7).

The impact of electronic glut upon the prime minister's job was all the more important, secondly, because of the job's *flexibility*. Britain's famous lack of a written constitution – a single authoritative document – provides much of the explanation. The constitution is found in a mixed collection of statutes, precedents and conventions. Even the rule that the prime minister must be a member of the House of Commons is conventional. The prime minister's role is variable within the cabinet, and so is the cabinet's within the wider executive. Some of the classic one-liners about the prime minister stress the variability. The prime minister is 'first among equals' – which is a logical contradiction and can mean no more than that relations between ministers and prime minister vary. Asquith got into the constitutional textbooks by writing, 'The office of Prime Minister is what its holder chooses and is able to make of it'. George Jones, in a much quoted analysis of the job in 1965, drew the conclusion that the prime minister 'is only as strong as [his colleagues] let him be'.<sup>2</sup> None of the prime minister's powers is based in statute. The first statutes even to refer to the prime minister were minor laws in 1917 (providing Chequers as an official country residence) and in 1937 (setting ministerial salaries). The constitution can therefore change simply through behaviour changing without being challenged: unchallenged, the change then becomes a precedent. All that is the stuff of textbooks. For the prime minister, it makes possible an acute sensitivity to the potential – and the dangers – of his media environment. When media change, in short, the premiership changes.

A third reason for looking at the relations between the prime minister's public communication and his job is that the literature on the premiership did not keep up with those developments. 'The British are

<sup>2</sup> H. H. Asquith, *Fifty Years in Parliament*, London: Cassell, 2 vols, 1926, vol. 1, p. 185; George Jones, 'The Prime Minister's power', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 18.2, 1965, p. 185.

rather vague about their system of government' is the comment (equally British) with which Simon James began his own study, *British Cabinet Government*.<sup>3</sup> Except historically, there has been little depth of knowledge at all about the workings of the cabinet. Scholars used to get by with the not-quite-up-to-date reflections of elder statesmen, a few historically slanted textbooks, and a political journalism of circumlocution ('sources close to the prime minister'). The publication in 1975–7 of Richard Crossman's revealing and cheeky *Diaries of a Cabinet Minister* attracted disproportionate excitement precisely because they were unprecedented.<sup>4</sup>

For decades this lack of detail could be put down to the culture of secrecy in Whitehall and Downing Street.<sup>5</sup> Since the 1980s, however, 'the machinery at the heart of British government is gradually being demystified'.<sup>6</sup> Crossman's diaries were a landmark. The stock of information about the workings of the cabinet system steadily grew, stimulated by declining habits of loyalty among political colleagues and reticence among retired mandarins, more insistent investigative journalism, probing inquiries by parliamentary committees, TV documentaries, and big publishing advances for ministerial memoirs.

With this knowledge came a brightening in the climate of official secrecy. For example the rules were relaxed about publicity for the cabinet's engine room – its elaborate committee system. From a position where ministers were forbidden to disclose the very existence of the committees, attitudes shifted sufficiently that in 1992 John Major could without contention authorize the publication not only of the names of the committees but of their ministerial memberships. *Questions of Procedure for Ministers* – the Cabinet Office guide detailing 'the arrangements for the conduct of affairs by Ministers', and the authority for such rules – was made public too. By 2001 it was available, renamed

<sup>3</sup> Simon James, *British Cabinet Government*, London: Routledge, 1st edn, 1992, p. 1. The sentence is (disappointingly) omitted from the second edition (1999).

<sup>4</sup> R. H. S. Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*, London: Hamish Hamilton and Jonathan Cape, 3 vols, 1975, 1976, 1977. For an account of the rigour with which secrecy rules were applied to prevent publication of the memoirs of the first secretary to the cabinet, Sir Maurice (later Lord) Hankey, up to twenty years after his retirement in 1938, see J. F. Naylor, *A Man and an Institution: Sir Maurice Hankey, the Cabinet Secretariat and the Custody of Cabinet Secrecy*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> Even in the comparatively open political culture of the USA, scholarly accounts of the presidency are anecdotal and unsystematic – mediaeval maps of the world, compared with the precise cartography of Congress.

<sup>6</sup> J. M. Lee, G. W. Jones and June Burnham, *At the Centre of Whitehall*, London: Macmillan, 1998, p. viii.

as *The Ministerial Code*, on the Cabinet Office website.<sup>7</sup> Whitehall in general became more receptive to academic inquiry.

The consequence of more detail about Downing Street and the Cabinet Office was an abandonment of the summary simplicities of traditional 'cabinet government' models. The system has come to be seen rather as comprising a large and changing group of people, among them the prime minister, whose relationships with each other fluctuate. The idea was popularized in the term 'core executive', defined by Rhodes as 'the complex web of institutions, networks and practices surrounding the prime minister, cabinet, cabinet committees and their official counterparts, less formalized ministerial "clubs" or meetings, bilateral negotiations and interdepartmental committees'.<sup>8</sup> As a result, concepts such as 'power' and 'decision-making' were visualized in terms of networks, coalitions, personal leverage, rival resources (knowledge, time, position); and they were seen as varying frequently with events, issues and personalities. In an early article Dunleavy and Rhodes were able to identify six different models even within the traditional institutionalist approach: prime ministerial government, prime ministerial cliques, cabinet government, ministerial government, segmented decision-making and bureaucratic coordination. In each, the prime minister's job was different.<sup>9</sup>

Although media relations were one of the factors distinguishing prime ministerial government (and the clique version) from others, none of those models said much about the prime minister's public communication. Later analyses in this warmer climate of inquiry do not necessarily say much either. For example Martin Smith, following Rhodes, builds a discussion of the premiership into an account based on structure, context and agents.<sup>10</sup> Within the structural constraints, the prime minister's power over his colleagues is seen as the outcome of an exchange of resources between them. Prime ministers have authority, staff and political influence; ministers have knowledge, time and networks of

<sup>7</sup> The relaxation is traced by the historian Peter Hennessy, a major contributor to the stock of knowledge about the modern cabinet system, in *The Hidden Wiring*, London: Indigo, 1996, ch. 4.

<sup>8</sup> R. A. W. Rhodes and Patrick Dunleavy (eds), *Prime Minister, Cabinet and Core Executive*, London: Macmillan, 1995, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Dunleavy and R. A. W. Rhodes, 'Core executive studies in Britain', *Public Administration*, 68.1, 1990, pp. 3–28.

<sup>10</sup> 'All actors within the core executive have resources, but how they use them will depend on their tactics (agency); tactics, however, depend on the particular political and economic context and the limits of action as defined in the structures and processes of institutions.' Martin Smith, *The Core Executive in Britain*, London: Macmillan, 1999, p. 37.



support. Smith's categories and illustrations are informative. But his claim that 'a Prime Minister's authority can extend only as far as the cabinet will allow' could come straight out of the 1960s.<sup>11</sup> Only perfunctory attention is paid to such possibilities as the impact of structures upon the prime minister's communication, or the value of (say) a media campaign as a resource, or the use of leaks as a tactic.

Similar comments can be made about other studies, such as those by James or Burch and Holliday.<sup>12</sup> In general, although such works treat the cabinet/'core executive' in far greater breadth, depth and contemporary detail than before, they still do not build public communication categorically into their models. They fail explicitly and thoroughly to identify and evaluate the importance of public communication by or about the prime minister as a factor in the policy-making and administrative processes which the analyses and models describe. The political consequences of the enormous changes in the media environment of the prime minister during the last forty years of the twentieth century are insufficiently visible.

The same may be said about a second, less theoretically ambitious, strand of literature – historical, narrative and largely chronological. For instance Peter Hennessy takes a plain man's approach in *The Hidden Wiring*. Paraphrasing the Victorian child that asked its father, 'What is that lady for?', the lady in point being the Queen, he puts the question: 'What is the prime minister for?' As answer he lists thirty-three items. Only one directly involves communications: responsibility for the 'overall efficiency of the government's media strategy'.<sup>13</sup> But Hennessy is not concerned with how the tasks are carried out. Even though the remaining thirty-two are riddled with communication implications, media come into his discussion only in anecdote and parenthesis. His later and much longer study, *The Prime Minister: the Office and its Holders since 1945*, proceeds mainly prime minister by prime minister and uses essentially the same framework of analysis. Dennis Kavanagh

<sup>11</sup> Smith, *The Core Executive in Britain*, p. 79.

<sup>12</sup> Simon James, *British Cabinet Government*; Martin Burch and Ian Holliday, *The British Cabinet System*, London: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996. 'Most post-war developments have exalted the premier vis-à-vis other ministers,' James writes. 'Television, international summits and Prime Minister's question time have strengthened the public impression that in many ways the Prime Minister *is* the government.' Despite these promising remarks there is just half a page on the Downing Street press secretary and about the same on 'the prime minister's influence over the press'. The remark that 'presentation is now an integral part of policy-making' – a claim with crucial implications, surely, for the premiership – is mentioned almost in passing. James, *British Cabinet Government*, 2nd edn, 1999, pp. 207, 112, 95 and 112.

<sup>13</sup> Hennessy, *The Hidden Wiring*, p. 89.

and Anthony Seldon organize *The Powers behind the Prime Minister: the Hidden Influence of Number Ten* on the same narrative and chronological basis. Their subject is the institutional premiership in Downing Street, so the scope is narrower and their comparisons are mostly summary.<sup>14</sup>

Two exceptions to these comments about the literature are books by Michael Foley and Richard Rose: *The Rise of the British Presidency* and *The Prime Minister in a Shrinking World*.<sup>15</sup> Foley comes close to a 'communications model' of the premiership, in that public communication is intrinsic to his key concepts and arguments. The analysis depends heavily on such ideas as 'leadership stretch' and 'spatial leadership'. The former applies to the vastly superior media attention and popular reputation of the prime minister compared with his colleagues, and the latter to his media-managed ability to distance himself helpfully from aspects of the institutional premiership. (Both are attributes shared with the American president.)

Foley's book is an extended argument, much of it about winning rather than holding office. He is more concerned with forms of communication-related activity by the prime minister than with the range of tasks to which they are applied. Rose, in comparison, is closer to the methods of the contemporary historians – but with a far greater sensitivity to public communication as a factor in the prime minister's performance across the board (including internationally) and in Tony Blair's populism. The book centres on five varying 'major political roles' essential to a prime minister's success, of which his communications are one. (The others concern party, electioneering, and managing parliament and the cabinet.) The discussion of communication (themed as 'from private to public government') is wide-ranging, subtle and historical. Communication is not an organizing or overarching concept applied systematically to the prime minister's tasks. But the approach is close to the one adopted – on a shorter scale – in the present study.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Hennessy, *The Prime Minister: the Office and its Holders since 1945*, London: Penguin Books, 2000. Dennis Kavanagh and Anthony Seldon, *The Powers behind the Prime Minister: the Hidden Influence of Number Ten*, London: HarperCollins, 1999. Hennessy describes his book as not an 'essay in political science' but 'a work of political and administrative history with a large dash of biography' (p. 15). The job of the prime minister is defined principally in chapters 4 and 5. *The Hidden Wiring* is subtitled 'Unearthing the British Constitution' and covers much more than the prime minister.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Foley, *The Rise of the British Presidency*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993; Richard Rose, *The Prime Minister in a Shrinking World*, London: Polity, 2001.

## The Prime Minister's Job in General

What, then, are the prime minister's tasks and activities? Which ones require public communication, and which may be assisted by it?

To explore these questions a number of distinctions can be made. First, the prime minister has three clear and overlapping roles in which to carry out his tasks as a public communicator. Most comprehensively he is a *source of news*. To project the news he wants, he is next a *communications manager*. President Eisenhower cheerfully but naively believed in 'letting the facts speak for themselves'. Perhaps a military hero turned politician could afford to take that view in the 1950s; but fortunately for him, his press secretary, Jim Hagerty, did not.<sup>16</sup> In an era of electronic glut, 'facts', more than ever, are manufactured, and they never speak for themselves. Third, the prime minister is a *public performer*. The locations are diverse. In the majority he will double as a news source, since the live audience will be supplemented by newspaper or broadcast audiences. When he takes part in a broadcast interview or 'writes' a newspaper column (a practice Tony Blair often used, through the medium of assistants), his performance is specific to news media but may be further spread by being discussed also as a source of news.

A fourth but rather different communications role is *media policy-maker*. It is different in that it directly involves substantive policy goals, whereas the other roles are principally means to the achievement of goals, not goals in themselves. By 2001 media policy was the responsibility of the Department of Media, Culture and Sport – a comparatively minor Whitehall player. But modern media impinge also on a wide range of other departments, including Trade and Industry, Education and Skills, the Home Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Most of these are run by cabinet ministers with more clout than the MCS minister. Media policy, in addition, can awaken passions. Increases in the TV licence fee are likely to irritate almost every household in the land; issues of privacy and censorship rouse editorialists. When governments tinker with media, moreover, they meddle with an instrument of their own public accountability – a 'free press'.

One result of these administrative and political complexities is that a distinction can be drawn in practice between policies based on ideology and those driven by expediency. Another result is that the prime minister tends to be drawn into media policy – of both types. For example,

<sup>16</sup> See Elmer E. Cornwell, Jr, *Presidential Leadership of Public Opinion*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965.

in the late 1980s, as a matter of free market principle, Mrs Thatcher promoted the policy of allocating the periodically renewed Channel 3 ITV franchises by auction instead of by beauty contest – a radical shift of emphasis.<sup>17</sup> She was also determined to break the power of the newspaper production unions. In 2002 Tony Blair took a direct interest in the legislation establishing an umbrella broadcasting regulator, OFCOM, and relaxing media ownership rules.<sup>18</sup> But in his case the policy looked more like a pragmatic response to corporate pressure than the result of core Labour beliefs (new or old).

The prime minister's involvement is only occasional. But the fact that governments cannot avoid having media policies (in this substantive sense), as they very largely could until the 1980s, must colour his relationships with media entrepreneurs and the BBC. It is also a factor in his role as media manager. For example real or imaginary deals between Rupert Murdoch and Mrs Thatcher, and then Tony Blair, were a frequent source of public speculation – help with satellite and cross-ownership policy, in exchange for the partisanship of the *Sun*?

The prime minister's tasks are carried out, secondly, in a mixture of *formal* and *informal* roles, *institutional* and *personal* roles, and *governing* and *non-governing* roles. They reflect, again, the flexibility of the job. The prime minister's public communication can be an important factor in determining the range and balance within each pair. Electronic glut has increased the relative prominence of informal and personal roles and has made more difficult the isolation (and protection) of non-governing from governing roles.

*Formal* roles become so if they have constitutional definition, which gives them a predictable character and a gauge with which to judge how well they are carried out. The prime minister has the formal task of choosing whom to put in the cabinet, and the calibre of his appointments will be a factor in our evaluation of his premiership. Informal roles, independent of an external constitutional authority, may change at the whim of the officeholder. There are no formal rules, for instance, about exactly how much the prime minister must perform in parliament. In the absence of such rules Tony Blair had the flexibility to change Prime Minister's Question Time from two afternoons a week to one (but doubling its length). While there were grumbles of criticism, he could

<sup>17</sup> The fifteen regional ITV franchises were allocated every ten years (but not in 2000) by the Independent Television Commission and its predecessors. Until the auction principle was introduced, the decisions were made on the basis of judgements about competence and quality.

<sup>18</sup> *The Times*, 29 July 2002.