Gordon Brown as prime minister: political skills and leadership style

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(PSA Conference paper 2010)

Political scientists have developed a range of theories, approaches and models to analyse the British prime ministership. The dominant contemporary political science models of the core executive, prime-ministerial predominance and presidentialization analyse and seek to explain the functioning, powers and development of the office of prime minister in the British political and governmental system. Prime ministers themselves – the individuals holding the office – get much less attention from political scientists (as opposed to historians, biographers and journalists). Individual prime ministers' personalities, leadership styles and political skills tend to be regarded as variables of secondary significance, if they are seen as relevant at all. The focus is instead very much on institutions, structures, networks and resources. But Richard Heffernan has argued that 'prime ministerial studies must factor in the prime minister's personality and style', 'describe and analyse what they do', and take account of their 'personal skill and ability' (Heffernan, 2005, 615-17). Without privileging agency over structure, the personal attributes and skills of a prime minister, he contends, do matter. Bowles, King and Ross (2007, 385-6) also suggest that 'the impact of the personal traits of the prime minister' should be on the research agenda: 'just how important are skill, character and experience to understanding the success of the British premier?'

In contrast to the many US studies of the presidential leadership role and the impact of personality on that office, there is a 'dearth of systematic studies on the individual characteristics of prime ministers and on the personal components of leadership' (Foley, 2000, 246). Core executive studies may downplay 'personality' as a factor in explaining how government works, but the real need is to unpack that general catch-all term and to develop ways of understanding and analysing the components of prime-ministerial leadership and personal style and skills, within a framework permitting comparison, generalization and evaluation. The argument here is that some of the most influential accounts of the US presidency offer a way forward and should be explored to assess their potential for enhancing our understanding of British prime ministers and the premiership.

Borrowing from presidential studies

The argument that 'the vast literature on the American Presidency can be used to suggest questions that might usefully be asked of the Prime Ministership in Britain' was made by Anthony King over forty years ago (King, 1969, viii) and has been repeated a number of times since. Philip Norton (1987, 326) argued that a number of the most influential American analyses of presidential power have 'a wider, suggestive relevance'. Michael Foley has insisted that 'the use of the analytical perspectives associated with the presidency' can afford 'a deeper insight into the contemporary nature of prime ministerial power' (Foley, 1993, 20), while Bowles, King and Ross argue that 'models of American presidential

leadership can help explicate and improve our understanding of the changing executive politics on this side of the Atlantic', and that there are 'important ideas, variables, concepts and theories to be gleaned from the established field of Presidential Studies' (Bowles et al, 2007, 372, 385).

Outside of the general debate about the presidentialization of the premiership (Foley 1993 and 2000) there have, however, been few attempts to apply specific ideas, frameworks or models from the field of presidential studies to the study of the British prime minister. Norton (1987) used James David Barber's famous analysis of *The Presidential Character* (1972) as a starting point to sketch out a model of prime-ministerial power based on the interrelationship of purpose, skill and circumstance, and to develop a typology of prime ministers ('innovators', 'reformers', 'egoists' and 'balancers'). But there has been no full-scale British equivalent of Barber's book. Ellis (2002) used Richard Neustadt's *Presidential Power* (1960) as an analytical tool to assess Harold Macmillan's premiership, arguing that Neustadt's insights into the 'power to persuade' provide a way into analysing the personal influence and skills of a chosen prime minister and cast light on the nature of the premiership in general. Theakston (2002) used a 'skill-in-context' model, inspired by Erwin Hargrove's similar approach to conceptualizing presidential leadership (Hargrove 1998 and 2002), to assess and compare Callaghan, Thatcher, Major and Blair as prime ministers and political leaders. Taking a longer time-span – looking at prime ministers back to 1945 – Theakston (2007) then applied Fred Greenstein's model, set out in his (2001) book *The Presidential Difference*, to compare the strengths and weaknesses of different postwar prime ministers and weigh up what makes for an effective prime minister.

This paper uses Greenstein's model to analyse and evaluate Gordon Brown's leadership style and skills. Greenstein built on, but went beyond, Neustadt and Barber to develop a six-point framework for analysing the political and personal qualities and skills of US presidents, their characters and leadership styles, and their successes and failures in office (Greenstein 2006). He assesses and compares presidents in relation to: (1) their proficiency as public communicators, (2) organizational capacity, (3) political skills, (4) policy vision, (5) cognitive style and (6) emotional intelligence. These qualities come in pairs: public communication is the outer face of leadership; organization is the inner face. Skill is complemented by the vision to which it is directed. Cognition and emotion are deeper and more psychological variables. The performance of presidents usually being mixed, the argument is that there is at least as much to be learned from their failures and limitations in these terms as from their successes and strengths. Greenstein is able to reveal shortcomings in the leadership of presidents generally regarded as 'successful' and the strengths of presidents usually written off as 'failures' (Rae 2002, 422). He does not present his six qualities in any particular order of significance but argues that while some presidential limitations or skill-gaps can be compensated for, a defective temperament or the lack of emotional intelligence can be a truly destructive weakness (Greenstein, 2001, 200). Some of his critics, however, argue that policy vision – a sense of direction and the values a president stands for – is at least as important, suggesting that performance in the White House cannot be judged by

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considering form in isolation from content. Meena Bose ranks vision as first in order of importance, followed by political skill, organisational capacity and public communication, with cognitive style and emotional intelligence as less important factors (Bose 2006).

Greenstein's original formulation of his model was open to the criticism that he neglected the importance of context and the wider political environment. The inheritance of an incoming leader, the circumstances faced and the problems on the political agenda all needed to be factored in. Perhaps some of the qualities, traits or skills Greenstein noted were more important in some times or situations than in others (Langston, 2001). In some later presentations of his model, however, Greenstein did acknowledge the importance of contextual factors, and that the nexus between the personal qualities of presidents and the demands of the times was central to their effectiveness. 'The capacity of the president to make a difference', he conceded, 'is a function not only of his personal attributes, but also the political environment in which they are brought to bear. A president who is well suited to serve in one setting may be ill suited for another' (Greenstein, 2005, 228).

Although developed to analyse 'the modern presidency' (Greenstein, 2001, 3) from FDR onwards, Greenstein's analytical framework can be applied comparatively. Chamorel (2003) has used it to assess and compare the leadership of French presidents from De Gaulle to Chirac. Greenstein has also gone back into history to analyse the leadership styles of the early presidents from George Washington to Andrew Jackson, applying his model to the very different political world of late-18th and early 19th-century America (Greenstein 2009a). In *The Presidential Difference* it is true that he suggested that in Britain, with its 'tradition of collective leadership', the personal leadership style and skills of the prime minister were almost beside the point: 'the rare Winston Churchill, Margaret Thatcher, or Tony Blair is far outnumbered by the many Stanley Baldwins, Harold Wilsons and John Majors, whose personal impact on governmental actions is at best limited' (Greenstein, 2001, 3). But Greenstein now accepts that the personal qualities of even the 'ordinary' or second-rank British prime ministers can make a difference and believes that his model provides yardsticks that would permit comparisons across nations (personal communication with the author). Allowing for constitutional, institutional and political differences between the US and British systems, it is possible to apply the Greenstein model to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of British prime ministers and provide insights into the reasons for success and failure in Number 10 (Theakston 2007). British prime ministers have to manage their Cabinets and lead and manage their parties in ways that US presidents do not, but the skills and qualities needed to do so can arguably be encompassed within the Greenstein categories (calling on a mixture of political, organisational and communication skills, for instance).

Public Communication

Effectiveness as a public communicator comes first in Greenstein's checklist though as noted earlier, he does not rank-order his six qualities. Bose (2006, 33)

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argues that while communication skills can enhance presidential leadership, they should rank lower in importance than vision, political skill and organisation, because it is the substance of those other qualities that will ultimately determine the success of communication. Strong policies, she suggests, may compensate for deficiencies in public communication. Just as Greenstein picks out only a handful of modern presidents as outstanding communicators (Roosevelt, Kennedy, Reagan, Clinton at his best, Obama), so there have been only a few real communication 'stars' among prime ministers over recent decades – and Brown is clearly not among them. Harold Wilson and particularly Tony Blair stand out for their communication and presentation skills and their abilities as political showmen. Brown would rank alongside the likes of Clement Attlee, Alec Douglas-Home, Edward Heath and John Major, who all disliked the idea of 'selling' or promoting themselves and their policies, and who recoiled from political 'packaging' and image-building. Brown suffered on this count through comparison with Blair and with David Cameron – both telegenic, persuasive, able to reach out to the public, sell their ideas and project empathy and sincerity. He tried to make a virtue of his lack of slickness, purporting to scorn the politics of celebrity and image – 'not flash, just Gordon'. At first, his more subdued style appealed to some as a welcome change from Blair's prime-minister-as-actor-on-the-screen approach. But 'as time went on, it became increasingly evident that Brown lacked the range of presentational skills required to be a successful modern leader' (Rawnsley, 2010, 525), and he paid a price for his weaknesses and limitations as a communicator.

'A prime minister needs a different set of skills from a chancellor of the exchequer', an anti-Brown Labour backbencher said in 2008. 'A prime minister must be able to communicate, persuade and enthuse. If not, the message is lost' (*The Times*, 29 July 2008). 'He's crap at communication', a minister summed up bluntly, 'and the role of a leader is to communicate' (*The Times*, 3 June 2008). So much was it the conventional wisdom that prime minister Brown was a poor communicator and uncomfortable with the mass media, it was often forgotten that he had worked as a television producer for three years before entering parliament and, as an ambitious and rising MP in the 1980s, had won plaudits as a skilful and biting Commons speaker, a master of the sound-bites. As chancellor and as prime minister his speechmaking style was described as monotone and relentless, involving 'a barrage of lists, facts and achievements' or 'firing out machine-gum fusillades of statistics' (*New Statesman*, 5 February 2010; *New York Review of Books*, 25 October 2007). At his best, it was said that he could be 'a forceful speaker, but not a great debater' and 'most impressive when rousing a crowd of believers', for instance at party conferences (Rawnsley, 2010, 56, 58). Blair, though, was better able to reach out to, connect with and persuade the wider public.

Brown could pack a real intellectual punch with his speeches – some drawing on and quoting a tremendous range of sources and heavyweight thinkers. 'He would probably have done quite well in the 19th century, making long speeches like Gladstone', was one view (Hughes, 2010, 206). But his style and public personality were not well suited to the business of connecting with a modern electorate through television. Attempts to lighten or to humanise his image often

ended up backfiring and making things worse, as with his infamous 'YouTube' appearance. The contemporary political-media culture, argued Steve Richards, 'is entirely at odds with Gordon Brown's political style and explains why he has failed to engage with the electorate as prime minister' (*The Independent*, 4 September 2009). Brown had entered Number 10 saying 'I have never believed presentation should be the substitute for policy' (Price, 2010, 394). But he came to acknowledge his shortcomings as a communicator and that 'that's not the way politics works these days', accepting 'I have to do better in the presentation area' (*GQ*, December 2009, 113).

The idea that the Brown premiership would bring 'the end of spin' was never credible given the aggressive media management he and his entourage had long practised (Price, 2010, 394-5). The real criticism was that Brown did not have an effective media strategy as prime minister and his Number 10 media operation could have been more effective, with the lack of a political heavyweight with hard-edged journalistic experience at the PM's side (a Joe Haines, Bernard Ingham or Alastair Campbell figure) being a particular weakness (Price, 2010, 438; *The Independent*, 14 April 2009).

Organisational Capacity

This aspect of presidential leadership is about forging an effective advisory system in the White House and the ability to 'design effective institutional arrangements' (Greenstein, 2001, 195-7). In the British context, the relevant issues relate to the prime minister and the Number 10 staff, the machinery of government, and the organisation and use of the Cabinet system. Most prime ministers (like other politicians) – though, arguably, Attlee and Heath were exceptions - tend to 'see politics through speeches' rather than in terms of managing institutions, people and systems to achieve results (Donoughue, 2005, 586; Hoskyns, 2000, 326). The problem with Blair was that he had never managed anything, his Cabinet Secretary once bluntly told the prime minister; Seldon (2007, 224) described Blair's management style as 'erratic'. Brown, complained one civil servant, 'had no more idea' of effective management (Seldon, 2004, 629).

Blair had greatly increased the size of the prime minister's staff, importing more politically-appointed advisers and aides and creating a plethora of new units and offices, though the regular Number 10 reorganisations over his tenure suggested that he never quite felt the set-up was right or working properly, and one adviser thought that his Number 10 operation was 'amateurish' (Seldon, 2007, 223). Attempting to signal a distancing from Blair's 'sofa government', 'denocracy' and presidential style, Brown initially brought over with him from the Treasury only a handful of advisers and trusted officials to run Number 10. It was always his preference to work through a small and tight inner group, but it was soon apparent that the prime minister's office had to be strengthened to deal with the demands of the modern premiership. Some of Brown's changes – such as the appointment of Jeremy Heywood as the first Number 10 permanent secretary to pull together the civil service side and progress-chase – were successful. But on the political, media and strategy sides there were more problems, and a

succession of staff changes and infighting (particularly during Stephen Carter's ill-fated time as strategy director, when he clashed with the old Brown political clique) that damaged 'the image and the effectiveness of his administration' (Price, 2010, 409). Brown's Number 10 was often labelled 'chaotic' and 'dysfunctional'. One official argued that Brown 'surrounded himself with people who amplified his weaknesses rather than compensated for them' (Rawnsley, 2010, 520). 'Brown is not challenged by his advisers intellectually', was another criticism. He had filled Number 10 with 'apparatchiks and spinners' (Hughes, 2010, 211). Moreover the Brown coterie were reported to be 'very reluctant to tell him when he was wrong. None of his people liked to contradict him' (Rawnsley, 2010, 524).

British prime ministers rarely take much interest in issues of Whitehall machinery and management, their departmental reorganisations and tinkering usually being prompted by political or presentational motives. Heath in the 1970s stands out as a prime minister fascinated by government machinery and prepared to think from first principles about its organisation and reform. Brown is no Heath in this respect, but then neither were Thatcher or Blair, who were more people-centred in the way they approached government rather than organisation-centred. Brown had moulded the Treasury around himself and (like Blair and some other New Labour ministers) had been mistrustful of and impatient with the traditional Whitehall methods and civil service personnel. He had ordered the merger of the big tax departments, Customs and Excise and the Inland Revenue, while imposing staff cuts and savings that compromised performance and efficiency. His main departmental changes as prime minister all involved promotions or boosts for political allies: the creation of the Department for Children, Schools and Families, headed by Ed Balls, and of the Department of Energy and Climate Change, under Ed Miliband, together with the expansion of Peter Mandelson's empire in 2009 with the merger creating the Department for Business, Innovations and Skills.

A return to collective Cabinet government was promised but the controlling and micro-managing Brown could hardly reinvent himself as an Attlee-esque chairman of the Cabinet. Geoff Hoon felt that neither Blair nor Brown had 'any time for ministers'. The difference was, he went on, that Blair 'broadly let you get on with it [and] wasn't much interested unless something went wrong', whereas Brown 'wants to interfere in everything. He's temperamentally incapable of delegating responsibility' (Rawnsley, 2010, 523). Peter Riddell noted that Brown's 'preferred method of operation is via telephone calls. So sofa government has been replaced by telephone government, with similarly little formal procedure or papers' (*The Times*, 4 December 2008). There were few 'ad hoc' or 'MISC' Cabinet committee's in Brown's system (only six by 2010), but Brown himself chaired two key central committees: NEC, the National Economic Council handling economic policy and the recession (Blair had not chaired his own government's economic policy committee), and NSID, the lead committee on national security, international relations and development.

Brown was depicted as a dominating figure at the start. Blair had had to share power with Brown, running a sort of rival government from the Treasury, but

there were said to be no 'big beasts' or 'alternative prime ministers' in Brown's Cabinet (Hughes, 2010, 30). The Cabinets of other post-war premiers had contained ministers with reputations and power-bases of their own, and there had been some heavyweight ministers under Blair (John Prescott, David Blunkett, John Reid, Charles Clarke). But there was, it was suggested, no one with the weight to challenge Brown (Rawnsley, 2010, 463-4). However, the picture of a hegemonic prime minister could hardly be sustained as events, mistakes, party unrest and Cabinet plots engulfed him. The return of Mandelson provided a political shield but the stories of Cabinet ministers (including Jack Straw, Alistair Darling and Harriet Harman) forcing a string of concessions on policy and strategy from the prime minister after the third abortive coup attempt in January 2010 spoke eloquently of dependency not ascendancy in Brown's position in the core executive.

Political Skill

Under this heading Greenstein assesses presidents as political operators, using skills in persuasion, negotiation, manoeuvre and deal-making to work the Washington system, deal with the problems they face and advance their goals. Successful political management requires British prime ministers to use a range of skills in terms of persuasion, conciliation, manipulation and brokerage with their Cabinet colleagues, parties and others, and calls for political sensitivity and good political antennae; individual premiers can have very different abilities and aptitudes in this respect (Norton, 1987, 332-9; Theakston, 2007, 236-8).

Brown was never going to be able to emulate Blair's almost Rooseveltian political use of personal charm to 'schmooze', persuade, win people over and avoid conflict (Rawnsley, 2010, 57). Brown was more the 'big clunking fist', as Blair himself put it, 'Stalinist in his ruthlessness' in the way that he operated, according to a former Cabinet Secretary. It was almost as if he would rather be feared than loved. He was described as having a 'mastery of machine politics' and using 'faction boss methods'. His negotiating style was 'bone-crunching'; he 'steam-rollered' and intimidated rather than reasoned or persuaded (Rawnsley, 2010, 69, 74, 434; Bower, 2007, 4, 109-10). Cabinet ministers had come to regard him as 'secretive, cliqueish and vengeful' at the Treasury, a political bruiser and a brutal operator (Rawnsley, 2010, 461). 'His standard operating procedure as chancellor was to hold back from expressing a view and then suddenly hit his Cabinet colleagues with a fully worked-out position backed up with Treasury papers at the last minute, so that they had little time to respond' (*The Independent*, 28 August 2009). One minister on the receiving end of his methods described Brown as 'authoritarian, impatient and arrogant. He believes in laying down the law rather than negotiating' (Hughes, 2010, 170).

In more positive terms, Brown was depicted as the 'consummate strategist', 'the biggest political brain in the Labour Party' with 'the ability to see where the politics of something is going', the 'great chess player of British politics, the man who always thought a dozen moves ahead' (Hughes, 2010, 75, 209; Rawnsley, 2010, 510). But he was also 'the scheming fixer . . . the petty infighter . . . [and the] endlessly prevaricating, indecisive, fiddling tactician' (Hughes, 2010, 3). His

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aim was always to carve out 'dividing lines' with opponents that exposed their vulnerability (Rawnsley, 2010, 58). His 'time horizon' was described as 'extraordinarily short'. 'He's always thinking how do we get ourselves out of a corner and put someone else in a corner' (Rawnsley, 2010, 585). However, the build up to and the procrastination over the 'election that never was' in the autumn of 2007 – allowing expectations to run out of control before deciding finally not to go to the country - exposed both 'tactical foolishness' and 'strategic stupidity', as Rawnsley (2010, 510) describes what was arguably Brown's biggest political mistake as prime minister.

Brown did have the ability to attract and retain tribal support as a sort of 'clan chieftain' in the Labour Party (Bower, 2007, xiii), winning and keeping the backing of a network of 'Brownite' MPs and ministers on the road to Number 10. He expected and required total loyalty while also licensing close aides like Charlie Whelan and Damian McBride to act as thuggish behind-the-scenes hatchet-men, spinners, attack-dogs and assassins. Brown was never squeamish about or reluctant to resort to the political black arts or methods of 'terrorism' (Bower, 2007, 191). The likes of Whelan and McBride did what they thought Brown wanted them to do, raising questions about his judgement and political style in terms of whom he chose as close allies, how he dealt with opponents and rivals, and his approach to the media (*The Independent*, 14 April 2009). This was the 'dark side' of the purportedly 'ideologically serious, morally driven statesmen' (Hughes, 2010, 183).

Prime ministers have to be able to build and maintain a coalition of different and sometimes conflicting interests, groups and personalities. But critics had argued that Brown was 'instinctively unwilling to engage foes and placate the outraged. He lacked the essential attributes of emollience and encouragement to gather together a coalition of supporters to respect his leadership' (Bower, 2007, 455). However as prime minister he did reach out to senior Blairites, giving some of them Cabinet positions, and even made some 'big tent' gestures (offering former Liberal leader Paddy Ashdown a Cabinet post and bringing in outside recruits at junior minister level – the 'GOATS' – to what was dubbed a 'government of all the talents'). But he remained a suspicious and cliqueish figure rather than genuinely pluralist (Rawnsley, 2010, 461-5). Bringing back Peter Mandelson in 2008 was an audacious move that reflected the weakness of Brown's political position, supplying much-needed presentational and strategic skills to the centre of government while also providing a prop and ally in the face of plots against the prime minister, but at the cost of making Brown dependent on his former bitter enemy. The June 2009 Cabinet resignations and coup attempt further underlined Brown's vulnerability – he could not move senior ministers (like Alistair Darling or David Miliband) to other posts against their will and his premiership could have been finished if they too had resigned.

Bower (2007, 314-15) argued that Brown was temperamentally unsuited and lacked the political skills needed for working with his counterparts in other countries. As chancellor he clearly disliked EU finance ministers' meetings and was reportedly loathed by the other ministers: 'conciliation and diplomacy, the essential ingredients of European negotiations towards collective decisions, did

not appeal to [him].' His approach could be seen in a different way, however, a senior official suggesting that 'Tony [Blair] was the weaker negotiator. If you want to put someone in a room with other EU leaders, give me Gordon any day. Gordon is stronger because he doesn't care whether people hate him and Tony does' (Rawnsley, 2010, 58). It should also be noted that Brown performed impressively and was in his element in the negotiations and meetings of world leaders (the G20) in 2009, responding to the global financial crisis. 'Grinding out deals, that is what Gordon likes doing and that is what he does best', said one insider. Both Obama and Sarkozy praised Brown's skills and the role he played in the high-level economic summitry (Rawnsley, 2010, 629, 632, 634).

Policy Vision

The 'vision thing' is not about a leader having an 'ism' in a dogmatic ideological sense, but possessing and articulating clear long-term goals and some overarching ideas and priorities that can provide coherence for the government and give it a sense of direction and purpose. Just as most of the modern US presidents have been pragmatists of one sort or another, so vision-driven prime ministers have been the exception not the rule in Britain. With the traditional model of collective Cabinet and party government it may not have mattered too much that many prime ministers did not provide distinctive policy agendas, a strong lead or ideas of their own but contemporary expectations are different. Both Thatcher and Blair saw it as vital to win the battle of ideas and to push forward with their own policies and goals, though Thatcher was more successful on this front as Blair's 'third way' and 'modernisation' ideas failed to give much in the way of consistency or clarity to government, often seeming to descend into 'waffle and cliché' (Seldon, 2004, 148).

Brown had little time for Blair's 'third way' and it suited him in the years before 2007 to seem a bit more to the 'left' and more authentically 'Labour' than Blair. Some of this was political tribalism, some of it was about maintaining party support and his stranglehold on the succession, but some of it reflected his deeper understanding of its socialist traditions and doctrines and stronger roots in the party than Blair (who delighted in 'taking on' his party and attacking its sacred cows). Some thought or hoped that he would break from Blairism and New Labour and eagerly anticipated radical new ideas and bold plans from a man who described himself at the start of his leadership as a 'conviction politician' with a 'moral compass' (Hughes, 2010, 11). Brown, as Watt (2010, 7-8) puts it, 'had been so desperate to become Prime Minister, and had plotted so meticulously and ruthlessly to get to No. 10, that we all assumed he knew what he was going to do when he got there.' However, it soon emerged that there was 'no vision, no strategy . . . [no] grand plan . . . Gordon was simply making it up as he went along.'

As a co-architect of New Labour from the start, and with his powerful influence from the Treasury over domestic policy after 1997, Brown – for all he positioned himself as 'not Blair' or even 'anti-Blair' - could hardly be expected to disown the past and engage in a complete ideological and policy redirection. In the post-war period, mid-term successions and changes of prime minister without a change of

party have not resulted in significant shifts in policy direction (Griffiths, 2009, 55). Broad policy continuity rather than a radical break or 'fresh start' could be expected.

There have been plenty of 'initiatives' from Brown ('too many' according to a former minister) but, overall, an 'incoherent policy agenda' and an inability to 'plant a firm enough idea of what he stands for' (Hughes, 2010, 213, 231). There was no 'strategy for government', as a Number 10 aide admitted. Brown seemed to have 'run out of ideas, seemed to have run out of big projects', argued Vince Cable, something putting his government at the mercy of events. Blair was reportedly concerned that Brown 'hasn't got a plan'. The absence of a coherent programme and compelling narrative led a Cabinet minister to complain that 'the dots aren't being joined up' (Rawnsley, 2010, 526-7). Brown's government, argue Beech and Lee (2009, 101), 'has suffered from the prime minister's failure to adequately articulate his vision . . . the general lack of an ideological narrative . . . has hampered his effectiveness [as prime minister]' (see also: Beech, 2009).

Brown cited the need for more time to spell out his 'vision for Britain' as one of the key reasons for not calling an election in the autumn of 2007 (Hughes, 2010, 134). Two years later, media critics were claiming that he 'doesn't know what he believes in' (*Guardian*, 3 September 2009). He has been labelled variously as a statist and social engineer, a technocratic Treasury centraliser, the heir to Thatcher, the heir to Blair, a man of the left or at least the centre-left, a practitioner of 'cautious Blairism' (Hughes, 2010, 126), and someone whose personal political philosophy has been more influenced by market liberalism and the ideas of US thinkers (including neo-conservatives) than by European social-democracy, becoming increasingly distant from the Labour Party's mainstream ideas (Lee, 2007). Brown was criticised for his lack of clarity and for 'facing both ways' (Bower, 2007, 492), but Thatcher's ideas about economy, state and society had also been a complex and not necessarily coherent or ideologically consistent mix. The difference was her greater ability to project and sell her ideas. Brown's failure to set out a plausible 'narrative' about what he was doing and trying to achieve – communicating a strategic sense of direction – damaged his credibility and weakened his leadership.

Cognitive Style

British prime ministers – like US presidents – vary widely in their cognitive styles, or the way in which they process and deal with advice and information and approach decision-making. It has suited some to seem to be less intelligent than they really are (such as Baldwin). Some have worked through a process of intuition, instinct and imagination rather than by prolonged calculation of the pros and cons (such as Churchill). Some have preferred to work in an orderly way and through paper rather than listening to people (Attlee), while others liked verbal advice and had a more freewheeling and intellectually agile style (Wilson). Heath's approach was rational and problem-solving, preferring hard facts and concrete recommendations to big ideas, while Thatcher was aggressively argumentative not calmly analytical, combining command of details and black-and-white instant certainty. Major was not a conceptual, strategic or

big-picture thinker but more the reactive problem-solver and details man (Theakston, 2007, 241-4).

Formal educational achievement is not the point. Two of the last five prime ministers did not go to university while Brown is the only British prime minister with a PhD. A formidable thinker, seriously interested in history and in ideas, and who reads widely and himself writes books, Brown is the most intellectual prime minister since Macmillan. Intellectuals have a mixed record in Number 10, however, as the contrasting fates of prime ministers like Balfour, Rosebery and Gladstone suggests. It is arguably more important for prime ministers to know how to make use of intellectuals than to be one (*Prospect*, 2007, 28-30).

Where Blair was 'a much more instinctive decision-maker', according to Jack Straw, Brown's approach was more methodical, cautious and slow (Rawnsley, 2010, 523). Brown had a deeper grasp of policy than Blair. But his style was marked by narrow calculation and 'obsessive attention to detail' (Price, 2010, 400). Critics argued that his long years at the Treasury were perhaps not a good preparation for the premiership. As chancellor, policies could be carefully planned and reviews instituted, giving him time to make up his mind. Chancellor Brown only rarely had to do 'the spontaneous and the immediate', but as prime minister the unpredictable and the press of events gave him no choice (*The Times*, 2 July 2007). Moreover, Brown was said to be someone who wanted to concentrate on issues one at a time, refusing to consider other questions until he had thoroughly gone through the options and the minutiae, considered all the angles and all the risks, and had finally come to a decision. A prime minister has to be able to deal with multiple problems and fast-moving crises, and critics doubted that Brown's ponderous and inflexible style was suited to the day-to-day demands and pressures of Number 10.

As Rawnsley (2010, 522) puts it, Brown 'did not excel at multi-tasking. His preference and his forte were to concentrate on one big thing at a time. He had largely been able to do that at the Treasury, where he could focus on the four or five major events of a Chancellor's year. Prime Ministers can get hit by four or five major events in a month, or even a week . . . Torrential volumes of business flow through Downing Street, much of it demanding instant attention.' 'As Prime Minister', an insider told Rawnsley, 'you are bombarded with things.'

It was not long before there were complaints that decisions were piling up and that while Brown burned the midnight oil, constantly demanding more papers and information, he came to seem indecisive, vacillating and dithering. On one matter after another (the 'non-election' of autumn 2007, the 10 pence tax rate, the expenses scandal), there seemed a crippling 'inability to make big decisions' (Watt, 2010, 174). Brown 'has a problem with decisions', said one insider bluntly (*Financial Times*, 6 February 2008). Faced with difficult decisions Brown, according to a senior civil servant, 'just delays and delays, thinking he will get a better set of options later. But quite often the options just get worse' (Rawnsley, 2010, 523).

Worse still, once Brown had made a decision, it was said to be incredibly difficult to get him to unmake it. Conviction that he understood the issues more deeply than anyone else bred stubbornness, inflexibility and a damaging unwillingness to change course or compromise in the face of public discontent, media criticism or backbench pressure (Hughes, 2010, 211). Brown was said to dislike open debate or challenge; he had 'difficulty distinguishing between disinterested advice and a stab in the back', complained one official (Bower, 2007, 213). Brown 'copes badly with criticism' it was claimed (*Economist*, 24 November 2007). 'He can't bear dissent', said a Number 10 insider (*Sunday Times*, 18 November 2007). 'He finds argument very difficult', reported a senior official. 'His answer is to thump out bullet points until he has ground you down' (Rawnsley, 2010, 56). Knowing that he responded badly to unwelcome advice, ministers and advisers could be reluctant to offer it. Overall, while there could be no doubting Brown's impressive intelligence, there were problematic aspects of his cognitive style and approach to decision-making that impacted negatively on his premiership.

Emotional Intelligence

Greenstein is concerned under this heading with how the occupants of the White House manage their emotions and turn them to constructive purposes rather than being dominated by them and allowing them to diminish their leadership. To adapt what was said about Roosevelt, the suggestion is that a 'first-class temperament' may be more important than a 'first-class intellect' in dealing with crises and the daily stresses and demands of high office.

The key question is how far emotional or temperamental flaws impede effective presidential or prime-ministerial performance and leadership? Greenstein concedes that 'great political ability does sometimes derive from troubled emotions', but puts most emphasis on the dangers and problems that can arise in this area. He admits, however, that while only a third of modern presidents have been fundamentally free of 'distracting emotional perturbations' and another third were seriously 'emotionally handicapped' in various ways, a final third had 'emotional undercurrents' that 'did not significantly impair' their leadership (Greenstein, 2009b, 229-30). Deficiencies in emotional intelligence may not therefore prevent a leader from governing successfully. Indeed, some of the great presidents, such as Washington and Lincoln, may not have scored highly on emotional intelligence (Bose, 2006, 34-5; Greenstein, 2009a, 23).

With British prime ministers too it is debateable how far there is a correlation between an equable temperament (emphasised by Attlee to be of key importance at the top [Field, 2009, 112]) and statesmanship or political achievement. Historically, leaders like Gladstone (often tense, moody, excitable, impetuous, passionate and angry) or Churchill (prone to violent mood-swings and depression, and warned during the war of his 'rough, sarcastic and overbearing manner' towards colleagues and officials) would hardly score high in terms of emotional stability (Crosby, 1997; Storr, 1969; Jenkins, 2001, 593).

Post-war premiers appear to have varied greatly in terms of emotional intelligence and in their strengths and weaknesses on this dimension of

Greenstein's model (Theakston, 2007, 244-7). It was frequently argued that Brown showed less emotional intelligence than Blair. Blair's extrovert and optimistic personality was originally a strength, but it is his flaws that stand out in David Owen's analysis of how his hubristic self-confidence and messianic self-belief led him into the Iraq war (Owen, 2007). The 'psychologically flawed' Brown, as Alastair Campbell is supposed to have labelled him, can be compared to Anthony Eden (petulant, volatile, easily upset and annoyed, bad-tempered) and Edward Heath (defensive, introverted, awkward in social and personal relations, sulky), though comparisons have also been made to another embattled Scottish prime minister, Lord Rosebery, Leo McKinstry noting 'the thin skin, the hyper-sensitivity, the gift for cultivating enemies, the brusqueness used to cover up shyness' (Hughes, 2010, 109; *Spectator*, 27 June 2007, 22).

Brown's suitability for the premiership was being questioned before he even assumed the office. Labour MP Frank Field said he had 'no empathy with people' and allowing him into Number 10 would be 'like letting Mrs Rochester out of the attic' (*Mail on Sunday*, 24 February 2007). Matthew Parris declared that Brown was 'psychologically unfit for the office' of prime minister, describing him as 'a worryingly closed and leaden personality' (*The Times*, 19 May 2007). Tom Bower's biography ruthlessly dissected Brown's character, depicting him as a 'brooding volcano', a man of 'demons and grudges', 'tantrums and offensive behaviour', 'consumed by hatreds', insecure and suspicious, awkward and uneasy, with poor social skills and a ferocious temper (Bower, 2007, 11, 67, 98, 194, 302, 344, 376-7, 415). 'Blair was much the more emotionally intelligent', says Rawnsley (2010, 56), 'which gave him the advantage in connecting with the public and colleagues.' Brown also suffered by comparison with David Cameron, his Conservative rival, who showed more 'emotional literacy' (Rawnsley, 2010, 537).

Brown was said to be 'a highly volatile man, more so than his predecessor, who usually kept his emotions tightly disciplined' (Rawnsley, 2010, 536). But for all his reported charm, warmth and humour in private life, a negative picture of the prime minister's public and political character was firmly established well before the publication of Andrew Rawnsley's (2010) book triggered a major media storm about Brown's leadership style, personality and alleged rages and bullying. His attempt to display a more 'human' side by lifting the veil on his private grief over the death of his infant daughter in a television interview in February 2010 seemed calculated, his long-held preference for privacy on such matters being more genuine (*Financial Times*, 22 February 2010). Brown was hardly the first prime minister to have been a difficult or even menacing person to deal with and to have a short fuse. Thatcher was once called 'the Lyndon Johnson of modern British politics' for her 'hectoring, cajoling, threatening . . . bullying' style and her willingness to humiliate ministers and officials (King, 1988, 57-8). Blair on the other hand confessed he only lost his temper in public situations deliberately and for reasons of calculation (Powell, 2008, 135). Was this aspect of Brown's character and style connected to mistakes of judgement and decision-making? Some commentators argued 'a prime minister who cannot control his emotions is unsuited to the job of making important decisions for the country' (*The Times*, 23 February 2010) and that Brown's personal shortcomings

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were 'deeply destructive to good governance' and were 'key to understanding why [his] government has been so uncoordinated, unhappy and ineffectual' (*Guardian*, 26 February 2010), while others argued they 'do not automatically render him unsuited for office' and were a 'disadvantage for a national leader . . . not a disqualification' (*Financial Times*, 22 February 2010). Poll evidence suggested the public were not too concerned about this controversy and Brown's allies sought to put a positive gloss on it by portraying him as a driven, demanding and tough but strong and determined leader.

With compensating strengths or positive qualities in respect of other aspects of Greenstein's model, or in more favourable circumstances with things going well, Brown's insecurities and shortcomings in terms of emotional intelligence may not have mattered too much. Brown displayed stamina and resilience, but a more even temperament may have been an asset and helped him to weather the demands of office and lead his government more successfully.

Conclusion

The prime minister is not the premiership, and the premiership is not the government. Individuals, offices and institutions, and the system as a whole all need to be studied (Greenstein, 2006, 25). Nevertheless, Greenstein's model helps us understand the tasks and demands political leaders face and the skills they have, and provides a set of benchmarks for assessing, evaluating and comparing them. In terms of his categories the ideal British prime minister would possess an unlikely combination of skills, qualities and attributes. Individual prime ministers will have their distinctive strengths and weaknesses under his headings. It is difficult to think of a recent prime minister who would rate highly on all of his counts. Gordon Brown has clear limitations or weaknesses in terms of most aspects of the model. Greenstein helps us to go beyond the general media comments about 'his evident lack of leadership qualities' (*The Observer*, 7 June 2009).

Besides the argument that Brown was simply 'unsuited to the job' of being prime minister (Hughes, 2010, 203), he was also clearly very unlucky in terms of the circumstances he faced in Number 10. A leader's inheritance, the situation faced, and the problems on the political agenda need to be factored in to Greenstein's model. Brown has faced a very hostile operating environment or context. Anthony Seldon has argued that had Brown taken over earlier – perhaps during Labour's second term, when the government was in a stronger political and economic position – his 'personal peculiarities' would have proved 'less of an obstacle' to positive achievement (Hughes, 2010, 109). Brown is said always to have feared that 'he would get the premiership too late to make a success of it' (Rawnsley, 2010, 280). In the event, he has run up against a whole range of problems that typically handicap multi-term governments and challenge 'tail-end' prime ministers following dominant and long-serving predecessors: 'longevity in office and the associated boredom of the electorate; a depleted stock of able ministers; loss of reputation for economic competence; an increasingly hostile press; internal divisions over policy and the succession; and a revived and credible opposition' (Hughes, 2010, 110; see also: Heppell, 2008).

Blair's personality and skills might have been better suited to trying to deal with and find a response to these problems.

In dealing with the global financial and banking crisis, Brown seemed more confident and at home than in discharging the normal political and public duties of prime-ministerial leadership. His decisive action and the sense that he had the experience to make him the right man for the situation may have helped him stave off leadership plotters. Normally portrayed as a cautious ditherer, he took bold and swift initiatives. 'He's really good in a crisis in a subject he understands', admitted a senior civil servant. 'He's energised by it' (Rawnsley, 2010, 586). And he took the lead in coordinating international action in a way that impressed other world leaders. As Rawnsley (2010, 634) put it, he enjoyed and was better at being 'Chancellor of the World' than prime minister of Britain. If he 'struggled to master many of the other demands of modern leadership', this role gave him a sense of mission, boosted his confidence and played to his strengths (Rawnsley, 2010, 598-9). His 'no time for a novice' line worked neatly against internal party rivals and the Tory opposition, but the political pay-offs with the electorate at home seemed less clear, particularly in the face of criticism that he had not addressed the longer-term economic and financial problems that built up during his time as chancellor.

Overall, Brown seems to be someone not well equipped for the highest office, in terms of the key leadership abilities, characteristics and skills that Greenstein identifies. This does not mean that he was or is bound to fail and to go down to electoral defeat. But in the situation he and the Labour government were in after 2007, it made it very much harder to be successful.

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