

There's No Need for the '-isation': The Prime Minister Is Merely Prime Ministerial

Richard Heffernan*

Politics and International Studies, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

*Correspondence: r.a.heffernan@open.ac.uk

The notion that the British prime minister had outgrown the parliamentary system enabled some scholars to theorise that the prime minister had become more 'powerful' over time and allowed critics to lambast Tony Blair for being unnecessarily and unreasonably powerful. Keith Dowding (2012) suggests it is time to 'finally put an end to the presidentialisation argument' (p. 618), but the notion—in both its uses—had fallen from favour long before his recent attempt to administer a coup de grâce. For one thing presidentialisation was forever undone by proof Blair was often hamstrung politically by his chancellor, Gordon Brown. By itself this illustrates that Blair, harried by Brown for the entirety of his premiership, was no president, even if at times a very powerful prime minister. No member, say, of any US president's executive (not even the vice president, the only person who can succeed the president) could ever engineer the president's ousting in the way Brown and his followers in Labour's parliamentary party obliged Blair to step aside in June 2007. No US Treasury secretary (nor any other cabinet member) could ever have been as obstructive, insubordinate or disloyal to the president they serve as Brown was to Blair.

Presidentialisation fell further from favour when Brown proved a weaker and less effective prime minister. Few suggested Brown was so empowered a prime minister he had become a president. And fewer still, given the realities of coalition government, refer to David Cameron in such fashion when he has presently to share some degree of power—over both the choice of policy and of ministerial personnel—with the deputy prime minister, Nick Clegg (Bennister and Heffernan, 2012).

1. Prime ministers can never be 'presidents' (not even metaphorically)

Comparing a president and a prime minister can illuminate the study of each, but conflating the British prime minister with a US president can only confuse our understanding of both (Heffernan, 2005a). The reason the British prime minister cannot become even metaphorically a president lies in the institutional differences between the two types of chief executive. It is these differences that ought to be emphasised, not the few similarities. This is because presidential and parliamentary systems create very different relations between intra-executive actors and exceptionally different inter-executive legislative relations.

So far, so political science 101, but this means presidents and prime ministers have very different leadership opportunities and face fundamentally different constraints. This is because there are two factors which separately determine the extent of their political influence: his or her authority within the executive; and their leadership over the legislature. The US president commands his or her executive, but has no ability to consistently lead (let alone dominate) the autonomous federal legislature. In Britain the executive as a whole can lead (and often dominate) their legislature, but the degree of the prime minister's authority within the executive (less so the legislature) is often uncertain. This is because if presidents command their *personalised* executive, prime ministers can only lead their *collegial* executive because they have to work with and through senior ministers (even if they can dominate less senior ministers found in the outer concentric circles comprising the hierarchical executive). But prime ministers, when empowered to work through their executive, can successfully pursue their policy agenda through their partisan advantage within their legislature; presidents cannot do this. By being institutionally denied any such purchase over their separate, independent legislature, the US president has to use their office as a 'bully pulpit' to urge law-makers to implement their agenda. In contrast, a British prime minister leading a single-party government can be assured of securing much of their legislative agenda. It was leading a single-party government with a large Commons majority—the intra-executive impediment of Gordon Brown notwithstanding—which helped make Blair at his peak a powerful (but never an omnipotent) prime minister. And this, in turn, made him infinitively more powerful than a president.

The present prime minister, David Cameron, by leading a coalition, faces the constraint of two separate parties having first to agree the policy agenda. One could therefore argue—totally contrary to the presidentialisation thesis—that such are the constraints of coalition Cameron finds himself more of a 'president' than Blair. In a speech on welfare reform Cameron set forth his ambition to further cut welfare and end dependency (2012), but openly acknowledged his

proposals could not be delivered in concert with the Liberal Democrats but had to await the election of a Conservative majority government. Cameron, much as a US president vainly implores Congress to enact his legislative agenda, was in the unusual situation of making plain only his aspiration; rather than state what he as a prime minister was actually going to do, he stated only what he do if he were able. Of course, Cameron is not a ‘president’, just a weaker prime minister constrained by coalition.

2. Political leadership and prime ministerial power

Changes in the form of the modern electoral professional British party—and in the system of British government—have made the party leadership (plural), the party in ‘public office’ (Katz and Mair, 2002), ascendant over their parties and, when in office, their government (Heffernan, 2011). Such changes have simultaneously empowered the party leader (singular) within this leadership (plural). Indeed, one of the key reasons why Blair mattered as prime minister was that party leaders (especially when prime minister) now matter more than ever. The presidentialisation thesis clearly drew on this development. This might be one reason, whatever the failings of the thesis, to question Dowding’s (2012) suggestion that it ought be ‘expunged from political science vocabulary’ (p. 617). Presidentialisation is certainly misleading [elements of the argument may indeed be ‘superficial’ (ibid 2)], but some of its advocates, Michael Foley (2000) foremost among them, have nevertheless helped us think interestingly and creatively about the changing form and function of the British prime minister (Foley, 2000, 2004; Poguntke and Webb, 2005a, 2005b). Party leaders matter more because contemporary politics has, in Foley’s (2000) helpful term, helped ‘stretch’ both the prime minister and the party leader ‘away’ from other party and parliamentary colleagues, so helping further empower or to personalise him or her (Langer, 2011). But the continuing collegiality still found within Britain’s parliamentary executive means it is an overstatement to suggest that this has the effect of ‘marginalizing other political actors to the periphery of public attention’ (Foley, 2000, p. 293). As Brown demonstrated in Blair’s case (as George Osborne and Nick Clegg in Cameron’s), this collegiality, even when weaker than previous, ensures not every senior party or governmental actor is marginalised.

How powerful, then, might the prime minister be? Keith Dowding counterpoises the notion of the ‘prime ministerialisation’ of the prime minister to presidentialisation. Initially, pace Hart (1991), his use of the phrase is seemingly sarcastic. It ought to remain so. Prime ministerialisation can surely only be a phrase offered in opposition to presidentialisation. It is not—in itself—a helpful concept because, even in pointing to the increasing power of the prime

minister arising from 'the personalisation of politics' and 'centralisation in the executive' (Dowding, 2013, pp. 618–619; 622–627), it cannot explain (i) either personalisation or centralisation in either institutional or behavioural terms or (ii) properly begin to account for prime ministerial power or its absence. At best, by adding an 'isation', the term merely rehashes the outworn notion of prime ministerial government. At worst, it adds little to our understanding of the premiership. One could speak of the 'footballerisation' of Lionel Messi, but who needs to note that Messi plays football, not, say, tennis? Moreover that he can play football to the highest standard is not captured by the notion of 'footballerisation'. That same description applies to any pub player turning out on a Sunday. How is it that '[t]he process of centralising in the UK enhances the prime minister's control over policy formation' (ibid 2)? Why? To what extent can such 'control' be 'enhanced'? Can it not sometimes be diminished? Adding an 'isation' to the words prime ministerial cannot distinguish the stronger prime minister from the weaker one; the more powerful from the less powerful one and the Blair and Thatcher from the Major or Brown (or early Blair from late Blair). Dowding—drawing on others—might identify the causes of the empowerment of the prime minister but he fails to effectively explain this empowerment—nor fully account for its consequences. Nor can he explain how and why a prime minister might someday find themselves less empowered or perhaps be even disempowered.

For Dowding it seems that the forces behind 'prime ministerialisation'—personalisation and the centralisation of power within the executive—only makes the prime minister ever more powerful. The undeniable trend toward the empowerment of the prime minister is not, however, a one-way process. Some prime ministers can be stronger or weaker and some (e.g. Blair) more 'powerful' than others (e.g. Major and Brown). All three, assumedly, have been 'prime ministerialised', but it will not do to suggest that one found himself more 'prime ministerialised' than the others. Nor could one say that Cameron has been 'de-prime ministerialised' by the fact that 5 posts in his coalition cabinet (and 13 other ministerial slots in his government), being held by Lib Dems, are in Nick Clegg's gift and not his. To explore the form and function of the prime minister prompts such questions as: What makes a prime minister powerful (Blair) and another less powerful (Brown)? What makes the same prime minister powerful (Blair in 2000–2002) but less powerful (Blair in 2005–2007)? Such questions are easy to pose, but challenging to answer. Prime ministerial power, because it is such a moveable feast, is extraordinarily problematic to measure, understand or theorise. Prime ministers, being prime ministers, not 'presidents', will matter more when they have more power and influence within their executive. But when? To what extent? And why?

3. The prime minister is pre-eminent, but if sufficiently resourced he or she can be empowered by being predominant

For the core executive model (see [Elgie, 2011](#)) the prime minister is but one actor. He or she has a set of resources, as do other executive actors, and to achieve their goals the prime minister has to exchange these resources with other actors. The core executive model has helped move us on from the shopworn debate between ‘prime ministerial’ vs. ‘cabinet’ government, but it too easily assumes that power, being nowhere found in any one actor, is therefore found everywhere. Such overtly pluralistic assumptions have been helpfully challenged by the best of the presidentialisation literature. And I have tried to argue that power within the hierarchical networks comprising the British executive (core or otherwise) is locational, not merely relational ([Heffernan, 2003, 2005b](#)). Being locational, something determined by where are you within the hierarchy of the network, means that the prime minister—being at the top of the hierarchy—is never only another minister. His or her authority is prime ministerial—never presidential—because it is the product of the *institutional imperatives* of the parliamentary systems within which the prime ministerial actor operate; but such prime ministerial authority remains a movable feast, however, because its extent—or the potential for prime ministerial power—is a product of the *changing political environment* in which the prime minister and other executive and legislative actors find themselves.

Thus, to repeat, we have no need to add any form of ‘isation’ to describe the prime minister. We have instead to better explore the ways in which prime ministerial authority is affected by the changing political environment within and without the parliamentary system. The prime minister—and his or her political, electoral, economic and social ‘worlds’—can usefully be ‘brought back into’ the study of executive government, something which, whatever its failings, the presidentialisation of the prime minister thesis has helped us do.

My notion of prime ministerial predominance ([Heffernan, 2003, 2005a](#)) suggests that the prime minister can sometimes be empowered by being the ‘stronger or main element’ within their government and that predominant prime ministers thus possess the less fettered hand (but never an entirely free hand) in the running of that government. The *prospect* of prime ministerial empowerment begins with the executive’s domination of its parliamentary legislature, but the *opportunity* for the prime minister to be empowered is determined by the degree to which he or she is able to exercise influence within both executive and legislature. Under certain circumstances the modern prime minister can play by far the leading role within their party and parliamentary leadership. This fact might be captured by the idea of ‘prime ministerialisation’ per se as Dowding would have it, but prime ministerialisation cannot identify the form this leading role takes. This

is because it cannot capture the necessary and sufficient circumstances enabling the prime minister to play not just *a* leading role, but *the* leading role within their executive. Prime ministers are (i) better resourced than other ministers and past prime ministers; but they (ii) can now at times be significantly better resourced; and (iii) prime ministers, even when better resourced than past prime ministers, can be (iv) more or less resourced at different moments in the timeframe of their premiership.

Prime ministerial empowerment reflects the fact that prime ministers—like party leaders—have a set of institutional power resources making them *pre-eminent* within their government—or when party leader, the party. This alone helps 'stretch' them away from their colleagues. Should, however, these institutional powers be reinforced by personal power resources in the possession of the individual prime minister and/or leader then he or she will be *predominant* as well as pre-eminent. Thus, being pre-eminent, prime ministers always matter, but those who are predominant matter more. Both pre-eminence and predominance are explained by the centralisation of leadership within the executive and the political party from which the personnel of the executive are drawn. Both owe much to the personalisation of politics. Pre-eminence, however is assured, but predominance is not. These institutional power resources make the prime minister pre-eminent:

- (1) being the legal head of the government, using the Crown prerogatives, and being involved, either directly or indirectly, in all significant matters relating to government policy.
- (2) having the political and administrative means to access knowledge and expertise and extend his or her reach and grasp across central government
- (3) being able to influence and shape the preferences of other actors and institutions and
- (4) being able to frame the policy agenda through leading the government and the party and by controlling the government's 'official' news media operation.

Such *institutional power resources*, being conferred by being prime minister, make the prime minister pre-eminent. For the prime minister to be predominant, to matter more, however, he or she has to possess and make effective use of the following four *personal power resources*.

- (1) being an entrenched party leader with a reputation for being 'prime ministerial';
- (2) being associated with actual or anticipated political success;
- (3) being electorally popular and

- (4) having a high standing in his or her parliamentary party (Heffernan 2003, 2005b).

Pre-eminence, then, offers only the prospect of predominance. Predominance, however, can be possible if the prime minister—and therefore his or her party—is *electorally popular* and is—or can hold out the realistic promise of being—*politically successful*. If prime ministers can only be as powerful as their ministerial colleagues allow them to be (Jones, 1985) then prime ministerial predominance explains why ministerial colleagues might permit the prime minister at certain times to be more rather than less powerful. Of course the continuing demands of collegiality imposed by the parliamentary system will always prevent the pre-eminent, predominant prime minister from ever being all powerful within their executive. For instance the pre-eminent predominant Blair failed in his personal ambition to have Britain enter the Euro. This failure was born of many factors, but his inability to persuade (let alone command) his chancellor to support entry was one of the key factors. Such collegiality means the prime minister has to work with and through ministers often using, if needs be, carrot and stick. He or she will be better empowered to lead the government—to influence and direct policy by having more carrots or sticks (or by having to make less use of either)—by becoming predominant, not only by being pre-eminent.

4. Prime ministerial power is a moveable feast

The prime minister's personal power resources can be significant or less significant; he or she can be resource rich or resource poor; or can have, if you will, more or less political capital. The power the prime minister has in practice is considerably influenced by the political environment in which they—and other political actors—find themselves. This environment is party political and electoral; and economic and social. For instance, the prime minister's party face matters more than is sometimes emphasised. This is because the party, by means of partisanship, is a resource of the pre-eminent, predominant prime minister because it encourages intra-executive stability (less so within a coalition) and provides inter-legislative control; but the party, however, can also be a source of weakness by being an obstacle to the prime minister.

For instance within Blair's parliamentary executive his party colleague, Brown, proved a source of endless vexation; his parliamentary party, being at times prepared to oppose him in the Commons, could sometimes oblige Blair to make compromises over policy. Note that two of the four prime ministers before Cameron, Thatcher and Blair, were prised from the premiership by elements of their parliamentary party (Thatcher brutally, Blair decorously). The other two, Major and Brown, surmounted intra-party challenges but to be ousted by the

electorate at the subsequent election. Strangely enough, the two prime ministers most likened to presidents—Thatcher and Blair—fell foul of elements of their parliamentary parties (and their intra-party rivals).

Being 'less constrained by their party than once they were' (Dowding, 2013, p. 618) means prime ministers will still to an extent be in some way constrained. Prime ministers are less constrained than previously, but prime ministerial power involves their being sufficiently resourced to circumvent these looser constraints to some extent; lacking such power means they are bound by them. Such power is thus a moveable feast. If, for instance, the party is to be either a resource or an obstacle then—to use Macmillan's well worn dictum—'events' favourable or unfavourably impacting the prime minister's political environment largely help determine which it is to be. It falls to the prime minister (and those working to the prime minister), however, to try to ensure that the party is more of a resource than it is an obstacle. For reasons identified by Dowding and others the personalisation of politics and the centralisation of power in parties and in government makes this an easier task than previously, but this only provides the prime minister with *some* power not *the* power. How much power? It depends on how well resourced the prime minister is. With regard to their party the better resourced prime minister, one who uses such resources wisely and well and who is able—by being electorally popular and politically successful—to deliver the goods the party seeks, will be better placed to have the party follow him or her rather than he or she follow it.

5. Conclusion

Personalisation and centralisation has clearly 'strengthened prime ministerial control' (Dowding, 2013, p. 631), but to what extent? Prime ministerial power is not, contra Dowding, the product of a linear procession to empowerment. Such power waxes and wanes. For instance, those who make the presidentialisation case (and perhaps a critic such as Dowding too?) too easily assume that personalisation by the news media inevitably strengthens the power of the prime minister. But because news media reportage reinforces perceptions of the weak as well as a strong prime minister, the media will certainly help make the weak prime minister weaker if it makes the strong one stronger (Heffernan, 2006). In any case the prime minister is not simply 'strong' or 'weak', but 'stronger' or 'weaker' according to the circumstances fashioned by their political environment, their personal power resources and the use they can make of them. Blair, somewhat plaintively, has remarked that when prime minister you 'begin at your most popular and least capable, and you end at your least popular and most capable' (Blair, 2012), something which indicates the variable relationship between prime ministerial resources. Thus, the prime minister can be more or less

powerful, but he or she will be considerably empowered if, by being considered to be a popular asset, rather than an unpopular liability, they can marry predominance to their pre-eminence.

References

- Bennister, M. and Heffernan, R. (2012) 'Cameron as Prime Minister: The Intra-Executive Politics of Britain's Coalition Government', *Parliamentary Affairs*, **65**, 778–801.
- Blair, T. (2012) 'Transcript of Evidence to Leveson Enquiry', accessed at <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Transcript-of-Morning-Hearing-28-May-2012.pdf> on 5 August 2012.
- Cameron, D. (2012) 'Speech on Welfare Reform', 25.6.12, accessed at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/9354163/David-Camerons-welfare-speech-in-full.html> on 5 August 2012.
- Dowding, K. (2013) 'The Prime Ministerialisation of the British Prime Minister', *Parliamentary Affairs*, **66**, 617–635.
- Elgie, R. (2011) 'Core Executive Studies Two Decades On', *Public Administration*, **89**, 64–77.
- Foley, M. (2000) *The British Presidency: Tony Blair and the Politics of Political Leadership*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Foley, M. (2004) 'Presidential Attribution as an Agency of Prime Ministerial Critique in a Parliamentary Democracy', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, **6**, 292–311.
- Hart, J. (1991) 'President or Prime Minister: Convergence or Divergence', *Parliamentary Affairs*, **44**, 208–225.
- Heffernan, R. (2003) 'Prime Ministerial Predominance? Core Executive Politics in the UK', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, **3**, 347–372.
- Heffernan, R. (2005a) 'Why the Prime Minister Cannot Be A President: Comparing Institutional Imperatives in Britain and the US', *Parliamentary Affairs*, **58**, 53–70.
- Heffernan, R. (2005b) 'Exploring (and Explaining) the Prime Minister', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, **7**, 605–620.
- Heffernan, R. (2006) 'The Prime Minister and the News Media: Political Communication as a Leadership Resource', *Parliamentary Affairs*, **59**, 582–598.
- Heffernan, R. (2011) 'Political Parties'. In Flinders, M., Gamble, A., Hay, C. and Kenny, M. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of British Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Jones, G. W. (1985) 'The Prime Minister's Power'. In King, A. (ed.) *The British Prime Minister*, London, Macmillan.
- Katz, R. and Mair, P. (2002) 'The Ascendancy of the Party in Public Office: Party Organisational Change in Twentieth Century Democracies'. In Gunther, R., Montero, J. R.

- and Linz, J. (eds) *Political Parties: Old Concepts and New Challenges*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Langer, A. I. (2011) *The Personalisation of Politics in the UK: Mediated Leadership from Attlee to Cameron*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Poguntke, T. and Webb, P. (eds) (2005a) *The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Poguntke, T. and Webb, P. (2005b) 'The Presidentialisation of Politics in Democratic Societies: A Framework for Analysis'. In Poguntke, T. and Webb, P. (eds) *The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.