

# What are prime ministers for?

*Lecture in Politics and Government<sup>1</sup>  
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*Abstract:* The article draws up an assessment of the resources and instruments a new prime minister inherits on his or her first day in 10 Downing Street. It examines the growth in the functions that have fallen to successive prime ministers, as heads of government, over the seven decades since the end of the Second World War. It explains the very special and personal nuclear weapons responsibilities that belong to a prime minister. It touches, too, on the physical and mental strains that often afflict those who carry the office of prime minister. The article examines Jack Straw's proposal that the United Kingdom prime minister and the collective Cabinet system over which he or she presides should be placed on a statutory basis by Parliament.

*Keywords:* Prime minister, Cabinet, collective governments, nuclear weapons, Parliament.

I owe my title question to a young boy in the late 19th century who may well have not existed beyond what one might call plausible and useful legend about the day Queen Victoria opened Blackfriars Bridge across the River Thames. As the little old lady in black passed in her carriage between her loyal and cheering subjects on either side of said bridge, the lad turned to his papa and enquired 'Dad. What is that lady for?' Unless Dad by chance was an avid reader of 'The Monarchy' chapter in Walter Bagehot's *The English Constitution*,<sup>2</sup> he would have been a bit pushed to provide the precocious child with a pithy answer.

One way of approaching the question is to think a bit about what a prime minister inherits once he has kissed hands with the Queen, delivered his or her well-rehearsed spontaneity on the step of No. 10 and marched down the corridor to the prime ministerial office past the same applauding Principal Private Secretary and Downing

<sup>1</sup>An edited version of the Q&A session that followed this lecture is published in *British Academy Review*, issue 25.

<sup>2</sup>Bagehot ([1867], 1963: 82–120).

Street staff who had clapped the predecessor out about an hour earlier as he or she set off for the Palace to resign.

Here is my top 20 of the bounty which falls into the lap of the new prime minister:

1. A £744 billion pot of public expenditure a year (the 2015–16 forecast from the Office of Budget Responsibility).
2. Twenty-two seats around the Cabinet Table for those ministers who will fight it out in front of you as to who will spend how much of the money pot and on what.
3. A direct labour force of about 400,000 people called the civil service.
4. Forty government departments.
5. Three secret agencies and some high class security and intelligence coordination and analytical machinery in the Cabinet Office.
6. Some 160,000 personnel in the Armed Forces.
7. A bomb of thermonuclear proportions and four very sophisticated submarines to carry it.
8. An interesting and usually leak-proof chat with the Queen each week if you are both in town or you pop up to Balmoral to see her in September.
9. A nice place in town plus a decent house in the Buckinghamshire countryside.
10. Round-the-clock protection from some highly trained and agreeable policemen noted for their sharpshooting.
11. A dominant share of parliamentary time.
12. The weekly torment of Prime Minister's Questions when the House of Commons is sitting.
13. Heaps of patronage in Whitehall and quangoland.
14. A press pack watching—or imagining—your every move on a 24-hour basis.
15. A seat—through your New York diplomatic representative—on the United Nations Security Council as one of its five permanent members.
16. A seat on the European Council as one of its 28 members; ditto the NATO Council.
17. Certain special operational functions such as the shooting down (or not) of a civilian nuclear airliner that might be in the process of carrying out a 9/11-style attack on the United Kingdom.
18. A slew of intractable problems at home and abroad, some of them centuries in the making, and a hand of history that falls upon you straightaway which is, for most premiers, both awesome and covered in calluses.
19. Very few direct levers of power.
20. And, finally, perhaps the most daunting responsibility of all, the writing and signing of four 'last resort letters' for placing inside the inner safe of the four Trident submarines containing your wishes—to retaliate; or not to retaliate; if you and much of your country are wiped out by a nuclear bolt-from-the-blue.

My first reaction to any list of this kind is ‘why on earth would anybody wish to do the job of Prime Minister of the United Kingdom?’

My second thought is to be intrigued by the absence of any job description for those who become the Queen’s First Minister. Neither is there any statute which lays out the parameters for the premiership or for Cabinet government. (I’ll come back to that, too, in a moment.) You just have to get on with it.

Most of the prime ministers who have taken office during the past century had sat in Cabinets before and seen other prime ministers in action. Some had not: Ramsay MacDonald in 1924; Tony Blair in 1997; David Cameron in 2010.

Mr Cameron, however, did possess an unusual characteristic in May 2010. He had been schooled as an undergraduate in Oxford by the ace professor Vernon Bogdanor at Brasenose and, as part of the PPE formation, familiarised himself with the great rolling debates about Cabinet government and prime ministerial government—a gratifying thing for those of us who labour our way through The National Archives and slog our way through the lecture halls and seminar rooms. And, in an interview he kindly gave me last year, the prime minister was intriguing on the themes which have turned into a thousand exam questions since John Mackintosh<sup>3</sup> and Dick Crossman<sup>4</sup> revived the old creeping prime ministerialism debate 50 years ago.

‘Vernon had trained me’, said the prime minister. ‘Dare I say I’d even read your book on the Prime Minister.’<sup>5</sup> (‘Dare away’, I thought—albeit silently. Those of us in universities who live under the curse of the Research Excellence Framework have to find ‘impact’ where we can.)

I asked the prime minister what else, apart from the Bogdanor training, had helped him form his view of what the job of prime minister involved before he found out for himself after May 2010? Our conversation ran like this:

CAMERON: The picture of the job I had was formed by watching John Major a bit because I’d helped him with Prime Minister’s Questions. So I’d seen inside the black box of No. 10. I’d worked in the Conservative Research Department when Mrs Thatcher was Prime Minister . . . trying to understand how much a chairman and how much a chief executive—that was something I’d thought about quite a bit having worked in business. Having studied the whole debate about how much Cabinet and Cabinet committees . . . informed decision-making structures, I’d thought about that a bit. I think I was determined to try and make it a little bit more formal and structured than it had been under my two immediate predecessors. Not necessarily because I had some sort of deep view that there was ever a perfect kind of Cabinet government, not that, just that I’m a fairly structured person. I like meetings to start on time, finish on time. I like process . . . and making decisions . . .

<sup>3</sup>Mackintosh (1962).

<sup>4</sup>Crossman (1963: 1–57).

<sup>5</sup>Conversation with David Cameron, 10 Downing Street, 3 Oct. 2013; Hennessy (2001).

HENNESSY: So it's for temperamental reasons rather than constitutional propriety?

CAMERON: A bit of both. I think things had gone too far towards the sofa and it needed to come back a bit.

Mr Cameron added that much 'depends on circumstance, it depends on what's happening politically, it depends on the characters'.

I asked him if he had talked to previous prime ministers before he came into office?

CAMERON: I talked to John Major. I did talk a bit to Margaret Thatcher. John Major I talked to quite a bit.

HENNESSY: What did John Major tell you in terms of do's and don'ts?

CAMERON: He gave me quite a lot of don'ts, of things he'd done, as it were. He said that he didn't manage his time as well as he should have. He wished he had made more time to think.

The prime minister's answer made me think that I'd missed an important 21st item in that list with which I began of what a premier inherits—finite time; thinking time especially. Mr Cameron has plainly pondered that a good deal. Later in the interview I put a follow-up question to him on the time/thought theme.

HENNESSY: Walter Bagehot writing on Peel. . . said that a Prime Minister needs a 'mind in reserve' for those things that come out of the blue and really stretch.<sup>6</sup> Do you think you're good at the mind in reserve?

CAMERON: Oh, that's a very good one. I think there's enough flexibility . . . in the job so that when something does come up, you can extract yourself from some of the things you're doing. So when, for instance, a Libya happens or a hostage crisis happens . . . you can step outside some of the day to day. . . . I try to make sure that my life is not too cluttered. You do need to have time to read, to think, to not get exhausted so then when something does come up that means you are really burning the candle at both ends, you've got the energy and the time to do it.

David Cameron has, in a way, done a Bagehot on himself—a bit of self-placement in the great rolling debate about prime minister and Cabinet. His prior thinking had led him to see the job as an executive chairman of the Cabinet and he reckons that is what he has been.

CAMERON: . . . you're the executive chairman; you're chairing the Cabinet; you're driving progress . . .

HENNESSY: Before the election you said that you wanted to be more collective, in the way you described earlier. But would I be right in thinking that the Coalition made sure you were virtuous?

<sup>6</sup>In fact, Bagehot used the phrase 'mind in reserve' in a later 1875 essay entitled 'The Premiership'. St John-Stevas (ed.) (1974: 67).

CAMERON: I think there's probably some truth in that. I think that I am quite a collegiate person . . . I think it will be true that Coalition adds an extra sort of buckle to prevent too much sofa government.<sup>7</sup>

A prime minister can shape—has to shape—the tone, pitch and style of a government. And it's possible—as David Cameron had plainly done—to think a good deal about it before you reach No. 10. But, after that, there's no road map, war book or cunning plan about what you do and how you do it. You are, to borrow a phrase Winston Churchill liked, the 'spear-point'.<sup>8</sup> Everybody knows it and expects you to be spear carrier-in-chief. But what are you really for?

The question may seem a touch luxurious for those who have held the office of prime minister because you're never short of things people are asking you to do on top of that most terrible of special delivery parcel labelled 'events' that turns up on the doorstep of No. 10 with wearing frequency. And, as Henry Kissinger once described the US system, the prize is 'to rescue an element of choice from the pressure of circumstance'.<sup>9</sup> And the sheer rapidity and variety of decisions you need to make is very sapping on the energy levels and the grey cells. As the neuroscientist, Daniel Levitin, expresses it: 'Each time we shift attention, there is a metabolic cost we pay in glucose. We don't actually do two, or three or 10 things at once, we just switch from one to another to another. Some brain activities are more expensive than others, and switching attention is among the most expensive.'<sup>10</sup> This applies to prime ministers in buckets.

One way I have tried to get a bit of purchase on 'What are prime ministers for?' is to attempt a functional analysis—to look at the mix of three things:

1. The functions that only prime ministers can carry out.
2. The things they have to do when certain events dump themselves on the prime ministerial desk.
3. The new functions the job has acquired over the decades that tend to stay in No. 10 once they have arrived and are rarely shed or passed to somebody else thereafter.

The idea of trying such a functional analysis came to me in the late 1980s and early 1990s after just such an attempt—an internal secret one conducted within Whitehall in 1947—had finally reached The National Archives. It had been prepared

<sup>7</sup>Conversation with David Cameron, 3 Oct. 2013.

<sup>8</sup>House of Commons (1947: cols. 203–4). It was in this same debate on House of Lords reform that Churchill famously remarked that: 'No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.'

<sup>9</sup>Kissinger (1979: 54).

<sup>10</sup>Levitin (2014).

by a young Treasury official, William Armstrong, in response to a request from the Institute of Public Administration for help in preparing a paper on the functions of the British prime minister to be presented at an international conference on government chief executives in western democracies.

William Armstrong, who went on later to head the Treasury and the Civil Service, sought the help of the senior and the wise in the Cabinet Office and Buckingham Palace before sending off a brief to the public administrators and placing the result, for the purposes of the Whitehall collective memory, in what was then a new artefact of the constitution called 'The Precedent Book'.<sup>11</sup> There is, incidentally, a fine thesis for someone in 'The Precedent Book'. Its creation in 1947 was not made public nor, until recently, was its demise. The final edition was created in 1992<sup>12</sup> and, as Lord Wallace of Saltaire told me in a written Parliamentary answer last August to my question inquiring whether or not HMG 'intend to restore and update the Cabinet Office Precedent Book', the volume 'has largely been superseded by the Cabinet Manual,<sup>13</sup> the Ministerial Code<sup>14</sup> and the Code of Conduct for Special Advisers,<sup>15</sup> which are public documents'.<sup>16</sup>

Back to the prime minister's functions as placed in the Precedent Book in 1947. The collective wisdom of Whitehall and the Palace came up with 12:

1. Managing the relationship between the Monarch and the government as a whole.
2. Hiring and firing ministers.
3. Chairing the Cabinet and its most important committees.
4. Arranging other 'cabinet business', i.e. the chairmanships of other committees, their memberships and agendas.
5. Overall control of the civil service as First Lord of the Treasury.
6. The allocation of functions between departments, their creation and abolition.
7. Relationships with other heads of government.
8. An especially close involvement in foreign policy and defence matters.
9. Top civil service appointments.
10. Top appointments to many institutions of 'a national character'.
11. Certain scholastic and ecclesiastical appointments.
12. The handling of 'precedent and procedure'.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Hennessy (2001: 58).

<sup>12</sup> See the evidence of Sir Jeremy Heywood, Secretary of the Cabinet, to the House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee on 17 July 2014, Questions 112–14.

<sup>13</sup> Cabinet Office (2011).

<sup>14</sup> Cabinet Office (2010a).

<sup>15</sup> Cabinet Office (2010b).

<sup>16</sup> Lord Wallace of Saltaire answered the question (HL 1518) on 5 Aug. 2014.

<sup>17</sup> The National Archives.

Had I been at William Armstrong's side (I was but a few months old at the time) I would have added to that core dozen. But its contents intrigued me. I made a few enquiries and, as far as I could establish, there had been no such audit before and none since. What's more, no prime minister had seen this job description.

So, a cunning plan of Baldrickian proportions formed in my mind. Why not pretend to be the William Armstrong of the early 1990s, draw up a modern list along 1947 lines, send it to the discreet and the wise on the inside for a bit of tweaking and then 'contrast and compare', as we like to say in exam questions. This I did in the mid-1990s and placed the result in a book I was then preparing on the constitution called *The Hidden Wiring*.<sup>18</sup> I had another crack at it three years ago with my friend and former student, Dr Andrew Blick, and placed it in a study of the writing of contemporary history entitled *Distilling The Frenzy*.<sup>19</sup>

I shan't go into the details here but some interesting things emerged from the exercises to update the 1947 taxonomy of prime ministerial tasks as head of government (not leader of party), which would have lengthened all three lists quite a bit had they been added.

First, the 1995 audit produced 33 functions compared to William Armstrong's 12 in 1947. Even allowing for those that should have been there originally—such as dealing with Opposition on a Privy Counsellor basis, overseeing the preparation of War Books, the distribution of honours, contingency planning for industrial disputes that might jeopardise the essentials of life and a few more—this represented quite an accumulation of functions and, it might be argued, an accretion of prime ministerial power that altered the balance within what we like to think of as a collective Cabinet executive.

The biggest change in terms of the quantum of personal prime ministerial responsibility was the question of authorising the release of nuclear weapons which had fallen to successive premiers since the first United Kingdom atomic bomb was delivered to the RAF in November 1953.<sup>20</sup>

A particular function that one does not associate with the *diminuendo* qualities of Mr Attlee was an increasing preoccupation with the media either in terms of attempting to massage and manipulate it or to fend it off. The Attlee years, too, were almost entirely free of the counter-terrorism work that fell to prime ministers after the Troubles recrudesced in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s.

When Andrew Blick and I set to work on our 2011 audit we wrote down 47 functions, nearly four times William Armstrong's. A swathe of them was specific to the Coalitionist requirements of the job after May 2010 and may disappear after the

<sup>18</sup> Hennessy (1995: 86–92).

<sup>19</sup> All three taxonomies are published. Hennessy (2012: 109–22).

<sup>20</sup> Hennessy (2007: 9).

May 2015 general election. Examples include managing intracoalition relationships within the so-called ‘Quad’ of prime minister, deputy prime minister, chancellor and chief secretary meetings, plus a more complicated process for some ministerial appointments such as agreeing with Nick Clegg who shall be the law officers.

Other accretions since the mid-1990s are not Coalition-specific such as deciding with the relevant minister whether or not to use the ministerial override on disclosing information as allowed by clause 53 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. An area where, unusually, a prime minister has shed power is, in effect, choosing the moment to trigger a general election by asking the Monarch for a dissolution of parliament which is now a matter of statute under the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act 2011.

The wider national security responsibilities of the prime minister have also increased and Mr Cameron’s most important innovation within the machinery of government—the creation of the National Security Council—reflects this. Indeed, when I asked him in our conversation of autumn 2013 ‘What surprised you most about the job when you started?’, the prime minister said: ‘I knew that the national security, terrorism, intelligence services role of the job was very big, but it still surprises you how big it is.’<sup>21</sup>

A very sombre and sobering aspect of a premier’s national security responsibilities that most intrigues audiences at literary festivals when one gives talks on the secret state or related themes is the preparation of the ‘last resort letters’ for the inner safes of the Royal Navy’s Trident submarines. These answer the question of retaliate or don’t retaliate after a nuclear attack which has wiped out the prime minister and his two or three alternate nuclear deputies drawn from the Cabinet on a personal basis.

In an interview this summer for the BBC Radio 4 ‘Reflections’ series, I asked Sir John Major how he had felt in the early days of his premiership when he had been briefed on this intensely prime ministerial duty? ‘It is a shock’, he replied:

The first I realised that I was going to have to write post-Armageddon instructions to our four Trident submarines [they were, in fact, Polaris boats still doing the patrolling in 1990] was when the Cabinet Secretary told me. And it is quite an extraordinary introduction to the premiership.

I remember I went away over the weekend and I thought about it a lot. And it was one of the most difficult things I ever had to do—to write those instructions; the essence of them being that if the UK is wiped out but its Trident submarines are at sea with their weaponry, what should they then do with their weaponry. Eventually I reached a conclusion and I set it out.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Conversation with David Cameron, 3 Oct. 2013.

<sup>22</sup> John Major, ‘Reflections’, BBC Radio 4, 13 Aug. 2014.

I'd heard that David Cameron had called him in before writing his letters for the submarines:

I talked to David about that. I'm not going to say what I said. But we discussed the parameters of it and I left him to make his own decision, as he did.<sup>23</sup>

Last year I'd asked the prime minister about his nuclear session with John Major when we talked in his office at No. 10. 'Yes', said the prime minister,

I asked John Major in and asked for his advice and I talked to him about it. I also talked to the Chiefs of Staff, I talked to CDS [Chief of the Defence Staff] I think. But then, in the end, it is you know, it is you in the office on your own. I sat at that chair and there's a great big shredder that was placed right here and you write . . . you choose which basic letter you want, make any amendments to it you want and then you seal it up and you shred all the rest. And so nobody hopefully will ever see these letters. It goes into the safe of the Trident submarine and then hopefully when you stop being Prime Minister they take it out and burn it and no one will have ever opened it.

As with John Major, I suggested that this 'must be when you realise what being prime minister really is all about because no one else ever does that'. It is, Mr Cameron replied, one of the 'big moments',

—going to see the Queen, walking through the door of No. 10, chairing your first Cabinet. It's probably, yes, because it's the oddest in a way. You've seen prime ministers drive up to Buckingham Palace. You've seen them walking through the door of No. 10. You can't really believe you are doing it yourself. But that bit in the office, writing out the letters, with the shredder . . . is such an extraordinary thing to have to do, you can't really imagine it until you do it.<sup>24</sup>

If Parliament ever manages to create a system, either through a House of Commons resolution or a war powers statute, to regulate the capacity of a prime minister and Cabinet to take military action, this 'last resort' prime ministerial function will obviously remain prerogative pure, by which I mean that, heaven forbid, if those letters are ever opened and they say retaliate, it will be under the ancient prerogative powers of the Crown that the Trident missiles will fly.

Is it possible—or desirable—for Parliament to acquire a say in the powers and reach of a British prime minister and Cabinet in the carrying out of their normal functions far away from the contingency planning for nuclear war? There's a little noticed section in Jack Straw's memoir, *Last Man Standing*, published in 2012, which takes a look at this very question.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Conversation with David Cameron, 3 Oct. 2013.

In the book, Straw is critical of some of the style of decision-taking on the road to the Iraq War of 2003 in which he was closely involved as Tony Blair's Foreign Secretary. 'Tony's reputation', wrote Straw,

has suffered because he used informal 'sofa government' methods of decision-making rather than ensuring that Cabinet (and its committees) were proper, formal bodies where collective decisions were made. The criticism is justified. Look at Iraq.

Straw went on:

I was fully involved in the decisions over Iraq, made informally and formally. Because Tony had agreed that any decision to take military action would have to go through the Commons, there had to be a high degree of involvement by Cabinet (and the Parliamentary Labour Party) in the final decision. The end point of this discussion chain was very formal indeed—a resolution of the House of Commons. But it would have been better—for Tony and his reputation, as well as for good government—if he, and I, and the Defence Secretary, had had to discuss progress with, and seek decisions from, a National Security Council, in turn reporting to Cabinet—and on paper, not by way of oral briefing.<sup>25</sup>

Straw reached the conclusion that: 'The days of self-regulation of Cabinet Government should be over.'<sup>26</sup> As a result he's been drafting a Cabinet Government and Executive Powers Bill for that purpose and, to declare an interest, I've been helping him with this. It's still a work-in-progress but here, briefly, are its essential provisions:

- Cabinet to consist of not less than 16 members and no more than 22.
- Cabinet will have two standing committees reporting to it—a National Security Council and a National Economic Council (whose duties and composition are set out in a pair of schedules to the Bill).
- The prime minister to be required to make an annual report to Parliament on the operations and effectiveness of the Bill's clauses that deal with Cabinet Government.
- That a consultation period of at least three months should be completed prior to major changes in the machinery of government with the Commons Public Administration Committee affording them prior scrutiny before the changes are approved by both Houses of Parliament on an affirmative resolution.
- 'That the prime minister shall not authorise the active, and large-scale, deployment of British forces overseas without the approval of the House of Commons' except where 'the operations of the Special Forces or where the circumstances require that no prior public notice of the deployment should be given.'

<sup>25</sup> Straw (2012: 544–5).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* (545).

The schedule dealing with the National Security Council, which, of course, already exists but on a non-statutory basis, specifies that it shall oversee all questions related to national security, foreign policy, defence strategy and policy (including decisions to deploy United Kingdom armed forces abroad on active service) as well as the coordination of intelligence and security.

The schedule touching upon the National Economic Council, which does not exist, tasks it with oversight of all questions relating to economic, fiscal and monetary policy as well as policy for industry, trade, investment plus energy and climate change. It also requires the Chancellor of the Exchequer to bring before the National Economic Council all Budget proposals and spending reviews before they are presented to Parliament and that the meeting of this requirement should be reported on the face of the resulting Budget or Spending Review.

To ensure that the collective work of the NSC and the NEC are at the core of the government's work cycle the schedules lay out that each shall meet at least 11 times a year.<sup>27</sup>

Of course any such Act, were Parliament to pass it, would create a collective framework for the conduct of central government—which is meant in the United Kingdom to be the norm as enshrined in *The Cabinet Manual*, *The Ministerial Code* and the code's predecessor, *Questions of Procedure for Ministers*, which ran as the core constitutional document (though it was secret until John Major declassified it in 1992) from 1945 until 1997.<sup>28</sup> But such a statute would not—could not—ensure that a collective spirit prevailed always and everywhere in the Cabinet Room.

For the style of a particular government would, as David Cameron suggested, continue to be shaped by the circumstances of the day and the temperament of the occupant of No. 10. And prime ministers, after all, set out their own stalls. Some set out to be transformers—Harold Wilson in 1964 to substantially raise the rate of economic growth (which he failed to do<sup>29</sup>) and Margaret Thatcher in 1979 to, as she put it to a Cabinet Office official, 'change the facts'<sup>30</sup> of the United Kingdom's political economy (which to a large extent she did by injecting successive tranches of economic liberalism and curbing trades union power). Ted Heath, though rarely seen as a transformer premier, also qualifies by steering the United Kingdom into membership of the European Economic Community in 1973; and Harold Macmillan did so between 1957 and 1963 by engineering the United Kingdom out of great tracts of its remaining territorial Empire. A side thought—would a prime minister who saw us out of the

<sup>27</sup> The draft Cabinet Government and Executive Powers Bill has yet to be published.

<sup>28</sup> Baker (2000).

<sup>29</sup> Kitson (2004: 32).

<sup>30</sup> John Ashworth quoted in Hennessy (2001: 422).

European Union qualify in that sense? I think so. As would perhaps a prime minister who presided over a Scottish separation.

Others because of circumstances or temperament do not set such high bars for themselves. Jim Callaghan was obliged to be a survivor or get-us-through premier during the protracted economic and industrial crises of his three years in No. 10, 1976–9. John Major, in his ‘Reflections’ interview with me, was eloquent about what he wished he could have done for health and education had he possessed the funds and a further governing spell after 1997 (which he made plain he never expected).

Historical memory can be—usually is—hard on the incumbents of No. 10. By seeking the highest office they set themselves up to be brought down in a variety of ways. It’s partly what E.P. Thompson called, in a very different context, ‘the enormous condescension of posterity’.<sup>31</sup> Is the premiership a victim of Enoch’s Law? Here I mean Enoch Powell who famously wrote in his study of Joe Chamberlain that: ‘All political lives, unless they are cut off in midstream at a happy juncture, end in failure, because that is the nature of politics and human affairs.’<sup>32</sup>

For me Quintin’s Law fits better than Enoch’s. Quintin being Quintin Hogg, Lord Hailsham, who for a few days came close to succeeding Harold Macmillan as prime minister in October 1963. In a 1989 interview with Anthony Clare for BBC Radio 4’s ‘In the Psychiatrist’s Chair’, Hailsham was asked did he regret not making it to the premiership? He replied:

I’ve known every Prime Minister to a greater or lesser extent since Balfour, including Balfour, and most of them have died unhappy . . . It doesn’t *lead* to happiness.<sup>33</sup>

It’s as if, in their often lengthy post-premier life, reflecting in tranquillity is not their lot—to have had that position and power and yet to have left substantial things undone that might have been done.

The nature of prime ministerial memory, too, can linger on what might have happened but did not in terms of catastrophe avoided. Harold Macmillan told his grandson, Alexander (now the Earl of Stockton), ‘that as an old man he only had nightmares about two things: the trenches in the Great War and what would have happened if the Cuban missile crisis had gone wrong’.<sup>34</sup>

I suspect for David Cameron, the early hours of Friday, 19 September 2014, will come into the category of catastrophe avoided when the results from the Scottish Referendum counts indicated that the United Kingdom would stay together. I’ve been keeping a diary of the unfolding story which I’ll publish next year under the

<sup>31</sup> Thompson (1966: 12).

<sup>32</sup> Powell (1977: 151).

<sup>33</sup> ‘In the Psychiatrist’s Chair’, BBC Radio 4, 16 Aug. 1989.

<sup>34</sup> Hennessy (2001: 102–3).

title of *The Lion and the Unicorn Revisited*.

I scribbled down in my entry for Tuesday, 16 September, that I thought ‘David Cameron made the speech of his life in Aberdeen yesterday’ followed by snatches of what the prime minister had said:

On Friday we ‘could be living in a different country with a different place in the world . . . We are a family. Four nations in a single country. That can be difficult; but it’s wonderful. Please, please don’t let anyone tell you, you can’t be a proud Scot and a proud Brit.’

I’ve been around the block a bit; fairly hardened when it comes to political rhetoric. But David Cameron meant every word.

On top of his convictions about the United Kingdom, he was facing a personal abyss on Thursday, 18 September. In my diary entry for that day, I sketched how Friday, 19 September, would play out for the prime minister if Scotland had voted yes.

PM and HM Queen. Surely he will want to go to Balmoral in person rather than phone from Downing Street. So swift flight from Northolt to Aberdeen to Balmoral and back. You can’t tell the Sovereign you’ve lost her kingdom by telephone.

Announcement that both Houses of Parliament will be recalled—probably for Monday.

I’d heard a whisper it could be Saturday and gathered subsequently that it would have been the first Saturday session since the Falklands War debate in April 1982. Back to my diary note:

Treasury and Bank of England (which does have a contingency plan) will be active from the moment the markets open.

Cabinet meets on Friday afternoon.

We will, as a wise insider friend of mine puts it, be ‘in completely uncharted territory’. The *Cabinet Manual* is silent on how to dismember the kingdom.

Had events panned out that way, Friday, 19 September 2014, would have been one of the most dramatic days in the history of the country and the modern premiership, let alone David Cameron’s Downing Street tenure.

Last month’s answer to the overarching Scottish Question *has* changed the functional configuration of David Cameron’s premiership. His Downing Street Declaration at six minutes past seven on the morning of Friday the 19th has seen to that. From worrying about the possible dissolution of the United Kingdom overnight we woke up to find ourselves on a vast constitutional building site without plan or blueprint. The master document was the front page splash of the *Daily Record* for Tuesday, 16 September 2014. Signed by David Cameron, Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg, it was the nearest the Brits can manage to ‘We Hold These Truths To Be Self Evident’. It was entitled

### THE VOW<sup>35</sup>

Which is more Hollywood than Philadelphia, and it encompassed

- Making the Holyrood Parliament permanent.
- Devolving to it extensive extra powers beyond those already transferred.
- Continuing the Barnett formula put in place by the eponymous Joel as Chief Secretary to the Treasury in 1978 during the Callaghan administration and intended to last two years.

As of first light on Friday, 19 September, the Scottish Question took a brief breather, the English Question, previously a growl, grew to a roar. Mr Cameron intends to tackle the two together—and fast.

His Downing Street Declaration made this plain.<sup>36</sup> He has placed the Leader of the Commons, the admirably historically minded William Hague in charge of the Cabinet committee to act as Clerk of Works of the great constitutional building site. But the overall responsibility for remaking the kingdom is undoubtedly—inescapably—prime ministerial. It is right up there in the list of prime ministerial functions and every political history of the Cameron years will linger upon that fact. It is—and will remain—intellectually stretching and energy-sapping.

Friday, 19 September 2014, and the seven days that followed will linger long as one of the strangest weeks in the history of the premiership. From facing the possibility that the kingdom might rupture until the early hours of that Friday morning to Friday, 26 September, when, with the approval of the House of Commons, David Cameron and his Cabinet took us to war again in Iraq,<sup>37</sup> there can never have been a week quite like it.

As if to add to the spectacle, not to mention the strain on the PM, he inadvertently blew his conversation with the Queen early on the morning of the 19th when it was plain her kingdom was safe for the time being. The Head of State/Head of Government net is one of the very few that does not leak. For observers of this most sensitive and most special membrane it felt rather like GCHQ getting a rare, revealing and wholly unexpected Signals Intelligence breakthrough.

Talking to Michael Bloomberg, the former Mayor of New York, while in the city for the United Nations General Assembly, Mr Cameron's words were picked up by a nearby television crew. This is what he said:

<sup>35</sup> 'The Vow', *Daily Record*, 16 Sept. 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Press Release. *Scottish Independence Referendum: Statement by the Prime Minister*, 19 Sept. 2014. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/Scottish-independence-referendum-statement-b>.

<sup>37</sup> Coates, Elliot & Haynes (2014).

The definition of relief is being the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and ringing the Queen and saying: “It’s alright, it’s OK”. That was something. She purred down the line . . .

But it should never have been that close. It wasn’t in the end, but there was a time in the middle of the campaign when it felt . . .

The PM’s voice drifted away at this point. He went on:

I’ve said I want to find these polling companies and I want to sue them for my stomach ulcers because of what they put me through. It was very nervous moment.

The BBC and Channel 4 news applied their best technology to decipher the next bit. The BBC’s version was the prime minister concluding by saying ‘I’ve never heard someone tear up like that. It was great.’ Channel 4 reckoned Mr Cameron had said ‘cheer up’ not ‘tear up’.<sup>38</sup> The whole thing should be captured in the equivalent of those great Scottish oil paintings—a huge canvas entitled ‘The Relief of Balmoral’. The prime minister was mortified. Apologies were offered and, no doubt, graciously received.

As I mentioned earlier, who on earth would want the job of prime minister—especially in the era of directional microphones and 24-hour rolling news—however much they cherish the United Kingdom and its well being?

Yet the British prime ministership remains *the* ‘glittering prize’, as F.E. Smith put it, nearly 90 years ago, ‘to those who have stout hearts and sharp swords’ and relish political power.<sup>39</sup> Gaining it is invariably an exhilarator but rarely a joy-bringer in the longer run.

It’s not a job one would wish on anybody—and perhaps you have to be a little odd to want to do beyond a certain level of appetite. But I have, I confess, a sneaking regard for those who have walked through that famous door, felt that inheritance and taken that range of tasks on. And, we can’t do without a prime minister. We may be—and I hope will be—a collective executive nation; but we need a man or woman to take the flak that assaults those at the point of the spear. The United Kingdom is still one helluva kingdom to lead.

Finally, if pressed to confine the answer to the little boy on Blackfriar’s Bridge to a single sentence, I would reply that the prime minister has to be a keeper and explainer of the government’s overall strategy. This was certainly Margaret Thatcher’s view, as those who worked most closely with her in Downing Street attest.<sup>40</sup> A prime minister, she liked to say, needs stars to steer by. And so, in my view, does a government.

<sup>38</sup> Mason (2014); Dominiczak (2014).

<sup>39</sup> Lord Birkenhead, as he was by then, delivering his Rectorial Address to the students of Glasgow University, 7 Nov. 1923, in Jay (ed.) (1996: 343).

<sup>40</sup> Private information.

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