

Discussing what Prime Ministers are for

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On 13 October 2014, Lord Hennessy of Nympsfield FBA, Attlee Professor of Contemporary British History at Queen Mary, University of London, delivered the first British Academy Lecture in Politics and Government, on 'What are Prime Ministers for?' A video recording of the lecture and an article published in the *Journal of the British Academy* can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/events/2014/

The following article contains edited extracts from the question and answer session that followed the lecture.

Do we expect Prime Ministers to do too much?

I think it was 1977 when the Procedure Committee in the House of Commons wanted the Prime Minister to be prepared to take questions on anything at PMQs (Prime Minister Questions). Until then – I can remember this from when I was a lobby correspondent – questions were referred to particular Secretaries of State, and only truly Prime Ministerial questions were taken. But then Jim Callaghan agreed to take them across the whole piece. This meant that, because the questions are disguised, Prime Ministers now had to prepare madly over an enormous range, which took up increasing amounts of time on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. Mrs Thatcher learned to use the process as a weapon of intrusion into other departments of government. But it did mean that the country expected the Prime Minister to answer everything all the time.

Jim Callaghan used to ration out his appearances with the media very considerably: very rarely were there interviews or press conferences. There used to be a time when you could be in your constituency and not be bothered much by television cameras. You could talk quite candidly to people. But the new methods of electronic 24-hour news gathering – often involving a local television crew of just two people – mean that you are never really left alone once you have reached a certain level in politics.

Douglas Hurd wrote that Prime Ministers shouldn't always have to be the head of the rush, shouldn't feel the need to respond to everything. I have often thought that

New Labour has a lot to answer for on this front. They had seen what the press was doing to John Major from Black Wednesday onwards – relentless attacks on him, which bothered him deeply.¹ And they were determined that this wouldn't happen to them. So they went into the business of creating permanent rebuttal capabilities. If somebody said something offensive about the Government on the *Today* programme, they would make every effort to put it right by the *World at One*. They went into this kind of mania of permanent rebuttal, which means that you don't have time to reflect before reacting to events.

It's arguable now that, if the Government doesn't react to events immediately, other people's versions of breaking stories (circulating through social media etc.) will make the pace, and it won't be able to get back on top of an issue. But it has all fed off itself.

You can't get back to the days of Mr Attlee saying 'Quite' – which was his standard answer to a question. (Douglas Jay, who had worked with him in Number 10 after the War, said that Attlee would never use one syllable where none would do.) I don't think Clem Attlee would be selected for even a *losable* seat today: he was all right on the wireless, but was terrible on television.² You obviously can't get back to those days. It may be that we will get a leader who isn't verbose, spin-laden and dripping with well-rehearsed spontaneities – but it will almost certainly be by accident.

My big worry is the debates held between the party leaders before a General Election. I know they got the 18- to 24-year-olds more interested, which was a good thing. But to succeed in a pre-Election leaders' debate you have to be above all a plausible tart. And being a plausible tart is only 10 per cent of the requirement of being Prime Minister, no more. It means that in future, if

1. Baldwin's advice to a new backbencher was: cancel your subscription to the cuttings agency, and grow a new skin.

2. When Tony Benn was once having lunch with Herbert Morrison, Attlee walked past, and Morrison, who was very sensitive to the press, said, 'Clem, have you seen that terrible attack on you in *The Sketch*?' Attlee said, 'No, I never read it,' and walked on. And Morrison said, 'I've known that man since the 1920s, and he has always been like this. I never know whether he is telling the truth or not.' But actually Attlee was, because he read *The Times* for the cricket and the crossword, the *Daily Herald* to see what the chaps were doing, and that was it.



Changed times. Clement Attlee, who had a monosyllabic relationship with the media, is shown campaigning in the 1945 General Election. (Reproduced courtesy of Queen Mary, University of London; PP2 Donald Chesworth archives.)



Now there is an expectation that would-be Prime Ministers should deliver polished soundbites in televised debates.

we have leaders' debates all the time, parties will choose their leaders with that in mind to too great an extent. So people who are not flash and quick, yet are extremely good, are very thoughtful and have all the other qualities, won't get a chance of being a party leader and therefore Prime Minister. So I think we have done ourselves a great disservice by these leaders' debates. But I have probably been round the block too long.

But the demands are all one way, and it's very hard to fight against this. The state has got out of a lot of activities since the '70s, with the privatisations and all the rest of it. But Prime Ministers are still expected to be in the vanguard on everything all the time. There are some things where they have got to be – if there is a terrible atrocity, or for moments of special anxiety – big things. But there is all that intermediate stuff – down to absolute trivia – which I am sure a determined Prime Minister could shed a great deal of. And we would probably breathe a sigh of relief.

Wouldn't a Prime Minister like Mrs Thatcher say that her role was to be the guardian of the strategy?

I remember that, in her televisual memoirs, which were extraordinary, Mrs Thatcher said, 'One must have stars to steer by.' You always knew what those stars were. Somebody once said to me that, of all the Prime Ministers this person had known, she was the same front of house and back of house. Very often a politician in private is a slightly different person, but she was pretty well the same in private as she was in public. Like Martin Luther, I always thought, she could be no other.

What if a Prime Minister doesn't have a strategy?

The British Civil Service, because it is a very good Crown Service and is not corrupted or politicised, is the best automatic pilot the world has ever seen. The show will always stay on the road. But you are reduced to what George Bain called 'structured busking', and you could argue that that isn't enough.

Are you worried by the increasing politicisation of the Civil Service?

I *am* worried. There has been creeping politicisation already. But Francis Maude has said publicly he wants powerful ministerial choice in the final decision on who will be a Permanent Secretary. He also wants extended ministerial offices – like a British version of French *cabinets* – in which there would be a large number of special advisers brought in on political patronage. The senior civil servants in the offices would still have to go through the Civil Service Commission. But there is a danger that you create a central directorate within a department which runs it, rather than having the departmental structure.

I am a great believer in Crown Service. Officials can't 'speak truth unto power' – which is what I think the best ministers want and which is indispensable – if they are creatures of patronage. It is often the ministers who, if I can put it tactfully, are not the most self-confident who don't value that. The Labour minister Edmund Dell was quite cynical about all this: he used to talk of the danger of 'surrounding yourself with a comfort blanket', and he would never have any special advisers, which I thought was taking it too far.

In the House of Lords we have debated this quite a lot, but I don't think this debate is happening widely; it should be. The test would be when there was a change of Government. The new Government could say, 'We wouldn't have introduced all this ministerial choice in appointments. But these extended ministerial offices are a good idea. And the Civil Service has now been effectively politicised. So we're going to do the same. We're going to have a wholesale clear-out, and bring in our people.' Then we will have lost the 19th-century principle which has served us so well – in the Home Civil Service, the Diplomatic, the secret world and in the military – of people being chosen because they can do things, rather than because of what they believe. It's like a clean water supply: we will only realise it has gone when it's too late.

What are the political factors that affect a Prime Minister's power and influence?

I have never made up my mind about changes in the political weather. Peter Riddell has argued that the press doesn't make the political weather; but if the political weather is turned for other reasons, the press can reinforce the weather change and speed it up. So it is usually a combination of factors that leads to the dissipation of power and authority.

I have always been reluctant to take part in those surveys that the newspapers occasionally do with political scientists and political historians on 'Who were the greatest Prime Ministers?' because the circumstances have been so different. Size of majority, the condition of the domestic economy and the world economy, international affairs – it is never comparing like with like. But, as a political historian, you can get a sense of those Prime Ministers who made the best of terrible circumstances, and also those who managed to put a ring round absolute essentials whatever else was going on around them.

Attlee had a sense of about five things that you had to do come hell or high water to improve the conditions of the 75 per cent of people who were then in working-class families. The phrase 'ring-fencing' didn't exist then, but through thick and thin – admittedly with a lot of help from American money, Marshall Aid – he stuck to those five things – which are roughly what was in the Beveridge Report. I have always admired Prime Ministers who have managed to do that to some degree, have kept going the essential flame of what they think really needs to be done.

Douglas Hurd observed in his biography of Robert Peel that fortunate are those Prime Ministers who come into Number 10 wanting to do the things that really need to be done – where there is that coincidence of purpose. I think you could argue that Mrs Thatcher reflected the need to do something about trade union power, for example – though there isn't a consensus on that.

So being a Prime Minister is very difficult, but it's about making the most of the circumstances and not panicking. When Parliament is sitting, it's like being a chief executive of a company in a permanent meeting of shareholders who are in a terrible mood, and who include several people you have sacked or never appointed in the first place and who therefore have got it in for you. And when Parliament is not sitting, the media immediately takes up that role. It is absolute hell, and it is inescapable. Some of the most poignant stuff in Bernard Donoughue's diary of the last days of the Callaghan Government is when Jim is so worn out he doesn't know what to do, and he stays for about a fortnight pretty much in his study. I remember him saying to a friend of mine, 'I felt I let the country down.' He simply didn't know what to do towards the end of the Winter of Discontent. I had immense sympathy with him because when you read Bernard's diaries and the other accounts, the flesh of his flesh had turned on him.

One of the awful things about studying Prime Ministers is that quite often they are wrecked on the very ground where they thought they were most secure in their own knowledge: Anthony Eden on diplomacy in the Middle East; Jim Callaghan on the Labour movement and the trade unions. You could say that Mrs Thatcher had a very strong empathy with the aggrieved rate payer, but the Poll Tax did for her, didn't it? For anybody here young enough to aspire to be Prime Minister – where you have really got to worry is when a problem arises on the terrain where you think you have got more knowledge than anybody else, because the gods of politics are wrathful bastards and they are always waiting.