

As head of the cabinet, the prime minister is little more than first among equals...



The Cabinet consists of a body of ministers drawn from the party that possesses a majority in the House of Commons. As a collective body the Cabinet is responsible to the Commons for the conduct of the administration. A recognisable form of the current Cabinet system was born during the 18th century when the monarchy surrendered its monopoly of power.

The desire to ensure that no one individual should have such powers again saw the Cabinet become 'the ultimate political authority'¹, resulting in 'British government being like an orchestra'², and having 'collective responsibility'³ for decisions. As Chairman, there was never a debate that the PM was anything but the conductor. However, from the 1960's to the present day, there has been an increasing belief that Prime Ministers have also assumed the position of leading violinist, and now have a supremely dominant role in the Cabinet. Those who believe the PM is more than 'first amongst equals' support the 'Prime Ministerial Power'⁴ thesis developed by Richard Crossman.

Writing in 'The English Constitution' by Walter Bagehot, he claimed that suggesting the PM was 'primus inter pares'⁵ (first amongst equals) was misleading. Sighting the PM's powers, he claimed that they were far more than just an equal. Without a doubt, the PM does possess 'formidable executive powers'⁶. With the power to hire and fire members of the Cabinet, the ability to control Cabinet agenda, the power to make decisions without taking a vote, and the freedom from departments to intervene in whichever areas of policy they choose, it is impossible to deny this. Furthermore, as is often pointed out, those in the Cabinet are mainly 'career politicians'⁷, and

with one eye on the next Cabinet reshuffle, it is unlikely that they are going to stand up against the person who has their career prospects in their hands.

Similarly, with the ability to control the agenda, and intervene in any policy area, it would seem that the PM is able to stamp his or her authority wherever they choose, and dictate public policy by deciding which issues to discuss. Such authority has resulted in King claiming that the PM 'is not a colleague, but the boss'.⁸ However, although the powers of the PM are undeniable, many people, including George Jones argue that in reality, the ability to wield such power is often very limited. Although the PM does pick the Cabinet, it is often suggested that many of the leading members of a party pick themselves, and that even if the PM disliked or considered ministers to be a threat to their own position, they have to be included to ensure party unity.

There are a many examples of this. Harold Wilson is said to have appointed a Cabinet that 'made few concessions to his friends and many to his enemies'⁹, whilst it is suggested that even during Margaret Thatcher's reign, which is considered to have been the most dominant of Premierhips, both John Prior and Lord Carrington demanded their respective positions in the party. Similarly, despite Harold Macmillan dismissing a third of his Cabinet, including his Chancellor during the 'Night of Long Knives'(1962), history suggests that there have been very few senior casualties. Furthermore, when senior figures have been dismissed, the consequences for the PM have been considerable. When Norman Lamont was dismissed by John Major, he became a figure head for extreme right wing criticism of the Major

administration, whilst the downgrading of Howe in 1989 had 'disastrous consequences'¹⁰ for Thatcher.

It is also suggested that irrespective of their powers, the Cabinet agenda is not subject to the PM's 'own whim or inclination'.¹¹ If ministers unite together and are determined to discuss an issue, the PM is not always able to dictate the agenda. Periods in the tenures of both Wilson and Thatcher are examples of this. Wilson's attempt to block Cabinet consideration over currency devaluation was successful in 1964 and 1967, yet he was eventually forced to allow the issue to be discussed. Thatcher was a little more determined regarding the Westland affair.

However, although this was within her powers, her apparent disregard for the Cabinet led to disillusionment within the Cabinet, the resignation of Michael Heseltine, and what many consider to be the start of her downfall. Indeed Thatcher's apparent disregard for the Cabinet is important to consider. Anthony King claims 'she did not care a fig for the principle of collegiality'¹² or 'collective responsibility' and made it clear that she did not consider anyone to be 'equal'. However, in the end the Cabinet were 'instrumental in bringing her down'¹³, with her colleagues 'tolerating'¹⁴ her approach when things were going well but succeeding in 'replacing'¹⁵ her once they were not. This enforces Richard Wilson's view, who soon after his retirement as Cabinet Secretary, claimed that the PM's powers 'vary..

according to the extent to which his or her Cabinet colleagues permit them to have that power'¹⁶. Furthermore, Crossman even altered his thesis in 1970, acknowledging that by 'mismanagement the Cabinet had the reserve power

which could reduce the Premier to primus inter pares¹⁷. As the example of Thatcher would suggest, this would appear to be the least of their collective powers. There are however, many other theories as to why the PM is more than just the 'first amongst equals'. In 'The Case for the Constitutional Premiership', written by Tony Benn, he suggests the PM is able to 'usurp some of the functions of collective Cabinet decision making'¹⁸. It is possible that by simply defining the government ethos and making policy decisions in key areas the PM can ensure 'predictable and hard solutions to most problems'¹⁹, which follow his personal views.

It is also suggested that under the current administration, the influence of the Premier is extended further, with nearly 50% of Cabinet Committees being chaired by members of the 'Blair policy machine' or 'inner Cabinet'. This results in the majority of policies already having the Prime Ministerial stamp long before they reach the main Cabinet, thus making Cabinet discussion immaterial and often making Cabinet ministers nothing more than 'agents of the Premier's will'.²¹ This has become even more the case with Blair having a member of the 'Policy Unit' in each department. They attempt to ensure that departmental policies are based on the 'Blair agenda', and it is suggested that they remove a great deal of departmental autonomy. Benn has also pointed to the PM's ability to tender his or her resignation and dissolve Parliament.

This, he argues can be used as a threat to the Cabinet, thus giving the PM greater influence. In a world of 'catch all parties' and the mass media, many suggest that society elects faces rather than parties, and as long as the PM has the public support, the fear of losing government (and with it personal <https://assignbuster.com/as-head-of-the-cabinet-the-prime-minister-is-little-more-than-first-among-equals-essay/>

career aspirations) could often ensure that Cabinet ministers eventually give in to the wishes of the PM. Indeed the influence of the mass media can have considerable influence on the PM's power. Their headlines often shape the way an administration is seen in the public eye, and it is easy to understand that the greater the success of the party, the more authority the PM has as party leader and as head of the Cabinet.

Once again those whom support the ' Cabinet Government'22 thesis suggest that things are not quite as they seem. The idea that the PM and his ' Inner Cabinet' control policy can be countered by looking at departments, where policies begin. Departments ' provide a unique concentration of financial, bureaucratic, knowledge and, in some cases, political resources. 23 The resources available to the Premier are negligible in comparison, and s there is simply insufficient time for the PM to deal with all policy affairs themselves, the heads of the departments come to the Cabinet table with knowledge that the PM's accept is greater than theirs. This, it is argued results in a far more equal distribution of influence than is often suggested, irrespective of the ' Policy Unit'.

Many people also suggest that there is a ' power dependency'24 within the Cabinet, which maintains the equality within the Cabinet and ensures ' collective responsibility' remains. As it is impossible to continually shuffle the Cabinet, the PM must develop relationships with members that are mutually beneficial, otherwise, the support, which has already been shown to be crucial is lost. Such relationships often hinge around the exchange of resources. The most obvious example of this, is the relationship between the

PM and the Chancellor. Most policies involve spending which in turn requires the approval of the Treasury.

Consequently it is often the case that the PM has to make concessions in order to gain the funds to pursue policies. This is very much the case in the current administration. The 'Comprehensive Spending Review' has seen the PM relinquish considerable power and has given Brown a 'major influence'²⁵ in domestic affairs. It is also suggested that the power to dissolve Parliament is not necessarily a way in which the PM can influence his or her Cabinet.

Often described as 'a two edged weapon'²⁶, it is suggested that threatening to resign can undermine the credibility of the PM and the party as a whole, thus reducing the PM's power in the Cabinet. Furthermore, as the PM's personal career is on the line, Cabinet ministers would consider the chances of such a threat becoming reality very unlikely.

This appeared to be the case when John Major threatened to resign if the Maastricht Treaty was not passed. Furthermore, statistics show that much of the public do still vote for a party based on values, irrespective of the leader, and that as there are always people in the Cabinet with strong support who are desperate to further their career, the threat of resignation could be regarded as a dream come true for many. Before drawing a conclusion, it is important to note the influence that the PM's individual personality is considered to have on their position in the Cabinet. King describes the Cabinet as a 'putty like concept' and claims that a PM 'can make of it largely what he or she will'.²⁷ Similarly Lord Blake states that 'the powers of the PM have varied with personality..

and with the particular circumstances of their term²⁸. To some extent this would appear to be the case. Thatcher undoubtedly dominated the Cabinet to an extent never seen before, and it can be no coincidence that so much of the literature surrounding her tenure concentrates on her ‘single minded’ and ‘domineering²⁹’ personality. Similarly, Major who was considered to have restored ‘Cabinet Government’, has been described by Anthony Seldon as a ‘conciliator’ who ‘liked to encourage discussion and reach a consensus in Cabinet³⁰. In conclusion it cannot be denied that ‘history and custom have contrived to endow the office of PM with formidable executive powers³¹. A combination of these powers, accompanied by being head of the party and Chairman of the Cabinet, does ensure that the PM stands above any other individual.

To some degree, the extent of Prime Ministerial dominance would appear to rest upon the PM’s personality and the circumstances during the administration. However, it is undeniable that over the last 40 years, the PM’s powers have increased. Despite this, as is stated by Richard Wilson, and was shown with Thatcher, the power of the PM varies ‘according to the extent his Cabinet colleagues permit³². Without a doubt in terms of individuals the PM is a great deal more than just ‘first among equals’. However as a collective unit, and with their ‘collective responsibility’ in mind, the other Cabinet ministers can, if they choose, be on equal terms with the PM.