THE COURT POLITICS OF THE BLAIR PRESIDENCY*

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Biographical note

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Introduction

This talk focuses on the debate about the 'Blair Presidency'.[1] I ask the deceptively simple question, 'how do we understand the relationship between the prime minister, ministers and the rest of Westminster and Whitehall?'

The lecture covers five topics. First, I document briefly the long-standing claim that post-war Britain witnessed expanding prime ministerial power and the growth of the UK presidency.[2]

Second, I turn to the most recent manifestation of this trend - the tales of a Blair Presidency. This story makes three main claims: that there has been a centralisation of coordination, a pluralisation of advice, and the personalisation of elections.[3] Obviously, I draw on the work of academic colleagues, especially where they cite interviews, but I concentrate on the views of practitioners.[4] I rely on the obvious sources of prime ministerial, ministerial and civil servant autobiographies, diaries and memoirs as well as official publications.[5] Many claim there are problems with the evidence of practitioners.[6] As Anthony Mughan (2000: 134) remarks 'for every "insider" … assertion that prime ministerial government has arrived in Britain, it is possible to find the counter-assertion that cabinet government remains the order of the day'. Such inconsistencies are the puzzle. I compare the several stories and show there is much inconsistency and contradiction. This divergent evidence highlights the paradox between presidential claims and the governance narrative.

So, third, I explore the governance paradox - even as people tell tales of a Blair presidency, they recount also stories of British governance that portray it as fragmented and multipolar. In particular, I argue New Labour appears to accept key tenets of the governance narrative. Innovations like joining-up and the reforms at No. 10 recognise the weakness of the centre and fuel claims of the Blair presidency. But New Labour ignores the other half of the governance narrative that stresses interdependence and cooperation, not command and control. So, claims of a Blair presidency founder on policy-making and implementation deficits.

Fourth, I argue this paradox reveals the distorting influence that the Westminster Model still exerts on many accounts of British politics. It acts as a smokescreen for the changes in executive politics.

Finally, I conclude that Blair is locked into the court politics of Westminster and Whitehall and to complex patterns of domestic and international dependence. The prime minister wins, loses and draws as one might expect given the volatile nature of high politics. Prime ministerial practice is equally varied. And the best way to understand this volatility and variety is through decentered studies of the beliefs and practices of politicians and civil servants.[7]

The story so far

Presidential tales are not told of all prime ministers. Sweeping judgements about the standing of prime ministers invite disagreement but many would agree with most of Peter Hennessy's (2000b: chapter 19) judgements on post-war prime ministers. He treats Clement Attlee and Margaret Thatcher as the two great 'weather makers'. Edward Heath and Tony Blair are seen as 'system-shifters'. Winston Churchill and James Callaghan are seen as 'seasoned copers'. Harold Macmillan and Harold Wilson fall, into the 'promise unfulfilled' category, although post-Iraq many might move Blair to this box (Riddell 2004 and even before Riddell 2001, 40). Alec Douglas-Home is a 'punctuation mark', John Major was 'overwhelmed' and Anthony Eden was a 'catastrophe'. So, of the twelve post-war prime ministers, only three have attracted the epithet 'presidential' - Harold Wilson (1964-70), Margaret Thatcher (1979-90) and Tony Blair (1997 to date), and with all of these three, judgements about their presidentialism varied while they were in office. This brief survey focuses on these three prime ministers.

When George Brown, Foreign Secretary, resigned from Wilson's government on 15 March 1968, he claimed that he 'resigned as a matter of fundamental principle, because it seemed to me that the Prime Minister … was introducing a "presidential" system in to the running of the government that is wholly alien to the British constitutional system' (Brown 1972: 161). Later memoirs and diaries lend support to Brown's view.[8] For example, Richard Neustadt thought that Wilson 'means to take all decisions into his own hands'; he said Wilson 'wants not only to make ultimate decisions but to pass issues through his own mind, sitting at the centre of a brains trust … on the model, he says, of JFK' (cited in Healey 1990, 330). Denis Healey, who was Wilson's long serving Minister of Defence and then Chancellor of the Exchequer, comments 'this was all true', and 'no Prime Minister ever interfered so much in the work of his colleagues' (Healey 1990: 332 – a judgement confirmed by Wilson's best biographer Pimlott 1992: 563. See also Benn 1989: 2 and 1975: 290).

Of course, there were differing views about Wilson. On 7 October 1969 Tony Benn[9] was invited to join Wilson's inner cabinet (Benn 1989: 206). By 1 November 1974, Wilson was demanding written assurances that Benn accept collective responsibility - 'the whole thing got very bitter and unpleasant' (Benn 1990: 254-5). By 1 October 1976, Benn (1990: 617) was writing 'thank god that man has gone'. His view in 1979 was that 'the centralisation of power into the hands of one man … amounts to a system of personal rule' (Benn 1995: 222).

If George Brown and Tony Benn complained about presidential tendencies, then Barbara Castle and Richard Crossman were criticising Wilson's style for lacking clear strategic direction – he was not presidential enough (Castle 1984: 640, Crossman 1975: 582). Wilson (1977: 12-24) refused to entertain the ideas of prime ministerial government. When he became prime minister for a second time in 1974 he claimed 'there would this time be no "presidential nonsense"' (cited in Donoughue 1987: 47, see also Castles 1993: 452, Walker 1970: 96). There were no cries of presidentialism during Wilson's second term. As his biographer Ben Pimlott (1992: 347) concludes:

"He was in many ways a civil servants' Prime Minister," says Peter Shore. "He liked advice coming to him from different angles," says an ex-official. Both were true. He was not, as Marcia [Williams] and other members of the political staff complained, swamped by Whitehall advice; neither was he, as some officials and politicians, and hence many journalists, often alleged, the creature of the kitchen cabinet, cut off from the wider world. Playing one off against another, he often frustrated both: and remained his own man.

In short, opinions on Wilson's presidentialism varied between individuals, over time and with the personal standing of the minister with the prime minister.

The record is just as varied for Margaret Thatcher. Reg Prentice[10] concluded that 'the old idea that the Prime Minister was the first among equals has given way, step by step, towards a more presidential situation' (cited in Young and Sloman 1986: 45-6). As Kenneth Baker (1993: 270), Secretary of State for Education, observed she relished the soubriquet 'The Iron Lady'. Three of her senior colleagues resigned ostensibly because of the way she ran Cabinet. Michael Heseltine (2000: 312), Secretary of State for Defence, resigned over the Westland Affair, claiming he had been denied the opportunity to put his case to Cabinet. Sir Geoffrey Howe, Foreign Secretary, criticised the way she ran her government, especially her 'roman intemperance' on European Monetary Union, which led her to criticise publicly her own government's policy. His cricket analogy has passed into parliamentary folklore: 'it is rather like sending in your opening batsman to the crease only for them to find, the moment the first balls are bowled, that their bats have been broken before the game by the team captain' (Howe 1994: 641, 666).

Nigel Lawson, Chancellor of the Exchequer, was no more impressed. He complained vigorously and often that there were two government economic policies, that of the Chancellor and that of the prime minister and her personal economic adviser. Such publicly expressed disagreements over the exchange rate were undermining both him and the government's policy (Lawson 1992: 955-6, 960-61), so he resigned. Perhaps Francis Pym (1984: 17), Foreign Secretary during the Falklands war, was most trenchant: 'I object to a system that deliberately pits Downing Street against individual Departments, breeds resentment amongst Ministers and Civil Servants and turns the Prime Minister into a President.'

Other ministers disagreed. Peter Walker (1991: 202-3) reports how Thatcher appointed him as Secretary of State for Wales knowing he favoured economic intervention and higher public spending. She thought he was 'awkward', and she knew he would not tackle the Welsh economy as she would tackle it, but she backed him fully. Peter Carrington (1988: 276) admired the way she allowed her 'highly intelligent head' to rule her 'natural impulses'. Nicholas Ridley (1991: 30) held several Cabinet posts. While acknowledging that Heseltine, Lawson and Howe all resigned because of the way she conducted Cabinet, he professed 'I … have no complains to make about the way Margaret Thatcher ran her Cabinet'. He also observes that, in 1979, 'in many respects it was Willie Whitelaw's Cabinet which she first appointed'. Only after the Falkland's conflict and the 1983 election victory was the Cabinet truly hers.

Again, in her later years, she lost the Cabinet to dramatic effect because when she needed their support in the leadership contest of November 1990, it was not forthcoming. Her pre-eminence was contingent on the support of the public, the parliamentary party, and the cabinet. It was not forthcoming. So, again, beliefs about prime ministerial power varied between individuals, over time, and with the personal standing of the minister with the prime minister.

Hennessy (1998: 19) reports a conversation with one of Heseltine, Lawson or Howe:

> I talked about the coming Blair premiership … and agreed it would be on the command model. "This would only store up trouble for him", I said, "Yes," replied X, adding ruefully, "but you can get away with it for a very long time."

Given the chequered history of his presidential predecessors, I now turn to the questions of whether, and for how long, Blair 'can get away with it'.

Presidential Tales

Journalists have repeatedly described Tony Blair as presidential from the moment of his election as Prime Minister. In Britain, *The Independent* ran an article by Anthony Bevins entitled 'Blair Goes Presidential' on 6 May 1997. In the US, *The Washington Post* ran one by Dan Balz entitled 'Britain's Prime Minister Assumes Presidential Air' on 2 October 1997 (see also Rawnsley 2001: 292-4, 379). Political scientists too argue Blair has manipulated his personal resources and expanded his institutional power to achieve a degree of predominance unmatched in British history.[11] For my purposes the key point is that such views are shared by insiders. At the start, Jonathan Powell (No. 10 chief of staff) had famously warned senior civil servants to expect 'a change from a feudal system of barons to a more Napoleonic system' (*Daily Telegraph* 8 December 2001 cited in Seldon 2004: 437). Blair's No. 10 aides claim:

> Cabinet died years ago. It hardly works anywhere else in the world today. It is now a matter of strong leadership at the centre and creating structures and having people do it. I suppose we want to replace the Department barons with a Bonapartist system' (quoted in Kavanagh and Seldon 2000: 291).

Blair's ministerial critics do not demur. Mo Mowlam (2002: 356, 361), former Secretary of state for Northern Ireland, claims 'more and more decisions were being taken at No. 10 without consultation with the relevant Minister or Secretary of State'. She criticises 'the centralising tendency and arrogance of No. 10', especially 'their lack of inclusiveness of the cabinet, MPs, party members and the unions leads to bad decisions. Try as I might, I got no indication that their views or behaviour would change.' Similarly, Clare Short (2004: 272, 278) talks of 'the concentration of power in No. 10' criticising Blair's 'informal decision making style' with 'his personal entourage of advisers' because it 'enhances the personal power of the Prime Minister and reduces the quality of decision-making'.

However, 'President Blair' asserts:

> To my certain knowledge that has been said about virtually every administration in history that had a sense of direction. I remember that people said that back in the Eighties about Thatcher. Of course you have to have Cabinet Government. (*The Observer*, 23 November 1997. See also the citations in Hennessy 2000c: 11 and n.70).

So, I assess the three main claims made to support the contention that Blair has transformed his role as prime minister into that of a president; namely, that there has been a centralisation of coordination, a pluralisation of advice, and the personalisation of elections.

(i) Centralisation

Structural changes at No. 10 and the Cabinet Office are the way in which Blair has strengthened the centre of government. The Policy Unit mutated into the Policy Directorate when it merged with the Prime Minister's Private Office. From day one Blair surrounded himself with a network of special advisers. Their numbers rose from eight under John Major to twenty seven under Tony Blair (Blick 2004: Appendix, and on the growth of advisers see next section). Total staff employed at No. 10 rose from 71 in 1970 under Heath, to a 107 under Major to over 200 under Blair (Kavanagh and Seldon 2000: 306), creating 'the department that-will-not-speak-its-name' (Hennessy 2002c: 6). Initially the focus was on improving communications with Alistair Campbell heading the Strategic Communications Unit (SCU). Latterly the emphasis fell on policy advice. The Cabinet Office was reformed to improve central coordination. Several new units were created: for example, initially, the Social Exclusion Unit and the Performance and Innovation Unit, latterly the Strategy Unit, the Office of Public Services Reform, and, most important, the Delivery Unit. As Hennessy (1998: 15) observes, 'Number 10 is omnipresent'. The Cabinet Office has always been a ragbag of functions bequeathed by former prime ministers. Now it groans under its own proliferating units posing the question of, 'who will coordinate the would-be coordinator?' Blair seeks to control government functions without bothering himself with too many operational details.

In presidential tales, the prime minister's department in all but name allows Blair to remain on top of several projects if not in detailed touch. It checks the problem of prime ministerial overload. As Anthony Seldon (2004: 630) observes 'however distracted Blair might be by other events, domestic and international, the work of monitoring … went on regardless ("The [Delivery] Unit never sleeps", Blair was told).' (See also Hennessy (2000a: 390).

(ii) Pluralisation

In the Westminster model, the civil service has a monopoly of advice and this advice is collated and coordinated by the Cabinet through its ministerial and official committees and the Cabinet Office. This neat and tidy picture has given way to one of competing centres of advice and coordination for which, allegedly, Blair is the only nodal point.

The Cabinet Office, which has been 'gradually brought into the orbit of Downing Street … serving as a part of a prime ministerial centre, rather than the cabinet collectively. Blair cut back on collegial decision making, 'reducing most meetings of the Cabinet to just forty minutes of approving decisions already taken elsewhere, parish notices and short speeches either delivered by the Prime Minister or vetted by him in advance' (Rentoul 2001: 540. See also Hennessy 1998: 11, Kavanagh and Seldon 2000: 278, Rawnsley 2001: 33, Seldon 2004: 437). Seemingly it is a commonplace that Blair rarely chairs cabinet committees. There are fewer committees, meeting less often and not always reporting to full Cabinet. Most decisions take place in 'bilaterals' – agreements struck in ad hoc meetings between Blair and ministers directly - a style favoured by both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor (Rawnsley 2001: 53). In his first three years of office, Blair held 783 meetings with individual ministers compared with John Major's 272 for the same period (Kavanagh and Seldon 2000: 279). As Blair said, 'I think most Prime Ministers who have got a strong programme end up expecting their Secretaries of State to put it through; and you've always got a pretty direct personal relationship'. Also, he would not expect ministers to raise matters in Cabinet: 'look I would be pretty shocked if the first time I knew a Cabinet Minister felt strongly about something was if they raised it at the cabinet table' – 'I would expect them to come and knock on my door' (cited in Hennessy 2000c: 12).

The list of decisions never even reported to Cabinet includes: Independence for the Bank of England, postponement of joining the Euro, cuts in lone-parent benefit, and the future of hereditary peers (Rentoul 2001: 540). Robin Butler, former Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Home Civil Service, reports that 'during the late 1940s, cabinet met for an average of 87 times a year, with 340 papers being circulated; in the 1970s, 60 times a year, with 140 papers; and by the late 1990s, no more than 40 times a year, with only 20 papers' (cited in Hennessy 2000b: 5). I might add, also, that Margaret Thatcher massively expanded the use of bilaterals as the primary means of decision-making. Nigel Lawson, a Chancellor of the Exchequer under Thatcher, recalled laconically, 'I used to look forward to Cabinet meetings as the most restful and relaxing event of the week' (Rentoul 2001: 540). Nevertheless, both the frequency and content of Cabinet meetings are said to have diminished significantly under Blair. Bilateral agreements have replaced collective government, and Blair is the coordinating nodal point. According to Rentoul (2001: 542), there is no 'trusted group of inner courtiers'. It would seem that Blair is the only person able to see all government functioning.

Blair is supported in this role by the new machinery of the centre and by sources of advice other than the civil service. Each Cabinet minister can have two special advisers but the total number remains small compared with 3,429 members of the Senior Civil Service. The civil service monopoly of information and advice was broken under Thatcher. The trend to more varied sources of advice has deep roots. Thatcher accelerated the trend. Blair took it further. He knows the general direction in which he would like government to move, but not how to get there.

> They say, in effect, "Tell me what <u>you</u> want and <u>we'll</u> do it. But he keeps saying different things. Richard Wilson [Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Home Civil Service] finds it very difficult the way the Prime Minister jumps around. It's a succession of knee jerks (cited in Hennessy 2000c: 9).

The result is a frustrated civil service and special advisers. Derek Scott was Blair's economics adviser at No. 10 and he was clearly frustrated by what he saw as Blair's limited grasp of economics (Scott 2004: 14, 17, 206). He argues that Blair paid less attention to his policy advisers and civil servants than to 'the occasional outsider or those members of his inner circle who had little grasp or real interest in policy'. Moreover, Blair's circle was not the only, or even the most important, source of advice on social and economic policy. Gordon Brown had his own coterie, and his pre-eminent *consigliore* was Ed Balls, Chief Economic Adviser to the Treasury and a key Brown supporter. So, pluralisation of advice also meant competing centres of advice and the competition between Blair and Brown's teams was intense.

(iii) <u>Personalisation</u>

Yet another theme in tales of a Blair presidency is their professional management of media relations and the use of spin doctors.[12] This professionalisation is harnessed to two bigger purposes - continuous electioneering and personalising that campaign, and indeed the government, by an almost exclusive focus on Tony Blair.

Andrew Rawnsley (2001: 488) amusingly illustrates the point:

> when Blair was asked why the manifesto contained seven pictures of himself and not one of the Cabinet mutes sat behind him, Brown's features were a study in granite …the Deputy Prime Minister [John Prescott], wearing what his mother called his "ugly face", looked like a man one provocation away from a detonation.

Blair did not invent media management as a way of sustaining the pre-eminence of the prime minister. However, his 'public communications, from the designer leisure wear to the designer accent and the designer press conferences probably attracted more public interest than those of any previous British government' (Seymour-Ure 2003: 7). Managing the media, or 'spin', is a game of chance and Blair's gambler-in-chief, his 'spin doctor' managing the media, was Alastair Campbell, Director of Communications and Strategy. The key organisation was the Strategic Communications Unit, created in 1997. Its job was to monitor the news and provide a rapid response, expounding the government's position and, where necessary, rebutting any criticisms of government policy. Campbell was the prime minister's voice. His job was to ensure that the prime minister's voice was also that of the government. He was the spin doctor who used his daily lobby briefings to control government links with the media. Also, this prime ministerial centre extended its role to commanding the press relations of all ministers. Early in 1997 he even 'informed all departmental press chiefs that media bids for interviews with their ministers must be cleared first with him' (*The Independent*, 6 May 1997). In this way, Blair allegedly got an advanced news management service akin to that of an American president (see also Scott 2004: 15-18, Seldon 2004: chapter 22).

Managing the media was also a central element in policy formulation. The strategy is called 'triangulation'. It involves packaging policies so they conflict with the left-wing of the Labour Party, thus winning support from the right wing press.

Blair's premiership is also said to have been marked by a significant increase in the personalisation of power. Present-day media create an environment in which a politician's ability to attract publicity is crucial to electoral success. Indeed, Blair's office helps to create this environment by personalising policy initiatives. For example, when Blair spoke of a rise in the rates of cancer, he publicly mentioned the death of both his own mother to throat cancer and his wife's aunt to breast cancer. Blair personalised policies with this public mix of sincerity and personal experience. As Seldon (2004: 432-6) documents, whenever Blair thought he was not getting the results he wanted, he took personal charge. He identified himself personally with policy initiatives in, for example, crime, education, health, immigration and transport. In the pungent phrase of the (then) leader of the opposition, Michael Howard, when he takes charge he has 'more summits than the Himalayas'.

Governance Stories

Even as journalists, political scientists, and practitioners tell tales of a Blair presidency, so they continue to recognise many limitations to Blair's ability to get his own way. Andrew Rawnsley (2001: 292-4) initially subscribed to 'the command and control' view of Blair. But by June 2003 he wrote of 'a prime minister who is not looking in the least bit presidential' at the head of 'a government displaying signs of drift' (*The Observer* 15 June 2003). In similar vein, Riddell (2001: 40) commented 'If Mr. Blair has been a Napoleonic figure, he has been a frustrated rather than a commanding one'. So, there is a second story that focuses on the problems of governance and sees Blair as perpetually involved in negotiations and diplomacy with a host of other politicians, officials, and citizens. He is cast as just one actor among many interdependent ones in the networks that criss-cross Whitehall, Westminster, and beyond. So, now I tell the story of the Blair government from the standpoint of Whitehall governance and governance beyond Whitehall.

(i) <u>Whitehall Governance: Blair and Brown</u>

Even political scientists who support the notion of a Blair presidency typically mention the Treasury, under Gordon Brown as Chancellor of Exchequer, as 'a great crag standing in the way of a thoroughly monocratic government' (Hennessy 2002: 21). Brown and the Treasury have come to influence an ever-growing range of activities. In particular, Brown implemented a new system of Public Service Agreements (PSAs) that define and direct the activities of government departments by setting agreed targets and then monitoring them. This control of public expenditure shows Brown's reach throughout government. Blair helped to increase the scope of Brown's authority by appointing him to chair the main economic committee of the cabinet – a post historically occupied by the prime minister.

Recognition of Brown's authority requires us to shift from tales of a Blair presidency to stories of at least a dual monarchy: 'Brown conceived of the new government as a dual monarchy, each with its own court' (Rawnsley 2001: 20). This notion has its roots in the 'infamous' Granita restaurant story - a meeting between Blair and Brown in Islington on 31 May 1994.[13] 'Brown believed that he had his wish granted to be the central figure over economic and social policy in the future Labour government'. There is much disagreement about, and little documentary evidence on, the degree of control ceded to Brown 'But there is no doubt that substantial if imprecise control was granted to Brown' (Seldon 2004: 193-4). James Naughtie (2002: 71) believes command over economic policy and 'significant chunks' of social policy were conceded (as do Keegan 2003: 124, Peston 2005: 58, and Rawnsley 2001: 20, 111). While there is no documentary evidence to support a deal on handing over the prime ministership to Brown[14], there is some evidence on the policy deal (*Guardian* 6 June 2003). Michael White, Political Editor of the *Guardian*, concludes that 'Blair had effectively ceded sovereignty to Brown in the economics sphere' (cited in Seldon 2004: 669, see also Peston 2005: 67). Rawnsley (2001: 143) describes Blair as 'the chairman and Brown the chief executive' (see also Wheatcroft 2004: 68).

There have been several occasions on which Blair has found his authority checked by Brown. Such checks have occurred most often and dramatically over Blair's European ambitions and the budget. For example, Brown frustrated Blair's wish to join the Euro (Peston 2005: chapter 6, Keegan 2003: chapter 12, Seldon 2004: 682-3). Brown also controlled the budget by withholding information. As Scott (2004: 24) comments 'getting information about the contents of Gordon Brown's budget was like drawing teeth' (see also Peston 2005: 99 and 226-7, Seldon 2004: 674). And it mattered because 'Brown always put his "poverty" agenda above Blair's "choice" agenda' (Seldon 2004: 688 and on the choice agenda see Blair 2004: chapter 43). Thus, Brown 'viewed the big increases he achieved in NHS spending as a huge moral victory against Blair' while he thought Blair's policy on hospitals was a 'distraction from his achievement in increasing expenditure'. Blair's policy on tuition fees for universities was also deemed a distraction from the real achievement of Brown increasing education expenditure (Seldon 2004: 682-3).

It may be accurate that in the second term 'while Blair aimed ... to limit Brown's authority over domestic policy, Brown fought to increase it (Seldon 2004: 627). But the result was two men presiding over territory ever more jealously guarded. Brown was 'immovable', 'dominating his own territory' with 'jagged defences designed to repel any invader, including the Prime Minister'. Not only was Downing Street left 'wondering on the latest thinking about the Euro' but 'unthrifty ministers' found him 'unrelenting in his pursuit of his own strategy'. Brown's role was that of 'social engineer who was redistributing wealth'. So, 'they were not interested in submerging their differences in outlook, but in making an exhibition of them' (Naughtie 2002: 352). It is a fine example of the politics of political space. Brown commanded most of the domestic political space forcing Blair almost by default into overseas adventures simply because of his inability to carve out some domestic political space.

Seldon (2004: 689) speculates on 'how much more Blair would have accomplished since 1997 had not so much time, emotional energy and goodwill been consumed' by their deteriorating relationship. He opines, 'Brown's achievements were almost undimmed by the shadow the relationship cast, while Blair felt hemmed in and often unable to realise his ambitions'; 'Brown felt himself to be the loser but in the end, it was Blair who lost out far more' (Seldon 2004: 689). By 2005, their relationship had deteriorated to an all-time low. Their 'TeeBee-GeeBees' are a long-running soap opera in the media.[15] But Brown now believes that Blair has torn up their deal with the announcement that he will stand for a third term (see Peston 2005: chapter 10). Brown was reported as saying to Blair that 'There is nothing you could ever say to me now that I could ever believe' (Peston 2005: 349). Brown was now 'the official opposition to Blair within the very heart of the Cabinet' (Peston 2005: 13 also 353).

A key characteristic of the past eight years is this shifting of fortunes, the contingency, of the court politics and the duumvirate.[16] Hennessy (2000b: 493-500) has conscientiously mapped Blair's inner circle and its changing membership. Many commentators discuss its influence (see for example Rawnsley 2001: 292, Rentoul 2001: 542-3, Seldon 2004: 407).[17] Beckett and Hencke (2004: chapter 14) describe the 'oestrogen-fuelled', '*Girl's Own*, comic book' view of life at the No. 10 court (see also Oborne and Walter 2004). I do not need to accept any account of life at No. 10 to make the observation that court politics are an important feature of the British executive.

Court politics are not confined to Blair and Brown. The barons still compete (Norton 2000: 116-7):

> Ministers are like medieval barons in that they preside over their own, sometimes vast, policy territory. Within that territory they are largely supreme. .. The ministers have their own policy space, their own castles - even some of the architecture of departments … reinforces the perception - and their own courtiers. The ministers fight - or form alliances - with other barons in order to get what they want. They resent interference in their territory by other barons and will fight to defend it.

The rivalry between Brown and Mandelson is a constant: 'one of the great laws of British politics … is that any action by Mandelson causes an equal and opposite reaction by Brown (Peston 2005: 223, see also Rawnsley 2001: 20, Seldon 2004: 162). There have been other major, running conflicts; for example, between Brown and Alan Milburn, Secretary of State for Health, over Foundation Hospitals. Other ministers struggle to become heavy hitters. David Blunkett's frank if injudicious comments on the abilities and progress of his cabinet colleagues are a public example of a conversation that Westminster and Whitehall conducts all the time in private.[18] Such gossip is the currency of court politics and the judgements are markers in the endless ministerial jockeying for position and recognition.

Not only are Blair's presidential tendencies constrained by court politics but the tendencies are over-stated. It may come as a surprise to learn that cabinet and its infrastructure of committees continues. As Rentoul (2001: 544) observes 'a lot of the business of government continued to be done in cabinet committees'. So, during the second term of government, there were some 66 cabinet committees and Tony Blair chaired 10 of them. Similarly, ministers play their traditional roles. David Blunkett rationed his contributions to key issues. He did not interfere in the affairs of other departments. However, he brought highly political issues such as introducing identity cards to Cabinet where they were fully ventilated. The policy was also and run through cabinet and interdepartmental committees (Pollard 2005: 26 and 305-6). If the decline of cabinet government refers to the meetings of full cabinet, then that specific meeting is no longer the forum for policymaking, if indeed it ever was (see below pp. 27-8). If cabinet government refers to the cabinet system then it is still active, even thriving, and desuetude is not yet cabinet's fate.[19]

The phrase 'the core executive' always sought to broaden the notion of executive power beyond a narrow focus on prime minister and cabinet (Rhodes 1995, Smith 1999). It stresses the interdependence of the *several* actors at the heart of government. The story of Blair and Brown, and their ubiquitous court politics, shows how misleading it is to focus only on the prime minister and cabinet. Political power is not concentrated in either prime minister or cabinet, but more widely dispersed. It is contested, so the standing of any individual, prime minister or chancellor, is contingent.

(ii) Governance beyond Westminster and Whitehall

The governance model of British government recognises the interdependence of prime minister and chancellor. It stresses the horizontal and vertical networks of interdependence in which the core executive is embedded. As the story of the rival courts of Brown and Blair demonstrates, the core executive can itself be seen as a set of overlapping networks. In this section, I focus not on the horizontal networks of Westminster and Whitehall but on the networks beyond Westminster and Whitehall. Government policymaking is all too often confounded by central fragmentation and the Blair reforms of the centre seek to impose the desired degree of coordination. Add the simple fact that service delivery is disaggregated to a multiplicity of networks and the explanation of the gap between rhetoric and reality is obvious (Rhodes 1988, 1977). The implementation gap is ubiquitous. Unintended consequences are inevitable.

This argument is illustrated by the several studies of policy under Blair (Coates and Lawler 2000, Toynbee and Walker 2001, Seldon 2001, and Savage and Atkinson 2001). Of course, there are policy successes; for example, devolution to Scotland. Polly Toynbee and David Walker (2001: 40) confess that a 'deep-dyed cynic' would be impressed by Labour's commitment to a fairer society and conclude they have improved the lot of the poor. In other policy areas there has been little change or the results are unclear.

During the first term, changes in social security were incremental and they often recalled Conservative policy. It is the same story in housing policy. Health is a more complex tale, and it differs across the four nations of the British Isles. In England, there has been a clear shift to mixed public-private provision but it is too early to assess the effects of these changes. Clearly, there has been a massive injection of public spending, although by international standards the UK is still well down the league table of spending on health. The age-old contest between 'professional monopolists' and the 'corporate rationalisers' is still unresolved. There has been a similar injection of cash in education but again the long-term outcomes are uncertain (and for a preliminary balance sheet see Seldon 2001: 593-600). There is a major emphasis on improving service delivery with ever more demanding performance measurement and evaluation. However, Tony Wright, Labour Chair of the Select Committee on Public Administration, commented perceptively: 'it is just not technically feasible, never mind desirable, to have that much centralization. If everything is a target, nothing is a target' (cited in Rawnsley 2001: 292). The emphasis on greater choice form users of public services is welcome but, as Clare Short 2004: 279) points out 'public sector reform cannot succeed on the basis of headline-grabbing slogans'.

Then there are the known domestic problem areas - higher education, immigration and transport – that still wait for their 'solutions'. There are the cock-ups – for example, privatising air traffic control, the railways, tax credit payments, reform of the House of Lords, passports. There are the disasters that discredit governments. The examples include: the millennium dome, the Hutton Inquiry into Iraq and weapons of mass destruction, the Joe Moore affair over her claim that 9/11 was a 'good day to bury bad news', and the proposed referendum on the Euro.

Finally, there is the rest of the world. Events such as 9/11, Northern Ireland, Kosovo, the Afghan war, and Iraq divert prime ministerial attention from domestic policy. Over Iraq, for example, not only did Blair have to persuade international leaders on the case for war, which he conspicuously failed to do, he also had to maintain support at home, which he did but at the price of eroding his authority in the party and with the electorate. The war presented Blair with the embarrassing resignations of two of his Cabinet colleagues, Robin Cook (formerly Foreign Secretary, at the time Leader of the House of Commons) and Clare Short (Minister for International Development). The resignation of Cook and the ensuing fallout increased Blair's dependence on his Cabinet colleagues. John Kampfner (2003: 161-2, 225-6, 272, 277 and 315) describes the extent of the opposition to the invasion of Iraq in the Parliamentary Labour Party. The rebellion by 139 Labour MPs was the largest ever and the public demonstration in London was the biggest in decades. Even the Cabinet was uncertain, verging on divided. In the understated phrases that are employed at times of stress and conflict, Cabinet support moved from 'rock solid' to 'broad' and 'fears were being expressed with uncharacteristic candour' (Kampfner 2003: 294, 255). Although a prominent critic of government policy, Robin Cook's (2003: 271-2) assessment is judicious:

> Part of the political cost of Iraq was that it created in the public mind an image of their prime minister as preoccupied with fixing the world rather than running Britain. The irony is that this political damage to the Labour government was a self-inflicted wound. It could have been avoided by listening to the majority who were opposed to the war.

All governments fail some of the time. All governments are constrained by world events. All prime ministers intervene. Few control and then only for some policies, some of the time. There is little evidence, for example, that James Callaghan's efforts to promote new policy initiatives in, for example, housing and education had much success (Donoughue 1987: 124). The test of success in politics is elusive and shifting. Maybe, as Enoch Powell said, all political careers end in failure. Maybe, as George Orwell said, 'every life is a defeat seen from the inside' (cited in Wheatcroft 2004: 69). But Blair's failures stand in stark relief to the early promise, making the disappointment of his supporters more acute. The problems the Blair government shares with all others have been compounded by two problems of his making: conflicts at the centre and his management style.

Blair's initiatives have depended on Brown's support – for example, top up fees for students where Brown called off the dogs at the last moment (Peston 2005: 55, Seldon 2004: 648, Stothard 2003: 83). Although improving public services lies at the heart of the modernising agenda, 'there were few signs that Blair was winning over his critics on public service reform (Seldon 2004: 634, 636). Blair's weaknesses included 'a tendency to embroider, to persuade, and then to forget' (Wheatcroft 2004: 64) and 'his lack of policy making and management skills' (Seldon 2004: 692).

> What he wants is results. He has a feel for policies but not how the results come. He finds it hard to understand why things can't happen immediately. There is a frustration in waiting for the pay-off and he doesn't have time. He comes back to this when one or other of the policy areas gets hot: education, then transport and now health (official cited in Hennessy 2000c: 10).

However, although 'the machinery of government was in a state of permanent revolution at the centre after 1977 … he never succeeded in finding a structure that suited him'. In effect, the reforms were a sign of weakness not strength (Seldon 2004: 694). So, Riddell (2001: 38-9) talks of a 'beleaguered centre' and a prime minister weak on detailed policies.

Westminster Smokescreens

I have told stories about the dependence of the prime minister on the court politics of the core executive and on the networks of service delivery. I have also pointed to the importance of party support, and the impact of political adventures in the international arena on domestic politics. To compare Blair pre- and post-Iraq is to see that prime ministerial pre-eminence comes and goes; to witness the transition from President Blair to the 'unfulfilled prime minister' (Riddell 2005), 'in office but not in power' (Wheatcroft 2004: 68). The Blair presidency exists at most, therefore, in the interstices between political rhetoric and reality.

Some of the claims about the changing pattern of political leadership in Britain are accurate. It helps to distinguish between the electoral, policy making and implementation arenas. First, personalisation is a prominent feature of media management and electioneering in Britain. If I must use presidential language, it is here in the electoral arena that it is most apt. Blair is the figurehead. But this statement must be qualified immediately because the court politics of the duumvirate fits uncomfortably with the notion of monocratic leadership. Brown played a pre-eminent role on the 2001 election (Seldon 2004: chapter 31). For the 2005 election, Blair recalled Alan Milburn from his retirement to act as election supremo, playing the role that Brown played in 2001. But who stood beside Tony Blair in the first Labour Party electoral broadcast? Who else but Gordon Brown, the pair shot as a happy couple by Anthony Minghella, director of *The English Patient*. The economy was and remained Labour's master card. Milburn retired (again). It was simple. It was brutal. Blair needed Brown and Brown judged it in his interests to cooperate. The wags have it that the Conservatives toyed with the slogan 'Vote Blair, Get Brown' until they realised that is exactly what the electorate wanted! The rest of us wonder whether Brown still held firm to his view that there was nothing Blair could ever say to him now that he could ever believe and, if so, was the deal on leadership succession confirmed in writing.[20]

In the policy making arena, there is some truth to the claim that Blair centralised policymaking on No. 10 and the Cabinet Office and eschewed cabinet government. However, this claim applies to selected policy areas only, with the equally important proviso that the Prime Minister's attention was also selective. The continuous reform of the centre speaks of the failure of coordination, not its success. The Prime Minister's influence is most constrained in the policy implementation arena, so it is conspicuous for its absence in most accounts of presidentialism. Here, other senior government figures, ministers and their departments, and other agencies are key actors. Similarly, although personalisation can affect implementation, that effect is intermittent. Too often, the presidential thesis treats intervention as control. There is much that goes on in British government about which the Prime Minister knows little and affects even less. And all these arenas are embedded in dependence on domestic and international agencies and governments, making command and control strategies counter productive.

So, we have a paradox. On the one hand, journalists, political scientists, and practitioners are telling tales of a Blair presidency characterised by centralisation, personalisation and pluralisation. On the other, the same people recount governance stories in which British politics consists of fragmented policy making and policy implementation networks over which a core executive maintains a fragile – and increasingly fraught – influence. I want to draw attention to two ways of interpreting this paradox.

First, all the chatter about a Blair presidency is a counter both in the court politics of the duumvirate and in wider party politics. So, it matters not that the presidential analogy is misleading because the game is not about empirical accuracy but about expressing hostility to Blair in particular and the Labour government in general.

The critics have several specific targets. Foley (2004) argues the epithet can refer to Blair's personal characteristics, to claims that he is too powerful, to the consequences of Blair's command and control style of government, to his international adventures and attendant disregard of domestic politics, to his flouting of constitutional conventions, to the influence of the USA on British politics, and to the failure to understand the shift from government to governance. So the term is a smoke screen behind which lurk several criticisms of Blair and the Labour government.

Conversely, when critics bemoan the demise of Cabinet government, what exactly has been lost? Weller (2003: 74-8) distinguishes between the Cabinet as the constitutional theory of ministerial and collective responsibility, as a set of rules and routines, as the forum for policymaking and coordination, as a political bargaining arena between central actors, and as a component of the core executive. Blair's critics single out cabinet's policy-making and coordination functions, yet it has been clear for over a quarter of a century that these functions have been carried out by several central agencies including but not limited to the cabinet. To suggest that Blair has abandoned the doctrine of collective responsibility is nonsense. Leaks are abhorrent. Unity is essential to electoral success. Dissenters go. To suggest that any prime minister in the post-war period has adhered to anything but a pragmatic view of individual ministerial responsibility is equally foolish.[21] In short, and again, key terms about British government act as smoke screens. But what are they acting as a smoke screen for?

Why do so many people who describe British governance as multipolar, nonetheless constantly talk about a Blair presidency? I argue the paradox arises because of the bewitching effect of the Westminster Model of British politics. In the need to preserve Westminster fictions, the tales of presidentialism are a smoke screen behind which we find a widespread acceptance of the governance story. If a commentator accepts any version of the governance narrative, with its stress on interdependence, then any tale of a Blair presidency will be undermined. Command and control mix with interdependence and cooperation like oil and water.

The interweaving of the two tales is obvious if I revisit briefly the accounts of Foley and Weller. Thus Foley's review of the uses of presidentialism encompasses the consequences of Blair's command and control style of government and the failure to understand the shift from government to governance. Both are core themes in the governance narrative. In a similar vein, Weller's account of the varieties of cabinet government includes cabinet as a political bargaining arena between central actors, and as a component of the core executive. Again both are key notions in the governance narrative.

So how does the Westminster Model infuse talk of a Blair presidency? Of courses, there is no agreed version of the Westminster model (Rhodes 2005). There are at least three possible versions: Tory, Whig and Socialist.

Philip Norton is a Tory and a combative defender of the UK constitution against all comers (see for example Norton 1982). He believes the Blair presidency is 'dangerous' because it centralises power in No. 10, adopts a principal—agent relationship with departments 'that is likely to be difficult to sustain', relies on goodwill for implementation 'that may not be forthcoming' and 'ignores parliament'. These problems are compounded by 'the lack of experience and, indeed, understanding of government by the prime minister and many of those around him' coupled with a 'leadership … obsessed with power' and 'no understanding … of relationships within the system' (Norton 2003: 277). Underpinning this critique is a governance interpretation of British government.

> Interdependency is a necessary feature of government in the United Kingdom. This interdependency has enabled government to cohere and deliver programmes of public policy because each part of the political system has recognised its distinct role within the system. It has been an interdependency of defined parts … The more the prime minister and senior ministers have sought to centralise power in their own hands then perhaps paradoxically, the more fragmented British government has become. The glue of government has started coming unstuck (Norton 2003: 276).

What to do? We need to end the 'institutionalisation of fragmentation' by returning to the 'party-in-government' as the body 'responsible for public policy' that 'can be held accountable by electors at a subsequent general election' (Norton 2003: 278). In other words, Norton uses the governance narrative to urge a return to the eternal verities of the Westminster Model. He criticises the notion of the Blair presidency to resurrect the Westminster Model.

Hennessy (2000b: 535) is a Whig: 'history is a discipline that sobers up its practitioners'. He rejects the command and control model of the prime minister as chief executive for two reasons. First, 'command models sit ill with open societies'. Second, 'British political culture reflects the compost in which it is grown'. It is a parliamentary not a presidential compost. So he defends the 'deep continuities' of the constitutional side of the job – relations with the monarchy, accountability to parliament, collective government, and a career civil service (Hennessy 2000: 539). However, he too recognises that Britain must change to meet the challenges of an interdependent world. He foresees prime ministers ever more entangled in international affairs, an expanding 'hybrid arena' where international and domestic mingle, relentless media pressure, 'the avalanche of information', and a reconfigured British state because of, for example, devolution (Hennessy 2000b: 538). In sum, he describes a world of complex interdependencies.

To meet these demands, he envisages, for example, No. 10 distancing itself from the hurly burley and developing both a plurality of analytical capacities and a greater capacity to provide risk and strategic assessments. All such changes would be within the context of collective government. Or to rephrase, to meet the challenges posed by the governance narrative, Hennessy envisages a return to cabinet government with reinforced analytical and strategic support. His notion of the British presidency is less that it is dangerous, although it may well be, but that to institutionalise it is to plant an alien invention in British soil.

The Socialist tradition in the guise of New Labour has its own conception of how British government should be run. In Peter Mandelson and Roger Liddle's (1996, chapter 10) 'shadow' manifesto they argue that, to succeed, Blair needed 'personal control of the central-government'. They describe with approval Mrs Thatcher's 'focus on a clear set of goals' and 'strength of will', claiming it 'says a lot about leadership in government'. Tony Blair should follow her example 'in getting control of the centre of government'. In particular there should be a 'more formalised strengthening of the centre of government' so it can 'give much-needed support to the prime minister' and 'provide a means for formulating and driving forward strategy for the government as a whole'. So, the No. 10 Policy Unit should be 'beefed-up', and the Cabinet Office needs to be more 'pro-active'. When New Labour came to power, therefore, it should have been no surprise that 'there was never any intention of having collective Cabinet government'. Blair was 'going to run a centralised government, with a commanding Policy Unit which was solidly New Labour' (insider cited in Seldon 2004: 437).

There are two features of New Labour's approach worth noting. First, it is strongly influenced by the example of Margaret Thatcher's leadership style. Second, it consigned Labour traditions, many of which are more democratic, to the dustbins of history. The contrast with Jim Callaghan or Harold Wilson is marked:

> from time to time there is discussion about the need for a formal Prime Minister's Department … such talk frequently overlooks the instruments he already has. He is able to provide himself with his own sources of information, he can send up a trial balloon or fire a siting shot across a Ministerial bow without directly involving his own authority or publicly undermining that of the Minister; and has the necessary facilities to take a decisive hand in policy-making at any moment he choose to intervene (Callaghan 1987: 408. On Attlee see Morrison 1959: chapter 1. On Wilson, see Wilson 1977: chapter 1).

Deserting Labour traditions for Thatcherite dynamism had its costs. It provoked criticism for eroding the:

> traditional norms of democracy and administration in favour of a model that rested more on central diktat. His three predecessors as Prime Ministers, Attlee, Wilson and Callaghan, had governed collectively: no previous Labour leader, from Keir Hardie to John Smith, had adopted such a personal style of control, and in this respect, as in others [Blair] showed himself to be a leader lacking empathy with the traditions of his party (Seldon 2004: 694).

Yet Blair and his entourage consistently deny they have abandoned collective government, arguing their reforms are consistent with present-day constitutional conventions. In part, such a defence is mere conventional convenience. If policymaking is presidential, then only the president is to blame when things go wrong. However, when the government faced its many policymaking and implementation problems, it blamed those long-standing whipping boys of the Westminster constitution - the civil service - said to lack both ideas and drive (Seldon 2004: 436).

Others saw a problem with Blair's policymaking and management style and the mistaken belief that running the government was like running the Labour Party writ large. Such auto-critique was not on the central agenda.

Of course the government could see that policy success depended on others cooperating - hence the drive to 'joined-up' government (see for example Cm 4310 1999, Cabinet Office 2000, and Mulgan 2001). The ubiquity of networks was drawn to the government's attention by its own think tanks (see for example, Perri 6 1997). They did not translate this recognition of dependence into a new leadership style. The governance narrative conflicted with their view of a strong centre. Command and control remained in vogue for running services built around many governments and organisations. But whatever the attractions of command and control, it did not work. New Labour's beliefs about the best way to run government positioned Blair between the rock of presidential critiques and the hard place of governance. Only the Westminster Model obscured the dangers of such a position.

Finally, there is one characteristic of the Westminster Model that is present in every tradition – it is inward looking. Once we look at the role of the prime minister beyond the confines of Westminster and Whitehall, any assessment of his or her presidentialism must be tempered. For Britain, the post-war years saw the end of empire and a loss of influence in the world. 9/11 and Iraq rubbed salt in to the wounds of dependence. British political leaders never ceased to hanker for a return to world prominence. So, parliamentary sovereignty and the Westminster constitution live on as emblems of a past age. The debate about presidentialism is a false debate, a smoke screen obscuring the frailty of the eternal verities of a tattered constitution.

Conclusion

When commentators focus on Westminster and Whitehall, the prime minister is indeed prime. When their focus shifts beyond Westminster and Whitehall, to the rest of the UK and beyond, then any presidential pretensions are a hollow crown. The inescapable fact is that Blair has to work in, with and through a complex of organisations, governments and networks with his power constrained by ever more pervasive and complex patterns of dependence. The more we look outside the Westminster Model, the more we find that centralisation, pluralisation and personalisation represent not a concentration of power, but an endless search for effective levers of control by a core executive less powerful than many commentators and insiders claim. While the core executive thesis can encompass the duumvirate, the prime ministerial power or presidentialisation thesis can not. I can think of no clearer example of how the language of Westminster obscures our understanding of trends in British governance. We live in a land where barons vie for favour in the court of a would-be president as dependent on them for support as they are on him for favours.

I have contrasted the Westminster and the governance narratives to show that recent trends in British government do not provide certain evidence of prime ministerial power. Tales of the Blair presidency can be retold as tales of the unfulfilled prime minister. There are two major limitations to the focus on presidentialism. First, when used as a smoke screen for attacks on the prime minister and government, the term is but a flag of convenience. Better by far to focus on the specific criticisms. If used as an analogy to identify leadership changes, it is potentially misleading because the differences between a parliamentary and a presidential system far outweigh the likenesses by some margin (see Rose 2001: 236-244). Better to talk of changing patterns of leadership. Second, a focus on presidentialism is too narrow, excessively preoccupied with Westminster and Whitehall.

If there are important changes in the British executive, we can explore them adequately only through decentered studies of the beliefs and practices of politicians and civil servants. Such an approach will necessarily lead us to look at the contingencies of political life and the ways in which individuals modify their inherited beliefs and practices when they confront the dilemmas of governance. If one conclusion is clear, it is that prime ministers vary in beliefs and practices. The office does not dictate their practices. The analysis of changing patterns of leadership should start here and not with misleading analogies with polities categorised as presidential. The aphorism that 'the prime minister is first among equals' only needs the addition of 'but often he is more equal than others' to capture life at the top.

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Notes

[2] When Hugh Heclo and Aaron Wildavsky (1974: 341-3) described the debate about prime ministerial power as one of the 'chestnuts of the constitution', they probably did not expect to see it thriving thirty-five years later as the presidentialisation thesis. In the same year, Butler and Stokes (1969: 351) published their classic analysis of British elections. They claimed the election of Harold Wilson in 1964 provided hard evidence of the independent effect of party leaders on elections for the first time. Academic debate had been fuelled by Richard Crossman's introduction to Bagehot's *The English Constitution*. He claimed that 'if we mean by presidential government, government by an elective first magistrate then we in England have a president as truly as the Americans' (Crossman 1963: 22-3, reaffirmed in 1970b: 67-8, see also Mackintosh 1968: 627). The terminology varies encompassing prime ministerial government, presidentialism, duumvirate, and monocratic government. Heaven forbid I should cover this ground again. For a review see Rhodes (1995) and Smith (1999). For useful collections of articles see King (1969, 1985) and Rhodes and Dunleavy (1995). For a comparative analysis of trends see Campbell (1998), Foley (2000), Hargrove (2001) Savoie (1999) and Weller (1985).

[3] Definitions of the presidentialisation thesis vary: cf. Allen (2002: 16), Foley (1993: chapter 1), Pryce (1967: 37 and 67) and Mughan (2000: 9-10). They variously emphasise the particular presidential case (Wilson, Thatcher, Blair) and presidentialisation trends. I synthesise the argument into the three trends of greater centralisation of policy making, pluralisation of advice and personalisation of elections. The Blair presidency is seen as a defining case supporting the presidentialisation thesis. If the evidence for the Blair case is weak, then the evidence for the thesis is weakened. Also, it is not always clear whether the comparison is with presidential systems generally or the American example. On the insurmountable difficulties of the American analogy see Rose (2001: 236-244).

[4] I use ethnographic methods to reconstruct the meanings of social actors by recovering other people's stories (see for example Geertz 1973: chapter 1, Taylor 1971: 32-3). Thus, I follow Hammersley and Atkinson (1983: 2) in making the basic claim for ethnography that 'it captures the meaning of everyday human activities'. Fenno (1990: 2) argues, 'the aim is to see the world as they see it, to adopt their vantage point on politics'. Ethnography encompasses many ways of collecting qualitative data about beliefs and practices. For example, Cris Shore's (2000: 7-11) cultural analysis of how EU elites sought to build Europe uses participant observation, historical archives, textual analysis of official documents, biographies, oral histories, recorded interviews, and informal conversations. I use the same methods. On the ethnographic methods see: Dexter (1970), Eckstein (1975), Fenno (1990), Geertz (1973), Hammersley and Atkinson (1983), Sanjek (1990), Silverman (1997) and 2000, Strauss et al. (1973), and Yin (1994). For applications to British government see: Heclo and Wildavsky (1974), and McPherson and Raab (1988), Richards and Smith (2004), and Bevir and Rhodes (2003, 2005).

[5] Most quotes are from practitioners but I also draw on distinguished journalists and biographers because of their sources. In particular, I use Hennessy (1999), Peston (2005), Rawnsley (2001) and Seldon (2004) because their insider sources seem as impeccable as they are limitless.

[6] I illustrate the various positions and arguments with selective quotes. I have not piled quote upon quote to make my point, although I could do so. Also, when I cite other practitioners in support of a particular point, I provide illustrative, not comprehensive, page references. In many cases there are several relevant citations in the specified text.

[7] I do not discuss the philosophical case for this interpretive approach here. I focus on its application to the case of the Blair presidency. For a detailed discussion see Bevir and Rhodes (2003, 2005).

[8] If there is one dominating impression given by the several diaries of the Wilson era, it is of ministers oppressed by the hurly burly of their everyday life. There is just no time to think about overall strategy, the prime minister's style and the government's overall performance. Such topics are at best *obiter dicta* scattered in the text, not mature reflections. On the workload see for example, Castles (1980: 317-8, 320 and 385). Wilson's (1971) own record leaves the clear impression not only of a crushing workload but also of domestic politics and policies losing out to foreign policy.

[9] Tony Benn was Postmaster-General 1964-66, Minister of Technology 1966-70, Secretary of State for Industry 1974-75, and Energy Secretary 1975-79.

[10] Under Harold Wilson, Reg Prentice was minister for Education and Science (1964-66, 1974-5), Public Buildings and Works (1966-67), and Overseas Development (1967-69, 1975-6). In 1977, he defected to the Conservatives and served under Margaret Thatcher as a junior social security minister (1979-81).

[11] Foley (1993, 2000, 2002 and 2004) is the most prolific academic contributor. Others who identify a trend to presidentialisation even as they criticise it include: Allen (2002), Heffernan (2003), Hennessy (1998, 2000a, 2000b and 2002), Kavanagh and Seldon (2000), Mughan, (2000), Pryce (1997), and Rose (2001). The most coruscating critic of all things presidential is George Jones. See for example Jones (1985) and (1995).

[12] On the growth of the media and its impact on British politics see Seymour-Ure (2003). On its relevance to the presidential thesis see Foley (1993, 2000, 2002), and Mughan (2000). On New Labour's 'spin doctors' see Jones (1999 and 2001). On Campbell see Oborne and Walters 2004.

[13] Peston (2005: 57, 58, and 60) claims that: the key meeting took place on May 15 at the home of Nick Ryden in Edinburgh, two weeks before the meeting at Granita; Brown was promised 'total autonomy over the social and economic agenda'; and negotiations continued over the next two weeks culminating in the Granita agreement.

[14] Peston (2005: 63) disagrees. He cites Nick Brown, a Gordon Brown supporter and former Minister of Agriculture, quoting Gordon Brown immediately after the Granita meeting saying 'Blair promised that he would only fight two elections as leaders' and that 'he would endorse Brown as leader when the time came'.

[15] If 'heebie-jeebie' refers to a state of nervous apprehension, then 'TeeBee-GeeBees', formed from the respective initials of the two protagonists, refers to their state of apprehensive antagonism and their regular spats.

[16] For the oestrogen-fuelled, *Girl's Own*, comic book view of life at the No. 10 court see Beckett and Hencke (2004: chapter 14), and Oborne and Walter (2004).

[17] Over the years, it included the likes of Alistair Campbell (Head, SCU), Jonathan Powell (No. 10 Chief of Staff), Jeremy Heywood (PM's principal private secretary), Anji Hunter (Special Adviser), David Miliband (Head of the Policy Unit) and Philip Gould (PM's pollster). Among ministers it included Charlie Falconer (Minister, Cabinet Office) and Peter Mandelson (various).

[18] For example, Alan Milburn (Health) had 'grown in competence and ability', Margaret Beckett (Environment and Agriculture) is 'just holding the ring'; Charles Clarke (Education) 'has not developed as expected', Patricia Hewitt (Trade and Industry) does not think strategically, and Gordon Brown throws his weight around (Pollard 2005: 27-8). Of course his colleagues reciprocate. John Prescott (deputy prime minister) is said to hold Blunkett in a mixture of contempt and suspicion while others grit their teeth at his 'idiotic indiscretion' (*Observer* 12 December 2004)

[19] After the 2005 election, Blair reduced the number of cabinet committees to 44. There are 25 new committees, most mergers of existing ones. Their numbers will grow over the life of the government. Blair will chair 15 committees. The rationalization was accompanied by the statement that 'government is a collective exercise and what you need to do is harness the collective responsibilities that different ministers have and also the collective experience they bring with them'. (*The Guardian* 24 May 2005). Like Margaret Thatcher before him, Tony Blair has discovered that collective government is a useful security blanket. He just didn't leave it as late!

[20] Gordon Brown's key position in the government and the Labour Party is signaled by his return to the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the Labour Party, from which he was excluded in November 2003.

[21] Ministerial responsibility is alive and well, although not quite in its conventional formulation. It is no longer the prime minister and the political standing of the minister alone that decide a resignation – but the media maelstrom (Rhodes 2005). David Blunkett, Home Secretary, had high personal political standing in the party and the full support of the prime minister but the pack brought him down (see Pollard 2005: chapters 12 and 13, Woodhouse 2004: 17). It would seem that only fox hunting among blood sports is to be banned.