



**THE BRITISH  
PRIME MINISTER  
IN AN AGE OF  
UPHEAVAL**

**MARK GARNETT**

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‘Approachably written, wide-ranging, and both historically aware and bang up to date, Mark Garnett’s book helps explain why what has become an almost impossible job – one that offers presidentialstyle prominence but far less real power than many of us imagine – increasingly seems to attract such improbable politicians. A great read for anyone interested in the past, present and future of British politics.’

**Tim Bale, Queen Mary University of London**

‘In this excellent and authoritative book, Mark Garnett offers invaluable insights into the troubled waters where politics and government merge in the role of Prime Minister.’

**Sir John Chilcot**

‘This is a timely attempt at helping us to better understand the role of the British Prime Minister and the challenges of providing effective political leadership. Mark Garnett has developed a thematic study which provides us with a range of new insights: a must-read for students and scholars with an interest in UK politics.’

**Timothy Heppell, University of Leeds**

‘A subtle and sophisticated contribution to the debate on the role of the Prime Minister, which also succeeds in being delightfully readable.’

**David Lipsey, Labour Peer**

‘A fresh, timely and original volume on the Prime Minister from one of our leading authorities on post-war British history.’

**Anthony Seldon, author and educator**

# **Dedication**

*In loving memory of Joan Elizabeth 'Betty' Garnett*

# **The British Prime Minister in an Age of Upheaval**

Mark Garnett

polity

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## **Preface and acknowledgements**

Writing a book is always a memorable experience, and not always in a positive way. An author, perhaps, can be forgiven for recalling the progress of a project from the initial proposal to the submission of a manuscript – and long-suffering publishers might wish that they could forget it. But if any book includes more than a brief reference to the production process it is usually a sure sign that the writer is suffering from an over-inflated ego.

On this occasion, however, a few words about the pre-history of the book seem to be justified. It originated in an invigorating conversation with Louise Knight, beginning with reflections on the political situation of the time and ending with a blurred outline of this book. It was September 2018, when the position of the Prime Minister, Theresa May, had already been the subject of considerable speculation for more than a year. In my innocence, I thought that it might be an appropriate occasion to take stock of developments in the prime ministerial role since 1979. More than once in the intervening months, I have wondered if the old curse should be adapted: to my (probably self-interested) mind, ‘May you try to write a book about the Prime Minister in interesting times’ seems far more menacing than the original version. Although the research began in 2018, the actual composition of the book has taken place during the ‘lockdown’ induced by the coronavirus pandemic.

In September 2018 Mrs May had already been the central figure in the most momentous events in British politics since 1945; and since her departure from office in the following summer almost every news bulletin seems to have featured developments which would have deserved

inclusion in a study of the prime ministerial role in 'normal' times. Rather than demanding a reconsideration of the whole project, it seemed (to the author, at least) that these happenings, properly understood, confirmed the line of argument in my formal proposal for this book, which was written at a time when the British government felt able to disregard contingency planning for the onset of a viral pandemic. In order to remain true to the original plan (and to stay within the word-limit), developments since May's resignation are outlined in the concluding chapter.

Louise and her colleague Inès Boxman at Polity have exercised considerable patience while I waited (in vain) for a respite from events which were all too likely to have a significant impact on the argument of this book. I am very grateful to both of them; to my colleagues and friends at Lancaster University (especially David Denver and Richard Johnson); to Dick Leonard, who has written with such erudition and eloquence on every one of Britain's Prime Ministers; and to the students who subjected themselves in 2019-20 to my module on this subject. I am particularly sorry that I took so long to finish the book, preventing me from forcing those students to buy it.

# Introduction

Speaking outside No. 10 Downing Street on 4 May 1979, Margaret Thatcher declared that being asked to form a government was 'the greatest honour that can come to any citizen in a democracy'. Almost exactly eighteen years later, the incoming Tony Blair referred to 'the huge responsibility that is upon me and the great trust that the British people have placed in me'. When Gordon Brown succeeded Blair in 2007 the new Prime Minister spoke as if he was still being screen-tested for a role he had coveted for so long: 'I have been privileged to have been granted the great opportunity to serve my country. And at all times I will be strong in purpose, steadfast in will, resolute in action.'

Even in an age when political rhetoric is regarded with widespread cynicism it would be difficult to question the sincerity of these sentiments, expressed by three very different politicians. Whether the ascent has been relatively easy and swift, or arduous and prolonged, the individuals who become Prime Minister have reached the summit of their ambitions. As John Major put it in a characteristic statement of the obvious after his party's defeat in the 1997 general election, 'It is a privilege that comes to very few people' (seventy-nine in 300 years). If anything, Prime Ministers tend to be even more effusive on leaving office - notwithstanding any professional or personal setbacks they might have suffered in the duration. In her last speech before her enforced departure from No. 10, Mrs Thatcher chose to overlook the traumatic circumstances of the last few days, assuring her audience that 'It's been a tremendous privilege to serve this country as Prime Minister - wonderfully happy years.' In July 2016 David Cameron said that he was 'very proud and very honoured'

to have held the highest office. Three years later, the emotions of the departing Theresa May spilled over soon after her declaration that it had been 'the honour of my life' to serve as Prime Minister.

'Pride', 'honour' and 'privilege': these are the recurring words when British Prime Ministers make their exits and their entrances. In also referring to 'responsibility', Blair was following Thatcher, whose initial reply to questions about her feelings on becoming Prime Minister were 'Very excited, very aware of the responsibilities.' Both Thatcher and Blair occupied the office of Prime Minister for more than a decade and would have served for longer if their parliamentary colleagues had allowed it. Even their warmest admirers would have to acknowledge that the experience left a mark on them. Thatcher's tearful departure from Downing Street was a vivid reminder to the public of the human frailties which lay behind her 'Iron Lady' image. For his part, as leader of the Opposition Blair had been nicknamed 'Bambi' in recognition of his youthful zest; but this sobriquet was rarely heard after the Iraq War, which seemed to affect his health and his physical appearance. The shadow of Iraq even fell over his final appearance at Prime Minister's Question Time (27 July 2007); although his parting performance closed amid applause from many MPs (including Opposition members), Blair began his remarks by honouring three service personnel who had died serving their country, more than four years after his fateful decision to commit British troops to Iraq.

Far from easing into the role of respected elder statespeople, Blair and Thatcher continued to be very divisive figures in retirement. While this is perhaps understandable in those specific cases, far less controversial personalities like John Major and David Cameron are still reviled in some quarters. It would be an

exaggeration to say that ex-premiers are without honour in their own country, but since the death of Baroness Thatcher in 2013 there have been no representatives of that exclusive club in the House of Lords, compared to four (Home, Wilson, Callaghan and Thatcher) after the 1992 general election.

Whatever the incumbents might say in public - and however difficult it is to quantify such things - there are good reasons for supposing that the job of British Prime Minister has become more demanding since 1979. For most people, the daily routine of a head of government (or, in presidential systems, heads of state) in any liberal democracy would be distinctly unappealing. When, in 2013, the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, publicly confirmed that if an unexpected vacancy arose he would rather like to be Prime Minister, he conceded the possibility that it might be 'a very tough job' (Cockerell, 2013). Johnson's career since the 2019 general election serves as salutary testimony to the wisdom of the old adage, 'Be careful what you plot for' (see Conclusion). Leaving aside their extensive formal duties, Prime Ministers are subjected to twenty-four-hour scrutiny from the media; they are like emergency fire-fighters who are expected to rush to the scene of any significant blaze, douse the flames themselves and then give a press conference on the subject. Often they will be dealing with one incident when they are alerted to another. Apart from the unexpected 'events' which Harold Macmillan famously feared, routine matters can suddenly give rise to serious accusations aimed at the Prime Minister in person. As Steve Richards remarks, being leader of a political party in itself brings 'titanic demands' (Richards, 2019, 14). In political systems like Britain's, where electoral politics is conducted on shoestring budgets, the Prime Minister is an obvious fund-raising asset who can never be free from the fear of incipient scandal. Tony

Blair's tenure was bookended by the Ecclestone affair (November 1997), which took away much of his initial lustre, and the 'cash for honours' revelations in the months before his enforced departure in 2007, resulting in him giving an exclusive interview to the police. Prime Ministers can expect limited personal privacy even after they have left office, requiring round-the-clock protection. Hounded on their holidays, they are often criticized for taking the temporary breaks which people in stress-free jobs regard as essential. Having a young (and in some recent cases, growing) family might make a Prime Minister look more like a 'normal' human being, but away from the cameras it will tend to have the opposite effect.

Why, then, do so many politicians continue to hanker after the role of Prime Minister? There has certainly been no shortage of aspirants in recent years. After David Cameron's resignation as party leader and Prime Minister in 2016, five Conservatives vied for the vacant positions. Three years later, when Theresa May finally brought an end to her inglorious innings, ten of her parliamentary colleagues volunteered to take her place. If the party had stuck by the rules in place in 1989-90, when Thatcher was challenged first by Sir Anthony Meyer and then by Michael Heseltine, it seems the ballot paper would have been even longer since candidates then required only a proposer and a seconder. However, it would be unwise to take this evidence at face value; more likely, the unusual circumstances of 2019 encouraged people who would normally have hesitated before throwing their hats into the ring to imagine that they might defy the odds (see [chapter 2](#)). Despite everything, finding an MP who would refuse to serve as Prime Minister is like looking for a 10-year-old who would turn down the chance to represent their country in a World Cup final.

The excessive personalization of British media commentary too easily gives rise to the notion that recent Prime Ministers have failed because they simply were not equipped for the job. There is no attempt in this book to deny that particular Prime Ministers have made maladroit decisions. However, the main purpose is to explore the possibility that the holders of the office would not have succeeded even if they had been of the very highest calibre. If the position of the Prime Minister has become dysfunctional – or, as New Labour apparatchiks liked to say, ‘unfit for purpose’ – the implications for British democracy would be profound. Even Prime Ministers who are reputed to be weak are expected to take responsibility for developments and decisions which, for ill or good, affect the present circumstances and future prospects of everyone living in Britain. In addition, whenever questions arise concerning the practices of other institutions, the Prime Minister is usually called upon to take a leading role in reforms. If the office of Prime Minister itself requires radical reform, this would help to explain why recent incumbents have made such a hash of opportunities to improve Britain’s system of governance and political culture (e.g. John Major’s attempt to clean up Parliament in the wake of ‘cash for questions’, and David Cameron’s selective endorsement of proposals arising from the Leveson Inquiry into the conduct of the press: see [chapter 4](#)). From this perspective one can readily understand why Tony Blair blocked attempts to make the House of Lords more accountable, and why David Cameron (again) used his position to prevent even a preliminary step towards a more defensible voting system in the 2011 Alternative Vote referendum. Finally, if it really has become impossible to carry out this job in full conformity with the informal rules and conventions which have prevented the British system of government from becoming an ‘elective dictatorship’, it would enable us to understand why recent Prime Ministers



have tended to act as if these restraints apply to other political actors but not themselves, and why governments now find it necessary to employ so many 'spin doctors' to justify their actions and create the *appearance* of success, often in blatant defiance of practical evidence.

Without anticipating the detail of the argument presented in this book, it is worth noting that while all liberal democracies have been affected by 'spin' in recent decades, arguably Britain is uniquely vulnerable to the contagion. This is because all Prime Ministers since 1945 - with the partial exception of Edward Heath - have felt it necessary to act as 'spin doctors' on behalf of their country, delivering speeches that present Britain as a major power which could (under appropriate leadership) prove even more influential on the global stage than in the days when its empire spanned more than a quarter of the inhabitable world (see [chapter 5](#)). It is possible that Margaret Thatcher really accepted this delusional view, although it would be more charitable to suppose that she thought British politicians had exaggerated the extent of the country's relative decline and that it was time for its leaders to err on the opposite side. It is, though, unlikely that any of Thatcher's successors have suffered from serious private illusions about Britain's relative position. Nevertheless, they have all participated, with apparent enthusiasm, in the self-defeating 'spin' operation, declaring that they are 'batting for Britain' (in dealings with the European Union (EU)) and boasting that the country 'punches above its weight' in matters relating to the non-European world. In this respect, at least, Thatcher and her successors have brought an unsustainable tension into their own working lives, forcing them somehow to live up to unrealistic expectations and leading (among other things) to the humiliating departures from office of David Cameron and Theresa May.

# The Prime Minister in history and theory

Since its inception (generally associated with the prolonged political dominance of Sir Robert Walpole (1721–42)), the role of British Prime Minister has attracted considerable and understandable attention from a variety of perspectives. The interest has increased in the years since 1979, thanks chiefly to the arrival in office of the most noteworthy individual to hold the office since Churchill was finally chiselled out of Downing Street in 1955. Although the primary subject-matter is the same, and their approaches sometimes overlap, the authors of important studies of the role can be consigned to five camps.

(1) *Contemporary historians*: these focus on individual Prime Ministers – their innate qualities, and their interactions with the broader context of their careers – or a succession of such individuals. Anthony Seldon is a prime example, having published studies of Major, Blair, Brown, Cameron and May, all of which are based on meticulous research including interviews with key participants.

(2) *Practising (or former) politicians*: these include individuals (like Richard Crossman, John Mackintosh and even Dr Gordon Brown) who were academics as well as politicians, but also non-academics (like Tony Benn and Graham Allen) who have tried to reach a critical understanding of the Prime Minister's role rather than merely reflecting on current developments. These observers might seem more authoritative than people whose analyses arise from second-hand knowledge. However, the view from 'the inside' could be misleading for other reasons: certainly the practitioners who have written on this subject are far from unanimous in their conclusions.

(3) *Authors of memoirs and diaries*: these include politicians and important officials who have recounted their experiences and observations without the *primary* purpose of shedding light on the Prime Minister's role. During the Thatcher years it seemed obligatory for Cabinet ministers to write their memoirs. As sources of insights these were of variable quality, but the best (like Nigel Lawson's compendious *The View from No. 11* (1992)) are invaluable. The publication in 1993 of diaries written by the maverick Thatcherite Alan Clark sparked a revival of this genre. Even if original diaries were redacted before publication, their main value for scholars lay in the unwitting revelations – often ones which the authors thought too trivial to leave out. In this respect, Labour politicians and their highly placed supporters have been far more prolific than their Conservative counterparts, so that anyone who was sufficiently interested could compile a voluminous day-to-day record of New Labour's period in office (1997–2010) on the basis of these publications. The main contributor to this avalanche of research-rich material is Alastair Campbell. While his friend Alan Clark enriched Britain's political literature by recounting the experiences of a narcissist who came close to the inner circles of British government, Campbell's published diaries are the reflections of an incurable, indefatigable reporter, whose diligence as a diarist makes even the prolific Tony Benn look like a dilettante.

(4) *Journalists*: these include authors who have provided day-to-day snapshots for various media outlets, as well as those (like Andrew Rawnsley and Tim Shipman) who have published substantial studies of specific episodes. It seems churlish to deny the most perceptive of these authors honorific membership of the 'contemporary historian' club. They are distinguished here by their different vantage

point, as bona fide inhabitants of the 'Westminster village' rather than occasional academic visitors.

(5) Last, but emphatically not least, are *political scientists* whose contributions are outlined in the rest of this section, mainly for the benefit of students of the subject. Readers with non-academic reasons for reading the book can be assured that this part of the literature is not revisited until the concluding chapter; and even then the main purpose of the discussion is to summarize the argument offered here rather than to engage too closely with existing interpretations.

For political scientists who have examined the role since 1945, the key questions have concerned the decision-making *power* of Prime Ministers - 'Can they dominate the policy-making agenda, or are they heavily constrained by the Cabinet and/or other significant actors?' - and an evaluation of the role in relation to institutions in other countries (e.g. 'Is the British Prime Minister becoming more like a US President?'). Before 1979, the most widely discussed contributions came from scholars who argued that the Prime Minister's role was superseding that of the Cabinet, which since the publication in 1867 of Walter Bagehot's *The English Constitution* (1963) had been regarded as the fulcrum of the British system. According to the revised argument, Britain's government was now essentially 'prime ministerial'. Significantly, the best-known proponents of this view - John Mackintosh (1929-78) and Richard Crossman (1907-74) - were both active political practitioners as well as academics.

This new interpretation was not universally accepted, partly because of its troubling implications but also because it seemed at best an over-simplification of the real situation. All systems of government are complex - not least liberal democracies, which are supposed to depend on

the voluntary adjustment of interests, mediated by sophisticated bureaucracies as well as political parties which are influential in themselves. Even before the advent of Margaret Thatcher, political scientists had qualified the picture presented by Mackintosh and Crossman (e.g. Jones, 1965, 167–85). They were joined in 1976 by an even more eminent analyst-practitioner, the recently retired Prime Minister Harold Wilson, who tried to demonstrate that Cabinet government was alive and well, thanks not least to his own unswerving fealty to constitutional convention (Wilson, 1976).

In his introduction to a volume devoted to the role of the Prime Minister, Anthony King wrote that, 'With luck, interest in the remarkable premiership of Margaret Thatcher will have the effect of further stimulating interest in the prime ministership' (King, 1985, 10). This was a pretty safe expectation, although the debate became more contentious after Thatcher had left office. Michael Foley's provocative book *The Rise of the British Presidency* (published in 1993) asserted that Thatcher's approach to governance had taken Britain beyond a merely 'prime ministerial' system, and that in important respects she had acted as if she were a President. As an expert in US politics, Foley was able to identify specific examples of 'presidential' tendencies during the Thatcher years. Using terms like 'spatial leadership' and 'leadership stretch', he argued that just like a US President British Prime Ministers can distance themselves from their parties, exploiting the media in particular as a means of reinforcing the idea that their authority arises from a personal connection with the electorate (Foley, 1993).

Foley's book could have appeared at a more propitious time. By 1993 Thatcher's successor, John Major, was projecting a very different style of leadership. Arguably, then, even if a British 'presidency' had risen during the

1980s it had sunk along with Thatcher herself – indeed her downfall could be attributed to a reaction against her domineering style. This course of events seemed to verify the opinion of the former Foreign Secretary Patrick Gordon Walker, who wrote in 1970 that a Prime Minister who ‘habitually ignored the cabinet ... could rapidly come to grief’ (Gordon Walker, 1972, 106). Normality seemed to be restored under Major, and for most political scientists ‘normality’ meant collective government. The membership of the ‘collective’ did not necessarily coincide exactly with the ministers who formed the Cabinet, but this had never been the case. Rather, the ‘core executive’ consisted of the Prime Minister and representatives of institutions which enjoyed ‘resources’ of various kinds – that is, ministers in the most important departments and their senior civil servants (see, for example, Rhodes and Dunleavy, 1993; Smith, 1999). The ‘prime ministerial/presidential’ approaches depicted politics as a ‘zero-sum game’, in which an accretion of power for the Prime Minister entailed a corresponding loss for other actors and institutions. The ‘core executive model’ rejected this picture, presenting the relationship between the Prime Minister and senior colleagues as one of mutual dependence and co-operation. There was room in the core executive model for special advisers, too, but these relative newcomers to the political scene were not regarded as very significant since their ‘resources’ depended on ministerial favour – that is, if their political employers were unhappy with their services, their influence could be ended abruptly.

By the end of the millennium events had moved on, and in 2000 Foley published a new version of his book with a defiant title (*The British Presidency*) which suggested that his interpretation was now established fact rather than a provocative hypothesis. His argument was based chiefly on the first Blair Government (1997–2001), whose practices

seemed in many respects to transcend Thatcher's tentative 'presidential' steps. However, as Foley himself knew very well, any claim that Britain was governed by a President was bound to run into the objections that its head of government was a constitutional monarch, and the Prime Minister (unlike a President) was directly responsible to Parliament. Foley's readers would be aware that he was trying to identify presidential *features* which had crept into a system whose formal constitutional status had not changed. However, his titles (and, often, his style of writing) gave a contrary impression; and others were less equivocal in their equation of New Labour with 'presidential' government. Indeed, the emphatically un-Blairite Labour MP Graham Allen published a very lively tract arguing that it would be much better for Britain if it implemented a formal presidential system of government, rather than suffering from the drawbacks which inevitably arose from a hybrid presidential/parliamentary system (Allen, 2003).

Despite Blair's presidential style the core executive approach was still generally accepted among political scientists at the time of his resignation in 2007 (Diamond, 2014, 193-213). It received timely support from scholars, notably Andrew Blick and George Jones, who found plentiful precedents for contemporary developments, even in the practices of the earliest Prime Ministers like Walpole and Pitt the Younger, who had employed the ancestors of today's 'spin doctors' and special advisers (Blick and Jones, 2010). While invaluable from an historical point of view, this *plus ça change* approach could be countered by the argument that examples drawn from the period before universal adult suffrage (1928) related to a very different political context. Since then, the exigencies of 'total war' would have promoted a lasting enhancement of the Prime Minister's role, even under a premier with none of

Churchill's relish for supreme command, or Clement Attlee's eagerness to exploit what remained of the wartime spirit in order to push through a socio-economic revolution.

Since 2003 the debate has continued but in a more subdued and nuanced fashion. While rejecting the 'presidential' thesis, most contributors have accepted that the Prime Minister's role has been strengthened (e.g. Heffernan, 2005; Dowding, 2012). The resulting scholarship has enhanced understanding of British politics in general, but it still reflects the preoccupation of political scientists with definitions, models and institutional comparisons. It is a common refrain in the academic literature that the role of the Prime Minister is still 'under-theorized'. It could be argued to the contrary that much of the work on the Prime Minister emanating from political scientists suffers from an *excess* of theory, being conducted within analytical frameworks which downplay other considerations (in particular, Britain's relative decline as a global power, and the influence of the media; see Rose, 2001), and draws too heavily on formal interviews tinged (even tainted) by hindsight, rather than contemporary media reports or the published diaries of key participants.

While the core executive approach is a valuable corrective to the notion that the Prime Minister can govern without co-operation of some kind, this is an unavoidable feature even of undemocratic states and thus cannot shed much light on the way in which the role has developed since 1979 (Brown, 2010). The core executive model focuses on the distribution of *power* - that is, in simplistic terms, the ability to get things done, for which co-operation (willing or not) is obviously needed. In Britain, the realization of most policy objectives (better health care, higher standards of education, etc.) cannot possibly be effected by a single person, but depends on co-operation at all levels down to nurses and classroom teachers. The argument presented



here is that a more relevant question relating to the Prime Minister is that of *prominence*, particularly in terms of electoral politics. This is much more compatible with a zero-sum game; if the front page of every newspaper features a photograph of the Prime Minister, his or her colleagues are being denied equal publicity, even if they are making more noteworthy contributions to governance.

A book which is more concerned with prominence than power is suggested by other developments in the academic literature. For example, Rod Rhodes and others have investigated developments within the British state, which in their view has been 'hollowed out' in recent decades (e.g. Rhodes, 1994; Campbell and Wilson, 1995). This seems difficult to square with the core executive model, since it implies that ministers and government departments have been losing their ability to effect constructive change and hence have fewer 'resources' at their disposal. On the face of it, this does look like a significant shift in the Whitehall power-game; if ministers have lost status and authority, the same is not true (at least directly) of the Prime Minister, who has no departmental responsibilities. If governmental capacity has weakened, more onus would be placed on the Prime Minister to create the impression of success, for vote-winning purposes. On a related theme, Patrick Diamond has argued persuasively that, having been seriously affected by the hollowing out of the state, civil servants now increasingly find themselves being 'politicized' - that is, working to enhance the popularity of the party in office, rather than pursuing what they conceive to be the national interest (Diamond, 2018). Looking back over the period since 1979, it is difficult not to hanker after the days in which departmental ministers and their civil servants really *did* enjoy 'independent resources'; in terms of the ability to achieve constructive results (and to palm

off responsibility when things go wrong) Prime Ministers themselves would be better off if this were still true.

It could be argued that too much of the political science literature on the British Prime Minister has been vitiated by disciplinary perspectives. If we cannot hope for 'joined-up government', we can at least aspire to joined-up thinking, approaching recent developments in the Prime Minister's position without theoretical preconceptions. The changes in the role since Thatcher will become apparent to anyone who reads Harold Wilson's contribution to the debate. In *The Governance of Britain* (1976), Wilson still felt able to describe the role of the British Prime Minister as 'one of the most exciting and certainly one of the best organised' positions in the democratic world (Wilson, 1976, x). If at least one of these claims is no longer true - and 'well organised' is not the term which immediately springs to mind in relation to any aspect of the contemporary British political system - inquiries into the most probable causes must be as broadly based as possible, and as free as humanly possible from any 'mind-forged manacles'.

## **Rationale and structure of the book**

The approach of this book reflects my view that attempts to draw on all of these sources, updated and reassessed at suitable intervals, can themselves serve as useful contributions to the subject, and that these exercises have been too rare. Ideally, books of this kind can be written in a way which informs the general reader as well as offering suggestions for students. The main purpose of this attempt is to provide evidence and analysis which allow all readers to draw their own conclusions about changes in the Prime Minister's role since 1979. In the interests of brevity, and to de-clutter the text, I have tried to confine the references to occasions when particular works really need to be cited.

The bibliography would have been much longer if it had included even a representative sample of the publications which have affected my views on this subject.

The remaining chapters of the book deal with various aspects of the Prime Minister's role. The format is thematic, but within each of the themes the treatment is broadly chronological (normally beginning with Thatcher and ending with Theresa May - the early part of the Johnson premiership is discussed in the concluding chapter). There is no attempt to provide an exhaustive list of the Prime Minister's resources, and some aspects of the position (e.g. its reliance in so many ways on prerogative powers, and responsibilities in relation to nuclear weapons) do not figure prominently in the discussion compared to the invaluable works of scholars like Lord (Peter) Hennessy (see, for example, Hennessy, 2000, 102-46). The primary focus of the present study is on the factors which have allowed Prime Ministers to retain so many of the duties and privileges once assigned to the monarchy, despite the subsequent introduction of democratic procedures.

With a structure which is chronological as well as thematic, the book can also serve as a history of UK politics since 1979 - albeit one which is skewed towards the prime ministerial perspective. This explains why devolution within the UK does not feature heavily - British Prime Ministers, including Blair, who oversaw the beginning of the process, have acted as if this constitutional development never happened. The reality, of course, is very different, and the divergencies between the various components of the UK have become increasingly important thanks to the 2016 referendum and the Covid-19 pandemic (which also revealed the centrifugal potential of directly elected Mayors, particularly in the north of England). My only excuse for adopting the prime ministerial perspective is

that a separate full-length book would be required to do justice to the subject of devolution.

The composition of the book has coincided with momentous developments; indeed, it could be argued that the British public has been subjected to continuous upheaval since the financial crisis which began in 2007, giving it little chance to pause for reflection. Whatever challenges might come in the future, it is unlikely that the British political system will be capable of meeting them unless the prime ministerial role is reconsidered. H. H Asquith - who was well qualified to pass judgement - famously wrote that 'The office of the prime minister is what its holder chooses and is able to make of it.' The main conclusion of this book is that the one thing a contemporary Prime Minister cannot 'choose' to do is to make a success of the role, which has become increasingly dysfunctional along with the other institutions of Westminster and Whitehall. The only recourse for Prime Ministers who care for 'the verdict of history' is to fall back on a minimalist definition of 'success' - that is, in terms of victory in the next election, even if this is owed primarily to weaknesses or divisions among Opposition parties. For a healthy liberal democracy this would hardly suffice as a measurement of 'success': in particular, it implies that whenever the national interest conflicts with the electoral needs of the Prime Minister's political party, the incumbent of No. 10 is now under overwhelming pressure to prefer the latter. The unsettling signs in recent years that British Prime Ministers have learned to accept this as their overriding 'performance indicator' is one of the main motivations for this book about their role.

# 1

## Majority leader

Parliament – and more specifically the House of Commons – is a convenient place to start an exploration of the Prime Minister’s role. In his great 1867 study of the ‘English’ constitution, Walter Bagehot depicted the Commons as a glorified electoral college: its members chose the Cabinet, which in turn nominated one individual to serve as head of the government (Bagehot, 1963, 150–2). In Bagehot’s day, MPs were relatively free from party discipline, and the requirement that the Prime Minister should be able to muster a majority in the Commons meant that proven parliamentary performers (even if they happened to be members of the House of Lords, in those days before its powers were curtailed) enjoyed a considerable advantage when the ‘electoral college’ made its choice.

In the past, Prime Ministers tended to be chosen because they commanded the confidence of the Commons. Now, when Prime Ministers command the confidence of the Commons they do so *because* they are Prime Ministers. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the changing relationship between Prime Ministers and the Commons in recent decades, and the way in which the ‘majority leader’ is selected today.

## The Prime Minister in Parliament since 1979

The fact that Prime Ministers are elected to the House of Commons on the same territorial basis as other MPs is

never forgotten either by holders of the office or by their constituents. The latter rarely feel that they are inadequately represented, since Prime Ministers always have a well-qualified team to deal with any local or national issues which constituents might raise, and their visits are likely to evoke feelings of pride and gratitude even among residents who voted for one of their opponents. Prime Ministers are usually glad to return the compliments, claiming that the freely expressed views of their constituents help to keep them 'grounded' in public opinion more generally. Yet this commendable attempt to feel the public pulse is not necessarily very informative, since the mere fact of being Prime Minister seems to have a distorting effect on the mindset of one's constituents. Since 1979, in every general election after a Prime Minister has stood down as an MP, the vote for her or his successor as the party's constituency candidate has declined.

Not even the most earnest and perceptive Prime Minister will find it any easier to monitor the mood amongst MPs, which is much more volatile and likely to be concealed from those who seek to gather information on the Prime Minister's behalf. If Prime Ministers conduct their own fact-finding exercises - for example by touring the numerous places of refreshment available to MPs at Westminster - the response is likely to be even less informative. At larger gatherings, like the notorious Conservative 1922 Committee, the banging of desks to greet the Prime Minister could mean almost anything - even, occasionally, sincere support.

In one respect, what Michael Foley called 'leadership stretch' has always been inherent in the role of Prime Minister (Foley, 1993, 120-47). There are unmistakable clues in both of the words of the job title. Being a minister of any kind means that one is a decision-maker, however humble. A Cabinet minister is not only a decision-maker,