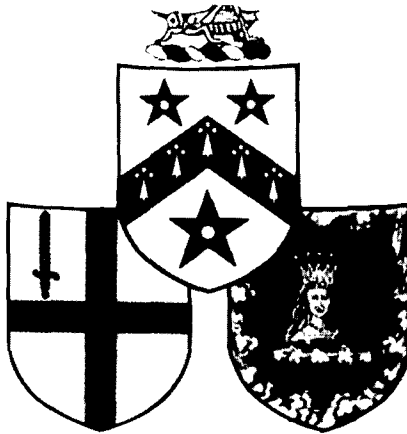


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PREMIERSHIP

Lecture 6

‘SHADOW AND SUBSTANCE’:  
PREMIERSHIP FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

by

PROFESSOR PETER HENNESSY BA PhD  
Gresham Professor of Rhetoric

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'PREMIERSHIP'

PETER HENNESSY, GRESHAM PROFESSOR OF RHETORIC

LECTURE SIX: 5 MARCH 1996

'"SHADOW AND SUBSTANCE": PREMIERSHIP FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY.'

This may strike you as very odd, but, when, in the historical sense, you've spent as much time in the company of past premiers as I have while preparing this year's series of lectures, you become rather sorry for them as a breed almost to the point of agreeing with Stanley Baldwin that: 'There are three classes which need sanctuary more than others – birds, wild flowers and Prime Ministers.'<sup>1</sup> Why is this? Partly because as Lord Hailsham has described, they rarely die happy. ('I mean it doesn't lead to happiness', was how he put it when asked if he regretted that the prize had not fallen into his lap in October 1963<sup>2</sup>); and partly because I tend to subscribe to what one might call 'Enoch's Law of Politics' which the singular Mr Powell advanced in a fond treatment of 'Rab' Butler's career. 'In politics of all callings', he wrote, 'the test of success or failure is so unsure that one is tempted to wonder whether there is such a thing as true political success at all: failure, or frustration, or reversal, seems so much to be the essence of any political career.'<sup>3</sup>

I am sure this is especially true of those who fill the premiership. To reach the single most powerful public and political position in the land and yet, inevitably, to discover in one's declining years that one's impact on such a torpid, traditional in many ways apolitical society as ours can only lend itself to a succession of broody might-have-beens left festering in the mind of the once mighty. That, I suspect, is what Lord Hailsham had in mind about the lack of contentment among the Honourable Society of Ex-Premiers (Though I suspect Clem Attlee and Alec Home were free of this incubus. They both spent their last years painfully missing their wives who pre-deceased them but that is a very different kind of affliction).

But I have not stood up before you today to break-open phials of soothing ointment over the bruised egos of old statesmen. There was nothing compulsory or obligatory about their wielding authority over their Cabinet, their party, our Parliament, and, by extension, over us. For another part of me is in tune with at least the first half of another Baldwinism – 'Never complain and never explain.'<sup>4</sup>

My purpose in the final lecture of this year's series is to look at the demands upon the office of Prime Minister and those who fill it as the century turns. And I approach this task in a very tentative spirit. Not for me the easy, almost casual certainty of the inventor of the pillar box and political novelist supreme, Anthony Trollope, who, through the mouth of the Duke of St Bungay declared:

'One wants in a Prime Minister a good many things, but not very great things. He should be clever but need not be a genius; he should be conscientious but by no means strait-laced; he should be cautious but never timid; bold but never venturesome; he should have a good digestion, genial manners, and, above all a thick skin.'<sup>5</sup>

Late twentieth century Britain is very different from mid to late nineteenth when, in Trollope's fictional characterisation at least, 'the most moving sources of our national excitement seemed to have vanished from life' yet 'the Government was carried on and the country was prosperous.'<sup>6</sup>

For all the vicissitudes experienced by our country since relative decline began to spall the polished carapace of our nineteenth century military and industrial superpowerdom, it is still difficult to arouse a genuine or a widespread concern about what Disraeli called 'the condition of the people' in not so much the social, but in the wider, political, governmental and institutional sense. Richard Hoggart captured this paradox quite marvellously last year when he wrote:

What an extraordinary feat it is that the British can so easily assume so much continuity and security; on the one hand, a feat of sleep walking; on the other founded in a near reality, in the assertion that order will survive. We had a civil war three centuries ago; some major centres of population were badly bombed in the last war, and there have since been some temporary and local breakdowns of order. There can be no suitable comparisons here with, say, Belgium or France or many another West and East European nation. No Holocaust, no Balkan-style disturbances...no ethnic cleansing.'<sup>8</sup>

All true though I would add 'don't forget Northern Ireland after 1969'. And yet complacency should not be the condition of the political nation in 1996. A Duke of Omnium or a Trollopian style of premiership simply does not fit the bill today and it has not for a very long time past, though Churchill might have been thought to be attempting it during his second and last spell in No.10 with his initial taste for 'overlord' ministers and that distinct flavour of 'pageantry' which Roy Jenkins detected in the old man's singular way of conducting the premiership.<sup>9</sup>

One must be careful, however, not to let style overlay or camouflage substance. There was something relentless about the increasing workload of British Prime Ministers as the postwar period deepened. In last year's Gresham series I examined the almost india rubber stretching of the scope and reach of the office of Prime Minister as illustrated by an analysis of the functions of the job carried out by the Cabinet Office, the Treasury and No.10 between 1947 and 1949 in Mr Attlee's time<sup>10</sup> and by me, unofficially, in 1995 in the absence of any internal Whitehall replica of the late 1940s exercise.<sup>11</sup>

I hope you'll forgive me if I reprise the findings of my efforts before offering a set of new and different-but-related measurements to illustrate what one might call the phenomenon of creeping-overload-at-the-top. From a dozen prime ministerial functions identified by William Armstrong and his colleagues in the late 1940s<sup>12</sup> (though, had I been consulted, I would have

added a further seven<sup>13</sup>), the total, by my reckoning, had increased to 33 in the mid-1990s, a figure which, like its late Forties precursor, excluded party as opposed to governmental duties. A breakdown of the 1995 audit shows:

- seven constitutional and procedural functions;
- six dealing with appointments;
- six dealing with the conduct of Cabinet and parliamentary business;
- seven touching organisational and efficiency questions;
- two concerning sensitive Budget and market-related matters;
- rounded off by five special foreign and defence functions.

Range of activity is one thing, frequency however, is quite another. And here what actually passed over prime ministerial desks is the next puzzle to be pondered and its key lies in the Public Record Office, at least for the period up to and including 1965.

Mercifully, the PRO has allocated special classes for Prime Ministers' papers in the postwar period – PREM 8 for Attlee; PREM 11 for the four Conservative Prime Ministers between 1951 and 1964; and PREM 13 for Wilson after 1964. Culling and categorising them has proved to be a revealing and fascinating exercise but, before exposing the results, I must come clean about its crudities. These are of two main kinds: not every file that crossed the PM's desk is to be found within the bounds of the PREM classes. Some of them lie scattered across various Cabinet office series; the intelligence material, an occasional mistake apart, has been stripped from the PREM series for the postwar period leaving no trace, for example, of the regular flow of so-called 'CX' reports from the Secret Intelligence Service.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, my categorisations of files by type are necessarily imperfect. For example, sometimes material dealing with atomic weapons is best placed under the heading of 'Defence'. At other times it fits more accurately under the caption 'Foreign Policy (USA).' Others, too, might have chosen a different variety of labels to pick from.

Anyway, here is the result. Let's take first Mr Attlee's tally for 1948 (see Table I).

**TABLE 1**

**PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE:  
PAPERS AND CORRESPONDENCE  
(INDIVIDUAL FILES)**

<b>CLEMENT ATLEE</b>	<b>1948</b>
1: Imperial/Commonwealth	54
2: Economic/Industrial/Regulatory	42
3: Defence	39
4: Foreign Policy (excluding USA & Middle East)	26
5: Whitehall/Ministerial/ Constitutional/Parliamentary	18
6: Domestic Policy	14
7: Security/Intelligence	5
8=: Foreign Policy (USA)	4
8=: Foreign Policy (Middle East)	4
8=: Monarchy	4
11=: Trades Unions/Strikes/Pay	2
11=: Ireland (excluding NI)	2
13: Party Matters (Labour)	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>215<sup>15</sup></b>

I chose 1948 as the year to measure because the comparisons I am about to make are, relatively speaking, for peacetime years and I wanted to move beyond the immediate shadow of World War II, some of whose unfinished business might have produced an abnormal workload. Distortions there are, of course, in 1948. For example, the leading category by volume, Imperial/Commonwealth, is distended by the transfer of power in the sub-continent. India accounts for 25 of those 54 items.

Apart from the overall total of 215 files (some of which, as with all the twelve-months surveyed, ran-on from previous years), what is striking is the preponderance of foreign, defence and imperial concerns as an absorber of prime ministerial time. Imperial and Commonwealth alone outstripped the Economic/Industrial/Regulatory category at a time of a considerable shift to the public sector and the continuing transfer of industry to a peacetime footing. The Domestic Policy item, too, I find surprisingly low in a year when the last big piece of the postwar welfare state – the National Health Service – was put into place.

Let's turn now to the supposedly relatively hands-off premiership of Winston Churchill. He was re-elected in 1951 partly on a ticket of reducing the waste and bureaucracy of what he liked to depict as a Socialist Government.<sup>16</sup> I have taken 1952, the first full year of his last premiership, as my test-bed. There are distortions here, chiefly under the Monarchy category as following George VI's death in February 1952, considerable effort was put into preparing for the Coronation of the present Queen, a matter in which Churchill took an intense personal interest.<sup>17</sup>

But look at that total: 314 items, 46 per cent up on Attlee's consignment four years earlier. (See Table II). The primacy of Defence is no surprise. It was his great preoccupation. Foreign Policy (USA) is surprisingly low given the immense importance he placed on restoring the 'special relationship' which he thought had decayed under Attlee, in nuclear collaboration especially.<sup>18</sup>

TABLE II  
PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE:  
PAPERS AND CORRESPONDENCE  
(INDIVIDUAL FILES)

WINSTON CHURCHILL		1952	(1948)
1:	Defence	66	(39;3)
2:	Economic/Industrial/ Regulatory	65	(42;2)
3:	Foreign Policy (excluding USA & Middle East)	53	(26;4)
4:	Whitehall/Ministerial/ Constitutional/Parliamentary	38	(18;5)
5=:	Domestic Policy	20	(14;6)
5=:	Security/Intelligence	20	( 5;7)
7:	Foreign Policy (Middle East)	17	( 4;8=)
8:	Monarchy	14	( 4;8=)
9:	Imperial/Commonwealth	10	(54;1)
10:	Foreign Policy (USA)	9	( 9;8)
11:	Trade Unions/Strikes/Pay	2	( 2;11=)
12:	Ireland (excluding NI)	-	( 2;11=)
13:	Party Matters	-	( 1;13)
		TOTAL	314 <sup>19</sup>

(% increase on 1948 = 46%)



Lord Salisbury (the prime ministerial Marquess not 'Bobbety' who resigned ostensibly over the return of Makarios to Cyprus in 1957<sup>20</sup>) would have been fascinated to observe the remorseless rise of prime ministerial activity over the six years from Churchill in 1952 to Macmillan's first full year in office in 1958 in a kind of malign contraflow with Britain's decreasing influence in the world post-Suez given his (Salisbury's) distrust of expert advice in particular<sup>21</sup> and his scepticism about government intervention in general. The Suez shadow is pronounced here with Foreign Policy (Middle East) in third place, though Defence has tailed off somewhat from its Churchillian pre-eminence (See Table III).

TABLE III  
PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE:  
PAPERS AND CORRESPONDENCE  
(INDIVIDUAL FILES).

HAROLD MACMILLAN	1958	(1952)	(1948)
1: Foreign Policy (excluding USA & Middle East)	75	(53;3)	(26;4)
2: Imperial/Commonwealth	58	(10;9)	(54;1)
3: Foreign Policy (Middle East)	43	(17;7)	( 4;8=)
4: Economic/Industrial/Regulatory	42	(65;2)	(42;2)
5: Defence	41	(66;1)	(39;3)
6: Whitehall/Ministerial/ Constitutional/Parliamentary	40	(38;4)	(18;5)
7: Domestic Policy	20	(20;5=)	(14;6)
8: Foreign Policy (USA)	14	( 9;10)	( 4;8=)
9: Monarchy	9	(14;8)	( 4;8=)
10: Trades Unions/Strikes/Pay	8	(2;11)	(2;11=)
11: Security/Intelligence	6	(20;5=)	( 5;7)
12: Party Matters (Con 1; Lab 2)	3	( - )	( 1;13)
13: Ireland (excluding NI)	1	( - )	( 2;11=)
TOTAL		360 <sup>22</sup>	

(% increases = on 1948 = 67%; on 1952 = 15%)

It was the release of the 1965 files for Harold Wilson's first full year as Prime Minister which triggered the idea of this exercise in my mind for, to carry on the percussive metaphor, there had, quite plainly, been an explosion of activity since the late 1950s. The tally of files was up 63% on Macmillan's 1958 figure, 87% on Churchill's 1952 accumulation and a staggering 173% on his Labour predecessor's score 17 years earlier. (See Table IV). Part of the inflation can be attributed to the Rhodesia crisis (34 of those Imperial/Commonwealth files dealt with it) and, given Wilson's delight in tinkering with the machinery of government and its minders, the Whitehall/Ministerial/Constitutional/Parliamentary item is understandably if unusually high.

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TABLE IV

PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE:  
PAPERS AND CORRESPONDENCE  
(INDIVIDUAL FILES).

HAROLD WILSON	1965	(1958)	(1952)	(1948)
1: Imperial/Commonwealth	117	(58;2)	(10;9)	(54;1)
2: Whitehall/Ministerial/ Constitutional/Parliamentary	110	(40;6)	(38;4)	(18;5)
3: Economic/Industrial/ Regulatory	102	(42;4)	(65;2)	(42;2)
4: Foreign Policy (excluding USA & Middle East)	93	(75;1)	(53;3)	(26;4)
5: Domestic Policy	52	(20;7)	(20;5=)	(14;6)
6: Foreign Policy (USA)	38	(14;8)	( 9;10)	(4;8=)
7: Defence	37	(41;5)	(66;1)	(39;3)
8: Trades Unions/Strikes/Pay	10	( 8;10)	( 2;11)	(2;11=)
9: Foreign Policy (Middle East)	9	(43;3)	(17;7)	(4;8=)
10: Monarchy	8	( 9;9)	(14;8)	( 4;8=)
11: Security/Intelligence	6	( 6;11)	(20;5=)	( 5;7)
12: Party Matters (Con 1; Lab 2)	3	(3;12)	( - )	(1;13)
13: Ireland (excluding NI)	1	( 1;13)	( - )	(2;11=)
TOTAL		586 <sup>23</sup>		

(% increases: on 1948 = 73%; on 1952 = 87%; on 1958 = 63%)

This is what I had in mind when in my fourth Gresham Lecture in this series I described Wilson as 'almost a natural generator of "overload"'<sup>24</sup> – a very high price to pay, I think, for his determination to turn No.10 from an alleged 'monastery' into a putative 'powerhouse'.<sup>25</sup>

Crude though these file-based comparisons are, they do, I think, amount to a new and useful indicator of "overload". To the best of my knowledge they have not been compiled here before nor does my friend Professor Richard Neustadt think there is anything comparable for the US Presidency in the postwar period.<sup>26</sup> Their value is demonstrated by the itch I have for the impossible – access to the files of successor prime ministers since 1965. For the period in which the archival treasure has still to reach the Public Record Office we are very much in the dark.

Wilson afforded one last beam of insight for the twilight of his last premiership, however. As befitted a former President of the Royal Statistical Society<sup>27</sup>, he published, in his The Governance of Britain, an analysis of his diary for the period 1 October to 31 December 1975. It reads as follows:

TABLE V

PATTERN OF PRIME MINISTERIAL BUSINESS, 1 OCTOBER - 31 DECEMBER 1975.

1:	Ministerial meetings (excluding Cabinet or Cabinet committees)	43
2:	Meetings with industry, prominent industrialists etc.	28
3:	Official meetings (unspecified)	27
4:	Cabinet committee	24
5:	Official lunches and dinners	20
6:	Ministerial speeches	17
7:	Visits within Britain	13
8=	Cabinet meetings	11
8=	Political meetings (no speech)	11
10	Political speeches	9
11=	Audiences of the Queen	8
11=	Receiving foreign VIPs	8
11=	TV or radio broadcasts (excluding party conference)	8
14:	Visits by heads of government	5
15:	Visits abroad	2
16=	Visits to Northern Ireland	1
16=	State visits	1 <sup>28</sup>

Rather plaintively Wilson added to that list: 'Christmas apart, I was not able to record a single private or social engagement.'<sup>29</sup>

Sadly, there is nothing comparable in Mrs Thatcher's The Downing Street Years. All we get is the following passage (though it's quite a revealing one):

'The hours at No.10 are long. I never minded this. There was an intensity about the job of being Prime Minister which made sleep seem a luxury. In any case, over the years I had trained myself to do with about four hours a night. The Private Office too would often be working till 11 o'clock at night. We were so few that there was no possibility of putting work on someone else's desk. This sort of atmosphere helps to produce a remarkably happy team, as well as a formidably efficient one. People are under great pressure, and there is no time for trivia. All the effort was to go into getting the work done.'<sup>30</sup>

'No time for trivia'. There's a phrase to savour. I was struck over a period of 13 years (which is the gap between the two dramatic and highly unusual insights into the most secret processes of 1980s policy-making – the Franks Report of 1982<sup>31</sup> and the Scott Report of 1996<sup>32</sup>) by just how little (especially in the case of arms and equipment to Iraq; less so the Falklands) reached prime ministerial level in No.10 at the time for all the attention they demanded and got from Mrs Thatcher ( in the case of the Falklands) and Mr Major (on arms to Iraq) at a later stage. I shall return in a moment to Mrs Thatcher's point about her slimline back-up in No.10.

First its another aspect for her premiership that I wish to dwell on (linking it to the width of material I have culled from the PREM 8, 11 and 13 series at the PRO) before moving on to what might be done to tone up the premiership for the twenty-first century. Constantly Mrs Thatcher would remind her ministerial colleagues that she, as Prime Minister, felt herself 'the guardian of the strategy' hence her habit of intervening early and often in ministerial discussions.<sup>33</sup> Guarding a government's overall strategy has been a key

function of all our postwar premiers whether they were overly intrusive in the Cabinet Room or not. It was – is – a function which falls into every PM's lap. No-one else can be expected to do it even if they are designated 'Deputy Prime Minister' with co-ordination and Cabinet committee functions as in the case of R.A. Butler in 1962-63<sup>34</sup> and even more so of Michael Heseltine in 1995.<sup>35</sup>

This requires premiers to be kept up to speed on a huge range of matters – issues which only they can, in the end, handle; issues of such a magnitude that they invoke questions of collective responsibility at their most intense; issues that could steal up on a government suddenly and, sometimes (I'm thinking of the Falklands again) in a manner that can threaten a premier's, even an administration's survival.

The federal nature of Whitehall demands a high degree of policy devolution from the centre but it has to be both a knowledgeable and an essentially sympathetic form of devolution. As Ferdinand Mount (a man with direct experience of No.10 life as the Head of Mrs Thatcher's Policy Unit in 1982-83) put it in his marvellously sensitive novel based on the life of Lord Aberdeen, 'George [as Prime Minister] encouraged and nudged and approved [Gladstone at the Treasury, Palmerston at the Home Office and Wood at the India Office]. These were not his fields, but he was happy to lean on the gate and watch them grow.'<sup>36</sup>

The PREM files for more modern times show, too, an intriguing and important linkage with the wider analysis of the centre of central government – the so-called 'core executive' approach – developed by British political scientists over the past decade. As one of its leading lights, Professor Rod Rhodes, has put it, it's time to get away from 'the textbook prime minister'<sup>37</sup> and into the wider realms of a premiership in the context of that 'core executive' which he describes as 'all those organisations and procedures which co-ordinate central government policies, and act as final arbiters of conflict between different parts of the government machine.'<sup>38</sup> An historian's trawl through the Prime Minister's Office files at any point in the postwar period



would illustrate just such linkages and processes in routine abundance though, as my observations on the Franks and Scott reports underlined, it would be wrong to think that all powerlines and every delicate issue find their way automatically into No.10.

This brings us to the matter of what should find its way into No.10, how should it be handled when it gets there and by whom? Immediately this raises the old question of the desirability or otherwise of a Prime Minister's Department – old in the sense that Lloyd George established a short-lived prototype with his Prime Minister's Secretariat of 1917-18<sup>39</sup> and every modern Prime Minister since Wilson Mark I at least has toyed privately with the possibility of establishing such a body only to reject it.<sup>40</sup> The idea only has to be raised to horrify most other ministers as well as the Cabinet Office, the institutional guardian of the collective approach. Immediately it suggests an imbalance at the centre, a disturbance of that concert of constitutional forces which, most of the time, restrains the potentially overmighty occupant at No.10. Sir Burke Trend, who as Cabinet Secretary always saw himself as the servant of the full Cabinet as well as the nearest thing to a permanent secretary a PM has, liked to remark whenever the idea refloated: 'By all means have a Prime Minister's Department provided it is always called the Cabinet Office.'<sup>41</sup>

The shadow of such a department, however, should not put into the shade other ideas for both human and procedural rejigging in No.10. The last 20 years have seen two profound and seemingly permanent ones – the bolting-on to the traditional Private Office of a Prime Ministers' Policy Unit since 1974 (which three PM's since Wilson have kept and refashioned for their own use<sup>42</sup>) and the development of an ever more powerful Press Office in tune with what Michael Foley has described as the media-driven 'leadership stretch' which really has opened up clear water between the Prime Minister and other ministers in terms of press attention.<sup>43</sup>

The last 20 years have also witnessed a growing sense that the centre, No.10 in particular, is too weak to carry the load it's required to bear under modern conditions. As a result of their combined experience in the Cabinet Office from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s Sir John Hunt, the former Cabinet Secretary, and Sir Kenneth Berrill, former Head of the Central Policy Review Staff, the fabled and still missed 'think tank', took to the lecture halls in retirement to highlight this theme.<sup>44</sup> They were followed in short order by Sir Douglas Wass, former Permanent Secretary to the Treasury in his 1983 Reith Lectures<sup>45</sup> and after a ten-year gap by Ferdinand Mount, ex-head of the Policy Unit.<sup>46</sup> The notion of a beefed-up No.10 has been taken up once more in recent months by the immensely knowledgeable Andrew Marr of The Independent<sup>47</sup> and in the recent days by Peter Mandelson, very much a Tony Blair confidant with a special brief to shadow and examine the Civil Service.<sup>48</sup>

Asking a historian, who has left a part of his youth at the Public Record Office while rummaging through those prime ministerial files and Cabinet Office papers over the past 20 years,<sup>49</sup> 'can premiers be efficient?' has, in many ways, the charmingly naive air of a recent leading article in the Jesuit journal, The Month, which inquired 'can politicians be holy?'<sup>50</sup> It is, however, a theme worth pursuing even by the relatively illusion-free when it comes to prime ministerial adequacy let alone perfectibility given the difficulties and the stresses they face under modern governing conditions. So, by the way rounding-off this year's Gresham series, I propose to review a selection of the various critiques and reform proposals on offer over the past 15 years before finishing up with a few suggestions of my own.

Berrill and Hunt were not the bureaucratic equivalents of John Mackintosh<sup>51</sup> and Dick Crossman.<sup>52</sup> They did not believe either that Britain had become a prime ministerially governed nation nor did they wish it to be. Essentially practical public servants rather than political philosophers or political scientists, they worried, in Hunt's words, 'how long can you go on applying sticking plasters' to the problem of the Prime Ministers burgeoning workload.<sup>53</sup> Though both were Cabinet Office men, they, like Ferdy Mount later,<sup>54</sup> knew full well that there were limits to what a thinly staffed

Cabinet Secretariat – whose primary role was servicing the Cabinet and its committees rather than briefing the premier – could be expected to provide.

Hunt put it very bluntly at the international conference in 1984 on advising rulers:

'Other present or former members of the Cabinet Office may disagree with me, but I think it is still run on a shoe-string...advice to the Prime Minister from the Cabinet Office is thin and the question is whether it is adequate. Personally, I do not think it is. I doubt whether prime ministers on the whole [and Hunt had served four: Heath; Wilson; Callaghan and Thatcher] have felt that it was adequate either.'<sup>55</sup>

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Ferdie Mount a decade later was equally critical of an unchanged scene:

'...the briefs circulated to members of Cabinet and the separate "handling brief" provided for the Prime Minister exhaled a studied neutrality; these briefs rehearse, in bland and unspecific form (partly, it must be said, for fear of leaks) the advantages and disadvantages of various courses of action. But the pros and cons will be listed without nuance, and, more damagingly, with little or no hard argument or information.'

Such briefs, Ferdie told a seminar of mine recently, show a 'lack of enthusiasm for any option unless it be for doing nothing very much.'<sup>56</sup> Douglas Wass picked up on a similar strategic gap when in his Reith Lectures he called for a system of well-briefed Cabinet 'review' committees.<sup>57</sup>

Very recently attention has returned to this particular aspect of what Hunt called the 'hole in the centre of our constitution.'<sup>58</sup> Last summer Andrew Marr suggested that 'the physical overload [endured by modern prime ministers] is partly due to the grotesque inadequacy of the Number Ten [as opposed to the Cabinet Office] machine, which is understaffed, poorly organised, and badly

resourced for the job it has to do' with the Prime Ministers' Policy Unit distracted from its 'forward-thinking strategic advice and pitfall-avoidance' functions because it has to struggle 'vainly with the daily and weekly agenda.' Though the word is that under its new head, Norman Blackwell, it has returned to more longer-spectrum issues.<sup>59</sup>

Peter Mandelson is the latest contributor to the debate about meeting a Prime Ministers' need for what John Hunt called earlier and deeper briefing<sup>60</sup> if his or her job, in Hunt's words once more, as 'guardian for the government's strategy as a whole', 'the person with the unique overview of all government activities' and leader of their party to boot is to be adequately fulfilled.<sup>61</sup> But before examining the Mandelson proposals for a future central Blair machine that were published last week, it might be useful to reprise the options for improvement drawn up by John Hunt (which reflected Ken Berrill's thinking, too) on the basis of how the Heath, Wilson, Callaghan and Thatcher Number 10s actually operated. There were four (to none of which John Hunt was strongly wedded.'<sup>62</sup>)

1: A full-blown Prime Ministers' Department.

2: A strengthened Cabinet Office.

3: A merger of an old-style Central Policy Review Staff with the No.10 Policy Unit to form a new body that would work for the Prime Minister rather than the Cabinet as whole.

4: An enhanced Prime Minister's Office with more advisers of the kind Mrs Thatcher acquired when first Sir Anthony Parsons and later Sir Percy Cradock (ex-diplomats both) were brought in to help her with foreign affairs.<sup>63</sup>

The Mandelson hybrid is rather different with more politics in it (which is not surprising given his formation compared to Hunt's).

He identifies three essentials for Mr Blair if he is to be the transforming, two-term (at least) premier of turn-of-the-century Britain.

'1: He has to get personal control of the central government machine and drive it hard, in the knowledge that if the government does not run the machine the machine will run the government.

2: At the same time, he needs to use all his Ministers - and their civil servants and advisers to maximum effect in their departments...

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3: He must sustain a vision of what the government is aiming for ...<sup>64</sup>

There follows some qualified words of praise for Mrs Thatcher's 'statecraft'.<sup>65</sup>

How does this overall Mandelsonian strategy work through into the mechanics of the centre?

1: More and different advice, including political advice, available in No.10. The political advice to come from a pair of politicians; 'principal political adviser' (a ministerial colleague, a Whitelaw kind of figure) and a more junior, lower profile political manager (who would not be a minister). A 'beefed-up' Policy Unit would complete the picture: 'Such a lean and focused unit is probably preferable to the reintroduction of...the Central Policy Review Staff...'<sup>66</sup>

2: A more 'proactive' Cabinet Office. 'More akin to a Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, charged with actively carrying forward the cross-departmental policies [Mandelson likes Michael Richard's phrase about the 'wicked issues' that transcend individual Ministers and often get lost between them<sup>67</sup>] agreed by the Cabinet with the Cabinet Secretary acting more in future like a policy-making permanent secretary than as a business manager and minute-taker.'<sup>68</sup>

3: A reshaped and beefed-up Treasury which will reflect a more collective and longer-term approach to economic policy-making and the allocation of resources.<sup>69</sup>

4: A system of 'superministers' chairing key Cabinet committees covering key areas of the government's strategy and serviced by the 'revamped Cabinet Office'.<sup>70</sup>

5: A revitalised rather than a purged Civil Service, freed from the 'colonisation' (rather than the alleged 'politicisation') of the Conservative years since 1979, giving fearlessly of its best to ministers who would also be helped by newly recruited specialists working with not against, the permanent staff. (With special advisers in the private office rather than French style cabinets for Cabinet Ministers.<sup>71</sup>)

6: The Prime Minister's Efficiency Unit to be retained.<sup>72</sup>

Most of the Mandelson analysis and prescription strikes me as sensible and workable including even the idea of Strategic Cabinet Committees chaired by 'Superministers'. It is, after all, a suggestion very close to the idea of an inner cabinet consisting of the PM and strategic cabinet committee chairs which I suggested in my Gresham Series last year.<sup>73</sup>

And it is rightly desirable that in the daily flow and treatment of government business the deeper questions are blended with immediate issues. For as Richard Wilding, Secretary of the Fulton Committee on the Civil Service a generation ago, has put it: 'The long-term grows out of the day-to-day.'<sup>74</sup>

But to my mind there is one serious omission in the Mandelson schema. His beefed up Cabinet Office needs the equivalent for economic and domestic policy of the Cabinet Office's existing Joint Intelligence Organisation, the key feeder of the Overseas and Defence Policy Cabinet Committee. This is why I still argue for a revived CPRS merged with the Efficiency Unit (linking policy-making with implementation is always desirable) serving the Cabinet as a whole, not just the PM, while filling that analytical-cum-briefing gap for both Cabinet and premier that Berrill, Hunt, Mount, Marr and Mandelson have decried.

The other reason for this approach, in Labour's case, is presentational and political. Tony Blair strikes many (including some members of his Shadow Cabinet<sup>75</sup>) as likely to head firmly for the prime ministerial rather than the collegial end of the spectrum of premiership types. If he does so, there are dangers that for all his good intentions, there could be a perceived down grading of Cabinet government with its inevitable concomitant, the accumulation of Cabinet resentment that bursts out at moments of policy setback and personal danger to the PM. This is a key lesson of the Thatcher Years – the great weakness in her 'statecraft' – that must not be overlooked ignored.

By all means let us look to a refashioned premiership for the next century, with a re-skilling and a re-peopling of the job's support systems. But the Cabinet, too – the key collegial mechanism – must be enabled to raise its collective game. Between it, the analysis of 16 years – from Berrill and Hunt to Marr and Mandelson – suggests that these two desirable objectives can be reconciled. It's vital that they should be. Because, with the occasional exceptions (Lloyd George in 1916; perhaps Ted Heath in 1970) the system and its operators have always been at least one step behind the new demands and realities placed upon government-at-the-top by Harold Macmillan's celebrated 'events'<sup>76</sup> and, in Victor Rothschild's favourite phrase from Aldous Huxley, by the 'orgies' which 'punctuate' the 'routine' of policy-making and administration.<sup>77</sup> And every day spent getting the 'hardware' and 'software'<sup>78</sup> of the twenty first century state right now, could save weeks, months and perhaps years of friction and inefficiency as the century turns.

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RHETORIC LECTURES 1995-96.

LECTURE SIX

ENDNOTES.

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22. PRO, PREM 11/2208-2581.
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24. 'Centre Forward, Centre Half: Herald Wilson, 1964-70', 'Premiership' Lecture Four delivered at Gresham College on 6 February 1996.
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55. Hunt, 'The United Kingdom', p.69.

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78. These metaphors are Lord Bancroft's. See Hennessy, The Hidden Wiring, p.26.

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