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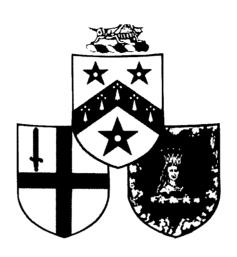
PREMIERSHIP

Lecture 1

'ORGANISED BY HISTORY':
THE OFFICE OF PRIME MINISTER

by

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'PREMIERSHIP'.

PETER HENNESSY, GRESHAM PROFESSOR OF RHETORIC.

LECTURE ONE:

'ORGANISED BY HISTORY': THE OFFICE OF PRIME MINISTER.

My title today comes courtesy of the late Lord Wilson of Rievaulx, a great connoisseur of the office he held between October 1964 and June 1970, March 1974 and April 1976. So much did he cherish its mechanics and its past that he devoted to them a sizeable chunk of the book on The Governance of Britain[1] which he sat down to write almost the moment he left No.10 Downing Street.

It was a much better volume than he was given credit for at the time when his stock amongst both the political and the commentating classes was low — so low that I remember a civil servant who was well disposed towards him saying to me 'you know, the trouble with Harold was that he treated being prime minister as if he were playing a game of Space Invaders, he went for the first blip on the screen regardless of whether it was important or not.'[2]

Yet The Governance of Britain was pure Wilson — steeped in the past,[3] dismissive of what he saw as arid academic debates about prime ministerial versus Cabinet government[4] and brimming with statistics about his workload as premier.[5] This wasn't Wilson the Downing Street player of Space Invaders, it was Harold the King's Scout, the eternal member of the 3rd Colne Valley Milnsbridge Baptist Scouts.[6] He had spent his whole life collecting the equivalent of scout badges — at Oxford, in the wartime Civil Service, the Attlee Governments and the doldrums years in Opposition before he became Leader of the Labour Party in 1963. Finally, in 1964, he had acquired the biggest badge of all to pin to that laden sleeve — the premiership — and, until his last illness, he always enjoyed communicating the pleasures its possession brought him not least in his own retirement study of the job and its holders, A Prime Minister on Prime Ministers.[7]

For Wilson much of the glory of the premiership lay in its antiquity. Insofar as his study of <u>The Governance of Britain</u> concentrated, Wilson wrote,

> 'on the prime ministerial role in Cabinet government it describes the day-to-day working of a calling that must be one of the most exciting and certainly one of the best organized — organized by history — in the democratic world: Britain's prime ministership'.[8]

And it's true that everyone who steps through that famous Downing Street door for the first time as Prime Minister must to some extent be thrilled as Churchill was on 10 May 1940 when after receiving the King's commission to form a wartime Coalition government he 'felt as if I were walking with destiny.'[9]

Yet the emergence of that destiny-laden office which fell into Churchill's hands during the extreme national emergency of the spring of 1940 was anything but pre-destined by history, to adapt Harold Wilson. What Edward Thompson once called 'the enormous condescension of posterity'[10] places Churchill 43rd in the line of succession from Sir Robert Walpole,[11] yet the man upon whom history has lain the mantle of Britain's first Prime Minister spent his entire career denying he was any such thing.[12]

Sir Jack Plumb, in his celebrated Eighteenth Century volume in 'The Pelican History of England' rightly warned generation after generation of history students from 1950 onwards against any over precise or schematic interpretations of the waning of royal power at the expense of a 'Cabinet' led by a 'Prime Minister' after Walpole became First Lord of the Treasury in 1721. 'Walpole and George II', Plumb wrote,

> 'encouraged the development of a small inner cabinet, consisting of the [two] secretaries [of state, for the Northern and Southern Departments] the Lord Chancellor, Lord Privy Seal, Lord President of the Council, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. This body met informally: it had access to all secret papers and it was here that the real decisions on policy were taken.

'It was quickly realised that if a minister belonging to this inner circle disagreed with his colleagues on a vital issue he had no alternative but to resign, an attitude which gave rise later to the idea of the collective responsibility of the cabinet. This small inner or efficient cabinet was the true ancestor of the modern cabinet, but still a remote one, and it is extremely misleading to try to impose modern, or nineteenth-century, constitutional ideas on the eighteenth century...

'In this inner ring of ministers there was frequently one who by common consent was the foremost, whose word carried the most weight and who acted as the principal vehicle in their relations with the King. Sometimes he was called the Prime Minister, but usually only by his enemies and as a term of mild abuse. He was still very much the King's servant.'[13]

Despite Plumb's strictures, Walpole's portrait continues to hang on the wall behind the Prime Minister's seat in the Cabinet Room[14] as the de facto founding father of the breed. And despite the fact that, as William Rees-Mogg put it this year, 'However skilful the British Prime Minister may be, he can not have the world impact of a Pitt, a Disraeli, a Gladstone, a Lloyd George or a Churchill,'[15] that seat beneath that portrait in that room remains the glittering prize for which the politically ambitious strive in Britain — not a European Commissionership, nor an Executive Directorship of the International Monetary Fund nor the Secretary Generalship of the United Nations.

So how did a notion which started its life here as a term of abuse hurled by Jonathan Swift at Robert Harley during the reign of Queen Anne,[16] come to be the ultimate spur to British political fame? It is best seen as one among a number of linked elements which sprang out of and enhanced still further the growth of political stability first in England and Wales, then after the Act of Union of 1707, in Britain as a whole following the upheavals of 1688-89.

The Bill of Rights had, without doubt, clipped the prerogatives of the monarchy and forged powerful new weapons for Parliament, both legislative and financial,[17] but it had by no means settled the real power flows in late seventeenth century England. As Glyn Williams put it, the new 'system was a fragile thing. It was neither party government nor non-party government; while not royal government it was not cabinet government in any collective sense either. It contained a number of able men...but none of them had the full confidence of the King...'[18]

For a few brief years at the beginning of the eighteenth century it even looked as if the country might consciously separate the powers of the executive and the legislature. The Act of Settlement of 1701 laid down that once Queen Anne was dead, no placeman of the monarch (ie. a Minister in modern parlance) could be an MP and that every piece of advice given to the monarch by the Privy Council should be made known to the House of Commons.[19] Had this part of the Act not been repealed in 1705 before it could be implemented, the tectonic constitutional shift, roughly delineated by the eighteenth century, from a monarchical system of government to one based upon collective Cabinet government, albeit a collective led by a leading 'First' or 'Prime' Minister, would not have occurred any more than the fusion of the executive and the legislative branches of government which Bagehot rightly saw in the mid-nineteenth century as the singular, 'efficient' secret of the British way of governance.[20]

Walpole's significance is that, buttressed by the stability of more effective departmental structures and fiscal arrangements in Whitehall,[21] he became the key figure in whose person these potentially conflicting power flows and practices were combined and, thanks to his immense political skills, moderated. The whole enterprise was lubricated by that potent mixture of money and patronage both of which passed through Walpole's hands as First Lord of the Treasury. As his biographer, Brian Hill put it:

> 'British government in Walpole's time, and for most of the eighteenth century, was in a process of transition from the dominant monarchy of the Stuart era to the Cabinet government of the nineteenth century. In Anne's reign there was a Cabinet which at first sight seems recognisably modern... Despite

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appearances, however, there was not yet full collective responsibility, so that ministers often assumed a semi-independent role...Yet Walpole's control was never monolithic, being often challenged by parliamentary opposition and finally overthrown by the straightforward and constitutional means of defeat in the House of Commons. He had to please two masters, Parliament and the King, and the loss of support from either could have destroyed him politically at anytime.'[22]

A modern prime minister would recognise elements of present-day reality in this, for in the Walpole years, the enduring strands of DNA were spun which continue to this day to determine the strength and scope, as well as the vulnerabilities of the job. It is interesting, too, that none of the 51 successors to Walpole has yet surpassed his record of 21 years in office.

But as in any living organism, there is more than one strand of DNA in action. And the growth of the office of Prime Minster — its power and its functions — has to be seen in the context of other developments which sometimes singly, often in combination, have determined the political ecology of that potent little cluster of power at the poky end of Downing Street. Over the grand sweep from Walpole to Major, one has to look at least six flows of power or influence and the contexts in which they have fluctuated. They are these:

**TABLE 1.   DEVELOPMENTS IN THE POWER AND FUNCTIONS OF THE
BRITISH PRIME MINISTERSHIP: CONFLUENT STREAMS OF
CHANGE.**

POWERS OF THE MONARCH

POWERS OF THE CABINET

POWERS OF THE PRIME MINISTER

POWERS OF PARLIAMENT

POWERS OF THE ELECTORATE

POWERS OF THE MEDIA/PUBLIC
OPINION

All shifting and reacting with each
other in the context of wider political,
economic and social change, to
specific events (contingencies, e.g.
war) and to Britain's place in the
world.

Insofar as it is possible to freeze-frame moments of transition involving such a set of shifting variables — for power is a relative concept — let me give you an example from the late nineteenth century. Monarchs had ceased to be able after 1841 to exert any real sway over the choice of ministers after a general election. By the end of her reign, Victoria would still badger her premiers, Gladstone especially, about church or military appointments and, occasionally, ministerial ones as well, but the personal royal prerogatives were, in real terms, already reduced to dissolving parliaments and appointing prime ministers. The important shifts were these — power to make or unmake administrations was moving out of the House of Commons to the electorate, inside the chamber ever tougher whipping and tautened parliamentary procedure was reducing the behaviourial scope of the individual member; and the power to initiate legislation was moving steadily away from Parliament and into the executive.

Inside the Cabinet Room, the Prime Minister was an ever more important figure, partly for functional and procedural reasons which I'll come to later, but also because of the increasing importance of party leaders due to the personalisation of British politics which grew with changes in the nature of electoral contests, party organisation and the media. At the same time, these shifting relationships took place against the background of a changing political agenda due to the rise of labour (with a small 'l') at home and international competition (both in terms of trade and political influence) abroad.

This, however, is to jump several guns of important percussive effect. Come back with me now to those crucial shaping influences which themselves had determined what Victoria, Peel, Gladstone or Disraeli could do and how. It is best to see the eighteenth century once more in fluid terms as a series of interrelated flows that together changed the nature of government from that of a monarchical chief executive dominating his 'Cabinet Council' to that of a collective executive led by a sometimes dominant figure, a Prime Minster, who nonetheless fell short of a chief executive himself[23] (And the great debate of recent times is whether or not in the second half of the twentieth century Britain has seen a reversal of that process through the supersession of the collective executive of the Cabinet by the 'elected monarch'[24] of the Prime Minister).

By the end of the eighteenth century a consensus was forming among those who had to deal with the stresses of first ministership, that the system could not cope without such a designated figure. The hapless Lord North, for example, begged George III to allow him to resign because 'in critical times, it is necessary that there should be one directing Minister, who should plan the whole of the operation of government and control all the other departments of administration...'[25] This, poor North confessed, he could not do. The younger Pitt put it less whingeingly and more tersely when he said 'there should be an avowed and real Minister, possessing the chief weight in the [Cabinet] Council, and the principal place in the confidence of the 'King'.[26]

Pitt, for me, has some claim to be the first modern premier (certainly the first real one since Walpole) and part of the evidence for this is the folk-memory of that most peculiar of trade unions — the Right Honourable Society of Ex-Premiers — of which in retirement Harold Wilson became a kind of house historian. 'If Walpole was the creator of the office of Prime Minister', Wilson wrote in A Prime Minister on Prime Ministers,

> 'Pitt is rightly descried by historians as the first to hold the office in a sense in which it could be recognised today. While he could still be summarily dismissed by the King, even though enjoying the confidence of Parliament, he was, in the language of those days, the "efficient" head of his Cabinet. Subject to some grumbles and queries by the King, its members were chosen by Pitt, and where necessary dismissed at his request. More than that, Pitt's administrations were more coherent than any of his predecessors, and the policies he enjoined on them and which they accepted were the policies of them all, and were collectively recommended to Parliament...

> 'Peel...described himself as a disciple of Pitt, and Peel himself has generally been regarded as the first "modern" Prime Minister, in the sense that his premiership more closely resembles that of a Prime Minister of the 1930s or 1950s than that of Walpole, whose term of office ended a century before Peel's only real administration began.'[27]

Wilson rather overdoes some points (for example, not till Balfour's premiership at the beginning of this century could a Prime Minister be absolutely certain of his power to hire and fire other ministers;[28] even Gladstone was not[29]).

But Wilson's disquisition on the DNA trail of premiership does hold good in the sense that Gladstone modelled himself consciously as Peel[30] and Rosebery, another member of the Honourable Society of Ex-Premiers, described Peel as 'the model of all Prime Ministers.'[31] Anthony King caught the 'importance of the cumulative shaping effect of past premiers when he suggested that: 'The person who walks for the first time through the door of Number 10 as prime minister does not create or re-create the prime ministership: the job, to a considerable extent, already exists.'[32]

We should not be surprised by this. Not only does it stem from the sense of the past that most prime ministers possess, it has to do with there being no official job description for the premiership let alone any statute which delineates his or her functions or powers.[33] (There is no reason to believe that any of the 10 Prime Ministers since World War II ever saw the one stab at this which was made in the Cabinet Office, the Treasury and No.10 between 1947 and 1949[34]).

There are two ways of depicting the development of this extraordinary creation of British history. The standard one is to trace it in terms of the macro-changes in the political system — the growth of stability in the first half of the eighteenth century, the executive exigencies created by war in the second half of that same century, the fuses lit by the 1832 Reform Act and exploded by its successor in 1867 in terms of the growth of mass parties 'out of doors', as Mr Gladstone would have said, beyond Parliament and the ever tighter discipline exerted on voting patterns inside the commons, the changing methods of political communication which went with those shifts, and so on. Plus the huge accelerating effect on all of these factors which was the cumulative effect of total war, the growth of the state and the burgeoning technologies of new mass media in the first half of the twentieth century.

Today, I want to tackle this prime ministerial phenomenon from a different angle, a micro but revealing approach which helps illustrate the accumulation of function and relative power over the past 200 years while recognising all the time that there is nothing either linear or inevitable about such accretions. This, in a way, has been the approach of the members of the Honourable Society themselves — 'Can I do this? Doesn't Balfour or Gladstone or Lloyd George provide me with the precedent to stymie those who say I am pushing the boundaries of the premiership beyond the constitutional?' That sort of thing.

Some modern-day functions were attached to the office from the start in Walpole's time — most notably the disposal of the secret vote, his inheritance from a long line of Crown servants beginning with Sir Francis Walsingham in Elizabeth I's time. As Christopher Andrew has explained:

> 'From the Restoration there was a Secret Service Fund and, from 1797, an annual Secret Service vote in parliament which continues to this day. But the pre-Victorian Secret Service Fund did not provide for an established Secret Service. It was used instead to finance British propaganda on the Continent, an assortment of part-time informants, a variety of secret operations by freelance agents, and an elaborate system of political and diplomatic bribery. During Walpole's twenty-one years as Britain's first prime minister...the Secret Fund was probably used more for political bribes at home than for diplomatic bribes abroad.'[35]

Overseeing the secret world, along with chairing the Cabinet, dealing with the monarch and managing Parliament, we can identify as the core functions of the prototypical premiership.

We need, I think, to move on another 60 years to find the next rash of historical accretions that begin to develop a kind of doctrine of prime ministerial indispensability and they came in a cluster in the early 1780s and in spurts thereafter. Let me, for the sake of brevity, itemise them starting with the Prime Minister becoming sole chairman of the Cabinet in the 1780s and finishing with Churchill establishing the primacy of the premier over nuclear weapons policy in the 1940s.

1: 1781. Last appearance of a monarch (George III) at the larger Cabinet Council (the so called 'Nominal Cabinet'[36]).

2: 1782-83. Reluctant acceptance by the Monarch that virtually all members of the smaller or 'Efficient Cabinet' should change with the appointment of a new Prime Minister.[37], a change which added substantially to the collective nature of Cabinet government. The fall of Lord North's Ministry in 1782 is also treated as a constitutional benchmark as it demonstrated the difficulty of a Monarch sustaining a government that had lost the confidence of the House of Commons.[38]

3: The Napoleonic Wars at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. War was added to money (never forget the importance of the Prime Minister as First Lord of the Treasury; Mrs Thatcher did not[39]) as a great enhancer of the relative power of the Prime Minster.[40] George III simply could not cope with the executive demands of war though it would probably be an exaggeration to see the younger Pitt as presiding over the first of a long line of 'war cabinets'. As late as the Crimea, Lord John Russell could describe the Cabinet as 'a cumbrous and unwieldy instrument'.[41] In fact, it was worse than that. One historian of that war has claimed that a majority of the Cabinet were asleep during the meeting when it was decided to take Sebastopol[42] (a problem that afflicted the Cabinet very frequently when it was standard practice to meet over dinner[43]). Not until the Hartington Commission of 1889 were any serious steps taken to plan for a substantial reshaping of government in time of war.[44] Yet so poorly did Whitehall adapt to the demands of the Boer War that the Prime Minister, the Marquess of Salisbury, was moved to admit to the

House of Lords in 1900 that he did 'not believe in the perfection of the British Constitution as an instrument for war.'[45] Not until the creation of the Committee of Imperial Defence by his nephew, Balfour in 1903 did matters seriously improve.[46]

4: During the same period of what one might call both prime ministerial and Cabinet consolidation in the late eighteenth century, Pitt demonstrated the indispensability of collective responsibility by persuading the King to dismiss Thurlow after the Lord Chancellor had criticised Pitt's Sinking Fund in the House of Lords in 1792.[47] (Though not till 1801, when Addington tackled another troublesome ex-Lord Chancellor, Lord Loughborough, was it established that former Cabinet ministers could not simply turn up at Cabinet meetings.[48])

5: That great prime ministerial device for managing both issues and ministers - the Cabinet committee — dates from 1831 when Grey asked Durham to 'take our Reform Bill in hand' by proposing 'the outline of a measure...large enough to satisfy public opinion and to afford some ground of resistance to further innovation, yet so based on property, and on existing franchises and territorial divisions, as to run no risk of overthrowing the [existing] form of government.'[49] This Committee, the prototype of a hugely important instrument of modern governance, met regularly at Durham's house in Cleveland Row.[50]

6: In 1835 Peel established the convention (it is no more than that) whereby ministers can only be recruited from either the House of Commons or the House of Lords, a move which reduced the pool of talent available for service in the Cabinet Room while tautening the bonds of prime ministerial patronage in the Palace of Westminster. (Peel wrote in January 1835: 'The holding of a seat in the Cabinet by a responsible adviser of the Crown — that adviser being neither in the House of Lords nor Commons, is, I fear, extremely unusual if not unprecedented in modern times.' The only recent precedent was Vesey Fitzgerald who carried on as President of the Board of Trade until March 1929 after losing the famous Clare by-election in June 1828[51]).

7: In 1861 Gladstone, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, began the practice of bundling together a whole range of tax and spending issues into a single Finance Bill.[52] By tradition the Cabinet is only given a Budget's details on the morning of the speech's delivery. Up to that point, only the Chancellor and the PM are fully apprised and, to greater and lesser degrees, work in tandem on its preparation[53] (Palmerston, the first premier to benefit from this stretched, or enhanced, Budget was, ironically far from happy with Gladstone's position on the issue which led to it — the controversy over the abolition of duties on paper, the famous 'taxes on knowledge'.[54]

8: Once Prime Minister himself, Gladstone enormously increased the power of the premier by simply ending in 1870 the right of any Cabinet Minister to call a Cabinet meeting if they had an important item of departmental business requiring collective discussion.[55] To this day only a Prime Minister can summon a Cabinet meeting.

9: Summitry has become an increasingly frequent prime ministerial activity. Though the phrase is of relatively recent vintage (it was invented by Churchill during the 1950 general election[56]), I would date its first modern form from the Congress of Berlin in 1878. When Bismarck fixed the time and place in June that year 'there could be no question', Robert Blake wrote, 'who would represent England. When it had been merely a matter of a conference the Cabinet had selected Lord Lyons, but at a full-scale congress attended by the imperial chancellors of the Northern Courts Disraeli and Salisbury [the Foreign Secretary] were bound to be the English plenipotentiaries.'[57]

10: Prime Ministers Questions in the House of Commons in their regular, beargarden-like modern form date only from 1961. But their earliest appearance as a recognisable phenomenon, though are far removed from our current televised trial-by-soundbite, took place in 1881 when 'Questions to the PM were grouped at the end of the day's list. In 1904 they were grouped, as the instructions of the Speaker, from Question 51 onwards. This was later amended to number 45' where they remained until 1960.[58]

11. Top appointments to the civil, diplomatic and armed services are very much a part of a modern prime ministers patronage portfolio. But not until the final showdown over the removal of her cousin, the Duke of Cambridge, as Commander-in-Chief-of the Army in 1895 (a very vexatious matter for Rosebery and his Secretary for War, Campbell-Bannerman) did Queen Victoria's sway in such matters publicly diminish. Though the great lady maintained until her dying day in 1901 that her prerogatives remained intact in this area.[59]

12: The absolute right of a premier to remove ministers came even later during A.J.Balfour's autumn crisis in 1903 over tariffs. As John Mackintosh put it: 'The most clear-cut demonstration of self-confidence on the part of a Prime Minister was when Balfour decided it was better to shed the free traders, Balfour of Burleigh, Lord Hamilton and Ritchie, faced them in the Cabinet and accepted their resignations without disclosing that he had Joseph Chamberlain's resignation in his pocket.'[60]

13: It was another Balfourian innovation, the Committee of Imperial Defence also in late 1903, which established in Anthony Eden's words, that 'Defence is very much a Prime Minister's special subject.'[61] As John Ehrman noted, 'It is...no accident that the Committee of Imperial Defence should be peculiarly Balfour's monument. He was himself well aware of its dependence upon him; he took care to be present at every one of the meetings held during his premiership,' and it was the main reason why he stayed in office during the fractious year of 1905 as he and the CID were deeply involved with the Anglo-Japanese Treaty.[62]

14: A spin-off from war gave the British Prime Minister another 'special' function, that of requesting the Monarch for a dissolution of Parliament triggering thereby a general election. This convention was established in the peculiar and complicated political circumstances of the Lloyd George Coalition ahead of the 'Coupon' election of 1918.[63] Though some premiers consult the full Cabinet, as was standard practice pre-Lloyd George,[64] ahead of such a request, others just an inner group,[65] the final decision is a premier's alone.

15: At about the same time as LG was siphoning the power of decision about the timing of elections away from the Cabinet, he was extending the Cabinet's collective nature down the decision-taking structure by creating the first permanent, standing committee of the Cabinet in the shape of the Home Affairs Committee in July 1918 which has existed continuously to this day in various mutations.[66] (Technically the first standing group was the Economic Defence and Development Committee created in June 1918 but this did not turn out to be permanent[67]).

16: For all the accretions of functions and powers into what Campbell-Bannerman called 'this rotten old barrack of a house',[68] No.10 has remained a relatively slim machine certainly compared to the apparatus available to most heads of governments.[69] It was not until 1928, however, when Sir Robert Vansittart became Principal Private Secretary to Baldwin, that the career Civil Service fully captured the Prime Minister's Private Office with the departure of Sir Ronald Waterhouse (who, in fact, as George Jones has pointed out 'was the last of the old style personal and political appointees, and the first of the new style civil servants' as he stayed on during the first ever Labour premiership under Ramsay MacDonald in 1924.[70]).

17: Such changes, of course, took place away from the gaze of a public then as now less than thrilled by the finer points of bureaucratics. But it was in Baldwin's time, too, that a very public development occurred which thrust party leaders, and premiers in particular, into the public eye with a novelty not experienced since Gladstone's Midlothian Campaign of 1879-80.[71] The initial instrument of a transformation which continues to this day (and forms the crucial component in what Michael Foley has called 'leadership stretch'[72]) was the radio, or the 'wireless' as they called it then. And if I had to date the beginnings of the mediafication of the British premiership it would be 16 October 1924 when Baldwin delivered his first broadcast in the general election campaign of that year. To widespread surprise, he proved a natural at the 'fireside chat' approach when, as his biographer G.M. Young put it, 'his diffidence dropped away...[and]...a note of authority came into his voice...'[73]

a capacity he utilised to great effect during the General Strike of 1926.[74] It was Baldwin's successor, MacDonald, however, who rejigged the internal workings of No.10 to enable it to cope with new media realities. In 1931 he appointed George Steward the first Downing Street press secretary. Almost immediately Steward arranged fixed times for briefing the Westminster lobby correspondents inside No.10, converting them thereby, in the disapproving words of James Margach, from 'old style competitive "outsiders"...into a fraternity of organised "insiders"'[75]

18: Of all the changes in the powers, responsibilities and reach of the British Prime Minister away from the arc light of publicity, the development of atomic weapons has been the most awesome and the most secret. Churchill kept knowledge of the bomb for over five years to the tiniest circle of advisers and colleagues. He simply did not think it a subject fit for the Service Ministers let alone the full Cabinet. (In March 1944, Sir John Anderson, in effect the 'Minister for the bomb', as Martin Gilbert records, 'suggested to Churchill that the time had come to give "full information" about "Tube Alloys" – the atom bomb research programme – to the three Service Ministers and to the War Cabinet. Churchill minuted, however, " I do not agree", asking in a note in the margin of Anderson's request: "What can they do about it?" Anderson, as Lord Cherwell later wrote to Churchill, "was perturbed by your decision," but as a result of it the atomic bomb "was never discussed at Cabinet or in the Defence Committee" at any time before the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki a year and a half later.'[76]) Churchill took the decision to give British consent to the use of the weapons on Japan, as required by the Quebec Agreement of 1943, on 4 July 1945 without consulting the War Cabinet.[77] For over 55 years the decision about who shall be consulted on nuclear weapons policy and in which forum has been an intensely prime ministerial one.[78]

This extraordinary progression, usually scarcely noticed at the time, from 1721 to 1945 represents a huge accumulation of functions, procedures and sheer power waiting to be handed over by Mr Churchill to Mr Attlee on the evening of 26 July 1945 after the electorate had inflicted one of what David Butler calls its 'civilised evictions'[79] on the old warrior. But none of the functions I have described is statutory (or was in 1945, to be more accurate[80]). There was very little a Prime Minister <u>had</u> to do and there are some scholars, like Vernon Bogdanor, who continue to raise the question 'is the Prime Minister really necessary?'[81] The job, as Asquith said, is very much what its holders make of it. And to examine that you have to look at how real-life Prime Ministers actually operated which is what we will do for some, though not all, during the postwar period beginning, next time, with Clement Attlee, the 'mouse'[82] that stayed.

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LECTURE ONE,
ENDNOTES.

1. Harold Wilson, The Governance of Britain, (Weidenfeld and Michael Joseph, 1976).

2. Private Information.

3. Wilson, The Governance of Britain, pp.12-20.

4. Ibid, pp.1-11.

5. Ibid, pp.x-xi.

6. Ben Pimlott, Harold Wilson, HarperCollins, 1992, pp.11-12. 'As Labour Leader', Pimlott wrote, Wilson 'liked to equate the Scouting Code with his brand of socialism...'

7.I remember sensing this when, as a young journalist on The Times, I called on him in No. 10 a few weeks before his surprise resignation in 1976. I went to see him as part of preparing an article on the Cabinet Office. I almost couldn't get away. Each time I suggested he had been very kind to see me and that I knew how busy he was he would bid me to stay as it was so interesting to him. I've every reason to believe it was as he quoted the resulting article in The Governance of Britain. Conversation with Harold Wilson, 1 March 1976: Peter Hennessy, 'A Magnificent Piece of Powerful Bureaucratic Machinery', The Times, 8 March 1976; Wilson, The Governance of Britain, p.63 fn; see also Harold Wilson, A Prime Minister on Prime Ministers, (Weidenfeld, 1977).

8. Wilson, The Governance of Britain, p.x.

9. Winston S. Churchill, The Second World War, Vol 2, The Twilight War, (Cassell, 1964), pp.238-9.

10. See E.J. Hobsbawm, 'Obituary: E.P. Thompson,' The Independent, 30 August 1993.

11. Robert Blake, The Office of Prime Minister, (British Academy/OUP, 1975), pp.70-3.

12. B.W.Hill, Sir Robert Walpole: 'Sole and Prime Minister', (Hamish Hamilton, 1989), pp.1-5, 206-7.

13. J.H. Plumb, England in the Eighteenth Century (1714-1815), Pelican, 1966 edn), pp.49-50.

14. Christopher Jones, No.10 Downing Street: The Story of a House, (BBC, 1985), p.38.

15. William Rees-Mogg, 'When Parliament becomes a bore', The Times, 31 July 1995.

16. Swift was borrowing a term already in common use in France. See Donald Shell and Richard Hodder-Williams (eds), Churchill to Major: The British Prime Ministership since 1945, (Hurst, 1995), p.3 and Marcel Sibert, Etude sur le Premier Ministre en Angleterre (Rousseau 1909), p.37. Harold Wilson claims that the epithet of 'prime minister' was first used in the 1670's against Danby in Charles II's time, Wilson, A Prime Minister on Prime Ministers, p.8.

17. For the Bill of Rights 1689 see W.C. Costin and J. Steven Watson (eds), The Law and Working of the Constitution: Documents 1660-1914, Vol. 1. 1660-1783, (Adam and Charles Black, 1952), pp.67-74.

18. Glyn Williams and John Ramsden, Ruling Britannia: A Political History of Britain 1688-1988, (Longman, 1990), p.20.

19. Ibid, pp.29-30; Betty Kemp. King and Commons, 1660-1832 (Macmillan, 1957), pp.118-9; for the Act of Settlement see Costin and Watson, The Law and Working of the Constitution, Vol II, pp.92-96.

20. Walter Bagehot, The English Constitution, first published 1867 (Fontana edition, 1963), p.65.

21. J.H.Plumb, The Growth of Political Stability in England 1675-1725, (Macmillan, 1967), pp.112-114.

22. Hill, Sir Robert Walpole, pp.3-4.

23. The former Secretary of the Cabinet, Lord Hunt of Tanworth, has been especially eloquent on the significance of the replacement of a single chief executive by a collective executive. See Edmund Dell and Lord Hunt of Tanworth, 'The Failings of Cabinet Government in Mid to Late 1970s', Contemporary Record, Vol.8, No.3, Winter 1994, p.466.

24. F.W.G. Benemy used this title for his 1965 study of prime ministerial power. F.W.G. Benemy, The Elected Monarch: The Development of the Power of the Prime Minister, (Harrap, 1965).

25. Kemp. King and Commons 1660-1832, p.126.

26. Ibid.

27. Wilson, A Prime Minister on Prime Ministers, p.20.

28. Carter, The Office of Prime Minister, pp.224-5.

29. The Carlingford case is the one usually cited to illustrate the inability of even Mr Gladstone's 'imperious vitality' (Sir Algernon West, Recollections 1832 to 1886, Nelson, 1899, p.285) to remove unwanted ministers from the Cabinet. 'Early in 1884' writes Robert Blake, 'Gladstone wanted to remove Lord Carlingford, the Lord Privy Seal, in order to make a place for Lord Rosebery. There was nothing against Carlingford and he would not resign. Gladstone was most reluctant to dismiss him. "Mr Gladstone," wrote Harcourt to Morley, "entertains great doubts as to the right of a Prime Minister to require a Cabinet Minister to resign." In fact Carlingford stayed on till the end of the year when he did at last go of his own accord.' Blake, The Office of Prime Minister, p.37.

30. W.E. Gladstone, Gleanings of Past Years, Vol.I, (John Murray, 1879), p.243.

31. Lord Rosebery, Miscellanies, Vol.I, (Hodder, 1921), p.197.

32. Anthony King, 'The British Prime Ministership in the Age of the Career Politician' in G.W.Jones (ed), West European Prime Ministers, (Frank Cass, 1991), p.31.

33. Peter Hennessy, The Hidden Wiring: Unearthing the British Constitution, (Gollancz, 1995), pp.78-9.

34. Public Record Office, CAB 21/1638, 'Function of the Prime Minister and his staff.' For the genesis of this see Peter Hennessy, 'Searching for the "Great Ghost": The Palace, the Premiership, the Cabinet and the Constitution in the Post-War Period', Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 30, No.2, April 1995, p.220.

35. Christopher Andrew, Secret Service: The Making of the British Intelligence Community, (Heinemann, 1985), pp.1-2.

36. For George III's last appearance see Blake, <u>The Office of Prime Minister</u>, p.28. For the differences between the 'Nominal' and the 'Efficient Cabinets' see A.Aspinall, 'The Cabinet Council, 1783-1835', <u>Proceedings of the British Academy</u>, vol.xxxviii, 1952, pp.145-8.

37. Ibid, pp.148-9; Kemp, <u>King and Commons 1660-1832</u>, p.128;
Blake, <u>The Office of Prime Minister</u>, pp.22-6.

38. G.H.L.Le May, <u>The Victorian Constitution</u>, (Duckworth, 1979), p.30.

39. She would remind Treasury officials of her position as First Lord on the rare occasions when signs of resistance would come from that quarter. Private Information.

40. Blake, <u>The Office of Prime Minister</u>, pp.26 & 32.

41. Olive Anderson, 'Cabinet Government and the Crimean War,' <u>English Historical Review</u>, Vol.79, (1964), p.549.

42. The historian was Kinglake. See John Mackintosh, <u>The British Cabinet</u>, (University Paperback, 1968), pp.166-7 & p.166 fn.36.

43. Aspinall, 'The Cabinet Council, 1783-1835', pp.181-93.

44. John Ehrman, <u>Cabinet Government and War, 1890-1940</u>, (Archon Books edn, 1969), p.6.

45. Ibid, p.25.

46. Ibid, pp.28-33.

47. Blake, <u>The Office of Prime Minister</u>, pp.30-1.

48. Aspinall. 'The Cabinet Council, 1783-1835', pp.149-50.

49. Michael Brock, <u>The Great Reform Act</u>, (Hutchinson University Library), 1973, p.136.

50. Ibid.

51. Aspinall, 'The Cabinet Council, 1783-1835', pp.166-7.

52. E.J. Feuchtwanger, <u>Gladstone</u>, (Allen Lane, 1975), pp.110-11.

53. W. Ivor Jennings, <u>Cabinet Government</u>, (CUP, 1936), pp.182-3.

54. Feuchtwanger, <u>Gladstone</u>, p.110; Henry Rosereare, <u>The Treasury: The Evolution of a British Institution</u>, (Allen Lane, 1969), p.140.

55. Mackintosh, <u>The British Cabinet</u>, p.315.

56. Martin Gilbert, <u>Never Despair: Winston S. Churchill, 1945-65</u>, (Heinemann, 1988), p.510.

57. Robert Blake, <u>Disraeli</u>, (Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1966), pp.645-6.

58. Professor Philip Norton, 'Memorandum' to the Procedure Committee,
23 November 1994, House of Commons Select Committee on Procedure,
<u>Prime Minister's Questions</u>, Seventh Report, Session 1994-95, HC 555, (HMSO, 1995), p.1.

59. John Wilson, CB: A Life of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, (St. Martin's Press, 1973), pp.190-201; G.H.L. Le May, The Victorian Constitution, (Duckworth, 1979), p.80; Mackintosh, The British Cabinet, pp.252-3.

60. Mackintosh, The British Cabinet, pp.314-5; see also Ruddock F. Mackay, Balfour, Intellectual Statesman, (OUP, 1985), pp.144-55.

61. Anthony Eden, Full Circle, (Cassell, 1960), p.367.

62. Ehrman, Cabinet Government and War 1890-1940, p.29.

63. For the origins of this convention, see Geoffrey Marshall, Constitutional Conventions: The Rules and Forms of Political Accountability, (Clarendon Press, 1984), pp.48-51.

64. Jennings, Cabinet Government, pp.311-13.

65. In the most recent instance in the autumn of 1994 John Major consulted his Chancellor, Kenneth Clarke and five other senior ministers over supper at No.10 before deciding to threaten his Euro-rebels with a general election if the Government lost its vote on contributions to the EU budget. See Andrew Marr, Ruling Britannia: The Failure and Future of British Democracy, (Michael; Joseph, 1995), pp.266-7. The Government prevailed so no dissolution request was placed before the Queen.

66. S.S. Wilson, The Cabinet Office to 1945, (HMSO, 1975) p.55.

67. Mackintosh, The British Cabinet, p.378-9.

68. Wilson, CB, picture caption opposite p.529.

69. See Kenneth Berrill, 'Strength at the Centre - The Case for a Prime Minister's Department' in Anthony King (ed) The British Prime Minister, 2nd edition, (Macmillan, 1985), p.242-57.

70. G.W. Jones, 'The Prime Minister's Secretaries', in J.A.G.Griffith (ed), From Policy to Administration: Essays in Honour of William A. Robson, (Allen and Unwin, 1976), p.29-30.

71. For Midlothian see Philip Magnus, Gladstone, (John Murray, 1954), p.259-67.

72. Michael Foley, The Rise of the British Presidency, (Manchester University Press, 1993), Chapter 5, p.120-47.

73. G.M. Young, Stanley Baldwin, (Hart Davis, 1952), p.83.

74. Ibid, p.117-18.

75. James Margach, The Anatomy of Power, (W.H.Allen, 1979), p.137.

76. Martin Gilbert, Winston S. Churchill: Road to Victory 1941-1945, (Heinemann, 1986), p.715.

77. Winston S. Churchill, The Second World War, Vol.12: Triumph and Tragedy, paperback edition, (Cassell, 1965), p.274.

78. For varying prime ministerial practice see Peter Hennessy, Cabinet, (Blackwell, 1986), Chapter 4, 'Cabinets and the Bomb', p.123-62.

79. David Butler, British General Elections since 1945, (Blackwell, 1989), p.1.

80. The Prime Minister's Secret Service functions have to some extent been spelled out in the Security Service Act 1989 and the Intelligence Services Act 1994.

81. Conversation with Vernon Bogdanor, 10 July 1995.

82. Dalton dismissed Attlee as 'a little mouse' when he became Leader of the Labour Party in 1935 Ben Pimlott (ed), <u>The Political Diary of Hugh Dalton</u>, 1918-40, (Cape, 1986), Diary entry for 26 November 1935, p.196.