

Public Communication and the Prime Minister's Tasks

Tony Blair's public communications, from the designer leisure wear to the designer accent and the designer press conferences, probably attracted more public interest than those of any previous British government. Apart from general claims that Blair was more concerned with 'style' than substance, much of the curiosity focused on the government's techniques of news management. 'Spin' – putting a tendentious interpretation on the news – and the 'spin doctors' who did it, became objects of suspicion and criticism in the later 1990s. The reason was partly a typical media obsession with media themselves: the dealings of Blair's press secretary Alastair Campbell with the Downing Street press corps were a recurring fascination. But the interest also reflected a growing curiosity about the links between communications and the prime minister's power. In what ways is public communication part of the prime minister's job? How far is it an instrument of prime ministerial power? How has it been treated in the literature about the prime minister?

The first three chapters of this book explore these questions. Chapter 1 starts by arguing the importance of the subject and examining its comparative neglect. The chapter then explores the prime minister's job description. Some of the prime minister's tasks involve public communication more or less as an end in itself: it is a form of accountability – of 'responsible government' in the literal sense of being answerable to the public, as in the theatricality of Prime Minister's Question Time. Other tasks involve communication as a means to achieve some separate goal, whether it be about American policy towards Saddam Hussein or the government's policy on the controversial MMR vaccination. Others again, such as chairing cabinet meetings, are supposed to be carried out in secrecy, with only the results (and by no means all of them) made public.

Chapter 2 discusses ways in which the prime minister's public communication fits in with his other resources. The prime minister's formal

powers often guarantee only the minimum of success: good public communication can produce something better. For instance the prime minister has the formal power to reshuffle his cabinet. But whether the reshuffle is seen as a sign of weakness or strength, and what effect it has on his standing in his party and the polls, may depend on how it is publicly presented.

Chapter 3 takes this analysis further. It argues that public communication is a key resource for turning prime ministerial *authority* into *power*. The power may not be great enough to achieve much of what the prime minister wants. But his communication resources are normally better than those of any rival, inside or outside his party. If he does not use them, he spurns a potentially crucial weapon. In the foreword to his autobiography John Major writes eloquently about the distorting pressures of media attention: negligible response time, reductive soundbites, ritualistic rhetoric (often misleading), skeleton reporting (even in the broadsheets), pressure to produce sensational stories.¹ Major's public communication was extremely unsuccessful, judged by the scale of his defeat in 1997. His complaint was no doubt bred of frustration: he had used his communication resources, but they were simply not good enough to get results. Blair, in contrast, was extremely successful, throughout his first term and beyond.

Public Communication and Accounts of the Premiership

Awareness of public communication, both as a task for the prime minister and as a resource, grew with the rapid development of broadcast news media in the last thirty years of the twentieth century. In 1970 the group of political lobby correspondents covering Westminster and Downing Street (taking their name from the Commons lobby, to which they had privileged access) included only two broadcasters, one each for the BBC and ITN. From the 1980s, TV and radio channels proliferated and news was broadcast round the clock. By 2002, one-third of more than two hundred lobby correspondents were broadcasters.

Broadcast media had once been unobtrusively concerned just to report and interpret politics. Now they played an ever more substantial part in shaping the institutions and arenas within which politics is carried on. At the beginning of the new millennium the internet was having a similar effect. You could read or watch an interview with Tony Blair on the Number 10 website, as you might have done formerly in

¹ John Major, *John Major: the Autobiography*, London: HarperCollins, 1999, pp. xixff.

the papers or on TV. Politics was in an era of *electronic glut*. Almost everywhere the prime minister went became potentially a place for political communication. The 'publicity needs' of the prime minister's job grew correspondingly. Does the prime minister now do anything deliberate at all, without taking into account the communication implications? One simple measure of the development is the new prominence of the Downing Street press secretary. During the Thatcher era this hitherto unremarkable post changed from grub to butterfly. Bernard Ingham held it for eleven years and became an influential member of the prime minister's immediate entourage. Blair's press secretary, Alastair Campbell, elevated the job even further (see chapters 6 and 7).

The impact of electronic glut upon the prime minister's job was all the more important, secondly, because of the job's *flexibility*. Britain's famous lack of a written constitution – a single authoritative document – provides much of the explanation. The constitution is found in a mixed collection of statutes, precedents and conventions. Even the rule that the prime minister must be a member of the House of Commons is conventional. The prime minister's role is variable within the cabinet, and so is the cabinet's within the wider executive. Some of the classic one-liners about the prime minister stress the variability. The prime minister is 'first among equals' – which is a logical contradiction and can mean no more than that relations between ministers and prime minister vary. Asquith got into the constitutional textbooks by writing, 'The office of Prime Minister is what its holder chooses and is able to make of it'. George Jones, in a much quoted analysis of the job in 1965, drew the conclusion that the prime minister 'is only as strong as [his colleagues] let him be'.² None of the prime minister's powers is based in statute. The first statutes even to refer to the prime minister were minor laws in 1917 (providing Chequers as an official country residence) and in 1937 (setting ministerial salaries). The constitution can therefore change simply through behaviour changing without being challenged: unchallenged, the change then becomes a precedent. All that is the stuff of textbooks. For the prime minister, it makes possible an acute sensitivity to the potential – and the dangers – of his media environment. When media change, in short, the premiership changes.

A third reason for looking at the relations between the prime minister's public communication and his job is that the literature on the premiership did not keep up with those developments. 'The British are

² H. H. Asquith, *Fifty Years in Parliament*, London: Cassell, 2 vols, 1926, vol. 1, p. 185; George Jones, 'The Prime Minister's power', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 18.2, 1965, p. 185.

rather vague about their system of government' is the comment (equally British) with which Simon James began his own study, *British Cabinet Government*.³ Except historically, there has been little depth of knowledge at all about the workings of the cabinet. Scholars used to get by with the not-quite-up-to-date reflections of elder statesmen, a few historically slanted textbooks, and a political journalism of circumlocution ('sources close to the prime minister'). The publication in 1975–7 of Richard Crossman's revealing and cheeky *Diaries of a Cabinet Minister* attracted disproportionate excitement precisely because they were unprecedented.⁴

For decades this lack of detail could be put down to the culture of secrecy in Whitehall and Downing Street.⁵ Since the 1980s, however, 'the machinery at the heart of British government is gradually being demystified'.⁶ Crossman's diaries were a landmark. The stock of information about the workings of the cabinet system steadily grew, stimulated by declining habits of loyalty among political colleagues and reticence among retired mandarins, more insistent investigative journalism, probing inquiries by parliamentary committees, TV documentaries, and big publishing advances for ministerial memoirs.

With this knowledge came a brightening in the climate of official secrecy. For example the rules were relaxed about publicity for the cabinet's engine room – its elaborate committee system. From a position where ministers were forbidden to disclose the very existence of the committees, attitudes shifted sufficiently that in 1992 John Major could without contention authorize the publication not only of the names of the committees but of their ministerial memberships. *Questions of Procedure for Ministers* – the Cabinet Office guide detailing 'the arrangements for the conduct of affairs by Ministers', and the authority for such rules – was made public too. By 2001 it was available, renamed

³ Simon James, *British Cabinet Government*, London: Routledge, 1st edn, 1992, p. 1. The sentence is (disappointingly) omitted from the second edition (1999).

⁴ R. H. S. Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister*, London: Hamish Hamilton and Jonathan Cape, 3 vols, 1975, 1976, 1977. For an account of the rigour with which secrecy rules were applied to prevent publication of the memoirs of the first secretary to the cabinet, Sir Maurice (later Lord) Hankey, up to twenty years after his retirement in 1938, see J. F. Naylor, *A Man and an Institution: Sir Maurice Hankey, the Cabinet Secretariat and the Custody of Cabinet Secrecy*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

⁵ Even in the comparatively open political culture of the USA, scholarly accounts of the presidency are anecdotal and unsystematic – mediaeval maps of the world, compared with the precise cartography of Congress.

⁶ J. M. Lee, G. W. Jones and June Burnham, *At the Centre of Whitehall*, London: Macmillan, 1998, p. viii.

as *The Ministerial Code*, on the Cabinet Office website.⁷ Whitehall in general became more receptive to academic inquiry.

The consequence of more detail about Downing Street and the Cabinet Office was an abandonment of the summary simplicities of traditional 'cabinet government' models. The system has come to be seen rather as comprising a large and changing group of people, among them the prime minister, whose relationships with each other fluctuate. The idea was popularized in the term 'core executive', defined by Rhodes as 'the complex web of institutions, networks and practices surrounding the prime minister, cabinet, cabinet committees and their official counterparts, less formalized ministerial "clubs" or meetings, bilateral negotiations and interdepartmental committees'.⁸ As a result, concepts such as 'power' and 'decision-making' were visualized in terms of networks, coalitions, personal leverage, rival resources (knowledge, time, position); and they were seen as varying frequently with events, issues and personalities. In an early article Dunleavy and Rhodes were able to identify six different models even within the traditional institutionalist approach: prime ministerial government, prime ministerial cliques, cabinet government, ministerial government, segmented decision-making and bureaucratic coordination. In each, the prime minister's job was different.⁹

Although media relations were one of the factors distinguishing prime ministerial government (and the clique version) from others, none of those models said much about the prime minister's public communication. Later analyses in this warmer climate of inquiry do not necessarily say much either. For example Martin Smith, following Rhodes, builds a discussion of the premiership into an account based on structure, context and agents.¹⁰ Within the structural constraints, the prime minister's power over his colleagues is seen as the outcome of an exchange of resources between them. Prime ministers have authority, staff and political influence; ministers have knowledge, time and networks of

⁷ The relaxation is traced by the historian Peter Hennessy, a major contributor to the stock of knowledge about the modern cabinet system, in *The Hidden Wiring*, London: Indigo, 1996, ch. 4.

⁸ R. A. W. Rhodes and Patrick Dunleavy (eds), *Prime Minister, Cabinet and Core Executive*, London: Macmillan, 1995, p. 12.

⁹ Patrick Dunleavy and R. A. W. Rhodes, 'Core executive studies in Britain', *Public Administration*, 68.1, 1990, pp. 3–28.

¹⁰ 'All actors within the core executive have resources, but how they use them will depend on their tactics (agency); tactics, however, depend on the particular political and economic context and the limits of action as defined in the structures and processes of institutions.' Martin Smith, *The Core Executive in Britain*, London: Macmillan, 1999, p. 37.

support. Smith's categories and illustrations are informative. But his claim that 'a Prime Minister's authority can extend only as far as the cabinet will allow' could come straight out of the 1960s.¹¹ Only perfunctory attention is paid to such possibilities as the impact of structures upon the prime minister's communication, or the value of (say) a media campaign as a resource, or the use of leaks as a tactic.

Similar comments can be made about other studies, such as those by James or Burch and Holliday.¹² In general, although such works treat the cabinet/'core executive' in far greater breadth, depth and contemporary detail than before, they still do not build public communication categorically into their models. They fail explicitly and thoroughly to identify and evaluate the importance of public communication by or about the prime minister as a factor in the policy-making and administrative processes which the analyses and models describe. The political consequences of the enormous changes in the media environment of the prime minister during the last forty years of the twentieth century are insufficiently visible.

The same may be said about a second, less theoretically ambitious, strand of literature – historical, narrative and largely chronological. For instance Peter Hennessy takes a plain man's approach in *The Hidden Wiring*. Paraphrasing the Victorian child that asked its father, 'What is that lady for?', the lady in point being the Queen, he puts the question: 'What is the prime minister for?' As answer he lists thirty-three items. Only one directly involves communications: responsibility for the 'overall efficiency of the government's media strategy'.¹³ But Hennessy is not concerned with how the tasks are carried out. Even though the remaining thirty-two are riddled with communication implications, media come into his discussion only in anecdote and parenthesis. His later and much longer study, *The Prime Minister: the Office and its Holders since 1945*, proceeds mainly prime minister by prime minister and uses essentially the same framework of analysis. Dennis Kavanagh

¹¹ Smith, *The Core Executive in Britain*, p. 79.

¹² Simon James, *British Cabinet Government*; Martin Burch and Ian Holliday, *The British Cabinet System*, London: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996. 'Most post-war developments have exalted the premier vis-à-vis other ministers,' James writes. 'Television, international summits and Prime Minister's question time have strengthened the public impression that in many ways the Prime Minister *is* the government.' Despite these promising remarks there is just half a page on the Downing Street press secretary and about the same on 'the prime minister's influence over the press'. The remark that 'presentation is now an integral part of policy-making' – a claim with crucial implications, surely, for the premiership – is mentioned almost in passing. James, *British Cabinet Government*, 2nd edn, 1999, pp. 207, 112, 95 and 112.

¹³ Hennessy, *The Hidden Wiring*, p. 89.

and Anthony Seldon organize *The Powers behind the Prime Minister: the Hidden Influence of Number Ten* on the same narrative and chronological basis. Their subject is the institutional premiership in Downing Street, so the scope is narrower and their comparisons are mostly summary.¹⁴

Two exceptions to these comments about the literature are books by Michael Foley and Richard Rose: *The Rise of the British Presidency* and *The Prime Minister in a Shrinking World*.¹⁵ Foley comes close to a 'communications model' of the premiership, in that public communication is intrinsic to his key concepts and arguments. The analysis depends heavily on such ideas as 'leadership stretch' and 'spatial leadership'. The former applies to the vastly superior media attention and popular reputation of the prime minister compared with his colleagues, and the latter to his media-managed ability to distance himself helpfully from aspects of the institutional premiership. (Both are attributes shared with the American president.)

Foley's book is an extended argument, much of it about winning rather than holding office. He is more concerned with forms of communication-related activity by the prime minister than with the range of tasks to which they are applied. Rose, in comparison, is closer to the methods of the contemporary historians – but with a far greater sensitivity to public communication as a factor in the prime minister's performance across the board (including internationally) and in Tony Blair's populism. The book centres on five varying 'major political roles' essential to a prime minister's success, of which his communications are one. (The others concern party, electioneering, and managing parliament and the cabinet.) The discussion of communication (themed as 'from private to public government') is wide-ranging, subtle and historical. Communication is not an organizing or overarching concept applied systematically to the prime minister's tasks. But the approach is close to the one adopted – on a shorter scale – in the present study.

¹⁴ Peter Hennessy, *The Prime Minister: the Office and its Holders since 1945*, London: Penguin Books, 2000. Dennis Kavanagh and Anthony Seldon, *The Powers behind the Prime Minister: the Hidden Influence of Number Ten*, London: HarperCollins, 1999. Hennessy describes his book as not an 'essay in political science' but 'a work of political and administrative history with a large dash of biography' (p. 15). The job of the prime minister is defined principally in chapters 4 and 5. *The Hidden Wiring* is subtitled 'Unearthing the British Constitution' and covers much more than the prime minister.

¹⁵ Michael Foley, *The Rise of the British Presidency*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993; Richard Rose, *The Prime Minister in a Shrinking World*, London: Polity, 2001.

The Prime Minister's Job in General

What, then, are the prime minister's tasks and activities? Which ones require public communication, and which may be assisted by it?

To explore these questions a number of distinctions can be made. First, the prime minister has three clear and overlapping roles in which to carry out his tasks as a public communicator. Most comprehensively he is a *source of news*. To project the news he wants, he is next a *communications manager*. President Eisenhower cheerfully but naively believed in 'letting the facts speak for themselves'. Perhaps a military hero turned politician could afford to take that view in the 1950s; but fortunately for him, his press secretary, Jim Hagerty, did not.¹⁶ In an era of electronic glut, 'facts', more than ever, are manufactured, and they never speak for themselves. Third, the prime minister is a *public performer*. The locations are diverse. In the majority he will double as a news source, since the live audience will be supplemented by newspaper or broadcast audiences. When he takes part in a broadcast interview or 'writes' a newspaper column (a practice Tony Blair often used, through the medium of assistants), his performance is specific to news media but may be further spread by being discussed also as a source of news.

A fourth but rather different communications role is *media policy-maker*. It is different in that it directly involves substantive policy goals, whereas the other roles are principally means to the achievement of goals, not goals in themselves. By 2001 media policy was the responsibility of the Department of Media, Culture and Sport – a comparatively minor Whitehall player. But modern media impinge also on a wide range of other departments, including Trade and Industry, Education and Skills, the Home Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Most of these are run by cabinet ministers with more clout than the MCS minister. Media policy, in addition, can awaken passions. Increases in the TV licence fee are likely to irritate almost every household in the land; issues of privacy and censorship rouse editorialists. When governments tinker with media, moreover, they meddle with an instrument of their own public accountability – a 'free press'.

One result of these administrative and political complexities is that a distinction can be drawn in practice between policies based on ideology and those driven by expediency. Another result is that the prime minister tends to be drawn into media policy – of both types. For example,

¹⁶ See Elmer E. Cornwell, Jr, *Presidential Leadership of Public Opinion*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965.

in the late 1980s, as a matter of free market principle, Mrs Thatcher promoted the policy of allocating the periodically renewed Channel 3 ITV franchises by auction instead of by beauty contest – a radical shift of emphasis.¹⁷ She was also determined to break the power of the newspaper production unions. In 2002 Tony Blair took a direct interest in the legislation establishing an umbrella broadcasting regulator, OFCOM, and relaxing media ownership rules.¹⁸ But in his case the policy looked more like a pragmatic response to corporate pressure than the result of core Labour beliefs (new or old).

The prime minister's involvement is only occasional. But the fact that governments cannot avoid having media policies (in this substantive sense), as they very largely could until the 1980s, must colour his relationships with media entrepreneurs and the BBC. It is also a factor in his role as media manager. For example real or imaginary deals between Rupert Murdoch and Mrs Thatcher, and then Tony Blair, were a frequent source of public speculation – help with satellite and cross-ownership policy, in exchange for the partisanship of the *Sun*?

The prime minister's tasks are carried out, secondly, in a mixture of *formal* and *informal* roles, *institutional* and *personal* roles, and *governing* and *non-governing* roles. They reflect, again, the flexibility of the job. The prime minister's public communication can be an important factor in determining the range and balance within each pair. Electronic glut has increased the relative prominence of informal and personal roles and has made more difficult the isolation (and protection) of non-governing from governing roles.

Formal roles become so if they have constitutional definition, which gives them a predictable character and a gauge with which to judge how well they are carried out. The prime minister has the formal task of choosing whom to put in the cabinet, and the calibre of his appointments will be a factor in our evaluation of his premiership. Informal roles, independent of an external constitutional authority, may change at the whim of the officeholder. There are no formal rules, for instance, about exactly how much the prime minister must perform in parliament. In the absence of such rules Tony Blair had the flexibility to change Prime Minister's Question Time from two afternoons a week to one (but doubling its length). While there were grumbles of criticism, he could

¹⁷ The fifteen regional ITV franchises were allocated every ten years (but not in 2000) by the Independent Television Commission and its predecessors. Until the auction principle was introduced, the decisions were made on the basis of judgements about competence and quality.

¹⁸ *The Times*, 29 July 2002.

not be accused of behaving unconstitutionally, and nothing could be done about it.

Even if Britain had a written constitution detailing the prime minister's formal roles, their practice would still be modified and supplemented by informal roles. The American constitution defines the president's formal roles within a framework of the separation of executive, legislative and judicial powers. In order to exercise leadership, he tries in practice to join them together again through the performance of well-established informal roles such as party leader and mobilizer of opinion. The election of the president is formally carried out by the electoral college, but informally it is settled by the popular vote – and the difference between the two was sensationally highlighted in the contest between George W. Bush and Al Gore in 2000. That said, however, it is true that in Britain formal and informal roles are more easily blurred. What the prime minister must (and must not) do, and the procedures by which he must do it, are comparatively wide open to argument.

The distinction between *institutional* and *personal* roles separates the abstract and corporate from the personal and single prime minister. The United States comparison is again illuminating. The American president is in one sense a huge, formal, collective institution – 'the presidency'. The president is its symbolic head and, about most of its activities, an unknowing one. Even when limited to the White House staff, 'the president' is a formal institution, where many people speak and act in the president's name. But there is the personal officeholder – 'Mr President' – who, one hopes, knows exactly what he is doing. Finally, and informally, there is 'George W. Bush', not only the president but a human being.¹⁹

In Downing Street the distinctions are not as sharp. The collective premiership is in one sense the cabinet, united by the formal convention of collective responsibility. But, just as at the White House, there is a corporate premiership, employing around two hundred people in the various offices, including the press office, centred on Downing Street. Even here, however, the prime minister/cabinet connection is involved, since the largest office in Downing Street (strictly, it stretches along

¹⁹ At different stages of the crisis over his relations with the White House intern Monica Lewinsky, and sometimes in different presidential roles at the same stage, Bill Clinton shifted from one version of the president to another. The affair was a private matter of the personal, informal president; impeachment would be harmful to the symbolic president, and so on. In the outcome, leaving Clinton secure in office, popular opinion may be said to have taken the view that it was a private and personal matter.

Whitehall) is the Cabinet Office, whose staff of more than two thousand serve the prime minister and cabinet collectively.²⁰

The institutional/personal distinction gives the prime minister scope to try and achieve his objectives by switching between one 'version' and another, by the use of news management. The personal prime minister can hide behind the institutional: remarks can be sourced to 'cabinet sources' or 'Downing Street insiders'. The prime minister's chief formal surrogate is his press secretary. Informal surrogates, such as ministers and staff members whose formal jobs do not include media briefings, become familiar to journalists over time. A simple example of this process at work took place a few months after Blair took office in May 1997. Blair worked hard to distance himself personally from the earliest institutional embarrassment of his administration. The Labour party was exposed as having accepted a donation of at least one million pounds from the controllers of Formula One motor racing. Press briefings by the institutional premiership did not dissociate him sufficiently, so he sought to project a 'What, me?' pose of injured innocence through a prominent TV interview by Honest Tony, the people's premier. The businessmen would have lost heavily if a planned ban on tobacco sponsorship, subsequently cancelled, had gone ahead. Blair announced that the donation would be paid back.²¹ Much later, at the end of 2002, Blair had to distance himself, with evident embarrassment, from a media frenzy ('Cheriegate') about his wife's association with a convicted fraudster.²² Prime ministers obviously do not have complete control over the versions of themselves which the voters perceive. But part of their media management is the continual exercise of choice about what to attach themselves to and in what version.

The scope for switching between the two through media management is the point of the distinction also between the prime minister's *governing* and *non-governing* roles. It could perhaps be argued that across a decade Mrs Thatcher used public communication to remove certain governing roles from the sphere of government altogether, inasmuch as she helped shift public opinion towards a reduced role for government

²⁰ Cabinet Office figures from Lee *et al.*, *At the Centre of Whitehall*. Number 10 figures from Kavanagh and Seldon, *The Powers behind the Prime Minister*, p. 306. Reliable figures for Number 10 are difficult to establish, since they depend on who is included (e.g. support staff). Two hundred sounds high, especially for late 1998.

²¹ Nicholas Jones, *Sultans of Spin*, London: Orion Books, 1999, pp. 107–19.

²² The conman, Peter Foster, was the partner of Cherie Blair's close friend Carole Caplin and had helped to negotiate the purchase of two flats for Mrs Blair in Bristol. One was student accommodation for Euan Blair and the other was for investment. See the national press *passim* for the first two weeks of December 2002.

in the public utilities, the prison service and various other traditional public sector undertakings. But more typically, media management is used the other way round, to turn non-governing roles to advantage in performing governing tasks. Spouse, parent, religion, occupation, and associated characteristics such as class and educational background, can be used both as symbols in their own right and to show the prime minister's governing capacities in the best light.

Bearing in mind these distinctions and the overall flexibility of the job, it is no simple matter to define the prime minister's tasks. James summarizes the job as 'running the key functions of government; fostering collective responsibility; giving strategic leadership; involving himself in individual policy issues'.²³ But general accounts do not get one far. Constitutional lawyers' textbooks are strong on such tasks as being First Lord of the Treasury and exercising what was historically the Crown's prerogative in various matters. In the different language of leadership analysis his tasks are managerial and executive (with much coordination, arbitration and decision-making), policy-making, and symbolic or expressive.

Hennessy's thirty-three answers to what the prime minister is 'for' are a job lot. Like the catalogue of a grand country house sale, they range from major items, such as the government's legislative programme, to attic trivia like the appointment of the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge. When informal tasks are brought in, such as the large number of activities carried out as party leader rather than as prime minister, the job lot approach becomes almost unavoidable. In addition, many tasks, including most of the prime minister's public performances, are carried out as means to some further end. Neither of these complications matters in the present analysis, provided that one avoids – as Hennessy to some extent does not – mixing objectives, functions, powers and positions (belonging to the prime minister either personally or institutionally).²⁴

The Prime Minister's Formal Tasks and Activities

Some of the prime minister's formal tasks get called 'powers' (for example by Hennessy) precisely because there is no challenge to the

²³ James, *British Cabinet Government*, 2nd edn, p. 89.

²⁴ Hennessy, *The Hidden Wiring*, p. 90; *The Prime Minister*, p. 58. In the latter, 'hiring and firing', for example, is described first as a function then as a power – 'the great twentieth century prime ministerial weapon'.

prime minister's right to perform them, although he obviously has to follow correct procedures. They include many *appointments*. First there are cabinet ministers (about twenty-one), non-cabinet ministers and all junior members of the government (totalling about one hundred). From among the ministers, the prime minister has to set up the standing and ad hoc cabinet committees, which traditionally have pre-digested or pre-determined most cabinet business, and to decide who will chair them.²⁵ The prime minister also appoints the Cabinet Secretary (and official head of the home civil service), the permanent secretaries in the departments, and other top appointments in the civil service – and also in the armed forces and the security services. He makes various other public sector appointments (such as heads of committees of inquiry), and he appoints most peers, certain clerics (notably bishops), and even a few regius professors. Inside his Downing Street entourage – greatly expanded by Blair in a move widely criticized as 'presidential' – he appoints staff to his private office and several other offices, including the press office; and usually he recruits a number of individual advisers. Many of all these will be political appointees.

How far into the business of making appointments does the personal prime minister go, before leaving the rest to the institutional premiership – the Cabinet Secretary for the civil servants; the whips or political members of his staff for others? Cabinet ministers are appointed by the prime minister personally – and he decides their specific portfolios. The personal prime minister dismisses them, too. One of the quaintest instances of the prime minister as public performer is the customary formal letter of thanks to an outgoing minister, conventionally made public (with its reply) at the time of departure, and construed by journalists for its nuances and subtexts. (Most such letters are presumably drafted in fact by the institutional premiership.) The prime minister's involvement with diplomatic and armed services appointments is in collaboration with the Foreign and Defence Secretaries; and he gives only final approval to ministers' choices of parliamentary private secretaries and special advisers.²⁶ Even where his involvement is personal, he will seek or be given advice. Overall, there must be a large group of appointments, between the senior and more junior, with which successive prime ministers are personally involved to varying degrees. Mrs Thatcher became well known for asking whether proposed appointees were 'one

²⁵ John Major chaired 9 out of 26 cabinet standing and subcommittees in 1992, Blair 5 out of 24 in 2000. R. A. W. Rhodes and P. Dunleavy (eds), *Prime Minister, Cabinet and Core Executive*, London: Macmillan, 1995, p. 305; www.number-10.gov.uk, 17 January 2000.

²⁶ Hennessy, *The Hidden Wiring*, p. 89.

of us'. She also took a keen and direct interest in some ecclesiastical and academic appointments.²⁷

When the prime minister is not personally involved in deciding an appointment, it seems less likely that anticipated public reaction will have been a significant factor in the decision. A few of the decisions – those concerned with intelligence and security – exclude publicity by their nature: they are not available even as news. But in this area too the warmer climate in the 1990s meant that the names of the heads of the intelligence services, for example, were freely disclosed. One lately retired head of MI5 published her memoirs.²⁸ For the rest, public reaction is most relevant to decisions about ministerial appointments.

A new prime minister takes over a going concern, but he may decide to change the *organization*. The cabinet's size, order of precedence and frequency of meeting are all flexible. So are the political parts of the Downing Street offices. The prime minister can also decide, on a larger scale, on the 'creation, abolition and merger of government departments and executive agencies'.²⁹ The main part of the machinery which formally involves the prime minister's role as a communications manager is the press office. (See chapters 6 and 7.) Its staff grew to ten in John Major's time and larger again under Blair. It was augmented by a Strategic Communications Unit and a Research and Information Unit, under the authority of a press secretary redesignated as Director of Communications and Strategy.³⁰ Although the press secretary/director generally has very close contact with the prime minister personally (both in non-governing and governing roles), the office itself is part of the institutional premiership. In this capacity it also quickly extended its reach, under Blair, into the Whitehall departments. Alastair Campbell added to his Downing Street job the headship of the Government Information Services in Whitehall. People in some other Downing Street offices also work formally, in part, as communication managers or sources for the prime minister. Blair's reorganization of Downing Street into three directorates in 2001 established a directorate for Government and Political Relations. This included units running prime ministerial 'events and visits' and relations with the Labour party.

²⁷ Lee *et al.*, *At the Centre of Whitehall*, pp. 49–51. Mrs Thatcher's phrase, 'one of us', stuck to such an extent that Hugo Young made it the title of his biography of her (*One of Us*, London: Macmillan, 1989).

²⁸ Stella Rimington, *Open Secret*, London: Arrow Books, 2001.

²⁹ Hennessy, *The Hidden Wiring*, p. 89.

³⁰ Lee *et al.*, *At the Centre of Whitehall*, ch. 5. The total cost of the Prime Minister's office by 1993, including such items as overseas travel, was more than £9,000,000.

One other formal piece of communications management served the institutional premiership at Downing Street during the last two years of the Major administration: a cabinet subcommittee chaired by Michael Heseltine, deputy prime minister, and charged with the coordination and presentation of government policy. It met daily at 8.30 a.m. 'Attended by ministers, party officials and civil servants, it considered day-to-day response to media interest, and coordination of policy in both the short and longer terms.' Its initials were EDCP, since it was a subcommittee of the economic and domestic policy committee, ED. It replaced a larger, unwieldy and less authoritative 'Number Twelve Committee' with similar functions, set up in 1991 under the chairmanship of the chief Whip. Under Tony Blair, this committee continued as an informal group chaired initially by a non-cabinet minister, Peter Mandelson.³¹

In sum, the tasks of organizing the Downing Street and Cabinet Office machinery and of making the associated appointments, both of ministers and of political and senior civil service staff, fall principally to the institutional prime minister. The necessary exception is the appointment of ministers themselves. In the orchestration of these appointments public communication can be important. It is managed chiefly through the institutional premiership, the Downing Street organization, and not by the prime minister himself, either as performer or personal source. The day-to-day work of coordination of media strategy and public communication is also handled by the institutional premiership.

Most of the prime minister's time is spent actually *working the machinery*, rather than organizing and staffing it. The scope for public communication varies. The prime minister chairs the cabinet and some cabinet committees, and meets with individual ministers, seeking agreement on decisions. From 1990 to 1997 John Major chaired 271 cabinets and 189 cabinet committees and had 911 recorded meetings with individual ministers. In his first two years Blair chaired 86 cabinets and 178 cabinet committees and had 783 meetings with individual ministers.³² All that, depending on the detail, is potentially newsworthy activity. It is the stuff of routine news management but there is no public performance.

The prime minister reports regularly to the Queen and manages the general relationship between the government and the monarchy, much of which is confidential. The prime minister's dealings with opposition leaders (on a so-called 'Privy Counsellor basis') are confidential too –

³¹ Anthony Seldon, *Major*, London: Phoenix Books, 1997, pp. 601–2; Burch and Holliday, *The British Cabinet System*, pp. 100–2.

³² Seldon, *Major*, appendix III; Kavanagh and Seldon, *The Powers behind the Prime Minister*, p. 286.

giving William Hague grounds for complaint, when negotiations about one of his recommendations for an honour were leaked.³³ Probably not more than twice in any incumbency, the prime minister will advise the Queen to dissolve parliament – obviously a major news item. From time to time, also, the prime minister will, with the Defence Secretary, ‘deploy Her Majesty’s forces in action’, as Hennessy puts it.³⁴

The prime minister meets with heads of government at home and abroad, and attends more and more international meetings. Often overseas trips involve ceremonial and ritual. Thompson and Donoughue calculated that from 1974 to 1979 Wilson and Callaghan between them had 160 meetings and 120 formal meals with overseas dignitaries and made 35 official visits overseas, taking some 75 days. By John Major’s time these numbers had swelled considerably. He had 662 foreign visitors and spent 251 days overseas between December 1990 and May 1997, on 96 separate visits. Under Blair the numbers continued to grow. He made 63 official visits overseas just in his first two years – nearly twice the Wilson/Callaghan total in less than half the time. In the six months after 11 September 2001 he visited twenty-two countries – though many of them briefly.³⁵

Both at home and abroad, some ceremonial, such as big sporting occasions, elides governing/non-governing and formal/informal roles. Any of these types of event can involve the prime minister in public performance, ranging from a summit press conference to a silent wreath-laying at the Cenotaph. The latter type of event is primarily symbolic; but the symbolism generally has the potential for political advantage. Mrs Thatcher made a surprise visit to British troops in the Falkland Islands in January 1983, six months after the islands were recaptured and some months before a triumphant general election, and milked it for publicity.³⁶ John Major visited troops in the Gulf War of 1991 and was filmed in appropriate kit, addressing them from a military vehicle. Tony Blair made a similar visit to Kosovo in 1999.

³³ William Hague, ‘What I learned about Tony – the hard way’, *Guardian*, 26 April 2002.

³⁴ Hennessy, *The Hidden Wiring*, p. 90.

³⁵ Robert J. Thompson and Lord Donoughue of Ashton, *On the Treadmill: Presidents and Prime Ministers at Work*, University of Strathclyde, 1989, p. 23; Seldon, *Major*, appendix III; Kavanagh and Seldon, *The Powers behind the Prime Minister*, p. 286; *Guardian*, 15 December 2001, 26 April 2002. According to Hennessy (*The Hidden Wiring*, p. 91, quoting *The Economist*), some two-thirds of overseas trips during Major’s first three-and-a-half years in office were to member states of the European Union.

³⁶ For details see Bernard Ingham, *Kill the Messenger*, London: HarperCollins, 1991, pp. 298–303.

The prime minister's diary includes, further, an unceasing round of visits, generally including a speech, to hospitals, schools, factories, conferences. Typically these will launch a policy or mark some achievement. Major undertook 1,359 such engagements, excluding personal, party and constituency engagements, according to his biographer. The *Guardian* reported that Blair had given 173 political speeches outside parliament during his first five years in office. He had spent 'a good deal of time attending carefully staged visits', commented Peter Riddell. 'There is hardly a school, hospital or rundown council estate within a couple of miles of Downing Street – and hence within easy reach of television cameras – that has not had such a media event.'³⁷ In the preparation for most of this public performance, the institutional premiership will have contributed, to a great or less extent. But the personal prime minister, inescapably, is the performer – unless he palms the task off on another minister. At least as likely, he will have taken over the task from another minister.

One must not forget, lastly, an archaic kind of public communication: letters. President Jimmy Carter got into trouble by campaigning in 1976 with the promise 'I'll never lie to you' and then, in office, using a signature-writing machine – not just a letter-writing machine. A prime minister, fortunately, can spread much of his correspondence round the Whitehall departments, or to his party headquarters. But some has to be done. The scale of New Labour's victory in 1997, and perhaps Blair's populism, were reflected in a surge of correspondence. Heath received an average of three hundred letters a week from the public in 1970–4, and Major four hundred in 1995. Blair was allegedly getting ten thousand – an estimated 500,000 a year – by 2000. A new unit in Downing Street, the Direct Communications Unit, was set up to cope with them.³⁸

Away from Downing Street an important set of tasks is the prime minister's *formal parliamentary work*. It is a fundamental principle of parliamentary government that the prime minister must be a member of parliament, which in practice means the House of Commons. But although parliament is part of the very bedrock of the job, helping determine its entire shape and the rhythms of its timetable, this does not mean that the prime minister has to turn up very often. In the first six months of his premiership, for instance, Tony Blair voted in only two of eighty-six divisions in the Commons. Moreover, as party leader the

³⁷ Seldon, *Major*, appendix III; *Guardian*, 26 April 2002; Peter Riddell, ch. 2 in Anthony Seldon (ed.), *The Blair Effect*, London: Little, Brown, 2001, p. 35.

³⁸ Kavanagh and Seldon, *The Powers behind the Prime Minister*, p. xi; *Guardian*, 10 February 2000; Number 10 website, 14 July 2000.

prime minister has a separate set of tasks, which are also carried out *at*, one may appropriately say, rather than *in* parliament. These events sometimes gain as much publicity as the others – for example, after a stormy meeting with backbenchers – though they are not normally supposed to be public. These count as informal tasks of the premiership. The distinction may seem strained, because the connection between the constitutional office of premier and the party institution which enables it to work is at its closest in the parliamentary arena. Nevertheless, they can be discussed separately, since they take place separately.

When the prime minister does turn up, it is to carry out the task of public performer in the Commons chamber. He never appears before any of the standing (legislative) committees. Nor did Blair's predecessors appear before any of the select committees which shadow the Whitehall departments and which became increasingly prominent during the last twenty years of the twentieth century. Winston Churchill set a crucial precedent in 1940, by separating the jobs of prime minister and leader of the House. The prime minister was thereby removed from close contact with the practical management of parliamentary business. His performances now consist in periodic visitations to answer questions, make statements, deliver set piece speeches and very occasionally intervene in debates.³⁹

From 1961 to 1997 prime ministers answered questions for fifteen minutes twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Tony Blair halved the frequency to once a week for thirty minutes on Wednesdays. This left the arithmetic unchanged at twelve to fourteen hours a year. Previously, even after 1940, there was variation between prime ministers: sometimes they answered questions on four days each week. Question Time in general became increasingly standardized and institutionalized. Questions grew more topical and less specific. Frequently they asked simply about 'the prime minister's schedule for the day', the object being to catch the prime minister out with a specific supplementary. The leader of the opposition became progressively more prominent in the exchanges, to the extent eventually of being expected to intervene in every one. Question Time is one of the opposition leader's main, regular, assured publicity opportunities, with the chance of (temporarily) seizing the news agenda. The intrusion of television in 1989 raised the stakes.

³⁹ The following account draws for its details principally on Dunleavy and Jones, ch. 12 in R. A. W. Rhodes and Patrick Dunleavy (eds), *Prime Minister, Cabinet and Core Executive*, London: Macmillan, 1995, and on June Burnham and G. W. Jones, 'Accounting to Parliament by British Prime Ministers: trends and discontinuities; illusions and realities', paper for the Political Studies Association annual conference, April 2000.

It accentuated still further the trend towards a 'more topical, gladiatorial and stylized' Question Time.⁴⁰

The prime minister comes to the chamber to make statements chiefly about international summits and crises (especially crises which might involve British military forces), and important developments in British politics with which he is personally associated. Compared with Question Time, their use is more flexible. Harold Wilson made statements on 106 days in the sessions from 1964 to 1969, relishing his mastery of the Commons and dramatizing his personal grip on policy issues. In the run-up to the 1970 election, the number declined sharply. Mrs Thatcher used statements largely for international issues (85 per cent compared with 42 per cent for Wilson and 24 per cent for Heath). But she made far fewer anyway – on only 79 days in her eleven-and-a-half years of office, including fewer than five per session in her last five years. John Major increased the number somewhat to 71 over six years and four months – but this figure includes speeches too. Blair made 41 statements in his first five years.⁴¹

Dunleavy and Jones found that Mrs Thatcher brought the amount of speech-making by the prime minister to a low point too. The decline had been going on since the 1920s, with exceptions during times of acute crisis, such as Eden in the Suez crisis. The prime minister's main routine performances are in the debate on the annual Queen's Speech, setting out the legislative programme for the new session, in debates on the most important pieces of legislation, and in emergency debates or no-confidence debates called by the Opposition. Mrs Thatcher made cabinet colleagues do all but the most unavoidable speeches. Half her own speeches were on foreign affairs. Apart from the debate on the Queen's Speech, she spoke for fifteen minutes or more only 23 times between 1979 and 1990. After 1987 she spoke on just one day per session. Major and Blair continued the trend. In his first year Blair made only one set-piece speech – in the debate on the Speech from the Throne setting out the government's legislative programme. Otherwise 'he seems to have shied away from speeches . . .'.⁴²

The fourth type of performance, intervening in debates, is defined by Dunleavy and Jones to take account of the idea of debate as interactive. Their measure is anything which Hansard records – which excludes body language but includes points of order and interjections. Between 1974 and 1990 prime ministers intervened scarcely at all. Callaghan

⁴⁰ Rhodes and Dunleavy (eds), *Prime Minister, Cabinet and Core Executive*, p. 282.

⁴¹ Rhodes and Dunleavy (eds), *Prime Minister, Cabinet and Core Executive*, pp. 284–5; Seldon, *Major*, appendix III; *Guardian*, 26 April 2002.

⁴² Burnham and Jones, 'Accounting to Parliament by British Prime Ministers', p. 15.

intervened only fifteen times in four sessions and Thatcher sixteen times in her first five sessions. From 1985 onwards she intervened only once, shortly before her resignation. Major and Blair barely intervened either.⁴³

The exceptionally large Labour majority won in 1997 enabled Tony Blair to pay less heed to the Commons than John Major, and he quickly established a reputation for being uninterested.⁴⁴ The number of days in which he took some part in proceedings reached an all-time low of 25 per cent. It is clear that, at least for the time being, a prime minister no longer needs to appear in the Commons as often as even quite recent predecessors. He can use the rules of procedure, as did Major and Blair, to make written reports – in answer to planted written questions – on subjects such as summits and visits abroad, about which Churchill, say, reported in person and took questions. His performances are highly formalized. He need never speak without preparation and a script. He performs almost entirely on his own terms, starting with the decision whether to perform at all.

Apart from rare emergency or no-confidence debates, Question Time is the one exception to all that. Here, his control is severely limited. Indeed it is arguably the formal performance over which he has least control in any location, inside parliament or out. Its high priority for the prime minister is reflected in the fact that Blair missed only seven out of a possible 169 Question Times during his first five years, while being in other ways a comparatively poor attender. The pressure to attend was all the greater because the sessions now happened only once a week, and in 2003 the Commons rescheduled them to the still more newsworthy time of twelve noon.⁴⁵

Some of the unpredictability of Question Time is removed by preparation and by party management – for example the planting of friendly questions (the institutional premiership at work).⁴⁶ When the prime minister is on his feet looking across the chamber, however, he is on his own. The fewer such performances, one might argue, the greater the H-bomb deterrent effect. The fact that a well-prepared prime minister with an adequate majority is extremely unlikely to put on a terminally disastrous performance at Question Time does not mean his preparation

⁴³ Rhodes and Dunleavy (eds), *Prime Minister, Cabinet and Core Executive*, pp. 293–4.

⁴⁴ William Hague, writing a year after the 2001 election, remarked that Blair's 'distaste for the House of Commons is all too evident to MPs'. Hague, 'What I learned about Tony – the hard way'.

⁴⁵ *Guardian*, 26 April 2002. The timetable change was one of several 'modernizing' initiatives by the House Leader, Robin Cook.

⁴⁶ See Gyles Brandreth, *Breaking the Code*, London: Phoenix Books, 1999, pp. 93–4.

will have taken no account of the need to minimize the possibility that this might happen. It is no surprise that prime ministers get nervous.⁴⁷ For such reasons it is difficult to know how far the largely quantitative decline of performance traced by Dunleavy and Jones reflects a lowering of prime ministers' priority for their parliamentary work. It is also difficult to fit the work clearly into categories of prime ministerial tasks. In some ways, it is activity devoted to the achievement of general goals: managing the government's policies and legislative programme; maintaining a majority; building the prime minister's vision. In others, performance is public communication as an end in itself. If one takes the 'stylization' point far enough, indeed, prime ministerial performance might now be regarded as one of the nineteenth-century commentator Bagehot's 'dignified' parts of the constitution and no longer one of the 'efficient' parts.

Ritual, however, can be highly functional. If one of the purposes of parliament is to symbolize representative and responsible government, then a ritual display may sustain the symbolism. It is probably in this way that one should judge Blair's agreement in 2002, after much urging, to attend, twice a year, sessions of the committee composed of twenty-five chairmen of the thirty-five departmental select committees.⁴⁸ But however one views it, the prime minister's parliamentary activity is the part of his formal work which most regularly shows him as a public performer.

The Prime Minister's Informal Tasks

By definition, there is even more flexibility about the prime minister's informal tasks than the formal ones, since there are no external authorities defining them. Even more of them, too, perhaps, are likely to be carried out privately, and any public accounts of them will not originate either from the prime minister personally or the institutional premiership. One should also expect more variation between prime ministers. For all those reasons there is no point in seeking to give more than an indicative account of them.

⁴⁷ 'If Britain ever had a prime minister who did not fear Questions, our parliamentary democracy would be in danger.' Harold Wilson, *The Governance of Britain*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson and Michael Joseph, 1976, p. 132.

⁴⁸ The first meeting took place on 16 July 2002 and lasted two-and-a-half hours. Blair described the discussion as 'less combative, more constructive' than Question Time. *Guardian*, 17 July 2002.

The prime minister undertakes innumerable *informal executive activities* linked to the formal work of running the machinery of government. For example, cabinet and cabinet committee meetings are supplemented by informal and casual meetings with ministers, civil servants and a variety of other persons involved in policy matters. Their purpose is to pre-digest, concert, bypass, undermine – that is, in one way and another to manage – the outcomes of the formal machinery. Their informality includes such features as spontaneity or irregularity, varying and informal locations (such as aircraft), lack of agenda and minutes, or even of a clear outcome, and changing and uncertain membership. They were a device much used by Blair and are well illustrated by the nature of his dealings with the Chancellor, Gordon Brown. Peter Riddell, a well-placed journalist, writes that ‘officials initially found it hard to penetrate the frequent Blair/Brown relationship and it was only after the arrival of Jeremy Heywood [private secretary] that a record was kept of their discussions’. More broadly, ‘the idea that officials at Number 10 headquarters are smoothly pulling strings and levers, effortlessly controlling events, is ridiculous’.⁴⁹

Knowledge of the existence of informal groups at cabinet level, though less often of their methods and meeting-places, entered the textbooks in the middle of the twentieth century. Lloyd George had a ‘kitchen cabinet’ of favoured ministers; Churchill had ‘cronies’. Wilson had a varying group of intimates. Thatcher relied on a succession of fixers, including Willie Whitelaw and John Wakeham. Analysts (not excluding a prime minister’s own colleagues) generally start looking for an ‘inner cabinet’ of some kind whenever a prime minister has settled into office. The recent demystification of the system has enabled academics to plot their incidence more elaborately than before, in the kind of literature discussed earlier.

Secretiveness is a common feature of these informal processes. Because they are likely to be seen as the ‘real’ ways in which policies and issues are settled, they are of great interest to journalists. The prime minister, both personally and through the agency of the press office – and, no doubt, of other intermediaries – will be active in managing the flow of information about them, as one method of getting his way.

The prime minister’s *informal parliamentary tasks* are aimed principally at sustaining his reputation in the party among backbenchers. Neglect and isolation are dangerous risks. Eden lost touch during the build-up to the Anglo-French invasion of Suez in 1956. Thatcher did so in 1990, at a time of domestic difficulty with the unpopular ‘poll tax’

⁴⁹ Peter Riddell in Anthony Seldon (ed.), *The Blair Effect*, pp. 37, 38.

intended to replace the local authority rates. During the Conservative leadership contest forced upon her by backbenchers, she attached a higher priority to attending a European summit in Paris than to staying at home in order to bolster her support. The tea room, smoking room and bars at Westminster are the traditional haunts which from time to time a prime minister should visit. For instance both Wilson and Callaghan, the former aide Bernard Donoughue writes, 'spent a fair amount of time in the House of Commons both before and after Question Time, meeting with ministers and MPs who sought a brief word with them'.⁵⁰ Even the lengthy process of trooping through the voting lobbies in a division gives opportunities for chat, and John Major voted on many occasions, nursing his small majority after 1992, on days when he did not otherwise take part in proceedings.

The usual intermediary in these encounters is the prime minister's principal private secretary, who is chosen for his or her suitability to interpret the prime minister and the party to each other. His job will include attending party meetings on the prime minister's behalf, as well as dealing with individuals. Major's PPS 'would meet individual MPs for meals, and arrange for groups of them to take tea with Major'.⁵¹ Such meetings do not necessarily take place at the Commons. Blair was keen on entertaining at Downing Street, for instance. Wherever they happen, they need more organizing than in the past, because MPs now have offices of their own – and these may be several minutes away from the Commons facilities. (See chapter 4.) Much of the casual contact in the public rooms of the Commons is a thing of the past.

Conclusion

That is a summary survey, and it takes no account of party activities carried out by the prime minister not strictly in that capacity. But it is enough to indicate that some of the prime minister's tasks *must* involve him in public communication, and others *may*. Only a few, concerned with security, positively ought not. The flexibility of both the formal and informal parts of the job give him great range as a performer and as a news source. A leitmotiv of the job can thus be the claim, a truism since Blair came to power but not so long ago a novelty, that presentation is part of substance. Whether a prime minister is wise to try and

⁵⁰ Thompson and Donoughue, *On the Treadmill: Presidents and Prime Ministers at Work*, p. 20.

⁵¹ Burnham and Jones, 'Accounting to Parliament by British Prime Ministers', p. 15.

do something at all and, if so, what and how, are all matters affected, in this era of electronic glut, by whether the decision can be sold. The ultimate buyers are the electorate. Typically the prime minister uses public communication in conjunction with his formal powers. The formal powers, it was suggested at the start of the chapter, give him authority; public communication turns it into power. This process will be explored further in chapters 2 and 3.