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IS WESTMINSTER DEAD IN WESTMINSTER?

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Is there anything left of the Westminster model? The answer lies in the family of ideas about executive government. For many, the defining characteristics of Westminster are parliamentary sovereignty, the concentration of political power in a collective and responsible cabinet, the accountability of ministers to parliament, and a non-partisan and expert civil service. But in Britain, all these ideas have been and continue to be challenged.

The hollowing-out of the state.

Many of the trends constraining parliamentary sovereignty and executive power in Britain can be summarised using the aphorism 'the hollowing-out of the state'. Devolved government to Scotland Wales and Northern Ireland is New Labour's most important single constitutional change. There are marked and growing differences in delivering services between the constituent territories of the UK; for example Scotland has free long-term personal care for the elderly, and no tuition fees for students in higher education. Initially, there was little tension with the centre. This equitable climate cannot be sustained because the rationale for devolved government lies in difference, not homogeneity. At some stage, there will be different parties in power in London, Edinburgh and Cardiff. In future, the pattern of intergovernmental relations in the UK will increasingly resemble those of other states like Australia and Canada with see-sawing tensions between territories and the centre

In the European Union (EU), the term multi-level governance is used to describe the need to work with and through the Commission, national ministries and local and regional authorities. It is a specific example of the impact of international interdependencies on the state. Outside the EU is the rest of the world in all its buzzing blooming confusion. Events such as 9/11, Northern Ireland, Kosovo, the Afghan war, and Iraq divert prime ministerial attention from domestic policy. The decision to invade Iraq eroded Blair's authority in the party and with the electorate. Even Cabinet support moved from 'rock solid' to 'broad' with 'fears expressed with uncharacteristic candour'. British government now confronts multiplying veto points. As one former prime minister confessed, 'It often feels like a very hostile world out there and the fact was I could do very little about it'.

From prime ministerial power to president and back.

Tony Blair is the would-be President. On New Labour's election victory, Jonathan Powell (No. 10 chief of staff) famously warned senior civil servants to expect 'a change from a feudal system of barons to a more Napoleonic system.' Blair's No. 10 aides claim

'Cabinet died years ago. It is now a matter of strong leadership at the centre.' No. 10 now has some 200 staff and many special units – for example, on service delivery - creating a prime minister's department 'that dare not speak its name'. Much coordination occurs in bilaterals between Blair and his ministers. He has cut back on collegial decision making. The list of decisions taken by Blair and Brown and never even reported to Cabinet includes such major matters as independence for the Bank of England. Bilateral agreements replace collective government, and Blair is the coordinating nodal point.

Another theme in tales of a Blair presidency is the professionalization of New Labour's relationships with the media and the use of spin doctors. We now live in an era of continuous electioneering and personalized campaigns. If a policy does not come up with the results Blair wants, he takes personal charge as in the cases of crime and immigration. In the pungent phrase of the leader of the opposition, Michael Howard, when he takes charge he has 'more summits than the Himalayas'.

This portrait of a dominant prime minister is only one version of the New Labour story. There is a second story that sees Blair negotiating with a host of other governments, politicians, officials, and citizens. He is cast as just one actor in the court politics of Whitehall, Westminster. Of all the rocks around which Blair has to navigate his ship of state, there is none more formidable than his Chancellor of the Exchequer. The brute fact is that Brown runs economic policy and, through his control of public expenditure, much social policy. Both men guard their territory. Their relationship has deteriorated to the point where Brown is reported as saying to Blair that 'There is nothing you could ever say to me now that I could ever believe'. Brown is now the official opposition to Blair and he is in the heart of the Cabinet and of government. In looking at the court politics of the executive, we must include the *several* actors at the heart of government. Political power is not concentrated in a single institution. It is contested, so the standing of prime minister or chancellor is contingent.

The accountability gap

Ministerial responsibility is one the hoariest chestnuts of the constitution. Current legal wisdom holds the rule can be suspended when the Prime Minister wants. In short, ministers do not resign and cabinets disagree in public. The trouble with lawyers, however, is they take the fun out of it all. So, it is worth noting in passing that 43% of all resignations between 1945 and 1991 were for sexual or financial scandals, not personal or departmental error. Even such statistics lose some the drama. I was present in the weeks leading up to a resignation and can attest to the emotional highs and lows of Minister, advisers and civil servants. It is hard to comprehend the maelstrom the media can unleash on the unwary. It places them in the media eye to a frightening extent. The press treated the Minister as an object, not a person. Indeed, the special correspondents took a backseat to the political correspondents, who knew nothing about the policy area and cared even less. The story, the scoop, the by-line were all that mattered. So, ministerial responsibility is alive and well, but it is no longer the prime minister and the political standing of the minister that decides a resignation – but the media maelstrom. It would seem that only foxhunting among blood sports is to be banned.

Learn skills that we haven't learned before

The role of the bureaucracy has also changed over the past two decades. In the words of the (then) head of the home civil service, Sir Richard Wilson the civil service is 'going to have to learn skills that we haven't learned before'. What has changed? What are these skills?

Unfashionable though it may be to say so, bureaucracy has its uses. It acts as the repository of specialised knowledge and as a counterweight to short-term political expediency and opportunism. The civil service is the locus of institutional memory and the bearer of institutional skepticism. It stands for integrity and probity against partisan interest and corruption. They are also a political necessity. Ministers may want responsiveness and better services. They also want the older arts. The good departmental secretaries spot holes before ministers fall in, pull ministers out when they have fallen in, and then pretend they never fell in at all.

Politicization is an emotive phrase for the government's search for greater political control of the civil service (for example, contracts instead of permanent appointments). It is more productive to talk of personalization. Permanent secretaries are selected and kept in part because of their style and approach, in part because of their policy preferences, and in part because ministers are comfortable with them. Permanent secretaries expect to establish the necessary rapport - which may be purely professional or something much closer - that is their job. There is no guarantee of success, but there is a clear set of expectations. Civil servants will be responsive to ministers. The statesmen in disguise of the golden years had to learn to be servants of power; to become can-do civil servants who are policy managers not policy makers.

Most top civil servants are adept at adapting. So, they no longer see themselves as the main let alone only source of advice but they do see themselves as collating, coordinating packages of advice. They do not fear competing advice, only being left out of the loop. Similarly, advisers provide few problems. Indeed, the civil service see them as an asset in relations with the media and the party and their help is actively sought.

Increasingly, the centre has to manage packages of services, packages of organizations, and packages of governments. I use 'diplomacy' to refer to management by negotiation in contrast to management by fear and sanction. As Sir Douglas Wass said 'finesse and diplomacy are an essential ingredient in public service'. Why is this relevant? Because diplomatic styles of management work for networks, command styles do not. So, the effective chief executives in the National Health Service build and preserve links and institutionalise strategic alliances. They need strong interpersonal, communication and listening skills with the ability to persuade and to construct long-term relationships. We relearn old lessons.

The sour laws of unintended consequences.

I do not dispute the British executive can act decisively. Obviously, the centre coordinates and implements policies as intended at least some of the time. But the Westminster model attaches too little importance to the sour laws of unintended consequences. There are the well-known domestic problem areas - higher education, immigration and transport – that still wait for their ‘solutions’. There are the cock-ups – for example, privatizing air traffic control, the railways, tax credit payments, reform of the House of Lords, passports. There are the disasters that discredit governments. The examples include: the millennium dome, the Hutton Inquiry into Iraq and weapons of mass destruction, and the proposed referendum on the Euro. All governments fail some of the time. All prime ministers intervene but few control and then only for some policies, some of the time. The sour laws of unintended consequences haunt all governments.

What use is Westminster?

The short answer is that Westminster is a useful myth. The chatter about a Blair presidency and other Westminster baggage is a counter in the court politics of the executive and in wider party politics. It does not matter that the presidential analogy is misleading because the game is about personal hostility to Blair and New Labour. It is a smoke screen. Conversely, when ‘President Blair’ asserts: ‘Of course you have to have Cabinet Government’, he is using Westminster as a cloak of invisibility for his centralizing reforms. Myths do serious work.

Why should we care?

Australian governments confront similar problem of governance to British governments. Both confront packages of governments and organizations, shared responsibility among webs of organizations, mixed management systems, the erosion of institutional scepticism, and declining strategic capability. Both must work with and through complex webs or networks of actors and organizations. Both have to manage veto points. They number the senate, the states and the courts in Australia. They are fewer and weaker in Britain but devolved governments and the EU can be potent checks and balances. Australian and British governments often fail because centralization is confounded by fragmentation and interdependence. In turn, failure prompts further bouts of centralization. It is time to break free of the shackles of the Westminster model. It was a simple model belonging to a simpler era. Now, Westminster is more fairy tale than fact. Governments in both countries, irrespective of party, must now manage complex and uncertain domestic and international networks over which they have little control and at best hands-off influence.