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Please cite this publication as follows:

Bennister, M. and Heffernan, R. (2011) Cameron as Prime Minister: the intra-executive politics of Britain's coalition. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 65 (4). pp. 778-801. ISSN 0031-2290.

Link to official URL (if available):

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsr061>

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## **Cameron as Prime Minister: The Intra-Executive Politics of Britain's Coalition Government**

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### **Abstract**

Forming a coalition involves compromise, so a prime minister heading up a coalition government, even one as predominant a party leader as Cameron, should not be as powerful as a prime minister leading a single party government. Cameron has still to work with and through ministers from his own party, but has also to work with and through Liberal Democrat ministers; not least the Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg. The relationship between the prime minister and his deputy is uncharted territory for recent academic study of the British prime minister. This article explores how Cameron and Clegg operate within both Whitehall and Westminster: the cabinet arrangements; the *prime minister's* patronage, advisory resources and more informal mechanisms. Cameron and Clegg both possess institutional and personal resources, but Cameron remains the predominant resource-rich actor, so at this early stage in the coalition government we can observe that no formal, substantial change in the role of prime minister has been enacted. Cameron's predominance, by leading a coalition, is partially constrained by Clegg, but he too constrains Clegg. This prime minister, then, can be predominant even when he is constrained in significant ways by the imperatives of coalition government. Cameron is presently no more constrained than a prime minister who is faced with a preeminent intra-party rival with a significant power base.

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David Cameron is not, thanks to the Conservatives' failure to win the last election outright, the party leader with a party majority in the House of Commons. He is, contrary to the manner prescribed by postwar tradition, only prime minister because the Conservatives formed a coalition with the third placed Liberal Democrats. No party leader in modern times has become prime minister by his party combining with another; a single party government, even in the hung parliament of February to October 1974, has long been the principal foundation for the prime minister. Cameron is prime minister alongside the formal deputy prime minister, Nick Clegg. To be an effective prime minister he has to manage as well as work with and through (perhaps sometimes appease) senior Conservative ministers and his own backbenches. Most unusually he has also, to work with and carefully manage both Clegg and the Liberal Democrat party. The established image of a strong, authoritative prime minister leading the government from the front is an image popularly associated with being Britain's parliamentary chief

executive. Is being prime minister radically different when leading a coalition government instead of a single party one?

### **Intra executive politics within the coalition**

Executive-legislative relations remain (so far) spectacularly unchanged under the coalition, thanks to the preparedness of the Conservative- Liberal Democrat Commons majority to prioritise supplying and supporting the government over checking and balancing it. The government's parliamentary majority remains, as ever, the keystone in the government's arch so, even with this government being dependant on a majority composed of two different and distinct political parties (with no national experience of working together), ministers still lead and the Commons (largely) follows (notwithstanding the fact that minority elements in both parties have been willing to rebel). It is, however, in the emergent relationship between both coalition partners within the government where British politics has entered hitherto uncharted territory: there have been some small, subtle (and perhaps far reaching) changes enacted in intra-executive relationships. Such changes, inevitably, manifest themselves in changes in the role played by the prime minister.

It is worth noting at the outset that the task of exploring how Cameron (and Clegg's) government 'works' is complicated by the fact that it rarely leaks or briefs about 'process' (process being 'how' ministers work, not just what they do). Labour endlessly, tirelessly did so as Tony Blair and Gordon Brown's battles for ascendancy, exacerbated by their eager camp followers (Rawnsley 2010, 2001; Blair 2010; Mandelson 2010), were ceaselessly reported to the news media. Reporters presently ask questions, but insiders, ministers and special advisers alike, largely refuse to provide answers. In terms of understanding how the government operates, the coalition awaits its own Andrew Rawnsley; we are presently very much on the outside looking in.

#### The Cameron-Clegg relationship

Both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats have made substantive policy concessions to the other; neither can insist on any policy the other cannot accept, so both observe a 'self denying ordinance' to work effectively together. Glimpsed from the outside, the Cameron-Clegg relationship does not seem combative with both recognising that their political and personal relationship is key to the coalition surviving (and thriving). The Cameron-Clegg relationship 'sets the tone for government at every level' (Laws 2010: 275) and both have, so far, seemingly enjoyed a convivial and trusting relationship.

Informality and personal warmth may have come easily to two forty-something year old leaders sharing similar educational backgrounds, but personal relationships, important as they are, need to be understood within the context of institutional arrangements. Exploring the relationship between the prime minister and a formalised deputy prime minister, especially one drawn from another party, requires us to enter uncharted territory. The role played by, say, the US vice president might change according to the

relationship a vice president has with his or her particular president, but the holder of the post is elected as part of a presidential ticket, holds a constitutionally mandated office and will, should the president resign, be impeached or become permanently incapacitated, automatically succeed to the presidency. No constitutional or political rights or any formal responsibilities are automatically conferred upon the British deputy prime minister. The 'post' exists only in reworked convention. It has previously been a courtesy title provided by the prime minister to indicate a minister's standing and seniority; recent examples include William Whitelaw in 1979-88, Geoffrey Howe in 1989-90, Michael Heseltine in 1995-97 and John Prescott in 1997-2007. Howe was given the title (but not the requisite status) only by being demoted from foreign secretary; Tony Blair awarded Prescott the title merely to keep him 'sweet' and because he felt Prescott's party status, being Labour's deputy leader, 'required' it; Gordon Brown felt no such compulsion to similarly reward his party deputy Harriet Harman rewarding instead the minister he most relied upon, Peter Mandelson, with the title of first secretary of state.

Under Clegg the position of deputy prime minister has now been formalised (if temporarily so). Clegg holds not only a title but a cabinet position with certain powers. His position in the government- and those of other Liberal Democrat ministers- is not something prime minister Cameron can change; this deputy prime minister, unlike other holders of the post since 1945, cannot be reshuffled or removed. This is, to say the least, unusual. Nothing of its like has been seen since Churchill's wartime coalition when the Labour leader, Clement Attlee, held the same post and sat of right in Churchill's cabinet. Cameron and Clegg's relationship, while it brings advantages to both (Cameron, being unwilling to lead a minority government, might not be prime minister without Clegg's party), may be presently one of convenience, not of conviction, but it remains the mainstay both of Cameron's coalition government and his premiership.

#### Making ministers and allocating portfolios

The Cabinet Office document, Coalition Agreement for Stability and Reform, published in May 2010, establishes that ministerial posts are allocated "in proportion to the parliamentary representation of the two coalition parties" and that the "prime minister will make nominations for the appointment of ministers following consultation with the Deputy Prime Minister" (Cabinet Office 2010). Thus Cameron has formally and substantively limited his prime ministerial prerogative to make ministerial appointments. He still, naturally, nominates Conservative ministers, but Clegg now nominates the agreed number of Liberal Democrat ministers. The Liberal Democrats have some five seats in cabinet and twenty-four other ministerial posts. The crucial allocation of portfolios, being left to bilateral negotiations between Cameron and Clegg, was not part of the coalition negotiations. Only three departments are run by Liberal Democrats (Business, where Vince Cable has left major work on universities to David Willetts; Energy and Climate Change and the post-devolution rather unsubstantial Scottish office). They control none of the big spending department; have no ministers in three major departments; and have to rely on junior ministers to be the Liberal Democrat voice in most departments (Paun 2010).

Not only has Clegg to agree to “changes to the allocation of portfolios between the parliamentary parties during the lifetime of the coalition”, but Cameron has also to accept that “no Liberal Democrat minister or whip may be removed on the recommendation of the prime minister without full consultation with the deputy prime minister” (Cabinet Office 2010). This second requirement, in light of the fallout from business secretary Vince Cable’s unwise and vain boast that he was ‘waging war’ against Rupert Murdoch (when Cable, unusually, was not fired, but responsibility for media regulation was transferred from his department to the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS)), suggests Clegg has the practical power - in consultation with Cameron - to defend ‘his’ ministers. Cameron’s powers of appointment have been limited by his coalition: Cable would surely have been fired had he been a Conservative. Cameron and Clegg together took the decision to keep him on; this is because his position within the cabinet (if not necessarily the portfolio he holds) is in the gift of Clegg, not Cameron. Both reached the compromise: first, hiving off media competition policy to the DCMS; second, keeping a chastened (and considerably weakened) Cable within the cabinet. The fact that Cable again retained his place in cabinet when subsequently criticising Cameron for being ‘very unwise’ in referring to the social problems caused by mass immigration, indicates the changed circumstances brought about under the coalition. Any minister referring to the prime minister of a single party government in such terms would surely have been fired; if not fired, such a minister would certainly have felt honour bound to resign.

The coalition, in order to maintain the agreed ministerial balance between the two partners, has also agreed to operate by a ‘one-in, one-out’ rule. For instance, when the Liberal Democrat David Laws resigned from the cabinet, he was replaced by the reshuffled Danny Alexander (who was then replaced by the promoted Michael Moore); When Liam Fox was forced to resign, having run a coach and horse through the ministerial code, his place in cabinet was ultimately taken by a promoted Tory, Justine Greening. The prime ministerial power of patronage has long been the essential resource binding ministers (and, crucially, would-be ministers and want-to-be-more-senior ministers) to him or her. Cameron, by having not only to consult- but also to ‘agree’- with Clegg on ministerial appointments and portfolio allocation, has had this power significantly constrained by a new formal limitation. Having to manage the coalition might help explain why Cameron, in contrast to his predecessors, has been noticeably reluctant to reshuffle his ministerial team. Clegg of course cannot influence Cameron’s right to choose the Conservative members of the government. Both principals, we can assume, respect each other’s right to freely choose which members of their respective parties are to be in the government (and at what level in which post). Any practical restraint on their use of that unequally shared prerogative (Cameron nominates more ministers than Clegg) will be exerted by what their respective parties deem bearable, not by Cameron, nor by Clegg.

#### Cabinet and its committees

It is well established that the full cabinet no longer plays any serious, meaningful role as a deliberative body charged with taking decisions (as opposed to the occasional collective

discussion and, more importantly, the endorsement of the policy agenda of senior ministers) (Marsh, Richards and Smith 2001; Smith 1999; Heffernan 2005a; Runciman 2004). Cabinet is merely reported to by key principals but can, occasionally, provide a sounding board from which key strategists, foremost among them the prime minister, can bounce off ideas and seek advice. The coalition cabinet mood music was genial from the start, as one would expect from a new government, with Cameron considering himself the coalition's 'chairman' (Parker 2011). The contrast with the Blair and Brown cabinets was evident. Not only would Cameron have to operate a more collective cabinet system by coalition necessity, but the lack of obvious leadership rivals meant a more convivial atmosphere. Clegg sits opposite Cameron in cabinet meetings, in the seat from where Brown eyed Blair. He has George Osborne on his right and Ken Clarke on his left (Laws 2010). Cameron is known to let discussion flow around the cabinet table and there are signs that the cabinet occasionally engages in discussion of an issue and some ministers show a willingness to assert themselves beyond their brief. Cabinet deals, brokered, if needs be, by Cameron and Clegg, have been struck. Generally, however, coalition ministers have surprisingly been on the same page; Cameron is reported to have remarked: 'I get far more trouble from Ken Clarke, Liam Fox and Iain Duncan Smith than I do from Nick' (Rawnsley 2010a).

We are thus led to believe that the full cabinet matters more under the coalition, creating the impression of a revival of cabinet and its committees (Hazell and Yong 2011). But the exchange of cabinet opinion is not the same as the taking of a substantive decision on a subject. As the coalition has entered choppy waters differences between ministers have become apparent, although the policy disagreements that have leaked in recent times often centre on tensions in the Conservative camp (most glaringly between Cameron and Liam Fox on the Strategic Defence and Security Review, Michael Gove and William Hague on Britain's response to the Libyan uprising, and between Ken Clarke and Theresa May both on sentencing and the impact of the Human Rights Act). Only on Lansley's NHS reforms have the parties, having publicly disagreed, had subsequently to seek compromise; both, having opposed views, have postponed consideration of the Human Rights Act for the remainder of this parliament. It is worth noting, however, that under both Blair and Brown cabinet discussions (such as they were) were largely confined to ministers asking (some) questions of the prime minister or of the relevant minister responsible for the issue at hand. Rarely did ministers engage with each other over matters relating to a particular minister's brief. Cameron's cabinet meetings have sometimes seen ministers engage with one another (notably over the case for a Libyan no fly zone, NHS reform and criminal justice policy), but the long established bilateral dynamic of the prime minister being the 'centre' and other ministers being the 'spokes' remains in place, even if Clegg plays a far more central role than previous holders of his post (Heffernan 2003, 2005a; Blick and Jones 2010).

### *'Coalitionising' policy*

Cabinet, for some time now, has largely worked through its committees (Lawson 1994; Hennessy 2005; Helms 2005). This has not changed under Cameron. However a leaner cabinet committee system was established; one with the bite to process decisions on key

issues. Coalition government means government by committee, but cabinet committee meetings on important matters have usually been preceded by meetings of the key principals led by Cameron and Clegg or their surrogates (Hazell and Yong 2011). Cameron and Clegg transact most of their business through regular and formal bilateral meetings (at least once a week on Monday mornings) and by holding numerous private conversations, but the coalition has then to work through various ministerial and official, formal and informal committees.

The formal cabinet structures put in place in the Coalition Agreement establish a 'coalition committee' at the 'top of the government's collective decision-making machinery' (Paun 2010). Cameron and Clegg co-chair this committee which has "to manage the business and priorities of the Government and the implementation and operation of the coalition agreement" (Cabinet Office 2010a). It contains five Conservatives and five Liberal Democrats, including the most senior figures of each of the parties, and is charged with keeping the coalition on track when times get tough. Unresolved issues are expected to be referred to the coalition committee, but 'the use of this right will be kept to a minimum' (ibid). Referral to the coalition committee is thus a last resort when other committees- and Cameron- Clegg communications- fail to solve the matter. It is listed as meeting weekly, but '[i]n its first three months of existence it has apparently met just once, to resolve issues relating to the plans for structural reform of the NHS and the proposed boundary review for House of Commons constituencies' (Hazell and Yong 2011). As a rule conflicts are resolved informally and mostly amicably, without formal reference to the coalition committee, something that indicates that other cabinet arrangements to resolve problems and potential conflicts between the coalition partners work well. It also demonstrates that ministers have, so far, established smooth and harmonious ways of working that have not needed the formal intervention of the 'court of last resort', the coalition committee.

Cabinet committees have a chair from one party and a deputy chair from the other. Either the chair or deputy chair of a committee has the right to refer irresolvable policy disagreements to the coalition committee. Among other important committees are the National Security Council (on which Clegg sits as Deputy Chair) and the Home Affairs Committee (chaired by Clegg, without Cameron's direct involvement) which has a broad remit covering constitutional, education, health, welfare and immigration issues. In addition there is a 'Coalition Operation and Strategic Planning Group', which comprises the Conservatives Oliver Letwin and Francis Maude and the Liberal Democrats Danny Alexander, and Jim Wallace. This, it was assumed, would informally troubleshoot issues beneath the attention of a formal committee or meetings of Cameron and Clegg, but it has hardly met because such issues are dealt with more informally between the key players (Hazell and Yong 2011).

Given the need for Conservative and Liberal Democrat ministers to have some form of 'ownership' of a policy, the cabinet system has to matter more than has been the case under past single party governments. For the coalition to work effectively it certainly requires a degree of collective discussion of key issues in cabinet committees, if not in

cabinet, to ensure comity between Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. For Cameron's first cabinet secretary, Gus O'Donnell, this means a

...completely different way of working. And that's because, as civil servants, we have put across the message that whenever a policy decision comes up we need to coalitionise (sic) it. That means very early on, it works across both political parties (O'Donnell 2011).

Of course ensuring each party works off the same page and can claim ownership of important policy issues need not imply a return to older school notions of collective cabinet or ministerial government, the practice called into question by both Blair and Margaret Thatcher.

### **Cameron as predominant prime minister?**

The notion that the prime minister should be powerful and authoritative- that any party leader, to be successful, has to be powerful and authoritative- is now a central feature of British politics. This is because two trends in comparative party politics have further rooted a leader-centric imperative within British politics: First the ongoing personalisation of politics places party leaders ever more centre stage, something prompted by the pathologies of news media reportage. Second, the ongoing decline in the electorate's ties to parties, which makes parties 'sell' themselves by emphasising their leadership and the policy presented by that leadership (Katz and Mair 2002; Panebianco 1988; Heffernan 2009). This means that each prime minister has a large political footprint. Elections are increasingly fought out between parties led by their leaders, so parties have significantly increased the political purchase of the individual party leader over their programme and campaign pitch (ibid). This contributes to the power of the prime minister in government (and to that of the deputy prime minister). As the televised party leader's debates at the 2010 election portend, the political purchase of the party leader is likely to increase, not decrease in the future. Cameron and Clegg both cast considerable shadows over their respective parties, but Cameron's is presently the larger.

Parties have always had a pyramidal structure, but now more than ever they reflect a strict parliamentary hierarchy of (1) leader; (2) other senior leaders; (3) frontbenchers; and (4) backbenchers. This reinforces the long established centrality of the prime minister as it is now assumed he or she will be more than 'primus inter pares' and have more authority, influence and power than other governmental actors. 'Weaker' prime ministers like Gordon Brown are unfavourably contrasted to more 'powerful' prime ministers such as Tony Blair; Cameron has long eagerly aspired to being in the Blair mould. Being powerful, though, never makes any prime minister a 'president' when the notion of presidentialisation (Foley 2000) was forever undone by the confirmation in recent ministerial (and prime ministerial) memoirs that infighting between Blair and Brown meant Brown regularly prevented Blair from pursuing his chosen agenda (Blair 2010; Mandelson 2010). No US president, unlike the British prime minister, can use a partisan majority to successfully lead their legislature; but no prime minister, as Brown proved



under the supposedly 'president' Blair, can ever have the total control the president has over his or her executive (Heffernan 2005).

Cameron, having been a powerful and authoritative party leader in opposition, is eager to cast himself in the modern mould of leadership. Even friendly admirers consider him "ambitious, competitive, there's an element of selfishness, all the things which are important if you're going to be Prime Minister. Ruthless. He's got all of those..... David is a natural No. 1" (Mayer 2008). Cameron, being prime minister, has automatic possession of the following four institutional power resources.

1. Being the legal head of the government, having the right of proposal and veto, to appoint and delegate responsibilities to ministers and departments through the use of Crown prerogatives, and having the right to be consulted, either directly or indirectly, about all significant matters relating to government policy;
2. Helping set the policy agenda through leadership of the government, bilateral negotiations with individual ministers, management of the cabinet and cabinet committee system and directing the Whitehall apparatus;
3. Heading up a de facto prime ministerial department in Downing Street and the Cabinet Office; and
4. Being able, through his or her party and the news media, to set the government's political agenda (Heffernan 2003).

These resources make any prime minister, even when leading a coalition, a unique, powerful Whitehall actor. Cameron, as with all prime ministers, will be a predominant prime minister (the 'stronger or main element' within the party, parliament and government), when able to marry his prime ministerial institutional power with the following personal power resources:

1. Reputation, skill and ability;
2. Association with actual or anticipated political success;
3. Electoral popularity; and
4. Having a high standing in his or her parliamentary party (less so the extra-parliamentary party) (Heffernan *ibid*)

These resources empower the prime minister within both their party and government. Within parliament the ability to lead a partisan Commons majority (even if one provided by a coalition) confers considerably advantage; within the government ministers, whatever their career trajectory, are more likely to work to or otherwise defer to a prime minister who is electorally popular and they consider politically successful. This gives the prime minister a less fettered hand in the running of their government. Blair, in his pre 2003 heyday, possessed such power resources in abundance (Seldon 2007, 2004; for the authors takes on this see Bennister 2009; Heffernan 2007). He was, notwithstanding Gordon Brown's ability to often stymie him in many policy areas, mostly predominant as a result.

Prime ministers find that their political 'skill in context' is crucial to their utilisation of resources, because these prime ministerial personal resources are contingent and contextual; they come and go, are acquired and squandered, won and lost. Cameron, like all prime ministers, will be predominant by being well resourced; he will be less predominant by being poorly resourced. Cameron might model his personal style on Blair, but he has to be aware that the former Labour leader could largely play loose with his party because (1) he was considerably bolstered by having led Labour to substantial parliamentary majorities and (2) he was, before 2004, personally popular with Labour voters and with MPs. Cameron, while being personally popular, can make no such similar claims of having 'won' an election or of having brought substantial electoral advantage to the Conservatives. He will also know that Conservative MPs have in the past been more amenable to regicide (or attempted regicide) than the often more compliant parliamentary Labour party.

Is Cameron constrained by Clegg?

Cameron, like any prime minister, is constrained by public and parliamentary opinion, the temporality of their power resources, the obligations of collegiality, and by limitations such as time, information and expertise. Cameron's opportunity to be a powerful and authoritative prime minister is, unusually, unusually constrained by his relationship with Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats. Prime Minister Cameron is powerful, by simple virtue of occupying the office, but within the coalition he has to:

1. Make policy compromises with his coalition partner, rather than pull his own party behind his own favoured policy agenda;
2. Negotiate the peculiarities of having to manage the 'two-headed leadership' of the government;
3. Accept that there are constraints on his ability to appoint and manage ministers who are not of his own party; and
4. Acknowledge, because the government has to operate not only intra-party, but also cross-party, that there is a new collective dynamic within the executive and specifically inside the cabinet system.

This reality, so far, has proven to be something to which Cameron has been able (happily) to accommodate himself to. His abovementioned personal power resources (his failure to win the election for the Conservatives or to subsequently improve on their electoral showing notwithstanding) are presently more in credit than debit, as demonstrated by his strong personal polling. His institutional power resources, however, are partially compromised by his leading a coalition and by his relationship with Clegg. Cameron remains the legal head of the government, but his prerogatives to propose, veto and make ministerial appointments are, as we have seen, constrained by Clegg. Clegg, having a party based autonomy from Cameron, plays some part in structuring the policy agenda through leadership of the government, bilateral negotiations with individual ministers, management of the cabinet and cabinet committee system and exerting influence over the Whitehall apparatus. This policy agenda has already been structured to a considerable extent by the Coalition Programme for Government. Cameron's ability to

be able, through his or her party and the news media, to set the government's political agenda is also partially fettered by Clegg's ability - and that of 'his' ministers- to try to do likewise as Liberal Democrats.

These constraints are a subtle qualification of the prime minister's institutional power. Can Clegg, short of the radical step of pulling the plug on the coalition, further constrain Cameron? Not really. Clegg's powers are often informal. He is Lord President of the Council, a post usually held by the Leader of the House of Commons or Lords but, beyond the Coalition Agreement for Stability and Reform, little other formal light is cast on his role. He has (1) Privy Council responsibilities; (2) heads up the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister; (3) is responsible for the Cabinet Office's Political and Constitutional Directorate; (4) fills in for Cameron at prime minister's questions and (5) 'runs' the routine, mundane business of government in Cameron's absence. As deputy prime minister, Clegg presently possesses, then, the following institutional power resources:

1. The ability to collapse the government (with the agreement of Liberal Democrat MPs) by withdrawing Liberal Democrat support from the coalition;
2. As Cameron's deputy he possesses the right to be consulted on ministerial appointments and can nominate, following consultation with Cameron, Liberal Democrat ministers; he has the right to propose (and perhaps veto) policy and, with other Liberal Democrat ministers, to amend policy; to stand in for the prime minister in his absence; and having the right to be consulted, either directly or indirectly, about all significant matters relating to government policy;
3. Helping set the policy agenda through bilateral negotiations with the prime minister; chairing of cabinet committees; and having the right to see and comment on departmental papers presented to the prime minister; and
4. Making use of a new, but limited (if expanding), deputy prime minister's office.

These resources, while more significant than those of any other minister, are weaker than those of the prime minister. In essence they enable Clegg to qualify Cameron's institutional power resources, rather than provide him with the means to pursue his own separate agenda. Clegg manages the government's constitutional reform agenda, but without a full department of his own, he is unusual by comparison with other comparative deputies (Paun 2010). He may have weakened his position by avoiding taking a major portfolio, but it is hard to see that Cameron could have made him foreign secretary and he is likely to have turned down the graveyard post of home secretary (being chancellor, George Osborne's non-negotiable perch, was, naturally, out of the question). The realities of coalition government necessitates Clegg's location close to the action with a strong domestic focus; only by lacking a strict departmental role can he hope to play some role across the range of government policy.

The limitations of *Clegg's* personal power resources

Clegg's principal resource, his trump card, is that the Coalition Agreement indicates that both prime minister and deputy prime minister 'should' have a 'full and

contemporaneous overview of the business of Government. Each will have the power to commission papers from the Cabinet Secretariat' (Cabinet Office 2010). The devil, as ever, is in the detail: the operative word there, one notes, is 'should'. The prime minister has the greater institutional resource to enjoy such a 'full and contemporaneous overview' than those possessed by Clegg's (newly established) office. There is "an inherent asymmetry in the coalition — in numbers, resources, experience and preparation" (Riddell 2010). By July 2011 Cameron had appointed some 20 Downing Street special advisers and Clegg had 5 (Hansard 2011). Clegg can draw on civil service resources but his office "remains under-resourced and overstretched. Initially it was inadequately staffed..... [It] is now much bigger than a Secretary of State's office, but the staff are more junior and inexperienced in comparison with those in No 10" (Hazell and Yong 2011). Clegg then, while better resourced than before, remains, however, considerably outnumbered and out resourced having 'to cover ninety per cent of the policy remit of the Prime Minister with less than half the support' (Paun 2010). Team Cameron might have brought "Liberal Democrat advisers into the heart of Number 10" (Seldon 2011), but while, as Seldon suggests, Clegg can make use of Downing Street resources, it remains unclear whether he can only draw on such resources for informational purposes, rather than being able himself to marshal and direct them. Locating himself at the centre may have been a strategic decision, but it has meant Clegg lacks the necessary resources to fulfil the coordinating role he had envisaged. He has also badly missed the advice of the absent David Laws, who left the cabinet following his failure to properly account for his parliamentary expenses. Laws' role as Clegg's 'deputy' has since been filled by the much less effective Danny Alexander (and Alexander, assumedly, has a full time job in the Treasury). Cameron remains the resource-rich actor in the executive; he has 175 staff at his disposal in the prime minister's office in contrast to Clegg's 13 in the office of the deputy prime minister (plus the 60 officials of the Constitutional and Political Reform Directorate) (Cabinet Office 2010b).

We may thus be able to identify a set of institutional resources for Clegg as the deputy prime minister, but Clegg can only be practically empowered within the executive should he be able to lay meaningful claim to the same personal resources as those of the prime minister:

1. Reputation, skill and ability;
2. Association with actual or anticipated political success;
3. Electoral popularity; and
4. Having a high standing in his or her parliamentary party (less so the extra-parliamentary party) (Heffernan 2003, 2005a).

Clegg presently struggles to possess (let alone effectively use) these four resources. He retains the fourth resource at present, but since entering government he has been considerably weakened in the others by being hit hard by (1) the Liberal Democrat slump in the polls; (2) losing the Oldham East and Saddleworth and Barnsley by-elections; (3) taking the blame for 'Tory measures' such as the cuts and the hike in tuition fees; and (4) by enduring considerable liberal (small l) hostility born of 'his' decision to 'prop up' a

Conservative government, something reflected in the dramatic collapse of the Liberal Democrats poll ratings. This was reinforced in May 2011 by disastrous results in the local and devolved elections in May 2011 and by the resounding rejection of the Liberal Democrat's cherished electoral reform at the referendum. Cameron has been criticised by Liberal Democrats for letting Clegg take the flak for breaking his party's promise on tuition fees, but Clegg, it would seem, has been more than prepared to take such flak and Cameron has further irritated some Liberal Democrats (notably Energy secretary Chris Huhne) when intervening to shore up the 'No' campaign in the AV referendum (even if Huhne's long term target is more likely to have been his own party leader). Clegg's problems are exacerbated by the irresolvable conundrum that he can (1) only operate in Whitehall (and extract policy concessions from Cameron) by being emollient and consensual, but (2) can only secure electoral credit from past Liberal Democrat voters by being assertive and confrontational. Having to balance both realities has seen Clegg assert a claim of 'muscular liberalism' since May 2011 (Clegg 2011) and his party engage in rhetorical Tory bashing at its conference in September

Clegg's weakness, then, is that many Liberal Democrat voters think the Conservative brand has not been 'sufficiently decontaminated'. The few concessions (or policy victories he might achieve within the cabinet system, and from Cameron) often remain out of sight of the electorate or are of a technical nature of interest only to the political cognoscenti. Clegg and other Liberal Democrat ministers cannot, for reasons of cabinet comity and their need to maintain the relationship between Cameron and Clegg and Conservative and Liberal Democrat ministers, too often 'run' against 'their' government. Neither can they 'challenge the 'Conservatives' or only trumpet their own party successes by distinguishing them from those of the government. Cameron, then, might find himself having to support and explain government policy not of his party's own making (the policy of Liberal Democrat ministers), but Clegg has the more unenviable task of explaining and defending Conservative policy to non-Conservative voters. This helps explain why Cameron's personal approval rating has hovered around 40 percent after the post-election high of 60 percent, but Clegg's plummeted from a similarly post-election high level to a 20 percent approval rating. A year into the coalition his party found itself polling an all time low of some 9 percent (YouGov 2011). George Osborne, asked why his prophecy about becoming Britain's public enemy number one has not yet materialised, joked with colleagues: "I hadn't reckoned on Nick Clegg" (Parker 2011a). So far the Conservatives, it seems, receive whatever credit is given the coalition and the Liberal Democrats much of the blame.

Cameron, while having to make concessions to and work with Clegg, remains a predominant prime minister

Clegg, short of the doomsday scenario of collapsing the coalition (or threatening to do so), can only significantly qualify the prime minister's institutional power, not permanently erode it. Any threat he might make to end the coalition cannot be made idly and can probably never be made more than once. The shift to fixed term parliaments, while appearing to limit the prime minister's prerogative power to dissolve parliament and use the advantage of incumbency, may well more tightly bind the coalition together

until 2015 and so strengthen Cameron's hand. Is Cameron predominant? Among Conservatives he is presently unchallenged. He has, for instance, no equivalent of Gordon Brown to contend with; something placing him in a more advantageous intra-executive position than Tony Blair; George Osborne, Cameron's chancellor, is his closest supporter, not a Brown-like scheming successor. Unlike the weaker Gordon Brown, Cameron's command of his party is such he would be wholly predominant were it not for the policy concessions he had to make to Clegg and his coalition partner. Such concessions, however, appear to be easily made by Cameron who seems not remotely concerned to be unable to pursue the entire policy agenda Conservatives (and especially the Conservative right) might favour. He is, then, in spite of Clegg, more predominant than not; he is, however, less predominant than he would be were he leading a single party government. Naturally, Cameron, like all prime ministers, probably thinks he is neither powerful nor sufficiently predominant.

### **Has Cameron restored some semblance of collegial government?**

Initial reading of Cameron's style saw some commentators, such as Fraser Nelson, claim that ministers were now more trusted by the prime minister and that

...[t]he old days – where Number 10 and the Treasury tried to pull the strings of government and treated Cabinet members like puppets – are over.... Number 10 does not try to control everything, the Chancellor no longer seeks to stop everything. The whole government is of a fundamentally different character..... Cameron has found ministers he trusts, and asked them to get on with it. It's called Cabinet government, and it was the norm until 1997. It has just made a comeback. Ministerial initiatives (police reform, health reform, welfare reform, school reform) are welcomed, not crushed, by a Prime Minister and a Chancellor who have a shared objective (Nelson 2010).

There is, given the need to coalitionise policy and to engage both sets of parties in decision making, a greater degree of cabinet collegiality than under Labour. Of course prime ministerial-led bilateralism, even when tempered by the involvement of the deputy prime minister, is not prime ministerial diktat, but neither is it a form of old school cabinet government (Heffernan 2005a; March Richards and Smith 2001; Blick and Jones 2010).

Cabinet collegiality, certainly in the form misattributed to the supposed 'golden age' when ministers submitted papers on subjects beyond their departmental brief and cabinet met for hour on end debating- with a vote taken- the pressing issues of the day, remains a thing of the past. Cameron's full cabinet remains, as argued above, largely a forum for the exchange of information. Committee deliberation is inevitably shaped beforehand by bilateral negotiations led by the prime minister in which Liberal Democrat ministers, especially Clegg, have a greater autonomy than their Conservative counterpart but in which Cameron and Osborne have considerable authority. Cameron, appearing before the Commons Liaison Committee, insisted that the process in setting the strategy for the Comprehensive Spending Review was 'more collegiate and collective than it has been in

the past'. But the pre-cooked nature of the negotiations was shaped by 'quadrilateral meetings' of Cameron, Clegg, Osborne and Alexander..... before nine discussions in Cabinet on the Comprehensive Spending Review' (Liaison Committee 2010). Regular meetings of this 'quad', which consists of Cameron, Osborne, Clegg and Danny Alexander, are a key feature of the coalition because they enable both principals and their primary advisors to troubleshoot issues and try to ensure both parties operate on the same page. Importantly, as Hazell and Yong note, this has come to form part of an established informal process within the coalition (Hazell and Yong 2011).

Cameron's management of the Conservative party has long exhibited Blair-like inner circle tendencies (Heffernan 2010; Bale 2010; Snowden 2010). In government we see that the aforementioned 'quad', while it includes the key Liberal Democrats, is an 'exclusive' meeting, not an 'inclusive' one. In opposition Cameron's style of policy making was not remotely collegiate in the sense that shadow ministers were able to collectively decide policy or strategy. It was only collegial in that shadow ministers conferred with Cameron and Osborne. This is still the case in government for the Conservative side of the coalition. It is, however, less so for the Liberal Democrat side where Clegg, speaking on behalf of 'his' ministers can make their case to Cameron. Of course, the weaker electorally or the less successful Clegg and his party are seen to be, the weaker he and it will be within the government. Liberal Democrats, faced with wretched poll ratings, are likely to have to cling to their Conservative nurse for fear of something worse. If Clegg is disempowered within government by being electorally unpopular his parliamentary party is not necessarily empowered (but can assert itself by putting the brakes on Conservative-led NHS reforms or when defending the Human Rights Act). The electorally weakened Liberal Democrats, barring any major unforeseen development, are in the coalition for the long haul. This means, provided Cameron is prepared to make the necessary compromises on policy that he can live with (and he is nothing but pragmatically flexible), that his potential to be predominant, his being more than *primus inter pares*, should be unaffected by his being prime minister in a coalition. Predominance, again, does not imply any form of prime ministerial 'omnipotence', but only the prime minister being the 'stronger or main element' within the party and the government.

An ever more assertive centre? Back to the Blair model?

Cameron has successfully presented himself as 'prime ministerial'. He often excels when making his case via the news media, shines effortlessly in both public and semi-private arenas, and makes effective use of his parliamentary platform. Cameron's approach to policy (as opposed to tactics and strategy) can, however, lack the necessary command of detail. He, and especially his team in No10, seems more prepared than most prime ministerial predecessors to delegate significant responsibility to ministers. The prime minister has, as a result, found himself charged with being behind the curve when problems arise in regard to such issues as the plan to privatize state owned forestry land, NHS reform and prison sentence reforms; he was recently reproached for being reactive when responding to the recent London riots. As a result Cameron, stung by the criticism that he responds only when assertive complaints about policy are made by Liberal

Democrat or Tory backbenchers, has recently sought to bolster the institutional grasp across Whitehall that is afforded him by No10.

Under Blair individuals mattered more than the formal positions they held. Trusted advisers had the prime minister's ear and resources were directed towards communications and trying to ensure that Blair's 'writ' ran throughout Whitehall (Seldon 2007; 2004). That Cameron has slowly moved back to the Blair model is obvious not only with his long standing dependence on special advisers such as Ed Llewellyn, Kate Fall, Steve Hilton, Andy Coulson and Andrew Cooper but in his communications operation, now led by Craig Oliver. It is very much in the mould of both Gordon Brown's communications team and of Blair's operation post Alastair Campbell. The loss of Coulson to the phone hacking scandal was a personal blow to Cameron, who was convinced that to manage the media you needed an experienced media operator at the centre. Cameron's private office similarly follows the Blair blueprint, being jointly led by a special adviser, Llewellyn, who is Chief of Staff, working alongside the seemingly indispensable Downing Street permanent secretary, Jeremy Heywood. The Number 10 Policy Unit has undergone three evolutions since May 2010 to become an 'integrated unit staffed by 12 civil servants head hunted and interview by both Cameron and Clegg. The Unit is led by officials, Paul Kirby and Kris Murrin, with a remit to 'depoliticise analysis of policy' (Hazell and Yong 2011; Montgomerie 2011a). An early tendency for 'departmentalism' has already appeared to have run its course. As Tom Kelly, Blair's press spokesperson and a former civil servant, notes: "it's all very well saying departments should do their own thing but in the end everything comes through the front and back doors of No10 and there is no alternative to a strong grip from the centre" (Daily Telegraph 2011a). Continuity is evident in the civil service with both Heywood and cabinet secretary Gus O'Donnell's having enhanced roles in managing the central functions of government (and with Heywood named as his successor as cabinet secretary). O'Donnell's higher profile enables him to try to reassert the civil service ethos in Whitehall by promoting the Cabinet Office as a crucial player in the coalition:

I describe myself as the equidistant Cabinet Secretary between the two. From my office it is – and I've counted it – 50 paces to get to the Prime Minister's office and 50 paces to get to the Deputy Prime Minister's office. That's a very nice balance to have (Daily Telegraph 2011).

Cameron, being aware of the need to strengthen Downing Street to enable him to be more assertive across Whitehall, has perhaps tentatively moved slowly, but methodically toward aping Blair's much criticised form of 'sofa government'. His, however, is to be a much larger sofa with more people sitting on it: Clegg, obviously, has to be seated on said sofa and George Osborne, who is the most important Conservative beyond Cameron, permanently sprawls on it. Osborne who, as one 'Downing Street insider' has confirmed, is 'David Cameron's principal adviser'(Montgomerie 2011a; Parker 2011a), is in attendance at all key Downing Street strategy meetings. He is, in sharp contrast to Gordon Brown who endlessly sought to assert himself over Tony Blair, a chancellor eager to help and support his prime minister and is a key member of 'Team Cameron'. Cameron and Osborne form the core of the Conservative inner circle and both convene



daily meetings in No 10 at 8.30 and 4.30 (Montgomerie 2011a; Seldon 2011). Presently cabinet (or rather its committees) matters more under Cameron than under Blair or Brown, but Cameron's large sofa will surely be increasingly used to strategically steer the government, if not necessarily to second guess or micromanage departmental policy; Cameron, one suspects, might find himself tempted to use it to do both. The prime minister's possession of a fully effective Policy Unit (or some variant on it) has long been the principal means by which Downing Street shadows and impacts policy making in specific strategic policy fields. It is no surprise that Cameron has finally seen the need to establish one (ibid); the surprise is that he thought he could manage without one for the first ten months of his premiership.

#### Cameron and Clegg going forward

Coalition government, in theory, implies a more inclusive and collective style of policy-making and decision taking (Laver and Schofield 1998; Muller and Strom 2000; Laver and Budge 1992). Government, which remains hierarchical, has still to be steered and led; which falls, as ever, to the prime minister and his or her office. In this task, however, Cameron is assisted by Clegg. Clegg, to his certain discomfort, provides a useful 'human shield' for Cameron, drawing much of the public ire on spending cuts and as cover from Cameron's right flank. Not only are Clegg's personal power resources weak, but his party's considerable electoral problems have made him much weaker than Cameron. Although he has bolstered his institutional resources (particularly with the appointment of Chris Wormald as his chief of staff in October 2010, so creating a Heywood/ Wormald Whitehall axis (Hazell and Yong 2011)), he is still hugely disadvantaged in comparison with Cameron. Cameron can still occupy the higher ground on international affairs and manage his more dominant public profile, being able to set the agenda of government. Without a department, Clegg has direct control over constitutional affairs only – an area of great occasional importance, but with minimal public salience.

Cameron's prime ministerial style continues to owe much to the fact that he thinks the party leader to be predominant and that the prime minister has to be predominant as well. Prime ministers have endlessly to fend off media scrutiny, work with intra-governmental rivals, manage their ministers and MPs, brush off the hostility of other parties and anticipate the reaction of the electorate. They necessarily work at being predominant. Some, like Gordon Brown, never quite manage it. Helping Clegg keep Liberal Democrats on board, especially when their poll ratings continue to tank, offers Cameron a formidable challenge. Clegg, however, is presently tied into the government, but so too is Cameron tied into his coalition. Cameron has to work hard to retain Clegg's trust and confidence because, should trust between the two falter, then Cameron would be weakened by the stability of his government being compromised. Both principals have thus to work with and through each other. So far, however, both seem part of the same solid team and relationships between the parties have proved surprisingly unproblematic. So far; because nothing in a coalition can be assumed.

Within parliament Cameron faces a Conservative right which is keen to assertive itself over issues such as the repeal of the Human Rights Act and the European Union. Their

clout was evidenced in October 2011 by the 81 Commons rebels prepared to embarrass Cameron by calling for an EU referendum and the over forty MPs who's threatened rebellion persuaded the government to alter its stance on knife crime. Many on the right, claiming to have been elected on the Conservative manifesto, not the Coalition Agreement, are prepared to flex what muscles they have (Montgomerie 2011), but lacking any serious or substantive champions either within or without the cabinet, rightwing backbenchers presently offers no immediate threat to Cameron. Thus there may be, in the words of those "close to the prime minister....., 'about 30 to 40 shits' who will take any opportunity to have a pop at him" (Forsyth 2011), but this ought be a manageable number. Conservative MPs can, however, embarrass, sometimes harry, Cameron and his ministers. Cameron has therefore to take care to manage- if not to placate- the right. He has, whenever possible, to try not to foster backbench discontent by creating unnecessary and avoidable grievance. The prime minister is eager, however, to lead his party as he chooses; his style of leadership reflects his belief that MPs should be seen to follow him (and his confidants), not he follow them (Heffernan 2010). Shoehorning the Conservatives into a coalition was an easy task, but Cameron will have to work to maintain that coalition should a critical mass of Conservative MPs become (1) unhappy at its policy direction and (2) critical of his high handed management of the party.

## **Conclusion**

A prime minister heading up a coalition government, even as powerful a party leader as Cameron ought not to be as authoritative as a prime minister leading a single party government. But the power of the prime minister always owes much to his or her informal, personal power resources which enable him or her to make effective use of their institutional power resources. This remains so under the coalition as under single party government. Cameron, being electorally popular and politically successful, can be an authoritative, predominant prime minister when he willingly accepts the policy compromises required by the Conservative- Liberal Democrat partnership. Cameron and Conservative ministers might well embrace such policy compromises, but have to acknowledge that the Conservative parliamentary party might not always be content to permit him and them doing so. Because Cameron's position is ultimately reliant upon his own parliamentary party, he has always to take care to retain the support of the broad majority of Tory backbenchers: He may face no present threat from the Conservative right, but he has to fear centrist backbenchers feeling pressurized by restless or unhappy Conservative voters. To be a predominant prime minister, Cameron feels he has to maintain his predominant party leadership; he will be considerably the weaker, should Tory MPs see him to be either electorally unpopular or politically unsuccessful. Having to work with and through Nick Clegg presents Cameron with the principal obstacle to his being predominant, but this is an obstacle he has mostly managed to so far circumvent.

At this early stage in the Cameron premiership, then, we can broadly observe that no formal, substantial change in the role of prime minister has been enacted. Cameron's predominance, by leading a coalition, is partially constrained by Clegg, but he considerably constrains Clegg. We would expect any future single party government to

enable a well resourced prime minister to revert to the ways of Thatcher and Blair. This prime minister, then, is predominant even when he is constrained in significant ways by the imperatives of coalition government. But being well resourced in terms of his powers, Cameron, if he is prepared to continue to accept the policy compromises coalition imposes, is presently no more constrained than a prime minister who is faced with a preeminent intra-party rival with a significant power base.

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