



Becoming Prime Minister

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'My predominant feeling was fear, and of a sort unlike anything I had felt before' (Tony Blair, *A Journey*, p.1)

'I can remember an odd sense of loneliness as well as anticipation when I received the telephone call which summoned me to the Palace' (Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, p.17)

It was only in the aftermath of the 1997 General Election result that Tony Blair contemplated what it would mean to become Prime Minister. It scared him: 'at that instant, suddenly I thought of myself no longer as the up-and-coming, the challenger, the prophet, but as the owner of the responsibility, the person not explaining why things were wrong but taking the decisions to put them right'.¹ Both Blair and Thatcher had had years in Opposition to prepare for office, yet when it was actually upon them, both found the prospect intimidating.

Most prime ministers do not unexpectedly find themselves in the job, unlike many of those asked to take on other roles in government. Half the UK's 14 prime ministers since 1945, came to power after a general election, the other half succeeded to the leadership while their party was in power. Whichever route they took, most proposed themselves for the role, so in theory had a chance to prepare for it.* But being Prime Minister is one of the hardest jobs to prepare for because of the breadth of the role, the scale of the workload, the varied pressures and the unexpected crises.

There are almost no guides to the mechanics of becoming Prime Minister: the early decisions, the support available, and the judgements that can set the tone for a

* The exception perhaps being Alec Douglas-Home who, in 1964, was chosen by then-Prime Minister Harold Macmillan as his favoured successor, against the expectations of the wider Conservative Party.

premiership. Memoirs, academic books and journalists may cover the politics and drama of becoming Prime Minister and holding the role – how previous prime ministers have managed their Cabinet, their MPs and their party, performed in the media and in Parliament, and made policy. The Cabinet Manual details aspects of the prime minister's constitutional role.²

This paper aims to fill that gap. Drawing on sources including previous Institute for Government research, our Ministers Reflect collection of interviews and the 'Day One' briefs that the civil service provide to new prime ministers and interviews with former officials, it sets out:

- **The transition** – the first few days of being Prime Minister, what decisions will be required to make and what factors they should consider.
- **The organisation** – what a new prime minister should bear in mind when organising their team in No.10 and the Cabinet Office.
- **The adjustment** – how a new prime minister may have to adjust to the role, including how they make decisions and organise their time.
- **The preparation** – How potential prime ministers can prepare for coming into office and what they should prioritise.

The role of the UK Prime Minister can be an enormously powerful one. But it depends hugely on the circumstances in which a prime minister arrives in office and their authority over their Cabinet and the wider party. Coming in to government with no majority, a divided party and a huge policy area to tackle is a very different experience from starting out with a large majority and a blank slate on policy. Whatever the context, early decisions can make a big impact on a premiership. When Theresa May became Prime Minister, among her early changes were the creation of the Department for International Trade and the Department for Exiting the EU. She appointed David Davis, Boris Johnson and Liam Fox to key roles. All these early decisions would have a lasting effect on her premiership. By understanding better the organisation they inherit and the consequences of key decisions that must be made, a new prime minister will be better prepared to secure real change while in government.

Becoming Prime Minister – the transition

Like Blair, Margaret Thatcher worried as she prepared to be appointed as Prime Minister. She was 'anxious about getting the details of procedure and protocol right'.³ But this is well-rehearsed by the Palace and the civil service.

Visiting the Queen

The resignation of an outgoing prime minister and appointment of a new one has a set routine. The Queen's Private Secretary ushers in the new Prime Minister and after the audience with the Queen, the Prime Minister's Principal Private Secretary is there to accompany them back to No.10. Prime ministers usually make a speech in Downing

Street when they return from the Palace. When David Cameron took over, his team were anxious to let him know where to stand to make that speech but struggled to get a phone call with him during the rush of events.⁴

Immediate tasks

It is when the new Prime Minister goes through the No.10 door that the real business begins. He or she will be clapped in the door by staff, be greeted by the Cabinet Secretary and soon after head into a meeting to receive pre-prepared civil service briefings. These briefings cover everything from living arrangements for the Prime Minister and their family, to the ministerial appointments process, key policy briefings, urgent decisions, protocols, security and intelligence information, and nuclear weapons release policy. Alongside these, the new Prime Minister is immediately launched into many rounds of phone calls with international leaders wishing them well in the new job.

The order in which these early tasks are completed will partly depend on external priorities, partly on how the new Prime Minister wants to tackle them and partly on how each day pans out. Getting through it all can be an exhausting process and one that usually comes off the back of a campaign, whether for the leadership or a general election. A new prime minister could take time, but the pressure of media and public anticipation usually means they want to be seen to get up and running. This provides an early lesson in how extensive demands on their time will now be.

Forming a government

Choosing a Cabinet is the Prime Minister's greatest power and that power is usually strongest when they have just taken on the role. However he or she comes into the role, a new premier is immediately launched into a period of 'high octane HR'.⁵ The process of forming a government can take several days, depending on the circumstances. Compared to most other countries, this is extremely rapid. Reshuffles by a prime minister from the same party can often be just as comprehensive as those by an incoming government.

Prime ministers will generally appoint up to six Cabinet positions on the first day, the rest of Cabinet the following day and more junior positions in the next day or two. As civil servants told Tony Blair in 1997, it is 'a pretty gruelling process'.⁶ Thatcher made her first appointments on the Friday following the 1979 General Election, she met with the new ministers one by one on the Saturday and they were announced to the press on Saturday afternoon.⁷ Now the precedent has become established for ministerial appointments to be announced as they happen, one by one or in small batches.

A new prime minister should not rush this process. The more that a future prime minister can think in advance about what they want to achieve in government and which individuals are most likely to deliver it, the better. If they have not had the time to consider these issues in advance, they would be well advised to take more time to make appointments, to avoid mistakes that may have a lasting effect.

Mistakes in the appointments process could result in:

- **Struggling or failing policies in different departments.** In 2010, Cameron appointed Iain Duncan Smith to the Department of Work and Pensions, bringing with him work he had done with the Centre for Social Justice on a Universal Credit policy. Duncan Smith became so closely associated with this policy it was hard for Cameron to change the policy without risking Duncan Smith's resignation.
- **The potential for political problems early in their premiership.** Government formation (and later reorganisations) can go wrong if someone refuses a post. In January 2018, Theresa May's reshuffle went off course as several ministers refused the jobs she had planned for them. Justine Greening ended up leaving the government after being told she was being moved from Education.
- **The possibility that personal disagreements may arise** – between departments, or between ministers within a department. In 1997, Blair came to regret appointing both Harriet Harman and Frank Field to Social Security: 'the result was a severe mismatch, like a kind of "dating agency from hell" mistake'.⁸ Blair moved Harman in the July 1998 reshuffle and Field resigned after Blair refused to make him Secretary of State.
- **A further reshuffle being required.**

Before making any appointments, a prime minister needs to consider whether they are going to make changes to any departments or ministerial titles. Prime ministers often create new posts or even new departments during government formation. Too often this has been done simply to make a new minister happy in the job they are being given:

'We do it all the time... In the process of a reshuffle, a few [switches or moves] happen and then you get Number 10 ringing up and saying: "The PM wants to keep X person happy. What can we give him to do?" . . . [It's a] very ad hominem arrangement. Some [changes] which turn out to be quite beneficial, but they were not based on any great analysis, nor was there time for it. When the question comes, very often you only have half an hour to find the answer. Literally half an hour. Sometimes less.'⁹

While prime ministers are often focused on the politics of their appointments, they don't always spend enough time on thinking through what makes for an effective ministerial team in each department. As well as avoiding personal disagreements between ministers who are required to work together (including giving secretaries of state a say about their junior ministers) a prime minister needs to ensure:

- that all policy briefs are covered, avoiding any confusion about who is covering which responsibility and including Lords ministers to represent the department in the second chamber
- that ministers have been given a clear steer about the priorities and objectives they are meant to cover.

The civil service supports the Prime Minister throughout, ensuring that formal aspects of the appointments process are adhered to, including the constitutional process of appointment (it is the Queen who formally appoints ministers); propriety checks on the new appointments; that the sinecure offices of Lord President of the Council, Lord Privy Seal, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Paymaster General are assigned; and the process of allocating the official residences.

For a government coming into office from opposition, shadow ministers might expect to take up the same posts they have been shadowing. This, in theory, provides continuity in their understanding of their brief, their knowledge of manifesto commitments and any contact with the department during the campaign period. However, historically many new prime ministers have made changes. After previous changes of government around two-fifths of ministers did not take up the post that they had previously shadowed.¹⁰ There can be good reasons for this: the size of the shadow cabinet, the difference between being a good opposition spokesperson and being a good minister, balancing political factions in the party, and promoting diversity in the Cabinet.

Getting government up and running

Alongside forming their government, a new prime minister will also be working their way through a range of other briefings, decisions and calls on their time.

Ministers will quickly head off to their departments and get going with their own induction into the Department and official briefings. In No.10, alongside any early policy decisions and announcements, the Prime Minister is continuing to make important decisions about the working of government.

On the first day, the business covered will probably include:

- Deciding where to have their office and where their key staff will sit
- Establishing priorities for the first week's diary, which might include the first Prime Minister's Questions, and any official visits.*
- Agreeing regular meetings (prime ministers will usually have a regular morning meeting – but the cast list for this varies).
- Establishing the membership and terms of reference of key Cabinet committees. The first question is which of these the Prime Minister will chair and who he or she will appoint as Chair of the others. These decisions send a strong signal about priorities and which of their ministers they favour the most.
- For prime ministers coming to the role from opposition, working on planning the draft Queen's Speech (drawing on the work the civil service will already have done on manifesto commitments).

* Theresa May visited Scotland for talks with the First Minister 48 hours after taking office in July 2016.

For new prime ministers taking over mid-term, rethinking the legislative agenda, and whether they need to introduce a new Budget.

First week

Throughout the first week of their premiership, a new prime minister will be in contact with their peers across the world. From the moment they walk in the door there will be a growing list of international leaders and others wanting to ring to offer their congratulations. President Barack Obama called David Cameron within the first half hour of Cameron arriving at No.10.¹¹ New prime ministers take these calls along with calls with first ministers in the devolved nations, interspersed with everything else that is going on. There is often an etiquette to the order in which calls are placed or received, but which calls matter the most will also depend on the new Prime Minister's policy priorities and what is happening in the wider world.

The Prime Minister will receive briefings from the Cabinet Secretary, the premier's main advisers, the heads of the intelligence agencies and the National Security Adviser. They are inducted into the Nuclear Release procedures and also have to appoint nuclear deputies who would decide what to do in the event of a nuclear strike if the Prime Minister is incapacitated.

The Prime Minister will also have to deal with a variety of other procedural matters, including propriety rules and ethics for both ministers and special advisers, whether they want to make changes to the Ministerial Code¹² and proposals for induction and support for new ministers.

Alongside all these, the new Prime Minister will also have to start working through their in-tray. During an election campaign some decisions – policy, appointments, invitations – will have been delayed. In the first days the civil service will keep such decision-making as light as possible but there may be some critical decisions that cannot wait longer than the campaign period.

Becoming Prime Minister – the organisation

Potential prime ministers are understandably focused on their policy objectives when they are thinking about the job. New governments can arrive in office with a long list of ambitions. But to do them effectively they need to consider how to organise No.10 and the Cabinet Office to work for them. How a prime minister organises the staff and the structures around them can be crucial in determining how effective they will be.

Support to the Prime Minister – the people

Prime ministers are supported in No.10 by two types of staff: the permanent civil servants who will have just said goodbye to the outgoing Prime Minister and provide continuity, and the political appointees they bring with them. Unlike other ministers, prime ministers can recruit quite a considerable number of political appointees. While the transition to a new prime minister is happening in front of the cameras, behind

the scenes officials try to organise a swift change in political appointees. In 2010, Cameron's team were brought in through the interconnecting door in the Cabinet Office ready to be in place for when he arrived back from the Palace.¹³

One of the initial challenges is that civil servants and political appointees know different things but have not had the opportunity to establish a working relationship. A prime minister coming to office from opposition will usually have thought through which of their staff they want to accompany them into No.10. A prime minister taking over mid-term has to decide how many of the outgoing Prime Minister's political staff to keep on and how many to let go. Partly this will depend how many they want to bring in. Most former ministers have special advisers they may wish to transfer into No.10. Others will want to build a new team from scratch – for instance if they want to reward staff who supported them through a leadership campaign.

As new staff come into No.10, they experience a transition that can be daunting. A former Cameron adviser described coming into government as feeling 'like a wave came over you'.¹⁴ Even well-honed opposition teams coming into government can experience a big adjustment. For Peter Hyman, adviser to Tony Blair before and after the 1997 election, the Labour advisers and shadows dispersing across Whitehall felt like 'the winning team was being broken up'.¹⁵

The key roles in No.10 are a mix of civil service roles, who provide continuity from one administration to another, and Special Adviser appointments:

- **Private Office staff** – The longstanding civil servants supporting the Prime Minister, headed by a principal private secretary with a number of private secretaries supporting different policy areas. They act as the main contact point for other ministerial private offices.
- **Chief of Staff** – This is a role developed since 1997. Blair made former diplomat, Jonathan Powell, his Chief of Staff to bring together the political side of No.10 with the official side. Brown and Cameron have both appointed chiefs of staff who have mostly been special advisers rather than civil servants.
- **Director of Communications** – Another post devised in 1997, but now accepted practice. For new prime ministers they need to consider who will undertake the daily lobby briefing and who will work on longer term communications planning.
- **Head of the Policy Unit** – This post has usually been held by a special adviser or civil servant, but in 2013 David Cameron appointed Jo Johnson MP as a ministerial head. The authority of this role stems from their relationship with the Prime Minister.
- **Political Secretary** – The Political Secretary and Political Office is funded by the party. Their functions include liaising with Party HQ and with the party in Parliament and the country. Some prime ministers have also appointed other close allies to manage key external relations.

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- **Constituency Secretary** – The new Prime Minister’s constituency office remains in the Commons, but this post can be housed in No.10 or in Commons, depending on the new premier’s preference.

The Prime Minister is also supported by various civil service duty clerks, who work with the private office and chief of staff, a diary secretary, a secretarial support staff, and someone handling and events and invitations.*

The key roles based in the Cabinet Office:

- **Cabinet Secretary** - The most senior civil servant; traditionally the Prime Minister’s principal official policy adviser and head of the Cabinet Office secretariats. They usually combine the role with Head of the Home Civil Service. The current Cabinet Secretary also holds the National Security Adviser role.
- **National Security Adviser** – An expanded role since 2010 and with the creation of the National Security Council. The NSA is secretary to the NSC and oversees the National Security Secretariat.

Support to the Prime Minister – the structures

New prime ministers often wish to signal a change from their predecessor by changing the structure and roles of No.10 and the Cabinet Office.

Every version of No.10 has to fit the ‘governing philosophy’ of the Prime Minister, but they also need to make sure they have the capabilities in place to achieve their goals.¹⁶ Despite the urge to make changes and to get rid of structures or roles that they associate with their predecessor, they should recognise that there is a lot of continuity in the types of things that UK prime ministers find valuable. If they want to make sure their organisation works as well as or better than their predecessors, a new prime minister should take advice on what has worked before. They will want to bring in their own people or new people, for certain roles, but should try to ensure that any changes don’t lead to a wholesale loss of expertise.

In recent years prime ministers have found it useful to have structures in place in the following areas:

- **Support on policy making:** the Prime Minister needs to have some understanding across all areas of policy for their government. Departments have great strength in depth in policy making, so the Prime Minister needs advisers with policy expertise who know what is going on in departments. Prime ministers have often wanted to use the centre to **make progress on key policies**. This might be the creation of specific units to head up a policy area – like the early 2000s Rough Sleeping Units or the Cameron-era Troubled Family unit. These have often been based in the department that has responsibility for that area.

* No.10 also houses various other staff who maintain and support the working of No.10, including the volume of correspondence, the honours list and appointments, No.10 switchboard and various housekeeping and security staff.

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- **Resolving policy disputes:** the Prime Minister is the key arbiter on inter-departmental disputes over policy and in overseeing the Cabinet Office's role in getting policy to Cabinet decision making.
 - **Checking progress:** under Blair, the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit was developed to ensuring that the government was doing what it said it would. Currently the Implementation Unit, based in the Cabinet Office, checks **whether policies have made a difference.**
 - **Communications and external relations:** helping prime ministers develop and promote a coherent narrative for government, and to engage effectively beyond Whitehall.
 - **Long-term thinking:** Recent prime ministers have often sought some capacity, either in No.10 or in the Cabinet Office, to support government thinking about **new or longer-term areas of policy** and getting more challenging views into government. From the late 1990s Blair's government developed various units to play this role, eventually bringing them together under the Strategy Unit.

Alongside these structures the Cabinet Office's traditional secretariats provide support to the prime minister. Their fundamental role is to support cabinet and cabinet committees, but they also help support policy development and resolve disputes.

Becoming Prime Minister – the personal adjustment

Being Prime Minister is very different from other ministerial posts. A significant adjustment is required whether a new prime minister has been a minister before or has no experience of government.

The Prime Minister's day

A prime minister's day is a hugely busy mix of regular meetings, briefings, set-piece occasions, urgent decisions and irregular meetings. All of this takes place alongside a forward programme of visits, press briefings, speeches and, significantly, their Parliamentary duties including Prime Minister's Questions and appearances in front of the Liaison Committee.

Every prime minister can, to some extent, decide how to manage their own working practices. But those occupying No.10 tend to adopt similar routines. This is partly because of the demands of the role, but it also reflects how Whitehall and Parliament operate. Regular meetings might include:

The daily morning meeting involving senior No.10 staff, the Cabinet Secretary, and one or two senior ministers to run through the day's plan.

- Cabinet and cabinet committee meetings through the week.
- Weekly audience with the Queen.

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- Regular meetings in run up to events such as the Queen's speech, spending review and budget and key policy launches.
 - Prime Minister's Questions – preparations for which can dominate Tuesday evenings and Wednesday morning.
 - Political meetings – on forthcoming elections, parliamentary or party matters.
 - Regular bilateral meetings with key colleagues – Cameron had regular meetings with his Chancellor George Osborne, who also attended the daily meetings.
 - Receptions, other ceremonial duties and meetings with visiting foreign leaders.

This makes for a very busy schedule. Unlike other departments, there are no boundaries to the policies and issues that No.10 needs to care about. It is made worse because much of No.10's time and that of the Prime Minister is events-driven, responding to what is going on in the media, in departments and in the wider world. Other calls on their time will include meetings to resolve a specific crisis or to decide policy questions and disputes between departments that have not been resolved through written correspondence.

Making decisions as Prime Minister

Prime ministers take many decisions each day. These include a far greater range of questions than fall within the responsibilities of any other minister, covering both big policy decisions and a swathe of smaller ones on media and communications issues, visits to the UK, political and personnel matters. The Prime Minister is also key to resolving inter-departmental clashes that have escalated beyond informal or formal mechanisms for resolution between departments. There are some formal mechanisms that govern the rhythm of decisions – the role of Cabinet, the Prime Minister's red box. They should also consider how they set expectations on decision-making and their own role.

Managing Cabinet

The way in which a prime minister manages Cabinet can be the key to their success. This is not just about the formal aspects of the Cabinet meeting, it is also about how the Prime Minister handles their colleagues and cross-government policy making. Aspects of it are highly political and very personal, but there is also the question of how they manage the process. Cabinet and its subcommittees can absorb a lot of government time, with clashes over what gets on the agenda and when, what papers are required before any decision as well as what is discussed and decided in the meetings themselves. The Cabinet Office oversees much of the day-to-day work on that, but the Prime Minister plays a major role.

The first question to be addressed is what they want Cabinet to do. Some prime ministers have used it merely to sign off decisions that have been discussed elsewhere, others have used the key forum for decision making. This affects how they manage the Cabinet meeting itself. Prime ministers can also use political cabinets to discuss party or

electoral matters where they don't want civil servants recording minutes, but they need to be clear about the difference between the two.

New prime ministers will often want to set a new tone for how they will direct the discussion. After he became Prime Minister, John Major told Cabinet that he would be doing things differently:

'Margaret had often introduced subjects in Cabinet by setting out her favoured solution: shameless, but effective. I, by contrast, preferred to let my views be known in private, see potential dissenters ahead of the meeting, encourage discussion, and sum up after it. A different approach, but, I believe, one that is equally effective'.¹⁷

There is much more to managing Cabinet, however. One key aspect is how many Cabinet committees the Prime Minister chairs. According to one senior official, when Theresa May came into office, she made it clear that she wanted to do things differently from her predecessors and talked about the importance of Cabinet government. However, in practice she did not always follow her own rhetoric – closely gripping the Cabinet committees and chairing many of them herself.¹⁸

Prime ministers have increasingly in recent decades come to rely on trusted deputies or political fixers to help them manage this workload. May eventually did also, through the appointments of first Damian Green as First Secretary of State and then David Lidington as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. Oliver Letwin performed a similar role under Cameron as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. The way in which this role is used depends on the needs of the Prime Minister and the personal style of the person holding it. Prime ministers can also have specific secretaries of state chairing the relevant committees.

Finally, a new prime minister should consider how they manage the number of Cabinet committees, who gets to attend, and the agenda. All of these tend to grow over the course of a premiership, duplicating or overlapping work and with a changing cast of characters. In their early briefing to a new prime minister, civil servants will provide their reflections on which Cabinet Committees work well and which do not; this is useful advice that should be listened to.

The red box

Prime ministers deal with large amounts of paperwork – it is part of the job. Some prime ministers like working this way: reviewing issues through reading and scribbling replies. Working like this puts a premium on the quality of submissions. Are they succinct enough, do they get to the heart of the matter?

The red box contains papers for decision and for information that a prime minister will get every evening and every weekend. For Thatcher, this 'ceaseless flow' began within days of taking office. She would get up to three every evening and four at weekends.¹⁹

The red box is a significant part of how the rest of government interact with the Prime

Minister. It is how departments get decisions through No.10. It can include a mix of big policy issues that require decisions, small choices about visits or media matters and briefings on various matters. It can vary depending on days of the week or what is going on in government at any time. On a Monday or Tuesday night it might include more that relates to that week's Prime Minister's Questions. Another time it might contain more security or intelligence matters. Big decisions will require more reading than smaller matters. Prime ministers will also get weekend boxes. Over the weekend duty clerks will bring a few ad hoc items to the Prime Minister's attention.

The box is usually managed by the private office. Private secretaries and the Chief of Staff decide what goes in there, depending on the preferences of the Prime Minister. They can help set expectations externally and set rules (such as how long any submission can be). They can also send items back if they feel that they don't meet these strictures or if they know it needs further work before being seen by the Prime Minister. Ministers, departments and other parts of No.10 will all lobby to get their issues moved up the agenda and into the Prime Minister's box for decision.

Setting expectations can be hugely important. David Cameron began his day at 5:45am to work through his red box for two hours.²⁰ However, the more practised Cameron became, the more people assumed that he could always turn things around overnight.²¹ His staff discussed whether they should set expectations that things would not always be turned around quickly.

Setting expectations and delegating

How the Prime Minister manages their workload can have a big impact on their working day and how much time they have for other things. But there are trade-offs involved. Missing things that were in your box might mean missing details on a key decision. On the other hand, going through everything in fine detail holds up the whole of government and is a large burden. A new prime minister needs to decide what kind of information flow they want and think carefully about who in their team they trust to help manage the work.

Prime ministers can set expectations about how interventionist they want to be, what they want to take decisions on and how much they want to delegate to others. But this also requires thought. In the early May premiership, her chiefs of staff Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill would each go over all issues before it went to the Prime Minister. But May would herself then go through them again in detail. This caused bottlenecks that resulted in frustration elsewhere in government.²²

One issue is that few prime ministers are explicit about which ministers they trust to take decisions and which they don't. It can be intensely personal, but it also can change over time. This has a big impact on wider government because, as one current official put it, 'the machine will treat everyone the same'.²³ If a new prime minister is clearer about when they are willing to delegate to others, and on what, this can make a big difference to their workload.

Taking decisions

A new prime minister should also consider how they, as an individual, like to take decisions. Taking considered decisions is important, but there is a cost to getting this wrong. If decisions pile up it means that everything else slows down and ministers become frustrated. No.10 can be a bottleneck for the rest of government. Some policy decisions will always require a significant amount of time and care to get them right.

For the staff around them, the decision-making capability of the Prime Minister is hugely important. How many times will they have to bring something to the Prime Minister's attention before it is resolved? Some issues can over-absorb prime ministers' attention, slowing down focus on other issues that are equally important but of less immediate interest. Prime ministers must balance the important against the most interesting or the most urgent.

Thatcher's archives show a prime minister who would work quickly and thoroughly through whatever was put in front of her, letting the author know exactly what she thought of the quality of drafting as well as the issue under discussion. Other prime ministers have tended towards decision-making through meetings.

Tony Blair took a strong dislike to the formal processes of the civil service:

'the old infrastructure of policy papers submitted by civil servants to Cabinet, who then debate and decide with the Prime Minister as benevolent chairman, is not suitable in responding to the demands of a fast-changing world or an even faster-changing political landscape.'²⁴

Managing crises

From day one, prime ministers will need to think about how they will cope in a crisis and how to manage the response of those around them.

First, they need to recognise whether or not something is a crisis. This is true of both civil emergencies and for political crises. Second, they need to make sure they have the right information flows in place and the right people to take action. Last – and most crucially – they need to work out whether No.10 needs to intervene.

There are well-established routines for the kinds of emergencies that are dealt with by the government's crisis management machinery, particularly the civil contingencies unit and COBR (Cabinet Office Briefing Room). The civil service will provide induction. However it is also important that a new prime minister considers how they will react and what their role will be in any crisis – particularly given the Prime Minister either chairs COBR or designates a lead minister. The role of politicians may include everything from rapid political decision-making, media handling and stakeholder relations, to having a sense of the overall picture and what everyone is trying to achieve. But politicians also need to allow officials or those on the ground to get on with their jobs. Former ministers agree that the civil service can be at its best when navigating a crisis: 'they don't panic'.²⁵

Many of the same lessons apply to political crises. One of the first issues can be identifying when something is escalating into crisis territory. By the time issues have got to No.10 they may have been on the Secretary of State's desk for a while and become even more acute. At times No.10 will use the power of the office to force action: giving the department in question a chance to resolve it, with the threat of taking over. But at other times No.10 intervention can exacerbate problems.²⁶ Prime ministers and those who support them have to work out when to trust the Secretary of State and department in question and when to intervene.

Living and working in No.10

Becoming prime minister usually also means moving in to No.10 Downing Street – though it does not have to. 10 Downing Street is actually a warren of several houses joined together over the years. One of the first decisions that a prime minister has to make is where to have their office. Gordon Brown chose the open-plan area of No.12, Thatcher was upstairs at No.10; others use 'the Den', close to the Cabinet Office.

Some prime ministers enjoyed living in No.10, others were more resistant. Thatcher described it as 'living above the shop'. It was for her a 'refuge from the rest of the world, though on occasion a good deal of business was done there too'.²⁷ The Civil Service's briefs for an incoming prime minister include quite a bit of focus on how the Prime Minister and their family move into No.10. On the first day there will be briefing for both Prime Minister and their spouse on how the whole building works, and questions on everything from what rooms they want to occupy – the No.11 flat is much larger than No.10 – where they will park their cars and (if they have small children) whether they will have additional live-in childcare or not. Protection officers will become part of their family's daily life: it is a necessary part of the job.

Being Prime Minister also has an impact on constituency work. A new prime minister can choose how to undertake the role, but it must be managed against all their other commitments. Prime ministers in recent history have rarely spent more than a day every other week in the constituency, depending on foreign travel and other commitments. For many it was a once-a-month activity. Thatcher had a monthly surgery in Finchley.²⁸ For David Cameron it was one Friday a month, plus quite a lot at weekends. For Theresa May constituency time was restricted to Saturdays – between twice a month and more frequent. It also partly depends on how far away they were. Blair travelled to Sedgefield far less frequently: it was several weeks before he first visited as Prime Minister. One of the difficulties for prime ministers is keeping focused while being dragged from issue to issue.

Prime ministers are usually not at No.10 on a Friday. This a day for visits, foreign travel, visiting Chequers (the Prime Minister's official residence), or back to the constituency. Regardless however, they are still working. Some prime ministers have chosen to try and finish early or to fit in other commitments. There will be meetings and phone calls, paperwork and decisions to be taken. But the Prime Minister can do these from a different base – such as Chequers or their home in their constituency.

Conclusion – how to prepare

Governments want to 'hit the ground running'. To do that effectively means thinking in advance about how you will transition into government. Preparation can be a very different experience for a Leader of the Opposition coming into government compared with a prime minister taking over while their party is in office. For both, the act of getting into office (whether through a leadership contest or a general election) will dominate their time and energy. But thinking about how to govern should form part of their time preparing. They won't get a second chance on their first decisions in office.

1. Devote time to preparation

The ability to prepare depends enormously on how much time, resources and opportunity an individual has to think through what kind of prime minister they want to be and to consider the key personnel, ministerial appointments and machinery they want to use. If there is no time to do this before taking office, take more time to make these key decisions when starting out.

2. Be prepared for the scale of the job

Once a new prime minister enters No.10, the scale of decision-making and the urgency of tasks will immediately come to dominate their time far more than any other post in British politics. They will have little time to reflect or plan.

Part of the preparation involves thinking through how you and your team work and how this will be different in government. It also means planning to adapt to government.

3. Don't plan to reinvent everything

New prime ministers will often come with preconceptions about how No.10 works, based on their experience of it from the outside and their views of how their predecessor did the job. There are many ways it can work better, but when new governments change too much of how the centre operates this can take up valuable time and put No.10 on the back foot with departments.

4. Consider how you will delegate and who you trust

While it may be policy pledges that got them elected, new prime ministers also need to think how they will deliver them. Part of this is about how they as an individual transition into the new job, how they set the tone, how they operate and how they react. Building a premiership is more than just the top job, it is about how the whole team can work together.

About the author

Dr Catherine Haddon is a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Government and is the IfG's resident historian. Catherine leads the organisation's work on the history of Whitehall, the constitution and changes of government, and our programme of professional development for ministers and senior officials. Catherine joined the Institute in November 2008 after a career in academia.

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