# Understanding Prime-Ministerial Performance
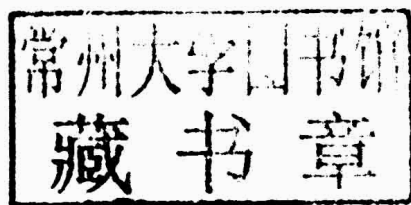
## Comparative Perspectives

EDITED BY
PAUL STRANGIO,
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# UNDERSTANDING PRIME-MINISTERIAL PERFORMANCE

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# 1

# Prime Ministers and the Performance of Public Leadership

*Paul Strangio, Paul 't Hart and James Walter*

## PRIME MINISTERS AS PUBLIC LEADERS

'From the moment the mantle is on your shoulders as prime minister, you understand that the scale, importance and complexity are completely different... You inhabit a new dimension altogether'. That is how Tony Blair remembers the overwhelming sense of expectation and responsibility that swept over him when he led British Labour into office in May 1997. He also recalls that as he breathed in the electoral triumph it dawned on him that he was fundamentally 'alone' in meeting those expectations and discharging those responsibilities (Blair 2010, 11). Prime ministers are potentially pivotal players in the politics and governments of parliamentary democracies and the responsibilities and expectations that go with the office can be vast. Prime ministers are expected simultaneously to be leaders of their party, their government and their country. They hold high public office and in its exercise are expected to be custodians of its dignity. At the same time, they have to be clever and at times even ruthless political operators in order to survive and thrive in the role. The centre of gravity of their efforts lies within the national political realm; yet they must at times devote a considerable share of their energy to local, regional as well as international issues and arenas. They are accountable for just about everything that goes on in the name of the governments they lead, regardless of the fact that even the most ambitious among them can know about, let alone control, only a modest part of all business that is being transacted.

Prime ministers have exceptionally multi-faceted jobs. They are architects and agenda-setters of the governments that bear their name. They are managers of ministers, cabinet processes, backbenchers, party faithful, public servants and other advisors. They are the drivers of collective decision making at the heart of government. They are its principal public face and its chief

ambassador abroad. When adversity strikes, they are national crisis manager in chief. Switching perennially between the front stage and the back stage of politics, and between the community gathering and the international summit, they convene, mediate, broker, persuade, bargain and cajole for a living.

Prime ministers work extraordinary hours, holding countless meetings, delivering speeches and processing incessant flows of information and advice. They frequently experience strong time as well political pressures. Their public and private lives are subject to relentless (and remorseless) media scrutiny. They are expected to have a solid grasp of a bewildering variety of policy issues, but they also have continuously to read the mood of the party room, key stakeholders, the commentariat and the public at large.

As the nation's chief political executive they are expected to breathe life into its politics, public policymaking and public bureaucracies. In other words, as Blick and Jones (2010) remind us, prime ministers are first and foremost expected to exercise public leadership: animating the key functions that need to be performed in order for a polity to govern itself effectively and democratically, but which are not performed spontaneously by that polity's public institutions, organizations and routines ('t Hart and Uhr 2008, 3–10). How each prime minister chooses to exercise such leadership and how successfully they perform it depends on many factors. This volume seeks to reinvigorate the study of prime-ministerial leadership. It helps explain and evaluate how the holders of the office perform the leadership roles that are associated with it. It does so by exploring the institutional and contextual 'power chances' of contemporary Westminster prime ministers (Part I), the nature of the relationship between premiers and their parties as a critical source of leadership empowerment and constraint (Part II), and the social construction of prime ministers as leadership 'successes' and 'failures' by means of expert rankings (Part III). To put our intended contribution into perspective, we first characterize the state of the art of relevant scholarship to date.

## UNDERSTANDING PRIME-MINISTERIAL LEADERSHIP

### The Agenda

In order to evaluate the nature of a prime minister's leadership performance, we must understand the style, skills and traits that gave them the capacity to fill the top job; the success or otherwise of their relationships with colleagues and followers; and the character displayed when they were brought down (since virtually none leave in circumstances of their own choosing). We must also understand their ties with peers and followers: the relation to their parties, their cabinet colleagues, and their appeal to electorates. But we must also

comprehend the historical context. Particular personal and stylistic qualities are efficacious in some contexts, and not in others: Churchill's pugnacity and never say die attitude made him the ideal war leader, but he was markedly less successful before the war and in the transition to peace. Institutional contexts are no less important than historical juncture. These include the evolution of executive-legislative relations, the make-up of the machinery of central government, and the norms and practices governing political-administrative relations inside the core executive. All these factors bear on the opportunities available and the constraints within which a prime minister must operate—no matter what gifts or limitations he or she displays.

Prime-ministerial leadership is therefore not just a matter of personality, style and skill. It is always co-dependent: on colleagues, on followers, on stakeholders—their favours won, their trust gained, their enmity contained, their needs fulfilled. And it is always conditional: on the historical moment, on political culture and political climate, on institutional conditions and institutional change. Contrary to Blair's election night epiphany, prime ministers do not govern alone. They may be 'at the pinnacle' or 'in the centre of the centre' of executive government, but they cannot escape the fact that governing entails working with a wide range of other players in the political system who have their own powers, responsibilities, mandates and constituencies. Aligning workable coalitions of these other players to their own cause is a pivotal challenge of prime-ministerial leadership. To analyse it in any particular instance, we must understand all of these factors. It is a challenging research agenda. Moreover, if we want to understand prime-ministerial leadership *performance*, we should not merely study the behaviour of prime ministers and the institutional and situational forces shaping it, but also explore the normative question of how it should be evaluated as well as the empirical question of how it actually gets evaluated contemporaneously as well as historically.

## The Field Today

We do not have to start from scratch. There is no shortage of considered writing about prime ministers. The institution of the premiership within the Westminster world—the empirical focus of this volume—has been well served by historical exposition (for an overview, see Blick and Jones 2010), comparative analysis (Weller 1985; Bennister 2012) and by elucidation of core executive functions (Rhodes and Dunleavy 1995; Smith 1999). These works provide valuable leads in understanding both the evolution and the functional character of the prime minister's office as one element within a 'differentiated polity' (Bevir and Rhodes 2008).

Moreover, across the Westminster world there are hundreds of books recounting and contemplating the personal and political lives of individual

prime ministers. They follow a familiar, most often chronological, narrative structure. Partly depending on when and by whom they are written, they vary widely in their thoroughness, neutrality, and insightfulness. Many contemporary accounts of prime ministers are written by journalists or for-hire biographers, and are timed to appear in the lead-up to elections. They are designed principally to praise or damn their subject, or in any case to sell a hard and fast story to a presumably information-hungry voting public. The post-career biographies (leaving aside autobiographies by former prime ministers, which offer no even-handed analysis) tend to be written by academic historians. They enjoy the benefit of hindsight, as well as of greater time and usually access to a larger body of research resources and more expansive written record. On balance, they are more likely to provide interpretations of a particular prime minister's style and impact that stand the test of time.

The limitation of the conventional biography, however, is that it does little to compare and contrast its subject and the circumstances in which that prime minister governed with other holders of the office and their contexts. Also, few prime-ministerial biographies explicitly engage with the questions, propositions and debates that fascinate political scientists and leadership scholars who study executive government (exceptions include Weller 1985; Ruin 1986), though some draw systematically on psychoanalytical concepts and ideas to interpret their subject's underlying drives and needs, their leadership style, the adequacy of their performance and the sources of their (in)effectiveness as public leaders (e.g. Esberey 1980; Walter 1980; Anson 1992; Brett 1997; Abse 2003).

Rich though they can be about the individual style and career of their subjects, in and of themselves biographies provide limited insight into broader patterns of prime-ministerial leadership performance within a particular jurisdiction and its constitutional and institutional underpinnings. This is only partly remedied by collective biographies of clusters of prime ministers within a certain jurisdiction. Seldom do they touch upon the nature, stability and change of the contexts in which individual prime ministers operate. Even more rarely do they attempt to discern trends and discontinuities in the ways in which different office-holders interpret and perform the role (e.g., Lotz 1987; Donaldson 1999; and beyond Westminster, e.g., Baring and Schöllgen 2002; März 2002; Ruin 2007; Langguth 2009).

In contrast, contextual, individual and institutional factors at play in prime-ministerial role-taking, consolidation and policy-shaping are the central focus of the aforementioned longitudinal-comparative accounts of the evolution of the Westminster premiership (e.g. Pal and Taras 1988; Rhodes and Dunleavy 1995; Kavanagh and Seldon 1999; Smith 1999; Foley 2000; Hennessy 2000; Rose 2001; Walter and Strangio 2007; Blick and Jones 2010). In addition, there are a number of highly valuable cross-national comparative studies of executive leadership at the heart of government, both within and beyond Westminster countries (Feit 1978; Weller 1985, 1991, 1994; Jones 1991; King

1994; Elgie 1995; Weller et al. 1997; Helms 2005, 2012; Poguntke and Webb 2005; Rhodes et al. 2009; Bennister 2012). A joint characteristic of all these studies is that they situate prime ministers and their leadership performance within the broader configuration of executive government and its various key offices (e.g. cabinet, the public service, political staff), executive–legislative relations, party systems, and electoral politics.

The core executive approach, implicit or explicit in many of these latter efforts, was an attempt to transcend a persistent debate in prime-ministerial studies concerning whether institutions have evolved in a way that had the potential to deliver greater power to prime ministers—a discourse that was consolidated as the 'presidentialization' thesis (Foley 2000; Heffernan 2005b; Poguntke and Webb 2005). The core executive approach has recast the terms of debate by properly insisting on attention to all the key players and institutions engaging in policy at the 'heart' of government: each agency is conceived as utilizing its resources (or as engaged in resource trading) to influence outcomes. The prime minister, despite the resources of the office, is forever enmeshed in dependency relations with cabinet colleagues, party power brokers and civil servants, and hence is just one element within this scenario. Regardless of public images of them as the spider in the web of government, prime ministers cannot simply be assumed to have a determining influence for each issue that crosses their table. Policy issues and episodes should be analysed on a case-by-case basis to ascertain who exercised leadership when and how.

For all this variegated activity, both theoretically and methodologically the field of prime-ministerial studies is still underdeveloped. If we take as the main comparator US presidential analysis, some holes in our knowledge about prime ministers loom large. For example, despite the growing stock of biographies devoted to them, there is a dearth of systematic behavioural analysis of prime-ministerial leadership styles, the impact of these styles on political outcomes, and the contemporary and historical assessment of prime ministers as leaders. More broadly, notwithstanding some pioneering calls to do so and some isolated examples of what such research might yield (Kaarbo 1997; Kaarbo and Hermann 1998; Verbeek 2003; De Landtsheer 2004; Dyson 2009), there is a need for more systematic knowledge about prime-ministerial beliefs, motives, information processing propensities, management of advisers and cabinets, and decision-making proclivities. Students of prime ministers, cabinet government and core executive leadership in parliamentary settings have rarely employed the various personality assessment techniques that rely on content analysis of speeches and interviews—a highly productive and competitive US cottage industry in both academic and applied research—the latter reaching all the way into the bowels of the CIA (e.g. Hermann 1980, 1984; Preston 2001; Valenty and Feldman 2001; Post 2003; Winter 2005).

A small number of scholars have investigated the rhetorical and communicative dimensions of prime-ministerial leadership. Some have also employed forms of rhetorical analysis—from formal content analysis to more interpretive, even ethnographic methods—to link individual prime ministers' verbal stances to issues of politics and governance above and beyond the usual focus on their roles in elections and campaigning (e.g. Walter 1981; Brett 1993; McAllister 2003; Masters and 't Hart 2012). This includes their roles in promoting particular narratives of national identity, (re)defining their party's ideology, and managing crises (e.g. Gaffney 1991; Uhr 2002, 2003; Curran 2004; Helms 2008; 't Hart and Tindall 2009; Toye 2011; Boin et al. 2012). There is also growing interest in the evolution of the machinery of 'media management' that has long existed around prime ministers, but which has made a quantum leap in the era of the 'postmodern' premiership where the 'framing battles' between political adversaries have become a matter of small armies of communication professionals trying to manage news cycles on their leaders' behalf (Sanders et al. 1999; Rose 2001; Seymour-Ure 2003; Spencer 2003).

## The Challenges Ahead

Further progress in the analysis of prime-ministerial leadership can be made if we find cogent ways to study *the interplay* between political circumstances, institutional possibilities, individual characteristics and social relations at the apex of executive government (Elgie 1995; Bennister 2012). Too often, research on prime ministers seems to hinge on only one or other of the components in this network of interdependent elements. Within Westminster systems, there is a strong tradition of descriptive biography, but all too little analysis of personality and psychology. We have increasingly sophisticated insights into the core executive, cabinet government (Blondel and Muller-Rommel 1994), the role of the inner circles ('courts') around political executives in a differentiated polity (Rhodes 2011), the ethnography of political elites (Rhodes et al. 2007), and the leadership implications of ongoing transitions of parties from mass parties to electoral professional machines and cartel operations. Yet each of these critical developments is treated discretely, when what is needed in prime-ministerial studies is the capacity to see how each of them relates to a prime minister at work, at a specific time, in a particular context. Elgie (1995), Hargrove and Owens (2003) and Helms (2012) have given us various flavours of this type of analysis at work. Johansson's (2009) analysis of prime-ministerial leadership in New Zealand and Bennister's (2012) comparative analysis of the leadership styles of Australian prime minister John Howard and British prime minister Tony Blair are good examples of the direction this work might take in Westminster settings.

In short, the agenda for prime-ministerial analysis needs to be moved beyond its traditional preoccupations. This volume moves in that direction by asking three interrelated questions about the leadership performance of prime ministers in Westminster systems:

- To what extent do different office-holders acquire the power needed to 'perform' their leadership roles?
- To what extent do the parties from which prime ministers spring and which they (nominally) lead enable and constrain their performance of these public leadership roles?
- And once prime ministers leave office how do their performances get assessed over time, and what do these assessments (and the public debates about them) reveal about changing societal norms and expectations concerning prime-ministerial leadership?

Each of these questions will be the focus of one part of the volume. Taken together, they allow us to probe new ways of conceptualizing, interpreting and assessing prime-ministerial leadership performance. Importantly, this is done comparatively, particularly in Parts II and III where we present national case studies from Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand. We introduce each of the core themes of the volume in the sections below. Before we proceed, we should acknowledge that this volume tackles only a part of the agenda for prime-ministerial studies identified above. Most importantly, it does not apply the tools of personality theory and social psychology to executive leadership in parliamentary systems. This limits the depth at which we examine the 'person' dimension among the constellation of factors (personal, institutional and situational) that we have argued are pivotal in shaping prime-ministerial performance (yet, see Walter, Chapter 2). Nor does it advance the nascent trend of understanding prime-ministerial leadership performance through rhetorical, dramaturgical and media analysis (Helms 2008; Toye 2011). Both these endeavours await future study.

Finally, though designed as a collaborative and comparative effort around three core questions, there is no single and shared analytical framework guiding the effort. Part III comes very close to this, in that all authors report findings of a single method of assessing prime-ministerial performance, namely expert ranking panels. In Part II, comparability is enhanced by the fact that there is a great deal of overlap in the way in which the four country case authors have approached the task of dissecting the dynamics of the prime minister–party relationship, but individual emphases remain apparent. The studies in Part I, finally, have no common framework at all; in fact, the very purpose of this set of papers is to showcase a variety of promising thematic and theoretical approaches to understanding the power chances of prime ministers. It is to this issue that we turn first in a series of three sections backgrounding the volume's major themes.

## UNDERSTANDING PRIME-MINISTERIAL PERFORMANCE: POWER CHANCES

Being prime minister is seen as the 'top job' in politics within parliamentary democracies. History provides us with numerous examples of prime ministers whose personal stamp defined their governments' agendas and decision-making processes and who were able personally to perform 'event-making' leadership. Yet for every prime-ministerial giant in the mould of Margaret Thatcher or Pierre Trudeau, history also provides counter-examples of prime ministers who were unwilling or unable to lead from the front. Their leadership style was more collegiate, their authority was more contested, and their performance considered 'weak'. Moreover, seemingly all-powerful prime ministers can come unstuck relatively quickly, suggesting that we should not make the mistake of confusing the appearance of dominance with the underlying conditional, contextual and thus potentially ephemeral nature of prime-ministerial preponderance.

The rise and even more precipitous fall of Kevin Rudd is an illuminating example. Rudd became Australia's prime minister in November 2007, just a year after being elected by a desperate Australian Labor Party (ALP)—he was the fourth leader Labor had turned to in as many terms to try and unseat the conservative government led by Liberal Party stalwart John Howard. Even before the ALP's 2007 election victory, Rudd had signalled that he would not be beholden to his party in the way he led his government. Most emphatically, he unilaterally overturned a century-old old Labor Party shibboleth by announcing that he would appoint ministers rather than their being elected by caucus. Taking office just when the global financial crisis was gathering force, Rudd styled himself as the national crisis manager, taking far-reaching recession-busting stimulus decisions in a small kitchen cabinet of four. He monopolized the government's public communications, riding the wave of stellar personal popularity ratings. He ran his own foreign policy, and quickly became a figure of note on the world stage, which he cherished. He consolidated this centralist, top-down style of governing even when the recession threat had abated, to the growing if muted chagrin of cabinet colleagues and party elites.

Before he had served a full term in office, however, Rudd's ascendancy began to collapse. In the election year, 2010, after the government performed an ill-received policy U-turn on climate change, major problems surfaced with the implementation of the massive stimulus package, and the prime minister picked a fight with the country's economic powerhouse—the mining industry—over the proposed imposition of a new 'super profits' tax. The government's and prime minister's opinion poll ratings nosedived. This collapse in the esteem in which his public leadership performance was held combined with growing

unease in government ranks about Rudd's reputedly authoritarian, emotionally unintelligent and disorganized backstage leadership performance. It precipitated an unravelling of his prime ministership at breath-taking speed. Having claimed control of most of the government's early successes, he was now blamed personally for its mishaps and shortcomings. Having ruled over rather than with his party, he had estranged the very people who had handed him the leadership. In June 2010, after little over two and half years as prime minister, he was deposed by a quick and brutal party-room coup. Rudd had gone from messiah to pariah, ending his term as prime minister prematurely, friendless and humiliated.

The rise and fall of Kevin Rudd epitomize the possibilities as well as the pitfalls of contemporary prime-ministerial power within Westminster parliamentary democracies. A range of contextual changes, to be explored further below, has enabled prime ministers who are so inclined to exercise a high degree of control over the government's composition and modus operandi (and see Pakulski and Körösényi 2012). When this occurs, it tends to come at the expense of the influence of their parties and the Westminster notion of collective, cabinet-driven government (Rhodes et al. 2009). This gives prime ministers considerable policy-shaping opportunities. Still, prime ministers acquire, wield and lose executive power in ways that continue to be shaped by institutional characteristics of the 'Westminster tradition'— however ambiguous and socially constructed these may be (Bevir and Rhodes 2008; Rhodes et al. 2009; Blick and Jones 2010).

This raises the question of whether the power equation that prime ministers face today differs much from that experienced by their predecessors of the immediate post-war period. Patrick Weller's *First Among Equals* (1985) was a pioneering analysis of prime ministers in the Westminster world, and up to this point its comparative approach has been rarely emulated (but see Bennister 2012). Weller's choice of title signified the enduring strength of collegial government and ministerial responsibility, which acted as checks on the scope and depth of prime-ministerial power. More than twenty-five years later, this way of framing the nature of prime-ministerial leadership seems to have gone out of fashion. Instead, we hear more about 'prime-ministerial government' and 'presidentialization' (the latter term relying upon a largely misleading analogy with the power of heads of government in presidential systems, see Hart 1992; Dowding 2012). Nonetheless, there is vigorous debate about leadership ascendancy in all liberal democratic polities (Pakulski and Körösényi 2012, 51–80; McAllister 2007).

Still, some key observers of the office (Weller 1992, 2007; Blick and Jones 2010) insist that little has changed since Weller's original analysis was published: circumstances such as war might sometimes favour strong leaders; instances of 'predominance' could be found in the past that matched any contemporary outbreak of 'command and control'; the office itself remained