

MANAGING THE CABINET'S BIG BEASTS

Andrew Heywood

All too often the cabinet in the UK is portrayed as a single, collective force – something that prime ministers try to subdue and control for fear of succumbing to it. This, indeed, is the conventional image of the political executive as a battle ground between the personal power of the prime minister and the collective weight of the cabinet. Prime ministers exert influence to extent that they are able to emancipate themselves from the constraints of cabinet collegiality. However, in many, perhaps most, circumstances this image is misleading. Despite the fact that, thanks to collective responsibility, the cabinet ministers stand or fall together, the cabinet usually acts more as a collection of individuals than as a single collective force. The prime minister has no single relationship with the cabinet, but rather a series of individual relationships with some 20 to 23 ministers. Most of these ministers, most of the time, can nevertheless be treated (should the prime minister so wish) with cavalier disregard. Quite simply, they need the prime minister much more than the prime minister needs them. The same, however, cannot be said about the cabinet's major figures – its 'big beasts'.

Who are the cabinet's big beasts? What is it that distinguishes the big beasts from, if you like, the small ducks? Three key factors stand out. First, big beasts have a significant power base within the party. They enjoy support within the parliamentary party, amongst backbenchers and, in all likelihood, among ministerial colleagues inside and outside the cabinet, as well as in the party more widely. This means that they will be influential players in any future power struggle within the party, and may even be leadership

contender themselves. Second, big beasts are figures of a certain public standing. They not only attract media attention and have high name-recognition, but also command a measure of public respect as ‘cabinet heavyweights’, usually linked to perceived competence and a record of policy success. This means that their fate – their rise or their fall - has an electoral impact on the government itself.

Third, big beasts, *project* themselves as big beasts. They develop and sustain independent political identities, albeit within the confines of cabinet collegiality and party unity. Big beasts not only possess political leverage, but are also willing to use it. In other words, objective and subjective factors need to coincide. A prominent cabinet minister who distinguishes himself or herself by scrupulous loyalty towards the prime minister – such as William (Willie) Whitelaw, home secretary and deputy prime minister in Thatcher’s first government, 1979-83 – is not a big beast. As Thatcher later, and gratefully, put it, ‘Every cabinet needs a Willie’. By the same token, political projection is not enough in itself if party and electoral leverage wane. For instance, John Prescott, deputy prime minister under Blair, 1997-2007, probably ceased to be a big beast once Blair had secured a second landslide election victory in 2001, as this demonstrate the declining significance of the left-wing and trade union elements within the party that tended to identify with Prescott as the leading survivor of ‘old’ Labour.

Ultimately, a big beast is a minister whose resignation would seriously weaken the prime minister, either or both by undermining party support or by damaging the prime minister’s public image. This does not, however, mean that big beasts are necessarily threats to, still less rivals of, the prime minister. Indeed, big beasts may benefit prime ministers as well as constrain them. No prime minister wants to be seen to preside over a cabinet of minnows. To some extent, the standing of the prime minister is a reflection

of the talent and ability in his or her cabinet, so long as, of course, unity and loyalty are maintained. The key point, though, is that the loyalty and support of cabinet heavyweights cannot be taken for granted: it must be worked for; big beasts must be ‘managed’. But what does this mean? Balance-of-power theorists in international relations helpfully distinguish between two types of behaviour that subordinate states may adopt in relation to dominant states. They may either ‘bandwagon’ (that is, side with a stronger power in the hope of increasing security and influence, meaning that they ‘jump on the bandwagon’) or ‘balance’ (that is, oppose or challenge a stronger or rising power for fear of leaving themselves exposed). In short, prime ministers manage the cabinet’s big beasts by encouraging them to ‘bandwagon’ rather than ‘balance’.

The classic strategy for ensuring the loyalty of cabinet heavyweights, inclining them towards ‘bandwagoning’ behaviour, is through patronage and preferment. Big beasts do not become big beasts because they hold senior cabinet posts; they hold senior cabinet posts because they are big beasts. Senior appointments work in two ways. In the first place, they prevent a potentially dangerous ‘gap’ opening up between a minister’s cabinet rank and his or her sense of their own importance. Non-preferment risks encouraging ministers to ‘balance’ by manoeuvring against the prime minister, either in pursuit of their own leadership ambitions or in the belief that their careers would prosper better under an alternative leader. The second, and vital, consideration is that senior appointments ensure that big beasts are forced to remain politically ‘close’ to the prime minister. Ministers who hold senior posts – especially those of Chancellor of the Exchequer, foreign secretary and home secretary – are not only forced into closer and more regular contact with the prime minister (even perhaps being drawn into the prime minister’s inner circle), but their greater public prominence also leaves very little scope for disloyalty. For senior-ranking ministers, open criticism of the prime minister is

unthinkable, and even the hit of ‘manoeuvrings’ against the premier is likely to damage the minister concerned every bit as much as the prime minister. Nevertheless, patronage is the beginning of the process of managing big beasts, not the end. Prime ministers must also be astute enough to recognise when big beasts need to be ‘stroked’ and when they need to be ‘checked’, as both strategies have their pitfalls. This is best illustrated by when things go wrong.

Margaret Thatcher claimed in her memoirs that she had been toppled by a ‘cabinet coup’ (Thatcher, 1993). In fact, the bulk of her cabinet only advised her in a series of individual meetings in November 1990 to withdraw her candidacy in the second ballot of the Conservative Party’s leadership election once her failure to secure victory in the first ballot had demonstrated that she was doomed to defeat. Nevertheless, the cabinet did play a role in this process, but more through individual actions rather than collective ones. The preconditions for Thatcher’s downfall were laid by three senior-level resignations from her cabinet – those of the defence secretary Michael Heseltine in 1986, the Chancellor of the Exchequer Nigel Lawson in 1989, and the deputy prime minister Geoffrey Howe in 1990. The cumulative impact of these resignations was to expose key policy divisions in the Conservative Party and the government (particularly over Europe) and to damage Thatcher’s reputation and public standing. Together with unpopular policies such as the Poll Tax, they contributed to the developing impression that the prime minister had become an electoral liability. Heseltine, Lawson and Howe were certainly more dangerous outside of the cabinet than they had been inside. The party leadership election in 1990 was precipitated by a challenge by Michael Heseltine, very publicly supported by Lawson and Howe – something that would have been impossible had they remained in the cabinet. What is more, each of the resignations was avoidable, as each stemmed from a failure to ‘stroke’ a big beast who was in danger of

'balancing' rather than 'bandwagoning'. Heseltine resigned over the Westland Affair when he believed that the prime minister had sided with his rival, Leon Brittan; Lawson resigned over a policy clash with the prime minister's economic advisor, Alan Walters, who she continued to back; and Howe resigned over Thatcher's unilateral assertion that the UK would never enter a single European currency.

The relationship between prime minister Tony Blair and his Chancellor Gordon Brown offers a particularly instructive example of the successes and failures of managing big beasts. Aside from speculation about a possible deal in 1994 that allowed Blair to challenge for the leadership of the party while Brown stood aside, in return for a promise by Blair to step aside in favour of Brown in due course, Blair's treatment of Brown bears all the classic hallmarks of a 'stroking' approach. As, with Blair, one of the two leading figures in the 'new' Labour project, an effective shadow Chancellor and the architect of Labour's 1997 landslide election victory, Brown was duly, and predictably, rewarded with control over the Treasury. Once the prime minister had consolidated 'new' Labour's control over key areas of policy-making, it is no exaggeration to suggest that, for Blair, cabinet management largely boiled down to managing Gordon Brown. He did this consistently by encouraging 'bandwagoning' rather than 'balancing', allowing Brown, for instance, to build up an unprecedented power base in the Treasury which enabled him to exert control over large swathes of domestic policy. Brown came to operate almost as a 'second' prime minister responsible for domestic affairs.

This strategy proved to be highly effective for most of Blair's first two terms, even ensuring Brown's full and open support for the deeply controversial decision in 2003 to invade Iraq. Brown's backing for the policy helped to consolidate cabinet support and at least reduced hostility to it on the Labour backbenches. Brown's 'bandwagoning'

benefited both himself and the prime minister. However, as the Blair premiership extended, after 2005, into its third term, the drawbacks of ‘stroking’ became increasingly apparent. Brown’s public prominence, his standing in the party and his power base in the Treasury, to say nothing of his record of policy success (based on years of stable economic growth), fuelled his ambitions as well as those of Brownite elements within the government and party who were increasingly frustrated by Blair’s long tenure. In other words, ‘stroking’ strategies had ultimately produced a ‘balancing’ response. At the same time, however, precisely the same factors effectively ruled out a shift at this stage to a ‘checking’ strategy, in which Brown may have been marginalised, demoted or even sacked. The result of this was that Blair stood down as prime minister in June 2007 without having served his promised full third term and against a backdrop of barely concealed hostility between Blairites and Brownites, which damaged the images of both the outgoing and the incoming prime ministers.

There are signs, nevertheless, that big beasts may be a species in decline. The Blair cabinets of 1997-2007 contained but a single, genuine big beast, while the Brown cabinet after 2007 arguably contained none. By contrast, Harold Wilson’s cabinets in the 1960s featured such heavyweights as Anthony Crosland, Dennis Healey, Roy Jenkins and Dick Crossman. Where have all the big beasts gone? They appear to have succumbed to the changing nature of political careers and to the changing character of modern political parties. The trend in favour of ‘career politicians’, whose main, and sometimes only, professional experience has been within, or related to, the Westminster jungle, is certainly part of the explanation. Working outside of Westminster, especially in senior positions – in academic life, business, law, journalism, the trade unions, the civil service or wherever – gave politicians wider skills, knowledge and experience, making them, somehow, figures of greater substance. Similarly, as programmatic, mass-

membership political parties have given way to modern ‘catch-all’ parties, political careers are increasingly built on the basis of presentational qualities and televisual skills, discouraging rising politicians from taking up ‘serious’ ideological stances and relieving them of the need to cultivate support within the factions and tendencies of the party. However, if the conveyer belt that produces big beasts now functions less reliably, much of the texture and vibrancy of cabinet government will be lost. It might also mark the point at which the task of checking prime ministerial power passed finally from the cabinet to the electorate.

Thatcher, M. (1993) *The Downing Street Years* (London: HarperCollins)