



Sacking Prime Ministers

Archive News Material Gordon Brown

The Queen has kindly agreed to the dissolution of Parliament and a general election will take place on May 6th.

Ian Willox Voiceover

Election time. A time when a Prime Ministers must win the support of both voters and their party to keep their job at No.10. They may seem vulnerable now but once in office the Prime Minister has unprecedented power.

Richard Heffernan

The British Prime Minister has always been a significant political figure but I suspect now more than ever, he or she rises above their party and their Government

Ian Willox Voiceover

Dr Richard Heffernan of the Open University from his birdsong filled study.

Richard Heffernan

Provided they are authoritative and wish to lead from the front, they can lead their party, they can never necessarily command it but the executive they lead can dominate Parliament through a Parliamentary majority.”

Ian Willox Voiceover

Political Commentator Andrew Rawnsley agrees

Andrew Rawnsley

A British Prime Minister in command of his Cabinet, and with a solid parliamentary majority, is more powerful than an American President.

Richard Heffernan

Well the American president elected in his or her own right but they are not guaranteed a legislature majority. It so happens that Barrack Obama does have a democratic majority in both the House and the Senate, the United States Legislature, but they are both independent of him and autonomous of him, Though they support him, they do so critically. They are actually accountable to their own constituencies, their own states and districts. And therefore they have to be bargained with, persuaded and cajoled. They can not be forced because the Legislature is separate from, and autonomous of, the American Executive, whereas here the British Prime Minister is only Prime Minister usually if there's a single party government, Blair was Prime Minister because he had a majorities of 179, 166 and 66 and these are Parliamentary majorities that translated into the American political system an American President would die to have, particularly when they can command them and lead them in the way that British Prime Ministers can do so.

Ian Willox Voiceover

What gives a British Prime Minister this advantage is time.

Richard Heffernan

This is because they have the ability to stay in Downing Street for as long as their party or the British electorate permits them to do so. Presidents on the other hand, can only stay as long as the constitution permits them. They may only be re-elected once. And I think that it's undoubtedly the case that when comparing the American President and British Prime Minister, one can only conclude that rather than say the British Prime Minister has the powers of the American States President, he or she has more political power because a well

resourced Parliamentary Chief Executive will be much more powerful within the Legislature, be able to get more things done than any American President.

Ian Willox Voiceover

* But the flipside to all this power is that in fact the PM is actually very vulnerable –

Richard Heffernan

Prime Ministers are restricted in the sense that if they are electorally unpopular and politically unsuccessful they may come under pressure from their own Parliamentary colleagues and they may eventually be evicted from office. Mrs Thatcher was essentially fired by her Parliamentary Party in 1990 and Tony Blair under pressure from Gordon Brown resigned sooner rather than later in order to make sure he resigned at a time of his own choosing rather than sacked by his party and the real strange thing there then is that a Prime Minister has not a leasehold on the office of Prime Minister. They don't have a freehold. They essentially have squatters' rights. They can sit there for so long but only for so long as the electorate returns their party to Parliament with a Parliamentary majority or until their party decides to no longer have them as their party leader. Once a President is in office, provided they get re-elected once they can not be removed, other than by being impeached for breaking the law and no member of their Cabinet can supplant them. Whereas, every Prime Minister has to face the reality that at some stage, at some time somebody within their Cabinet may challenge them and may try to seek their job and may evict them from office.

Ian Willox Voiceover

Andrew Rawnsley thinks that if you're a squatter - albeit a very distinguished one - you need support.

Andrew Rawnsley

There tends to be a sort of feedback loop between a Prime Minister's support among the Cabinet, his support among his Party more widely, including his backbench MPs, and support of the public. So long as the Prime Minister is popular with the public, even if he may not or she may not be so popular with their colleagues for other reasons, the colleagues will probably tolerate it.

Because when it comes down to it, the bottom line of political activity is winning elections and retaining power. And as so long as people have a popular leader, a Party thinks it's got a leader that is going to lead it into a victory at the next election, they will actually tolerate quite a lot from a leader so long as that is the case.

But once a leader begins to lose popularity with the public, especially when the unpopularity seems to be so profound that a Party begins to despair of its prospects at the next election, that of course feeds into the opinion of backbencher MPs, who then become more vocal in their criticism of the leader, it then feeds into the way the Cabinet behaves. What we tend to see is that Cabinet discipline begins to disintegrate, you get Cabinet splits ...

and of course then that restiveness among the backbenches and splits and voices of dissent from the cabinet feed back into the voters who hear this, and it tends to make the governing Party and the Prime Minister even less popular. And so that's the downward spiral that can destroy many premierships. I think that downward spiral helps account for why Margaret Thatcher was removed by her Party.

Andrew Rawnsley

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the fact that the Tories have been able to do that to Margaret Thatcher made it possible towards the end of Tony Blair's time for people in the Labour Party to contemplate they could do the same to him when they saw his electoral powers were waning.

Ian Willox Voiceover

So a Prime Minister tends to stay in office only as long as their parliamentary colleagues are persuaded to allow them.

Richard Heffernan

In: Modern British politics is so personalised now, that we tend to increasingly cast our votes as electors for party leaders as well as for parties and for images of party leaders as well as for policies the parties present. I sometimes wish as a citizen that we would follow the advice given to us by Bob Dylan who said that we should not follow leaders but watch the parking metres. We increasingly judge politics on the way we think leaders will operate. If you take the last election debates it is undoubtedly the case that the leaders debates had an enormous impact on the way electors approached politics. The three debates dominated the horseshoe of the campaign and they gave more attention to the Prime Ministers in waiting than they did to the parties that were seeking our votes. So much so that any successful candidate for Prime Minister may now be able to claim a personal mandate for being successful in leading his party to victory at the polls and in claiming that by being electorally successful, by being politically successful, they can then stamp their authority on their party and then their party then even if they disagree with certain aspects of the leader's policy find themselves obliged to follow him or her.

Andrew Rawnsley

Character starts to matter more to voters.

If the policies are not so dramatically different between the parties, then you begin to think: well it's the character who's the better manager, the more attractive personality, the person you might like to have a barbecue with, the person you trust to make the right decisions, those become more important. And one consequence of that, and it's been very, very striking feature of the New Labour, is a more soap operatic politics.

IAN Willox Voiceover And in an equally soap operatic plot turn Britain faces a the possibility of something that hasn't happened in 40 years - a hung Parliament - where no one political party wins an outright majority.

Andrew Rawnsley

There's nobody really in officialdom with any experience of dealing with a hung Parliament. In fact the only person who's got any experience is Her Majesty the Queen, the only person in a position of any influence, potentially, who can remember what it was like when it wasn't clear in February, 1974 ...whether Ted Heath would remain as Prime Minister or Harold Wilson would take over. And we won't hear a peep from the Queen, because the one thing she and the Palace will absolutely desperate not to get involved in is any hint of political contentiousness concerning Her Majesty. There's no reason why a hung Parliament has to lead to great economical political stability. It depends entirely how the parties decide to behave whether their going to behave responsibly, whether the Prime Minister who is a minority Prime Minister doesn't try to behave as if he's a majority Prime Minister and whether other parties are prepared to give a fair wind as long as the minority Government is not being unreasonable to its budget and its Queen's speech.

Ian Willox Voiceover

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