



## Understanding Prime-Ministerial Performance: Comparative Perspectives

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## **(p.216) (p.217)** Part III Evaluating Prime-Ministerial Performance: Introduction to Part III

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In this section of the volume we investigate approaches to assessing prime-ministerial performance in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The chapters reflect upon the cultural traditions that exist within these countries for thinking about and memorializing prime-ministerial reputations and the established scholarly practices of leadership evaluation. Within this broad frame, a particular focus of each chapter is the experience and record of expert (and popular) rankings of political leaders. In what surely is an unprecedented exercise in coordinated cross-national leadership rankings, in 2010-11 each of the contributors to the section (Kevin Theakston writing on Britain, Stephen Azzi and Norman Hillmer writing on Canada, Paul Strangio writing on Australia, and Jon Johansson and Stephen Levine writing on New Zealand) surveyed historians and political scientists (and other experts in the cases of Canada and New Zealand) on prime-ministerial performance in their respective countries. The responses to those surveys are discussed, their results are analysed and compared to those of previous ranking exercises with the objective of illuminating how settled or dynamic the leadership ratings are, and conclusions are drawn about what the rankings reveal about the qualities of prime-ministerial leadership most esteemed in each country.

As suggested in other parts of this volume, the trend-line in the four countries is towards greater prime-ministerial predominance. Yet it is probably to be expected that these Westminster democracies, rooted as they are in principles of cabinet (collective) government, have been slow to emulate the presidential United States in its preoccupation with measuring and comparing leadership

performance. Leadership rankings, whether by public polls or by elite ratings, are relatively novel in all four of our case study countries. That they are belatedly attracting interest is possibly a symptom of leadership centralization. While Britain shares the limited history of rankings (the first Schlesinger-style survey of academics had to wait until **(p.218)** 1991), it does appear that scholars, commentators and the public in the United Kingdom have been more comfortable with debating the notion of leadership virtuosity (or failure) than their Westminster counterparts in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Indeed, the latter three countries are shown here to have a strong disposition against venerating or memorializing leaders. Situation-specific reasons are proposed for that cultural diffidence in each of the relevant chapters, but it is interesting to speculate whether their shared histories as colonies and relatively modest place in the world have conditioned self-effacing perceptions about the stature of their leaders.

Our contributors have run the gauntlet of the difficulties inherent in leadership ranking exercises. In Australia and New Zealand scholarly communities specializing in politics and political history are small (certainly compared to the United States) and response rates to the surveys were relatively poor. Australian scholars reacted to the exercise with considerable scepticism, a matter that is probed in the relevant chapter. In all countries historical knowledge of past prime ministers is uneven, and, predictably enough, is generally weakest the earlier a leader's period of office. Notably, the British expert rankings undertaken to date have generally omitted the pre-twentieth-century prime ministers. There is evidence, too, in the case studies, of leadership reputations being influenced by the phenomena of presentism and attribution. Scholarly interventions are seen to have the potential to shape perceptions of a leader's performance—a theme that emerges particularly strongly in the Canadian case study.

Allowing for the qualification that rankings have only a short history in our case study countries, analyses of the results show that in each of them elite perceptions of prime-ministerial success and failure have been largely stable. That is, there is broad consensus over time about which leaders deserve to be in the top tier of the rankings and which belong in the bottom tier. This is consistent with the interpretative literature on rankings originating from the United States that suggests ratings generally remain steady at the top and lower levels. On the one hand, that stability reinforces questions about how much leadership reputation is a prisoner to attribution, but, on the other hand, suggests continuity in the values experts bring to bear in assessing leadership performance. The results are also largely congruent with another key observation based on the record of US presidential ratings: that these exercises favour activist leaders. In each of the four countries, the top-rated prime ministers almost invariably boast credentials as change agents; in short, they tend to have been transformative leaders. At the same time, there are subtle but

distinct differences between the archetypes of exemplary leadership that are constructed in each chapter from analysis of the rankings. In Britain, for example, the experts are seen to prize prime-ministerial leadership that is bold and conviction driven, while in Canada an ability to hold together a nation with pronounced regional and cultural cleavages is confirmed as the **(p.219)** sine qua non of successful leadership, and, consistent with this, preference is given to change wrought consensually and unobtrusively. Similarly, in New Zealand a very high premium is placed on durability (prime ministers need to have won at least three elections to be considered in the top tier), whereas in Australia longevity in office seems to be a less important indicator of leadership excellence than is policy legacy.

In other words, while the evidence from the rankings points to common ingredients in leadership success across the four countries, there are also home-grown variables. This is fertile ground for further comparative research on leadership performance in the Westminster sphere and beyond.

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