



Understanding Prime-Ministerial Performance: Comparative Perspectives

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(p.125) Part II Prime Ministers and their Parties: Introduction to Part II

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This section of the volume investigates the rules of the game in the relationships between prime ministers and the parties they lead. In four country chapters covering the United Kingdom (written by Timothy Heppell), Canada (Jonathan Malloy), Australia (Judith Brett) and New Zealand (Jon Johansson), we examine how these rules have evolved over time under the influence of forces of change such as those described in the opening chapter, and how this has affected the nature of these relationships. These 'rules of the game' include formal features of party policy, such as rules concerning the selection and removal of party leaders, the control over its policy platforms and electoral campaigns, or the allocation of cabinet portfolios. The party's cultural, ideological and governance traditions may shape the expectations of the party's rank and file concerning their leaders, and their willingness to stay the course even if a government that bears the party's name appears to have lost its way. Yet those factors have lesser salience in determining the prime minister's behaviour as the parties have become electoral-professional machines, and parliamentary elites have gained more traction than party followers. In Australia, it is strikingly clear that the prime minister's relations with the parliamentary party are more important now than ever, a trend that appears also to be gaining ground in other jurisdictions.

The rules of the game are important because they determine the extent to which we might view the prime minister as their party's agent or—at least de facto—as its principal. Regardless of their role as head of the nation's government, in some parties (or historical eras within the life of parties) prime ministers can be more or less obliged to defer to party forums, be it caucus, regional barons, or the big beasts in cabinet. Their longevity in the job may depend on it. Indeed,

the chapters in this section remind us forcefully that, despite 'leader-centric' trends, a prime minister's performance is always dependent, first, on success in party leadership.

(p.126) In some cases prime ministers may themselves be inculcated with a belief that the party philosophy and programme should dictate their action. But if so, this appears to be becoming rare: as these chapters show, in all jurisdictions, the relationship between the party organization and its prime minister and front bench has become primarily pragmatic and transactional. Leaders are expected to deliver the electoral goods and win or retain government. The party machine will then let them govern for as long as they remain popular enough to give the party a good shot at the next election. When the belief takes hold that its electoral fortunes are being squandered, the leader/prime minister will be in trouble, regardless of their loyalty to the ideological platform of the party or the dominant factions within it.

At the other end of the principal vs. agent continuum, prime ministers may enjoy near complete de facto autonomy from their parties. In all four countries, concentration of resources in the prime minister's office and an increase in the latitude granted leaders have been marked features of the recent past. In Canada and the UK, the prime minister's independence from the party machine has been enhanced by party leadership selection rules that provide them with a direct mandate from the rank and file or party conference that can be rescinded only at great financial and political cost to the party. In Australia, in contrast, leader selection by the parliamentary party alone makes the prime minister's role potentially much more fraught, but the difficulty of sustaining fragile coalitions (such as those current at the time of writing in Australia and the UK) may reinforce a leader's position: would minority party or cross-bench alliances be sustained if the major party leader was removed?

In many instances, prime-ministerial supremacy vis-à-vis their parties is the sum of a confluence of their media appeal, their dominance within cabinet, high structural as well as cultural removal thresholds within the party organization, and auspicious political circumstances favouring their political agendas. However, none of these situations is static, and this can never be taken for granted by either side. As we have seen in Part I, prime-ministerial power is dependent on contextual factors as well as personal and institutional resources. And the former may shift even as the latter two are relatively constant, altering the opportunity structure for prime-ministerial leadership.

The chapters in Part II of the volume shows that in every party and jurisdiction, such contextual shifts occur from time to time, in some cases sweeping along the institutional arrangements governing party leadership. They also examine how individual prime ministers are more or less astute in exploiting those arrangements, and responding effectively to changes within them, thus

deepening the analysis of prime-ministerial power by focusing on one particular set of relationships through which this power is constituted.

The case studies throw light both on similarities (for instance, the conservative parties in all four countries traditionally give more licence to their leaders than do parties of the left, but the latter have incrementally moved towards the **(p. 127)** 'governing party' style) and on the considerable differences that exist between parties within countries that ostensibly are all part of the same 'Westminster' tradition. The brokerage tradition of Canadian parties is much more pronounced than in Australia, despite both countries having federal systems and federated party structures. The MMP voting system in New Zealand demands a degree of negotiation and compromise that is foreign to the UK, Canada and Australia, although these three have all had to accommodate to minority/coalition government of late. The electoral system in New Zealand and the need to manage regional and religious divisions in Canada seem to have generated more modest and anti-ideological leadership repertoires than prevail in the more confrontational cultures of Australia and the UK. Systems of leadership selection and removal continue to vary widely and, to this day, the main parties in Australia and New Zealand have bucked the trend towards democratization of party leader selection that the UK and Canada bear witness to. Some parties—the UK Conservative Party in 1990 and the Australian Labor Party in 2010, for instance—have not shied away from removing hitherto strong and successful prime ministers simply by caucus vote. Such feats of party rebellion against a leader are almost literally unthinkable in Canadian politics, where leaders are put very firmly in the saddle.

Despite the many idiosyncrasies and differences that exist within and between parties in respect of their relationship with their prime ministers, the chapters do suggest common trends that, on balance, seem to strengthen the hands of leaders vis-à-vis their parties. Prime ministers must attend closely to their parliamentary parties, but are now relatively free from constraint by the broader, external party organizations. The prime minister's increasing centrality to the running of cabinet; the decline of the importance of 'movement' and 'ideology' to parties' political platforms; the significance of the leader's image in aggregating electoral opinion; the steep rise in the proportion of floating voters; the increasing incidence of direct election of party leaders by the party membership; the imperatives of fast, disciplined and consistent 'real-time' messaging in the world of the 24-hour news cycle and on-line political communication—all of these factors conspire to strengthen the hands of prime ministers in relation to their party colleagues in cabinet, caucus and cadres. Such trends may be familiar in many of the Western democracies, but these chapters illustrate the importance of attending to the detail of specific cases, for the opportunity structures governing the exercise of power and determining effective performance will differ in each instance.

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