

The Self-Magnification of British Leaders: Prime Ministers' Perceptions and Projections of their Powers and Roles in the Postwar Era

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Abstract

Within the extensive literature on the powers and constraints of British prime ministers, there has been little comparison of the extent to which the premiers themselves have perceived or projected a personal entitlement to determine government policy. Using both quantitative and qualitative analysis, this article compares prime ministers who have asserted a right to be the ultimate decision maker with those who have embraced, and even emphasised, the determining role of government ministers and collective bodies in major policy making. For quantitative comparison, the focus is on prime ministers' speeches to their party's annual conference, from Attlee in 1946 to Starmer in 2024. Margaret Thatcher's leadership emerges as a transition point. Post-Thatcher, prime ministers have an augmented sense of their own prerogatives and a greater willingness to claim increasingly capacious powers.

Keywords: personalistic leadership, prime ministers, political language, content analysis, foreign policy, postwar Britain, Attlee, Thatcher, Blair

NORMATIVELY, IT IS OF some consequence how much a head of government is constrained or unconstrained by colleagues and whether the 'core executive'—a term that entered academic literature in the 1990s—includes or excludes people of independent standing who are not afraid to tell prime ministers what they would be unwise to do and what they cannot do. The more decisions are left to the prime minister, the more *de facto* power devolves to his or her unelected aides.¹ They are generally the most enthusiastic backers of the magnification of their employer's powers, since they are the principal beneficiaries. These are among the reasons why it matters if assumptions that the prime minister has supreme power over policy—or that it is the leader, rather than the party, that wins elections—are uncritically promulgated. It matters if prime ministers believe that they are entitled to determine all major policy or, aspiring to do so, seek to project themselves

as the paramount policy makers. Such self-magnification has hitherto not been the focus of systematic comparison. Attempting to rectify that, we look at how prime ministers from Clement Attlee to Keir Starmer have perceived and projected their roles and powers.

Investigating their perceptions and projections, we pay particular attention to the language they use in their speeches to the annual conference of their political party. Whether the prime minister has written the speech or it is composed by one or more speechwriters who know the premier's mind is largely immaterial, for it is a document to which every prime minister devotes sustained attention. The date of the speech is known long in advance and it is a mulled-over statement that normally goes through several drafts. It is aimed at multiple audiences—party activists in the auditorium, the party as a whole, the mass media and especially (via the media) the wider public. All postwar prime ministers' conference speeches from Attlee in 1946 to Starmer in 2024 have been analysed to see what light they throw on how these leaders perceive and project their role, how they view

¹A. Brown, *The Myth of the Strong Leader: Political Leadership in the Modern Age*, London, Bodley Head, 2014, pp. 9–10, 348–359.

their powers and their relationship to other ministers, the Cabinet, government and political party. Do they claim personal ownership of particular policies, take a capacious view of their powers and seek to enhance them vis-à-vis governmental and party colleagues? Or do they portray and extol a more collective leadership? For a fuller understanding of these changing perceptions and projections of prime ministers' own assumptions about the rights and duties of their office, it is, of course, essential to draw on a wide range of sources, including memoirs, biographies, interviews, the academic literature on political leadership and on the UK premiership specifically.

Quantitative analysis of prime ministers' conference speeches nevertheless brings out the extent of change over time in leaders' personalisation of power. As Figure 1 below makes clear, there have been zigzags from one prime minister to another, but the broad trend in the period since 1945 has been towards prime ministers making more personalistic policy-making claims. Margaret Thatcher's premiership can be seen as a transitional point. Pre-Thatcher, there is a greater emphasis on collectivism, whether the collective body most referenced is the Cabinet, government or party. Post-Thatcher, prime ministers are more assertive of an assumed right to determine policy than were their predecessors in the 1945–1979 period. Indeed, the largest leap in the overtly personalistic claims of policy determination by a prime minister comes, counterintuitively, with John Major. While all prime ministers do much to set the tone of a government, some more than others give a lead on policy. But there is a difference between giving a lead and claiming the right to be the ultimate policy maker.

Search terms in the quantitative part of our analysis were chosen for their relevance to policy determination and as a means of identifying the extent of prime ministerial claims to have personally decided major policy. These include, for example, leaders' use of causative verbs such as 'chose' and 'decided' when these are preceded by the first-person singular rather than by a collective noun or the first-person plural. Frequent use of 'I' can be a rough guide to the degree of personalism, but, on its own, this can be misleading.² Examination of the language political leaders use

when talking about decisions and policy initiatives provides insight into the extent of their self-magnification or, alternatively, commitment to a more collective leadership and dispersed power.

A low personalistic ranking for policy making is not synonymous with self-effacement. For a prime minister, Attlee was, indeed, self-effacing, and he made a virtue out of governing collectively through strong senior ministers, several of whom had held high office in the wartime coalition government in which Attlee had been the deputy prime minister. But in the most apparently anomalous result of content analysis of prime ministers' speeches to their party conferences, Boris Johnson appears to be even less 'personalistic' than Attlee. The explanation is that what is being measured is not attention-seeking of the kind signified by a daily succession of photo opportunities—a practice embraced by Johnson, but for Attlee unthinkable. Our measure is of a prime minister claiming his or her individual right to take the big decisions and to determine policy. Although in general terms Johnson made such an assumption, the reason he occupies the position he does in Figure 2 is because his conference speeches were largely free of policy content. Thus, claims of personal entitlement to decide one or another policy hardly arose.

Only slightly less surprising than Johnson at one end of the scale in Figure 2 is Liz Truss so prominently out on her own at the other end. Part of the reason she appears the most strikingly personalistic in her decision-making and policy-determining style is that she had only the one party conference speech as prime minister and it came close to being as self-referential as peak-Blair, whereas not all of Tony Blair's conference speeches during ten years as prime minister were as self-magnifying as others.³ Thus, Blair's mean score for personalism—though the highest of

²For fuller information on how our quantitative data were derived, see the online methodological appendix.

³Truss's forty-nine days as prime minister happened to include the annual Conservative Party Conference. Sir Alec Douglas-Home's ten months in 10 Downing Street did not. He is the only postwar prime minister not to have addressed the conference in that capacity.

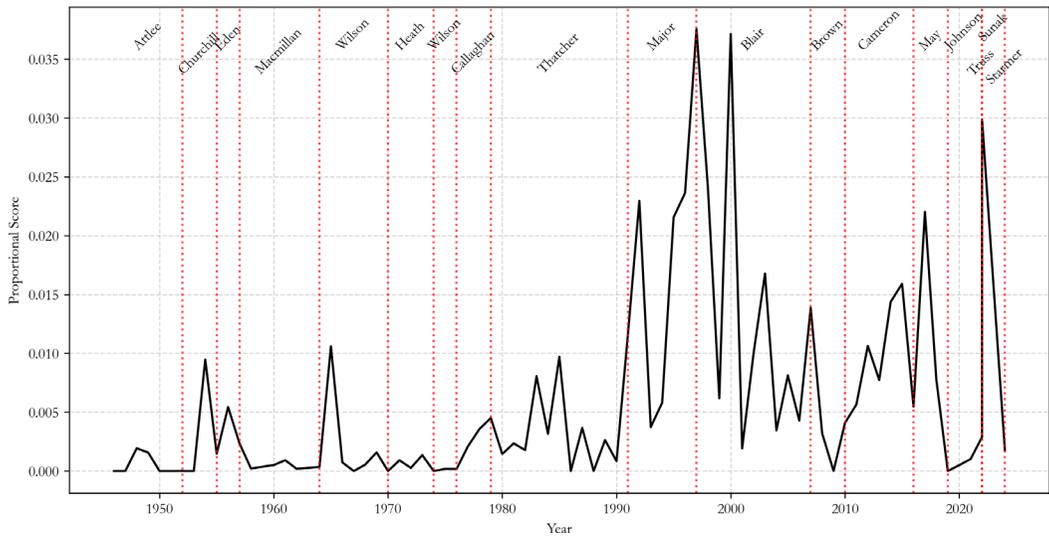


Figure 1: Personalistic measure by year (normalised by speech length)

all long-serving prime ministers—appears below Truss’s bid for glory.

There are parallels between media magnification of prime ministers and the degree of their self-magnification in conference speeches.⁴ There are also differences—vast differences in the case of Johnson who, in less than half a year in 2019, was referenced more in the press than was Attlee during his six-and-a-half years as prime minister.⁵ Margaret Thatcher appears somewhat less self-assertive as policy maker in content analysis of her conference speeches than knowledge of her media coverage and leadership style would lead us to expect. This, however, exemplifies the difficulty of capturing quantitatively her *implicitly* capacious view of her personal historic significance when she is making extremely large claims for the government she led and stressing groundbreaking policies especially dear to her.⁶ Not one of the pre-Thatcher postwar

prime ministers occupies any of the top six places for personalistic policy claims, measured by their party conference speeches. Eden comes closest. His two conference speeches (1955 and 1956) implied his personal dominance of foreign and defence policy, the latter speech largely a defence of the disastrous Suez venture, which, in Keith Kyle’s words, had seen Eden playing ‘an absolutely determining role’, taking ‘detailed direction of every move in the game’.⁷ But the top six personalistic places, as Figure 2 illustrates, are occupied (in ascending order) by post-Thatcher

speaking of the Government’s achievements, she should say “we”, not “I”. The main author of the missive was the Head of the 10 Downing Street Policy Unit, Sir John Hoskyns. See J. Hoskyns, *Just in Time: Inside the Thatcher Revolution*, London, Aurum, 2000, pp. 323–328, esp. p. 326. Although outraged by the tone of the memorandum, Thatcher at times overlearned use of the first personal plural, most famously when, on the birth of her first grandchild, she announced, ‘We have become a grandmother’.
⁷K. Kyle, *Suez: Britain’s End of Empire in the Middle East*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2003, 2nd ed., p.467. In his memoirs, Eden wrote: ‘Defence is very much a Prime Minister’s special subject ... The Prime Minister is ultimately responsible for all important decisions on defence. That is how it should be’, *The Memoirs of the Rt.Hon. Sir Anthony Eden: Full Circle*, London, Cassell, 1960, p. 367.

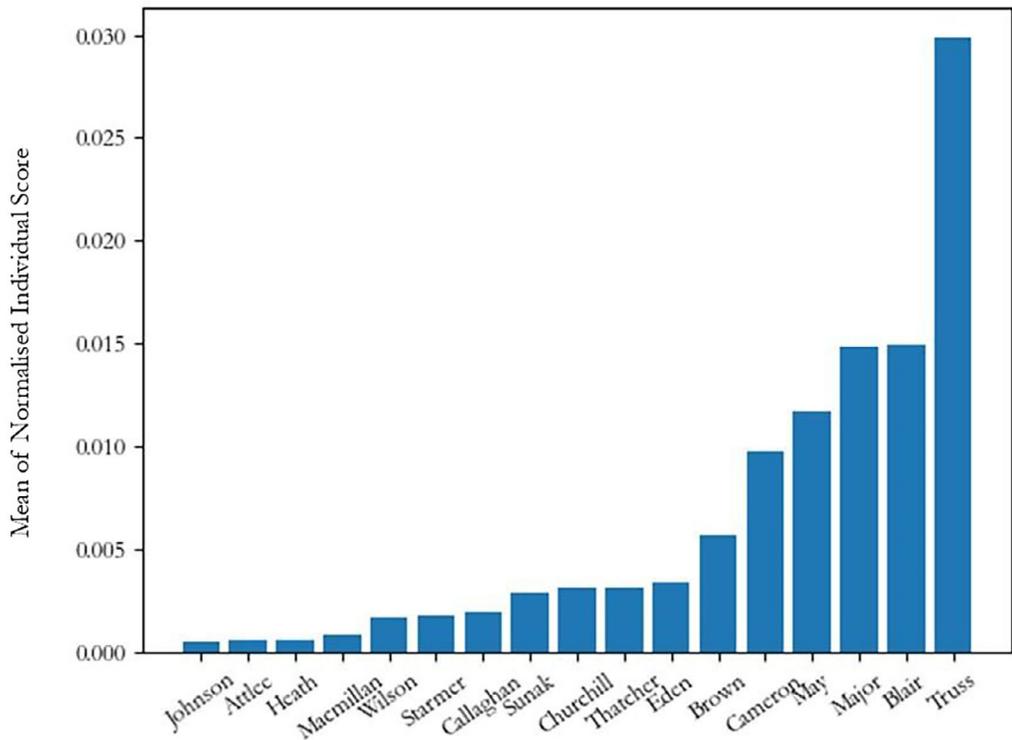


Figure 2: Personalistic measure by prime minister (normalised by length in office)

premiers Brown, Cameron, May, Major, Blair and Truss.

The long-serving postwar prime ministers

Particular weight should be attached to the findings on the long-serving postwar prime ministers, defined as those who have held the highest office in government for more than five years. The larger quantity of data available for long-serving prime ministers reduces the influence of outliers and noise, thereby providing a more robust foundation for identifying consistent trends and variations in their leadership styles and policy claims over time. The interpretation and contextualisation of the data drawn from the prime ministers' conference speeches focusses especially, therefore, on the seven prime ministers who meet our criterion for long-serving postwar prime minister of having held that office for more than the

length of a full parliamentary term. Winston Churchill was prime minister for over eight years, but does not appear in Figure 3 because his postwar premiership occupied only three-and-a-half of those years. It is, nevertheless, worth noting that Churchill's relatively high score for policy personalism (by pre-Thatcher standards) is heavily influenced by just one conference speech (in 1953) when he emphasised his desire, following the death of Stalin, for summit talks with 'the new Russian leaders' in the belief that he could have 'an influence on what I care about above all else, the building of a sure and lasting peace'. In his postwar leadership, Churchill was essentially close to Attlee in respect for the Cabinet and attribution of policy to the government as a whole.

Attlee epitomised respect for collective leadership. When he used the first-person singular, it was in a banal way, as in his 1947 conference speech, while specifically attributing successes to the Labour government collectively, he said,

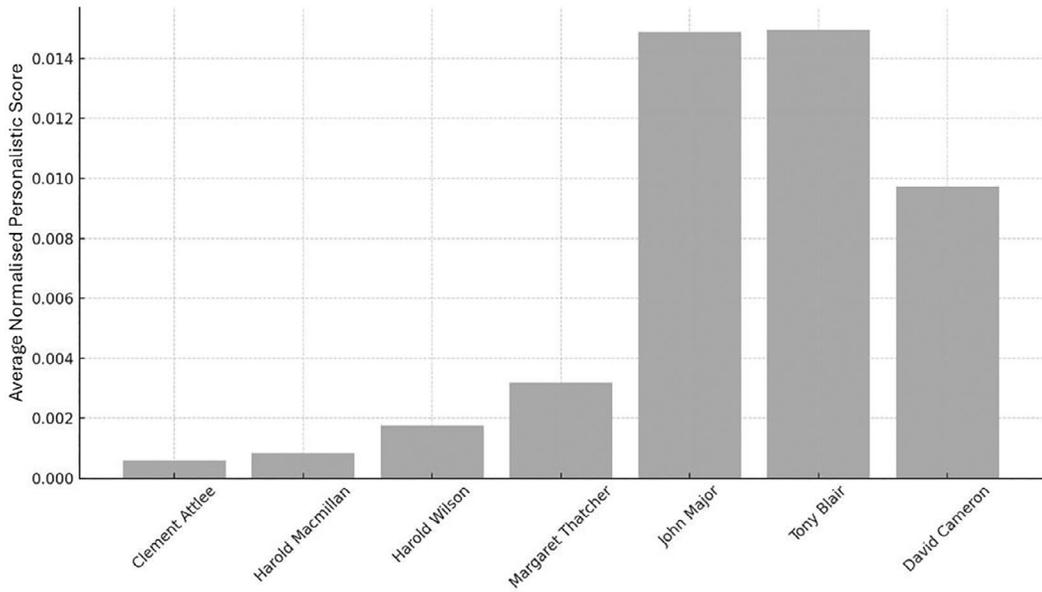


Figure 3: Mean personalistic score of long-serving prime ministers

‘I am not going to deal with all our achievements or I would take too long’.⁸ When Attlee refers to fighting general elections, to policy or to governing more generally, the emphasis is on the team—not the leader. He repeatedly attributes policy to the government, Cabinet and, more broadly, the Labour Party. Thus, in his conference speech at Bournemouth in 1946, Attlee ascribes policy to ‘the Labour Government’, ‘the whole Cabinet and its Committees’, ‘a co-operative effort’, ‘the Movement going forward’ and notes, ‘The work of a Government is team work’. He lauds senior Cabinet colleagues by name and praises the work they are doing in the policy areas for which they are responsible.

⁸The vast majority of prime ministers’ speeches to their party’s annual conference are available in the online British Political Speech Archive, an invaluable electronic source from which we accessed the PM speeches from Attlee in 1946 to May in 2018. The (post-2018) speeches of Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer were accessed from other websites—Politics Home, UKPOL.co.uk, *The Spectator*, with Sunak’s 2023 speech obtained from the Conservative Party website and Starmer’s of 2024 from the Labour Party site. In any quote from the conference speeches, we note the year of delivery.

Addressing the party conference at Scarborough in 1948, Attlee explicitly states ‘Whilst every Minister is responsible for his own departmental decisions, the collective responsibility both in home and foreign policy is with the Cabinet. We share the blame and credit for every action of the Government’.

The two governments in postwar Britain which made the biggest political and economic difference were the immediate postwar Labour government and the Conservative administrations of 1979–1990. Yet, they were led in utterly contrasting ways by Attlee and by Thatcher.⁹ The one occasion in any of his party conference speeches Attlee uses the entirely uncharacteristic phrase ‘I and the Government’ with reference to policy was

⁹P. Bew, *Clement Clem: A Biography of Attlee*, London, Riverrun, 2016; P. Hennessy, *The Prime Minister: The Office and its Holders since 1945*, London, Penguin, 2001, pp. 147–177, 397–436; C. Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography, Volume 1: Not For Turning*, London, Allen Lane, 2013; C. Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography, Volume 2: Everything She Wants*, London, Allen Lane, 2015; C. Moore, *Margaret Thatcher: The Authorized Biography, Volume 3: Herself Alone*, London, Allen Lane, 2019; N. Thomas-Symonds, *Attlee: A Life in Politics*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2010.

in his 1950 speech at Margate, when he was adding his personal endorsement to the highly controversial nationalisation of the iron and steel industry, while stressing that it was ‘Labour Party policy’.

When ill-health and the Suez crisis aftermath forced the resignation of Eden (the most personalistic of pre-Thatcher postwar prime ministers) in January 1957, his successor, Harold Macmillan, was much closer to the collectivist end of the spectrum. That was, however, consistent with providing intellectual and political leadership to the government, especially on Europe.¹⁰ In his last speech to a Conservative Party conference in 1962, Macmillan devoted a large part of it to the desirability of Britain joining the European Economic Community (EEC). Accepting the collective nature of the ultimate decision, he said, ‘We in the Cabinet have given long and anxious thought to every aspect of this problem’. Towards the end of his premiership, Macmillan made drastic use of his prerogative of choice of Cabinet ministers by replacing a third of them. The limitations of exercising that power were illustrated by the fact that this accelerated—rather than stemmed—a decline in the prime minister’s standing.¹¹

Macmillan took a strong personal interest—which emerged in his conference speeches as well as in his daily exercise of political leadership—in foreign, defence and economic policy. In addition to seeking to persuade the Cabinet of his view that Britain should join the EEC, he was no less keen on improving East-West relations and seeking summit talks with the Soviet leadership. These policies figured prominently in his conference speeches. Macmillan was a firm economic expansionist—‘almost a wild inflationist’ in the exaggeration of Derick Heathcote-Amory, the chancellor whom Macmillan, in purely personal terms, liked best.¹² The depression and mass unemployment of the 1930s, when Macmillan represented a parliamentary seat

in northeast England, were never far from his consciousness. His conference speeches, however, did not lay claim to personal ownership of policy in any particular area, with the partial exception (by implication) of foreign policy. Like his premiership as a whole, his speeches set the tone for the government, while reflecting his practice of not overruling departmental ministers during their tenure of office.

There was an upward turn in personalism when Harold Wilson became the first Labour prime minister for thirteen years. Wilson was far from being as self-effacing as Attlee, yet, in his conference speeches, he emphasised that domestic policy had been made collectively. The policies being presented, he told the conference in 1964, were ‘the result of patient work in the National Executive, in the Parliamentary Party, in working parties and advisory groups which have employed the long years in opposition to good purpose’. Wilson did link himself with a particular policy on occasion, including his 1964 speech when he said, ‘The first Bill we introduced in this Parliament was a small one but one close to my heart, for which I and the Chief Whip and others have been fighting for years—a simple measure to restore to local authorities the power to allow old age pensioners and others to travel free on municipal transport undertakings’. He was fond of quoting himself—for example, when referring to the Conservatives in his 1965 conference speech: ‘As I said on television last week, nothing is more pathetic than this repetitive complaint that in less than a year, we have not yet done everything that they failed to do, or neglected to do, or hadn’t the humanity to do, or refused to do, or didn’t know how to do, in 13 years’.

The limitations of measuring the use of the first-person singular, in the absence of examining the context, are readily apparent in a short passage from Wilson’s 1967 conference speech when, in the space of a few lines, he uses ‘I’ seven times, but while emphasising the limits on what was politically possible for him to do: ‘Now I read in the Daily Telegraph—and I believe it—(laughter)—of their leader and, I quote, “instructing” local

¹⁰Macmillan was able to dominate the Cabinet through intellectual ability’, R. A. Butler told Archie Brown in an interview of 13 September 1966. Butler had no personal reason to laud Macmillan who had gone out of his way to ensure that Butler himself would not become prime minister.

¹¹D. R. Thorpe, *Supermac: The Life of Harold Macmillan*, London, Pimlico, 2011, pp. 519–525.

¹²A. Horne, *Macmillan 1957–1986*, London, Macmillan, 1989, vol. 2, p. 140.

Conservative councillors. I do not try to instruct local Labour councillors, I know what I would get if I did'. For the most part, Wilson referred to 'we' and 'the Government' when discussing policy rather than claiming his own individual ownership of it. One of the rare exceptions, though it is an ambiguous one, is when in his 1968 conference speech, he said 'Two years ago, I told this Party that never again would Britain engage in any war, other than self-defence, except on a basis of collective security'. He could not, of course, predict a future in which that rule would be breached, but of more immediate relevance is the fact that throughout Wilson's 1964–1970 premiership, the defence secretary was a formidable Labour figure—Denis Healey—who possessed great authority in foreign and defence policy. Wilson's statement could only have been made if Healey was in full agreement with it. At one point, Wilson—who has been given credit for keeping Britain out of the Vietnam war, for he came under pressure from American President Lyndon Johnson to send at least a token British force—raised with Healey a possible change of policy. Healey's response was 'Absolutely not!' Wilson did not pursue the matter further.¹³

When Labour returned to office in February 1974 following four years of Conservative government under Edward Heath, they initially failed to gain an overall majority. Wilson formed a minority government and Labour comfortably won the election he called for October of the same year. A more relaxed prime minister in the 1970s than he had been in the sixties, Wilson had already decided in 1974 that he would retire in 1976 when he reached the age of sixty—a rare case of a prime minister leaving at a time of his own choosing when under no pressure to do so.¹⁴ Wilson's 1974 and 1975 conference speeches emphasised collective leadership, with much use of 'the Labour Party', 'Government', 'Labour Government', 'this Movement', 'this Party' and 'we' (rather than 'I') in relation to policy. He was at his most personal in his final (1975) speech as prime minister and party

leader when discussing party management. The Labour Party, he said, needed to guard itself against the 'extreme so-called left' and 'in a few cases extreme so-called moderates' who had 'in common only their arrogant dogmatism'. But he also emphasised his ability to hold the party together, saying that 'I have led this Party, so far, for twelve and a half years' and during that period, 'not one of the near 600 Labour Members of Parliament who have served in Parliament over those years has had the Party Whip withdrawn. I am proud of that'. Wilson's ability 'to provide political cement' within a fractious Labour Party was, as his biographer Ben Pimlott noted, 'widely acknowledged'.¹⁵

By the time Wilson resigned as prime minister in March 1976, he had been party leader for thirteen years and had led Labour into government in four elections: 1964, 1966 and twice (minority government, then majority government) in 1974. His successor, James Callaghan, led the government in a still more collegial way, and remained more popular than his party and than his principal opponent. Although Margaret Thatcher was to become Britain's longest-serving postwar prime minister—and the driving force of a change-making government—her party won the 1979 election in spite of her leadership rather than because of it. Throughout the election campaign, 'Labour invariably lagged behind the Conservatives in Gallup, MORI, Marplan, and, to a lesser extent, NOP polls', but 'Callaghan led Mrs Thatcher by an average 20 points in polls on the party leaders and who would make the better prime minister'.¹⁶

In office, Thatcher used speechwriters for her conference orations, but every sentence had her imprimatur. That was dramatically illustrated in the early hours of Friday, 12 October, 1984. In her hotel suite at the Brighton Grand Hotel, she was still making changes to her speech to be delivered that day and had just handed over the revised draft for retyping when at 2:50 AM the IRA bomb that was intended to kill her exploded. It killed five conference delegates, injured thirty-one others, and badly damaged the hotel, including the prime minister's suite. Having had no

¹³G. Dougary, 'Happy days', *Times*, 28 June 2006; <https://www.thetimes.com/article/happy-days-pv7w00fwxwj>.

¹⁴B. Pimlott, *Harold Wilson*, London, HarperCollins, 1992, pp. 648–652.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶K. O. Morgan, *Callaghan: A Life*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 692.

sleep, Thatcher defied suggestions that the conference should not meet that day, earning the respect of her opponents as well as the acclaim of her party for insisting that it go ahead on schedule. In her speech, she said that ‘the fact that we are gathered here now—shocked, but composed and determined—is a sign not only that this attack has failed, but that all attempts to destroy democracy by terrorism will fail’. She devoted just three paragraphs to the bomb attack before continuing with her prepared speech.¹⁷

In the conference speeches, Thatcher was more personalistic than any of her postwar predecessors other than Eden, and less so than most of her successors. She became more personalistic from the mid-1980s, seen in Figure 1. But quantitative—as distinct from qualitative—analysis of her speeches does not fully capture her implication that she was the driver of great change. In her 1980 speech, for example, it is ‘this administration’, the government she led, or contemporary ‘Britain’ that is instituting dramatic political change. In that same speech, she said that ‘my fellow Heads of Government’ wondered whether Britain had ‘the courage and resolve’ to sustain the policies the government had embarked upon. Her response was ‘we have and we shall’, adding ‘That is what marks this administration as one of the truly radical ministries of post-war Britain’. The most famous passage in that 1980 oration—written by Ronald Millar—alluded to the title of a play by Christopher Fry, *The Lady’s Not for Burning*. In Thatcher’s version, ‘To those waiting with baited breath for that favourite media catchphrase, the “U”-turn, I have only one thing to say. “You turn if you want to. The lady’s not for turning”’.¹⁸ She returned to the historic importance of the government she led in her 1982 conference speech, comparing its performance favourably not only with Labour, but with all previous postwar Tory governments, saying that ‘we are only in our first term’, but ‘we have done more to roll back the frontiers of socialism than any previous Conservative Government’.

¹⁷Moore, *Volume 2*, pp. 309–316.

¹⁸A phrase that machine-reading of the text (as distinct from qualitative interpretation of the words used) does not classify as prime ministerial personalism.

By 1989, exhilarated by the transformative change in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe—which she believed she had done much to inspire—Thatcher enthusiastically embraced the notion of ‘revolution’ in her conference speech. ‘What happened in Russia in 1917’, she said, ‘wasn’t a revolution. It was a coup d’état. The true revolution is what is happening in Russia and Eastern Europe today. In 1979, we knew that we were starting a British revolution; in fact, we were the pioneers of world revolution’. It would be hard to imagine Churchill, Eden, Macmillan or Heath—not to mention Stanley Baldwin—using such language. Thatcher’s portrayal of herself as a ‘pioneer of world revolution’—a kind of Tory Trotsky—was in keeping with the charge brought against her by more traditional Tories that she was less a true Conservative than radical ideologue.¹⁹

Thatcher’s ousting by her parliamentary party in November 1990 came as a great shock to her. Yet, when she made what turned out to be her last conference speech as prime minister the previous month, she was aware that not only policies she had championed—especially the decision that led to poor and rich households alike paying the same ‘poll tax’—but also her leadership style, were coming under increasing attack from within her party as well as outside it. This may have had a bearing on her far-wider-than-usual distribution of praise on Cabinet colleagues. She referred by name to fourteen of them and exclaimed, ‘What a fabulous team we’ve got’. The compliments did not prevent the ‘team’ telling her a few weeks later that she was unable to win the second round of the parliamentary Conservative Party leadership ballot and that she should, therefore, resign.

Personalistic leadership post-Thatcher

Thatcher was—for most of her premiership—much more dominant within the government and party than was her successor, John Major. Yet Major, while more modest than Thatcher in his claims for the government he led, in some years went much further in explicitly

¹⁹I. Gilmour, *Dancing with Dogma: Britain under Thatcherism*, London, Simon & Schuster, 1992.

asserting personal ownership of policy. This was especially true of his earlier conference speeches as prime minister (visible in Figure 1) when his position was stronger than it later became. A notable case in point was his 1992 speech, his first after the Conservatives had achieved a fourth successive general election victory. It was the only occasion when he led his party to electoral success, but since that government lasted a full term (and as Major had already served two years) his was one of the lengthier postwar premierships. With Britain's relations with Europe a deeply divisive issue in the Conservative Party, Major used the first-person singular extensively in answering his critics. Noting his own role in the negotiations over the Maastricht Treaty, he told the 1992 party conference that 'the Treaty I hear talked about is not the one I negotiated'. He stressed the British opt-outs on the single currency, immigration policy and refusal to sign up to the Social Chapter. 'If I believed', Major added, 'what some people said about the Treaty I would vote against it. But I don't. So I'm going to put the real Treaty—the one I negotiated—back to the House of Commons'.

In his 1992 and 1993 conference speeches, Major went quite far in claiming personal ownership of the government's European policy, educational policy and decisions on war and peace, with particular reference to the war in the Balkans following the break-up of Yugoslavia. Thus, in his 1993 conference speech, he said, 'It's my responsibility, my responsibility as the Queen's first minister, to advise when soldiers should be sent to fight and to risk being killed'. Later, he added, 'I consider all the options, but I must think first of the lives of British soldiers. And I will not put them at risk for the sake of talking big and striking attitudes. I will not rush into war. Emotion says yes, logic says no. I say no'. He was similarly assertive of his personal determination of policy when, a year later, he discussed Northern Ireland, saying other people could 'call for speed if they wish', but 'I must ask the hard questions and I must make the right judgments at the right time, and to the best of my ability'.

That Major appears (in Figures 2 and 3) substantially more assertive in his conference speeches of his individual role as policy maker than was Thatcher—and only fractionally less

personalistic than Blair—is unexpected. It partly reflected changed expectations about a prime minister's prerogatives fostered by Thatcher and was partly a consequence of his needing to respond to intraparty criticism over Europe. The policy personalism of his conference speeches, in comparison with those of Thatcher, is striking if her words are taken at face value—much less so when they are contextualised and due attention is paid to her very large, implicitly self-magnifying claims. There is no doubting, however, the sharp contrast between Thatcher's and Major's ways of chairing the Cabinet. As Malcolm Rifkind notes, Thatcher did not shirk robust exchanges or resent opposition if it was evidence-based, but would state 'her own conclusion' at the start of each item, 'challenging her colleagues to agree or disagree with her'. Major's approach was 'the exact opposite', for he would 'go round the table hearing every view before expressing any opinion of his own'.²⁰

The Thatcher premiership—taken in the round—marked a point of substantial change, not only in policy content, but in perceptions of the kind of power over policy and vis-à-vis colleagues a prime minister exerts and is entitled to exert. When Labour won the 1997 general election by a landslide, Thatcher's style of government appeared much more attractive to the new prime minister, Tony Blair, than the 'weak' leadership he attributed to Major, even though Major's conference speeches were more overtly personalistic on policy than those of any of his predecessors. Blair was not as dominant as he aspired to be or as his chief of staff, Jonathan Powell, believed he should be, largely because of the countervailing force of Gordon Brown as chancellor.²¹ Alistair Darling—a Cabinet minister throughout the entire thirteen years of Labour government from 1997 to 2010—recalled Blair, when prime

²⁰M. Rifkind, *Power and Pragmatism: The Memoirs of Malcolm Rifkind*, London, Biteback, 2016, pp. 116–117.

²¹Powell notes that 'Gordon normally kept us well away from Treasury civil servants ... and saw off the two Number 10 economic advisers, Derek Scott and Arnab Banerji, by starving them of information and forbidding Treasury officials to meet them' (J. Powell, *The New Machiavelli: How to Wield Power in the Modern World*, London, Bodley Head, 2010, p. 112).

minister, complaining in private that when he had asked for a meeting with Brown to discuss one of their publicly known disagreements, the chancellor responded that the only time he could see him was ‘at 6:30 in the morning’. Blair told Darling that those meetings ‘were like facing the dentist’s drill without an anaesthetic’.²²

Although Blair was often stymied by Brown—most notably, over Britain joining the euro—he carried rhetorical personalisation of government further than had any postwar predecessor. He preferred the terminology of reform to that of revolution, but the claims he made for the government he led were as audacious as Thatcher’s ‘pioneer of world revolution’ rhetoric from 1989. While setting out a reformist programme (the most historically significant components of which were already party policy before he became Leader) at Labour’s Brighton conference in 1997, Blair said, ‘Today, I want to set an ambitious course for our country. To be nothing less than the model 21st century nation, a beacon to the world’. Later in the speech, he specified that this meant they would be ‘one of the *great*, radical, reforming Governments of *our history*’—a more grandiose claim than Thatcher’s in her 1980 conference speech to be leading ‘one of the truly radical ministries of *postwar Britain*’ (italics added).

In that first conference speech, Blair was more self-referential than hitherto any postwar premier had been, captured in the sharply rising curve in Figure 1. There was constant use of phrases such as ‘I am going to pledge to you’, ‘I want’, ‘I don’t want’, ‘I will not rest’, ‘I’m tired of hearing’, ‘I promise you’, ‘I tell you’, ‘I say to the country’, ‘I make no apology’, ‘I back zero tolerance on crime’, ‘I give you this pledge’, ‘I can announce to you’, ‘I know’, ‘I commissioned’, ‘I am so passionate in my commitment to action’ and ‘Today, I

issue a challenge to you’. He did not hesitate to make pronouncements about the future. At the 2001 conference, he said, ‘People ask me if I think ideology is dead. My answer is: In the sense of rigid forms of economic and social theory, yes’. In the same speech, rather than describe the destruction of the twin towers in New York that year as a particularly grotesque terrorist act, Blair said ‘it marked a turning point in history, where we confront the dangers of the future and assess the choices facing humankind’. Related to that, much of Blair’s 2003 conference speech was taken up with justifying the war in Iraq and Britain’s participation in it. He made clear that joining the United States in the invasion of Iraq was his personal decision, saying, ‘I do not at all disrespect anyone who disagrees with me. I ask only one thing: attack *my decision*, but at least understand *why I took it* and *why I would take the same decision again*’ (italics added).²³

The policy of British participation in the Iraq war was an especially clear instance of Blair as the dominant decision maker. There were other areas where Blair’s association with a wide range of government policies had more to do with the conscious efforts of his skilled communications team and his own expressed desire to be publicly linked with something or other new. In a note to his staff in April 2000, Blair asked them to come up with ‘a series of eye-catching initiatives’, adding that ‘I should be personally associated with as much of this as is possible’. In the words of the *Financial Times* journalist who revealed the note, ‘the prime minister wanted more headline-grabbing initiatives and wheezes to keep him in the public eye’.²⁴

²³Blair’s lauding of what he presents as his personal achievements and ‘courage’ are liberally displayed not only in his conference speeches, but in numerous interviews and, not least, in his memoirs. In the space of just two pages, Blair asserts: ‘I had led the Labour Party to victory. I had reshaped it. I had given it a chance to be a true party of government. All of this took a degree of political skill and courage’; ‘...ultimately I’m the prime minister and have to decide’; ‘I had discovered long ago the first lesson of political courage: to think anew. I had then learned the second: to be prepared to lead and decide. I was now studying the third: how to take the calculated risk’, T. Blair, *A Journey*, London, Hutchinson, 2010, pp. 27–28.

²⁴P. Stephens, *Tony Blair: The Price of Leadership*, London, Politico, 2004, p. 188.

²²A. Darling, *Back From the Brink*, London, Atlantic Books, 2011, pp. 321–322. Darling himself had good relations with both Blair and Brown until those with the latter deteriorated drastically during Brown’s premiership. Remaining aloof from factionalism, Darling took part in none of the plots to remove Blair after 2003 or, after 2007, to replace Brown as prime minister, although in his memoirs (p. 321) he says that by 2006 he ‘didn’t see how Tony Blair could stay on’.

From 2003 onwards, Blair's increasing association with Iraq, the doubts about (and opposition to) that war on the Labour benches and in the country, and the growing impatience of his formidable rival, Gordon Brown, to succeed to the top job all diminished Blair's authority.

Labour had won a third general election in a row by the time the 2005 party conference took place, although with 2 million fewer votes than the party obtained in 1992 when—on a higher turnout and led by Neil Kinnock—Labour lost to the Conservatives. In each election under Blair's leadership, the party's share of the vote was reduced—'a steady decline from a position of great party strength'.²⁵ In his 2005 conference speech, Blair presented himself as the decision maker in a wide range of policy areas: 'I will never return us to selection aged 11 in our schools. I will never allow the NHS to charge for treatment... Every time I've ever introduced a reform in government, I wish in retrospect to have gone further... For eight years I have battered the criminal justice system to get it to change... When I became prime minister I took a decision: always to be at the forefront where decisions are made' and 'I never doubted after September 11 that our place was alongside America and I don't doubt it now'. In his 2006 conference speech—which Blair, under pressure to quit from within the Labour Party, acknowledged would be his last to the party as prime minister—he finished up by saying 'I don't want to be the Labour leader who won three successive elections. I want to be the first Labour leader to win three successive elections'. In countless interviews, as well as in that speech, Blair attributed the election victories of 1997, 2001 and 2005 to himself or to 'New Labour' which he saw as an extension of himself (the name did not appear on any ballot paper). Media references to these election victories have frequently taken Blair's view that they were leader-determined at face value, accelerating a trend away from the political language of earlier postwar decades when election victories were attributed to the parties which won them.

Gordon Brown made fewer claims to have determined policy as prime minister than did his predecessor, but stressed his specific role in dealing with the threat to the global economy resulting from the sub-prime mortgage crisis and collapse of major financial institutions in the United States. In his final conference speech as prime minister in 2009, 'we' greatly outnumbered 'I' when Brown was speaking of policy, with the partial exception of confronting 'the biggest economic choices the world has faced since the 1930s' when 'I knew that unless I acted decisively and immediately, the recession could descend into a great depression with millions of people's jobs and homes and savings at risk'. Content analysis of the conference speeches places Brown as the sixth most personalistic of all postwar prime ministers (Figure 2), but when he spoke of policies Labour had implemented or would go into the next general election manifesto, it was, for the most part, what 'we', 'Britain' or 'Labour' had done and would do.

As the Conservatives failed to get an overall majority in the May 2010 general election and formed a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, there were limitations on the extent to which Brown's successor, David Cameron, the most recent of the long-serving postwar prime ministers, could dictate policy or claim to do so. Although Cameron's conference speeches were not as self-magnifying as those of Blair and Major, they scored more than twice as high for personalism than those of any pre-Thatcher prime minister. An area where Cameron increasingly used 'I' was on relations with the European Union, as he talked tough on Europe in an eventually vain attempt to conciliate Tory Euroscepticism. Thus, at his Birmingham speech in 2012, Cameron said:

Last December, I was at a European council in Brussels. It was three in the morning, there was a treaty on the table that was not in Britain's interests... and twenty-five people round that table were telling me to sign it. But I did something that no other British leader has ever done before... I said no—Britain comes first—and I vetoed that EU treaty.

The adversarial tone when he talked about his European partners was a common thread in Cameron's conference speeches. At Birmingham in 2014, he said:

²⁵M. Benneter, B. Worthy and P. 't Hart, eds., *The Leadership Capital Index: A New Perspective on Political Leadership*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 132.

Around that table in Europe, they know I say what I mean, and mean what I say. So we're going to go in as a country, get our powers back, fight for our national interest... and yes—we'll put it to a referendum... in or out—it will be your choice... and let the message go out from this hall: it is only with a Conservative Government that you will get that choice.

The Conservative victory in the 2015 election meant Cameron had to deliver on the EU referendum promise since the party was no longer in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Years of emphasising the supposed negatives of EU membership rather than the positives did nothing to help him get the 'yes' for continuing membership he sought in the 2016 referendum, but that failure made his continuation in office untenable.

Following Cameron's resignation, Theresa May became in July 2016 the first of four successive Conservative prime ministers to enter 10 Downing Street without the inconvenience of a general election campaign, but by decision of the Conservative Party, whether of their MPs alone, as was the case with May and Sunak, or of both parliamentary party and the country-wide membership with Boris Johnson and Liz Truss. May's first conference speech as prime minister in 2016 was not especially personalistic, but it was designed to impart a different tone to the Conservative government. By the time she came to address the 2017 party conference, May was doubly handicapped. She had a cough and difficulty in speaking, though that did not affect the text prepared well in advance. Her main problem was that, having previously said she would not call an early general election, she held one in June 2017, in the expectation of turning a small majority into a large one. In defiance of conventional wisdom that the election campaign as such makes little or no difference to the outcome, opinion changed substantially during the 2017 campaign. The movement in opinion was enough to turn a Conservative majority into a minority government, forcing May to reach an agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland in the attempt to get legislation through the House of Commons. In her October 2017 conference speech, May referred fleetingly to the election campaign she had led, accepting it had been 'too scripted' and 'too presidential'. Indeed, it had been entirely built around her on the assumption that highlighting

a comparison with Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn would work to the Conservatives' advantage. In the course of the campaign, Corbyn reduced the 38 per cent gap between those who thought that May would be the better prime minister to 11 per cent, though, even at the end, he ran behind her and also behind his own party in popularity.²⁶

In her 2018 conference speech, May presented herself as policy-maker-in-chief on defence and national security and claimed ownership of Britain's post-Brexit policy vis-à-vis the EU. Overall, she appears in Figure 2 as more personalistic than Cameron. It was her failure to carry her own parliamentary party and their Northern Ireland conditional allies with her on Britain's future relationship with the EU that was her undoing. She could not get her relatively 'soft' Brexit deal through the Commons. That, together with resignations from the Cabinet, including Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson's, forced her resignation and led to Johnson succeeding her in 2019.

Johnson choosing to campaign for Leave rather than Remain in the referendum on British membership of the European Union may, given the narrowness of the vote, have tilted the balance, thereby sealing Cameron's fate as prime minister.²⁷ More certainly, he played a huge part in undermining May's premiership. When he himself was forced to resign as premier because of a cavalier relationship with the constitution and with the truth,²⁸ a senior civil servant observed that 'Boris Johnson is

²⁶P. Cowley and D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2017*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 412–413.

²⁷Cameron was in no doubt about the reason for the shift in the position of a former pro-European Mayor of London, writing in his memoirs that the most important thing about Brexit for Johnson was, 'what was the best outcome for him', for 'Whichever senior Tory politician took the lead on the Brexit side ... would become the darling of the party'. But, adds Cameron, Johnson was 'certain that the Brexit side would lose', so it would be 'a risk-free bet on himself', D. Cameron, *For the Record*, London, William Collins, 2019, p. 654.

²⁸As has been widely noted, succinctly by David Sanders, 'One Man's Damage: The Consequences of Boris Johnson's Assault on the British Political System', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 94, no. 2, 2023, pp. 166–174; and at length by Anthony Seldon and Raymond Newell, *Johnson at 10: The Inside Story*, London, Atlantic, 2023.

the third prime minister to be brought down by Boris Johnson'.²⁹ Johnson has never been renowned for self-effacement or shunning the limelight. Yet, Figure 1 shows a sharp downward trajectory in personalism when Johnson succeeds May. Most paradoxically of all, Figure 2 makes him appear less personalistic than Attlee. If the measure was of personalism in the sense of projecting one's own personality and seeking and achieving celebrity status, Johnson would be at the other end of the scale from Attlee. The gulf is no less great between the two prime ministers' attitudes to the Cabinet, whose meetings Johnson viewed as 'a chore to be raced through'.³⁰

Johnson's three conference speeches were humorous, but almost devoid of policy content. In his 2020 speech, delivered remotely because of Covid, Johnson praised Chancellor Rishi Sunak for coming up 'with some brilliant expedients to help business to protect jobs and livelihoods' during the public health emergency. On Europe, he described David Frost—the former diplomat to whom he awarded a peerage and appointed negotiator with the EU—as 'the greatest Frost since the great frost of 1709'. Jokes aside, his three speeches were broad-brush and—having said little about policy—he had even less to say about who was responsible for it, apart from praising Sunak in successive years.³¹ The absence of claims to have personally decided specific policies, combined with fulsome praise for Frost and Sunak, explain Johnson's score in Figures 1 and 2. They also indicate the potential limitations of the quantified data when only a very few conference speeches are involved. If Johnson had still been prime minister at the time of the Conservative Party Conference of 2022, he would surely have highlighted his personal role in offering political and military support to Ukraine, and the

fact that, as prime minister, he made four visits to Kyiv within the space of seven months, the first of them three weeks before the Russian invasion, the other three while the war was in progress.³²

The speeches do not display Johnson's belief that he was personally entitled to take all the big decisions in government. One of Johnson's more impressive former backers, Jesse Norman (in a June 2022 letter informing him that he could no longer offer his support) accused him of 'trying to import elements of a presidential system of government that is entirely foreign to our constitution and law', adding: 'But you are not a president, and you have no mandate other than as an MP, and from the confidence of your colleagues'.³³ Johnson would have been hard put to articulate specific policy, as distinct from bland generalities, in his speeches, since much depended on which of his aides and advisers had most recently bent his ear. His views—more precisely, the answer he gave to his interlocutors—on the same issue could oscillate wildly on the same day.³⁴

By attempting to hoard power in 10 Downing Street, Johnson unwittingly enabled his own manipulation by his staff appointees, especially his chief adviser Dominic Cummings. That continued until Cummings left Downing Street in November 2020. Johnson's illegal attempt to prorogue Parliament in 2019 was strongly backed by Cummings, who prevented some of the notes on the legal risks of prorogation from reaching the prime minister. More generally, as Cummings has made abundantly clear, he did not trust Johnson to take the decisions that he,

²⁹S. McDonald, *Leadership: Lessons from a Life in Diplomacy*, London, Haus Publishing, 2022, p. xiii.

³⁰Seldon and Newell, *Johnson at 10*, p. 458.

³¹By 2022 their relations had deteriorated drastically. In his resignation letter of 5 July, Sunak told Johnson that 'the public rightly expect government to be conducted properly, competently and seriously', and 'those standards are worth fighting for'. That was why he was resigning, for 'we cannot continue like this', *BBC News*, 5 July 2022; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-62058236>.

³²Johnson devotes forty pages of his memoirs to the Russo-Ukraine war and to decisions in support of Ukraine he took as prime minister. His 9 April 2022 visit was the first by a foreign head of government since Russia had invaded Ukraine on 24 February, though, to his annoyance, President of the European Commission Ursula van der Leyen got to Kyiv one day earlier. See B. Johnson, *Unleashed*, London, William Collins, 2024, pp.633–673; and Seldon and Newell, *Johnson at 10*, pp. 427–428.

³³@Jesse_Norman, tweet, X, 6 June 2022; https://x.com/Jesse_Norman/status/1533699235417403393.

³⁴J. Reed, 'Sir Patrick Vallance criticises Boris Johnson's "impossible flip-flopping"', *BBC News*, 3 October 2023; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-66998218>.

as his key political adviser, considered necessary. He preferred, as a senior civil servant observed, 'to take them himself, as if he *was* the Prime Minister'.³⁵

By July 2022, Johnson's loss of support within the government and his parliamentary party was such that he had no option but to announce his resignation, and in September, Liz Truss was chosen by Tory party members in preference to Rishi Sunak. Her forty-nine days as prime minister produced an economically disastrous mini-budget presented by her chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, accompanied by political turmoil. Yet, she made the most self-assertive, self-referential party conference speech since those of Tony Blair who was prime minister for ten years. Projecting herself as a bold leader, she was prodigal in her use of the first-person singular: 'I am determined to get Britain moving', 'I am driven in this mission', 'I did not accept that things had to be this way. I knew that inaction [on tax] would be unconscionable', 'I could not allow this to happen', 'I have three priorities for our economy: growth, growth, growth' (an echo of Blair's 'education, education, education'), 'I'm working flat out', and 'I am ready to make hard choices'. The language—projecting herself as supreme policy maker—is reflected in the sharp upward movement in 2022 of both Figures 1 and 2, since she had only the one speech, delivered at full personalist throttle.³⁶ The downward plunge which follows refers to Rishi Sunak's sole party conference speech as prime minister in 2023. It contained much referencing of other ministers and an emphasis on the first-person plural, together with indications that his leadership style would be different from that of both Truss and Johnson.

Labour's landslide victory in the July 2024 general election—albeit on a low turnout and with less than 34 per cent of the overall vote—put Keir Starmer in a strong position. Although Starmer has spoken positively about Harold Wilson,³⁷ aspects of the current prime

minister's intraparty leadership style have appeared far removed from Wilson's, especially the latter's satisfaction that no Labour MP had lost the party whip during his thirteen-year leadership. Early reports that Cabinet ministers were being allowed to get on with their jobs without constant 10 Downing Street interference may not have survived the replacement of Sue Gray by Morgan McSweeney as Starmer's chief of staff.³⁸ The timing of the general election for 4 July 2024 meant that Starmer's first speech as prime minister to the Labour Party conference was delivered less than three months after the election victory. Although he has centralised power within the Labour Party, content analysis of that speech (Figures 1 and 2) places him remarkably close to Wilson. Starmer did make some large personalistic claims—especially the use of the first-person singular in the boast, '*I changed the Labour Party* to restore it to the service of working people...' (italics added). Overwhelmingly, however, he used the first-person plural when talking about the policies Labour would pursue, which is why the quantitative analysis places him closer to the least personalistic of postwar prime ministers than to those who have been most prone to portray themselves as the supreme policy makers. (Indeed, Rachel Reeves's speech to the party conference a day earlier than Starmer's provided more examples of policies being her personal choice than were to be found in the prime minister's.)

Conclusions

How prime ministers perceive and project their roles influences their successors' understandings of their prerogatives and the rules of the game surrounding them. Margaret Thatcher's assertive leadership had an impact on all her successors, even when they did not wish to emulate her. There is a clear 'before and after Thatcher' distinction in our quantified data. Thatcher's own conference speeches—when taken at face value and

³⁵Seldon and Newell, *Johnson at 10*, pp. 87–88.

³⁶Other especially personalistic prime ministers were not, of course, uniformly self-referential in their party conferences. Their peak-personalist speeches might match Truss's, but their mean score is lower.

³⁷T. Baldwin, *Keir Starmer: The Biography*, London, William Collins, 2024, p. 294.

³⁸P. Crerar, "'We all hope it's teething troubles—but worry it's something worse': the inside story of Labour's first 100 days in power", *The Guardian*, 12 October 2024; <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/oct/12/the-inside-story-of-labours-first-100-days-in-power-keir-starmer>.

without analysis of their meaning—underplay her actual dominance, captured in her former chancellor and foreign secretary Geoffrey Howe's observation that she 'subconsciously attended' meetings throughout Whitehall and Westminster where the 'discussion would always come round somehow to: how will this play with the prime minister?'.³⁹ But, in reality, her conference speeches were self-magnifying in as much as they made very large claims for the historic significance of the governments she headed and, by implication, for herself. Her sense of prime ministerial entitlement influenced her successor, John Major. Even though he tried to lead the government in a more collegial way, he was rhetorically one of the most assertive of his policy prerogatives of all postwar prime ministers.

Of the long-serving premiers, it is two Labour leaders—Attlee and Blair—who stand at opposite ends of the personalistic spectrum. Attlee headed one of the two most transformative governments of the postwar era (Thatcher the other), and demonstrated that a 'strong leader'—of the self-magnifying type asserting a right to take all the big decisions—is not necessary in order to produce great change. Attlee's conception of his role as evidenced in the conference speeches, was in harmony with his day-to-day leadership style. He was a brisk and efficient chair of the Cabinet who kept a strong ministerial team together, presiding over the most transformative democratic socialist government Britain has ever had. Reflecting on the role of head of government in his retirement, Attlee said that a prime minister could not afford to be 'egocentric', 'must remember that he is only first among equals' and that 'you can't ride roughshod over a Cabinet unless you're something extraordinary'.⁴⁰ Almost all political analysts, media commentators and politicians themselves now regard the prime minister as substantially more than 'first among equals' within the Cabinet. Attlee was an unusual postwar premier in his acceptance of that description—perhaps unusual also in thinking he was not 'extraordinary'.

Although Tony Blair essentially determined the British decision to participate in the Iraq war, his conference rhetoric overstated his

dominance of domestic policy. His desire for Britain to join the euro was blocked by the criteria Gordon Brown insisted must be met before this could occur. Much of the legislation of most lasting significance enacted by the governments Blair headed was already settled Labour Party policy before he became leader in 1994. His predecessor John Smith's last conference speech in 1993 included, for example, the policy of adopting the EU's Social Chapter as well as legislating for a minimum wage, a Bill of Rights, a Freedom of Information Act and Scottish and Welsh devolution.⁴¹ Nevertheless, Blair's own sense of what a prime minister was entitled to do—coming through strongly in his conference speeches—has given added impetus to the tendency to conflate a government's policy-making powers with those of the prime minister.

Prime ministers' self-magnifying rhetoric contributes to the notion of the head of government possessing supreme policy-making powers. There were countless critiques of Blair's committing British troops to war in Iraq, but surprisingly little astonishment at his rhetorical insistence that he was personally entitled to commit the country to war if he thought it was 'the right thing to do', as evidenced in 'my decision' and 'why I took it', terms he used in his 2003 party conference speech and on numerous other occasions. Pre-Thatcher, prime ministers did not use this kind of quasi-presidential language about a momentous governmental decision, and she herself, in her conference speeches, did not do so as overtly as Blair—and, indeed, Major—did.

In assessing what content analysis of conference speeches adds to study of the self-magnification of prime ministers or, contrariwise, their commitment to a more collective leadership and diffusion of power, most weight should be attached to the findings on the longer-serving prime ministers, defined as those who have held this office in postwar Britain for more than five years. On a self-magnification/collectivist leadership scale, these leaders all emerge from the quantitative research close to where we would expect to find them, with the exception of Major. His

³⁹Brown, *The Myth of the Strong Leader*, p. 352.

⁴⁰Bew, *Citizen Clem*, p. 393.

⁴¹'Leader's speech, Brighton 1993, John Smith (Labour)', 28 September 1993; <http://www.britishpoliticalspeech.org/speech-archive.htm?speech=199>.

everyday leadership style and manner of conducting Cabinet meetings notwithstanding, he was surprisingly assertive in his conference speeches in staking claim to be the ultimate decision maker in several areas of policy. Major's experience as a Cabinet minister of Thatcher's dominating role, a desire to show that he, too, could be a 'strong leader', and a felt need to respond to critics within his party may account for this.

If most prime ministers from Margaret Thatcher onwards have had an augmented sense of their own powers, and a greater willingness to articulate a capacious view of their entitlements, than pre-1979 postwar prime ministers, does this matter? We hold that it does, not only out of respect for the norms of democracy and governmental accountability, but on grounds of effectiveness. Prime ministers are now so occupied with foreign policy, international developments and meetings with other heads of government that their knowledge of—and attention to—many areas of domestic policy is limited by comparison. Unelected political appointees in 10 Downing Street are happy to step in and make policy in the prime minister's name.

Democratic government, however, benefits from diffused power and the presence of people of independent standing within the executive who can challenge the arguments of the prime minister. Free discussion within a prime minister's coterie is no substitute. Courtiers, even those prepared to argue, remain courtiers. No leader was chosen by a democratic party (or, indirectly, by the electorate voting for his or her party) because that

person was believed to have a monopoly on wisdom or good judgement. The prime minister's aides and advisers have no democratic legitimacy other than that conferred on them by the premier. It is in their interest to promulgate the idea that only an all-powerful 10 Downing Street, and a supremely dominant prime minister who takes all the big decisions, can effect truly radical reform. Such misleading nonsense deserves far more critical scrutiny than it has hitherto received.

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