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Public Administration
and Constitutional Affairs
Committee

The role and status of the Prime Minister's Office

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to the report*

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Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

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Summary

The Office of the Prime Minister (“Number 10”) has an opaque status. It is neither a government department in its own right, nor is it simply a Private Office. It is formally a business unit within the Cabinet Office, but it operates with a degree of autonomy from the department that its Cabinet Office business units do not enjoy. As such, it is not subject to the accountability mechanisms that government departments are. It produces no Annual Report and Accounts, for example, nor is there a dedicated Select Committee to scrutinise its expenditure, administration, and policy. But neither is it properly scrutinised through the Cabinet Office. Historically, this lack of transparency and accountability was less of an issue as Number 10 had only a small staff of officials and operated far more like a Private Office. However, successive Prime Ministers have increased its size and extended its role, establishing specialist units to increase the capacity to drive policy across government from Number 10. They have also drawn on the capacity of the wider Cabinet Office, blurring the lines between the Prime Ministerial resource of Number 10 and the supposedly collective resources of the Cabinet Office.

The Committee does not take a position on the desirability of these developments but is concerned that accountability properly reflects the decision-making process. It is clear that the status of Number 10 as a business unit within the Cabinet Office does not accurately reflect the significance of its role or the autonomy with which it operates. The Cabinet Office Annual Report and Accounts should give a far fuller account of Number 10’s operation. The Cabinet Office’s Single Departmental Plan should distinguish between support for the Prime Minister and for Cabinet.

Greater transparency could be achieved by creating a separate Department for the Prime Minister. This would require Annual Report and Accounts to be published and a dedicated Select Committee to hold it to account and scrutinise its work. However, we found little support for such a step. Whilst the creation of a separate department would help to resolve some of the accountability issues, these could be resolved more easily through greater transparency within the existing arrangements.

The number and significance of Prime Ministers’ Special Advisers has increased to the point where some appear to be operating in quasi-executive roles. This undermines the principle that Ministers are accountable to Parliament for the actions of their Special Advisers. Prime Ministers and Cabinet need to ensure that Special Advisers in Number 10 act within the proper parameters of their role.

1 Introduction

1. The UK does not have a dedicated department supporting the Prime Minister. The Office of the Prime Minister, or “Number 10”, is formally a business unit within the Cabinet Office. But there is concern that this does not accurately reflect its actual role and the degree of autonomy with which it operates. It is often described as being functionally distinct from the Cabinet Office. Yet, as a Cabinet Office business unit, the direct accountability to which it is subject is limited.

2. Mechanisms to hold government to account reflect the formal distribution of power to departments. Budgets are allocated to departments and Accounting Officers (usually Permanent Secretaries) are accountable for the use to which that money is put. Secretaries of State answer to Parliament for their department’s activities and the Permanent Secretary for the management and the performance of the department.

3. With few legal powers vested in the office, Prime Ministers have not sat neatly within the traditional framework of formal accountability. However, the lack of such powers clearly does not reflect the role that Prime Ministers play in practice. Accordingly, measures have developed to hold Prime Ministers to account more directly. Since 1961, time has been set aside each sitting week for Prime Minister’s Questions, for example. And since 2002, Prime Ministers, who had not previously appeared before select committees, have appeared before the Liaison Committee a few times a year.

4. Yet such developments have not replicated the accountability to which Secretaries of State are subject. Dr Catherine Haddon (Institute for Government) notes that they do not help in:

Understanding how Number 10 is structured, understanding the people that surround them, how we are using them and what that means for the competent running of Government, these are all hugely important questions for anyone observing Government, but it is very difficult unless the Prime Minister offers answers and unless Parliament is able to get information out of the Government to understand what is going on inside Number 10 at any one time.¹

5. Such an absence of accountability might have proved unproblematic in a period when resources in Number 10 were extremely limited and primarily provided by career civil servants. But there has been a steady accumulation of resource in Number 10 over the late twentieth century such that it can no longer legitimately be treated as simply a Private Office. The number of staff hired by Prime Ministers from outside the Civil Service has also grown. Some of these externally hired Special Advisors (“Spads”) have been appointed to positions with significant levels of influence on the conduct of government. Furthermore, at times, Prime Ministers have sought to draw on parts of the Cabinet Office to further increase the capacity available to them at the Centre of Government. The lack of clear designations of either, or of the respective role of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, mean there are few impediments to this.

1 [Q2 \(Catherine Haddon, IfG\)](#)

6. Periods when Prime Ministers have tried to lead their Government more assertively, perhaps encroaching on departments' role in policy making in key areas, have typically prompted debate about the appropriate balance between the Prime Minister and Cabinet.² We have not commented on this in this report nor on the appropriate level of resource for Prime Ministers. However, we do assert the principle set out by the Constitution Committee in its 2010 review of the Centre of Government that "structures of accountability should mirror structures of power".³ Efforts to increase the direct accountability of Prime Ministers could be said to be reinforcing the notion that the Prime Minister has a personal mandate and to further embed their dominance over Cabinet. Yet we consider it merely to be reflecting the reality of where decisions are made in contemporary government.

7. We received three written submissions and heard oral evidence on 13th October 2020 and 10th November 2020. We thank all those who contributed to the inquiry.

2 For instance, academic debate in this surged in the Blair era. See A. Blick and G. Jones *Premiership: The Development, Nature and Power of the British Prime Minister* 2010, Imprint Academic, chapter 1.

3 Constitution Committee [The Cabinet Office and the Centre of Government](#) HL Paper 30, 4th Report of Session 2009–10, para. 8

2 The Office of the Prime Minister

Prime Ministers and Cabinets

8. The opaque status of Number 10 is a reflection of the status of Prime Ministers in the UK.⁴ The formal role of Prime Ministers is not well defined. It is primarily the product not of statute but of convention and of political contingency. It emerged in the 18th Century and has continued to evolve since. This lack of a clearly defined role has allowed incumbents to define the role in ways determined by their own personal preferences and priorities and by the political capital they can wield. In his written submission, Andrew Blick (Kings College London) notes that:

The role of Prime Minister is by its nature flexible. The precise way in which it is deployed varies in accordance with who holds it; and the circumstances in which they operate. The approach taken can vary sharply from one incumbent to the next.⁵

9. The Cabinet Manual notes that the Prime Minister is the head of the government but, beyond that, has “few statutory functions”.⁶ The legal powers that allow governments to operate are largely vested in Secretaries of State.⁷ The formal means by which government is held to account reflect this. The Ministerial Code states that:

The Minister in charge of a department is solely accountable to Parliament for the exercise of the powers on which the administration of that department depends.⁸

10. The absence of statutory definition for the role has meant that the way in which Prime Ministers have interpreted their leadership has varied between holders of the office and even between periods within an individual's premiership.⁹ The emphasis has, at times, been on consensual decision-making through Cabinet. At other times, Prime Ministers have sought to take a more dominant role. The ability to do so, though dependent on circumstance, has been strengthened by factors such as the rise of organised and disciplined political parties, with the Prime Minister usually the leader of the largest in the House of Commons, and the personalisation of campaigning that *could* lead to electoral success being interpreted as a personal mandate.¹⁰ It also means that, in the words of one such Prime Minister, Tony Blair:

The real world is that with the Prime Minister the buck stops with you; that is the top job and that is how it should be.¹¹

4 Dr Andrew Blick (Reader in Politics and Contemporary History and Head of Department of Political Economy at King's College London) ([PMO0001](#))

5 Dr Andrew Blick (Reader in Politics and Contemporary History and Head of Department of Political Economy at King's College London) ([PMO0001](#))

6 Cabinet Office [Cabinet Manual](#) 2011, para. 3.1–3.3

7 Cabinet Office [Cabinet Manual](#) 2011, paras 3.24–3.38

8 Cabinet Office [Ministerial Code](#) 2019, para. 4.6

9 For example, see B. Worthy & M. Bennister “‘Dominance, defence and diminishing returns’? Theresa May's Leadership Capital July 2016–July 2018” *British Politics* 2020

10 Though it is worth noting the number of recent Prime Ministers who have taken office mid-term.

11 Liaison Committee [Oral Evidence](#) 16 July 2002, Q8 (Tony Blair)

11. Some Prime Ministers have used this preeminent position in ways that could be seen to encroach on their ministers' traditional responsibility for policy making. Appearing before the Liaison Committee in 2002, Blair gave the impression that, rather than the preserve of the relevant department, the development of policy, at least in areas deemed a Prime Ministerial priority, was more of a joint enterprise. Number 10 was, he said:

in constant dialogue [with departments], keeping up an exchange of views and partnership with the departments to drive forward the process of change.¹²

12. In seeking to more directly intervene in policy, as well as taking a more prominent and proactive lead on overall strategy, some Prime Ministers have bridled against the limits of the institutional resources available to them.

The Office of the Prime Minister

13. Whilst Prime Ministers have been accused by their critics of bypassing or overriding Cabinet throughout the Twentieth Century, the trend towards Prime Ministerial pre-eminence has only belatedly been reflected in greater institutional resource to support the Prime Minister, though it should be noted that it remains small relative to comparable governments.¹³

14. Reflecting departments' ownership of policy and Prime Ministers' limited statutory role, as late as the 1960s, Prime Ministers had very limited institutional resources working directly to them, limited to a small Private Office. In particular, there was little in the way of resource for intervening in policy making. On taking office in 1970, Edward Heath introduced the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS), known colloquially as the "Think Tank". Its remit was to develop a "a clear and comprehensive definition of Government strategy". This was further elaborated to the "task of relating individual departmental policies to the government's strategy as a whole". It was based in the Cabinet Office rather than Number 10 but was intended to provide a degree of strategic policy development at the centre of government, "above" that being conducted in departments. It was staffed by a mixture of career civil servants and external recruits. Its director was generally externally recruited and most of those who held the post had business backgrounds.

15. The CPRS was, in principle at least, a collective Cabinet resource. Though it was retained by the incoming Labour Government in 1974, Harold Wilson also established the Number 10 Policy Unit to provide the Prime Minister with a source of advice on areas of policy independent of the relevant Secretary of State or department.

16. Yet, even under a seemingly dominant Prime Minister such as Margaret Thatcher, Downing Street was very modestly resourced. Sir John Redwood, who led the Number 10 Policy Unit during her premiership, told us that he had a team of just ten.¹⁴ Professor Mulgan said that, on arriving in Downing Street, he found it to have only "pretty thin capability, much more focussed on media political firefighting than anything resembling long term strategy".¹⁵ It was dwarfed by the resources available in other departments and

12 Liaison Committee [Oral Evidence](#) 16 July 2002, Q7 (Tony Blair)

13 [Q7 \(Alex Thomas\)](#)

14 [Q30](#)

15 [Q32](#)

HM Treasury in particular. Reflecting on his tenure as Cabinet Secretary at the time, Lord Turnbull suggested that, on arriving in Downing Street, Prime Minister Tony Blair could legitimately ask:

“is this all I have to lead the fifth largest economy in the world, 60 million people, a public service of 5 million people and a civil service of 500,000. And even if it can cope with the day-to-day operations, does it have the ability to develop strategy, to lead a reform programme for the public services?”¹⁶

17. Sir John Redwood told the Committee that, with only a small policy team, he tried to keep the Prime Minister from being drawn into areas that could or should be dealt with by Ministers.¹⁷ Jonathan Powell, Tony Blair's Chief of Staff from 1997–2007, said that, in spite of presiding over a period of significant expansion, he too favoured a relatively small operation in Number 10. However, the pressure from “the modern world” and, in particular, the 24 hour media which was emerging at the time had intensified the demands on the Number 10 and capability was needed to respond to this.¹⁸ Fiona Hill, Theresa May's Joint Chief of Staff in 2016–17, who had been a journalist during the Blair Governments, agreed that changing media had changed the demands on Number 10:

I remember when I started at Sky News way back in the day—and Jonathan would have been in government then—the advent of 24-hour news speeds up decision making, even policy decision making. I am not making a judgment call on that, it is just the reality. Therefore, the Prime Minister needs to have enough resource and knowledge around him or her to be able to then hasten some decisions that may, in John Redwood's time, have taken a much longer time.¹⁹

18. Under Blair, Number 10 was further strengthened. Stronger central coordination on policy development and communications was imposed from the centre to ensure a consistent “message”. The Blair Government followed the Wilson approach of building policy capability in Number 10 and the Thatcher Government's efforts to strengthen Number 10's capacity to drive change from the centre. The number and prominence of Spads increased, particularly in Number 10, who took on responsibility for key policy areas which might have been regarded as the preserve of the relevant departments. In addition to the Policy Unit, a number of Spad-led, specialist units were established in Number 10 and the Cabinet Office to drive change across government. There were also steps taken to extend Prime Ministerial control of the Cabinet Office

19. Prime Ministers have often remade and remodelled the organisation of Number 10.²⁰ Nonetheless, the core functions remain relatively consistent. Dr Haddon refined the contemporary Number 10's core business down to two broad areas, reflecting the way in which the role of Prime Ministers has evolved. The first is a strategic policy development function that requires Number 10 to have sufficient capability to:

16 Lord Turnbull “Full text: Sir Andrew Turnbull's speech” [Guardian](#) 27 July 2005

17 [Q38 \(Sir John Redwood\)](#)

18 [Q35 \(Jonathan Powell\)](#)

19 [Q37 \(Fiona Hill\)](#)

20 Dr Mark Bennister ([PMO0002](#))

have sight of what is going on across Departments, to understand some aspect of the detail of policy, how things are being delivered, keep a lookout for problems on the horizon, think about long term strategy, all of those roles that the Prime Minister is keen to play at the top of Government.²¹

20. The second is a policy implementation function. With no direct policy implementation or delivery role, Number 10's role in this respect is likely to focus on oversight or monitoring of departmental progress on implementation. Polly Mackenzie, who had worked in Number 10 for Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg during the 2010–15 Coalition Government, noted the need to “man mark” departments from Number 10 to ensure they were progressing objectives that had been agreed. At times, she said, Ministers from one Coalition partner could prove reluctant to progress policies that had initially been proposed by the other.²² Dr Haddon explained that:

[Number 10] has to find the means to work with Departments or to force Departments or encourage Departments to take the action that the top of Government has decided needed to happen. Because it is small, because it does not have very powerful formal levers at its control, it is all dependent on the power of the Prime Minister, their personality, their position within the party, their relationship to their wider Cabinet, the people that it has there and the way in which it organises them is so important for being able to fulfil what is a quite difficult job.²³

21. Jonathan Powell emphasised the challenge involved:

You have no civil servants to speak of, you have almost no budget to speak of by comparison with big Departments and all you can do is persuade Cabinet Ministers who have the statutory powers to come along with you.²⁴

As a consequence, the ability of Prime Ministers and their offices to ensure that this implementation of agreed objectives actually takes place is contingent and largely dependent on the political capital a Prime Minister can bring to bear. Where the Prime Minister feels a Secretary of State is failing to deliver an agreed policy, and if efforts at persuasion have been exhausted, the Prime Minister can replace them. However, for Prime Ministers, the freedom to do so, at least without suffering a loss of political credibility and authority, can often be limited. The result, Alex Thomas (Institute for Government) has noted, is that:

Where policy is internally contested it can be very difficult for a Prime Minister to corral his or her government to deliver it.²⁵

Prime Ministers have responded by seeking to increase the resources available to them.

21 [Q3 \(Catherine Haddon, IfG\)](#)

22 [Q36 \(Polly Mackenzie\)](#)

23 [Q3 \(Catherine Haddon, IfG\)](#)

24 [Q77 \(Jonathan Powell\)](#)

25 [A. Thomas The heart of the problem A weak centre is undermining the UK government Institute for Government January 2021, p.5](#)

The Cabinet Office and Number 10

22. Formally, the Office of the Prime Minister is a business unit of the Cabinet Office. Alex Chisholm, the Permanent Secretary to the Cabinet Office, emphasised the extent to which, in this respect, it operates much the same way as other parts of the Cabinet Office. In terms of its budget, for instance, he said:

It is the case that Number 10 is part of the Cabinet Office for accounting purposes. At the beginning of every financial year, a delegation is made of that budget to the senior official there, as is the case for every other business unit across the Cabinet Office. That would give them an allocation of money and guidance on the correct use of that money in compliance with rules in relation to managing public money and all of that. Then through the course of the year, we look at the expense of that. We track their expenditure, the same as we do for every other business unit.²⁶

In the past, governments have released more information about their Number 10 operation, though largely on an *ad hoc* basis.²⁷ Government responses to Written Questions about staffing in Number 10 have simply noted that the Office of the Prime Minister is part of the Cabinet Office and refer to overall staffing details for the Cabinet Office itself.²⁸ However, former Cabinet Secretary Sir Mark, now Lord Sedwill, told us that:

Number 10, in Government, is a separate entity like another Department ... It is not a Department of State, but it does operate as a separate unit for employment within the Government.²⁹

23. However, it is apparent that this formal status does not fully reflect the operational reality of Number 10. Though emphasising the position of Number 10 within the Cabinet Office, Alex Chisholm conceded that in some respects, Number 10 has “a degree of autonomy in some of the activities they undertake”.³⁰ Cabinet Secretary Simon Case made a similar point, acknowledging that Number 10 has some “special characteristics” that set it apart from the other business units in the Cabinet Office.³¹ Alex Thomas captured its rather ambiguous status:

there is this box called the Cabinet Office and there is this thing inside it or alongside it called Number 10. Within that, the nature of the structures very much flow according to both the preferences of the Prime Minister and their style and the power flows that sit in the centre of government and who has influence.³²

26 PACAC [Oral evidence: The work of the Cabinet Office](#) HC 118 29 September 2020, Q339 (Alex Chisholm)

27 E.g. Constitution Committee [The Cabinet Office and the Centre of Government](#) HL Paper 30, 4th Report of Session 2009–10 Supplementary Letter from Sir Gus O’Donnell KCB p.161–170

28 <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2017-03-30/70093>

29 PACAC [Oral evidence: The work of the Cabinet Office](#) HC 118 10 March 2020 Qq95–97 (Sir Mark Sedwill)

30 PACAC [Oral evidence: The work of the Cabinet Office](#), HC 118 29 September 2020, Q340

31 PACAC [Oral Evidence: The work of the Cabinet Office](#) HC 118 22 October 2020, Q452 (Simon Case)

32 [Q2 \(Alex Thomas\)](#)

24. Foremost amongst these “special characteristics” mentioned by Simon Case is that Number 10 is headed by the Prime Minister. Witnesses noted the coherence that this focus on serving the Prime Minister gave to the Number 10 operation. Dr Diamond (QMUL) told us that as a Number 10 Spad, though he was nominally employed by the Cabinet Office, in practical terms, he worked for Number 10:

you are very conscious that you are an employee of Downing Street and, by extension, of the Prime Minister rather than being an employee of the Cabinet Office, even though ... your pay and your contract and so on is officially coming through the Cabinet Office.³³

25. In contrast, the Cabinet Office was established to support Cabinet rather than just the Prime Minister.³⁴ In a joint submission to a House of Lords inquiry into the Centre of Government, three former Cabinet Secretaries—Lords Armstrong, Butler and Wilson—emphasised the functional separation between Number 10 and the Cabinet Office:

The function of the Prime Minister's Office is to serve the Prime Minister exclusively, whereas the function of the Cabinet Office is to serve the Cabinet. In our view this functional distinction remains real, valid and important. We believe strongly that it should be reflected in the continuing and future structure of the centre of government.³⁵

26. They seem to suggest a fairly minimalist role for the Cabinet Office, focussed on coordinating the Cabinet's work, resolving and managing cross-departmental issues, and a modest amount of strategic, “blue skies” thinking.

27. However, the boundaries between Number 10 and the Cabinet Office are less clearly defined than that simple distinction would suggest and this, in turn, reflects the ambiguous nature of the Prime Minister in relation to Cabinet that we highlight in paragraphs 8–12. Jeremy—later Lord—Heywood, who was then Number 10 Permanent Secretary, said:

the apparently clear distinction between the Prime Minister supported by Number 10 staff and the Cabinet Office supporting the Cabinet, that just does not capture the reality of the situation.³⁶

28. The Prime Minister's status as Chair of the Cabinet creates a link with the Cabinet Office secretariats distinct from that enjoyed by other Cabinet members, for instance. But, beyond this, Prime Ministers have essentially extended parts of the Downing Street operation beyond the infamous green baize door and into the main Cabinet Office building. In part, this reflects the limited space in Number 10 itself: Jonathan Powell told us that, during his time in Downing Street, space was at such a premium that people were reduced to working in bathrooms.³⁷

33 [Q16 \(Patrick Diamond\)](#)

34 Dr Mark Bennister ([PMO0002](#)), para.1.1

35 Constitution Committee [The Cabinet Office and the Centre of Government](#) HL Paper 30, 4th Report of Session 2009–10, p.54

36 Evidence to House of Lords Constitution Committee inquiry on The Cabinet Office and the Centre of Government 4 November 2009, [Q376](#)

37 [Q80 \(Jonathan Powell\)](#)

29. But it also reflects the desire of some Prime Ministers to increase resource in key areas at the centre of government. This has seen the establishment of various units that appear to be Prime Ministerial in orientation but are actually Cabinet Office entities. Successive governments have established specialist units focussed on either a specific task, such as Performance and Innovation, Strategy or Delivery, or a policy area that the Prime Minister has prioritised, such as social exclusion or race disparity. Many of these units have clearly been set up by, and for, the Prime Minister of the day, yet they formally have been Cabinet Office bodies, outside Number 10.³⁸ Blick and Jones described some of these units as “avowedly Prime Ministerial bodies”,³⁹ and Dr Diamond said:

The Cabinet Office is often used as a physical base where advisers are located even if they are in fact *de facto* operating in practice as advisers to the Prime Minister.⁴⁰

30. In their written submission to the House of Lords Constitution Committee’s inquiry into the Cabinet Office and the Centre of Government, former Cabinet Secretaries, Lords Armstrong, Butler and Wilson, expressed concern about the impact of the such units on the distinction between the “avowedly Prime Ministerial” resource of Number 10 and the collective Cabinet resource of the Cabinet Office:

Units as regards the Strategy Unit, the Social Exclusion Unit, the Women’s Unit, the Regulatory Impact Unit and the Anti-Drugs Co-ordination Unit, we see no objection in principle to such units being located in the Cabinet Office, provided that it is clearly established that their role is one of co-ordination, that their responsibilities do not overlap and that they do not impinge upon or conflict with the executive responsibilities of Ministers in charge of Departments. We believe that these conditions are not always satisfied at present.⁴¹

31. Lord Armstrong described such bodies as “emanations” of the Prime Minister’s office and, insofar as they represent an attempt to extend the authority of the Prime Minister more directly into the development of policy and administration of departments, risked conflicting “with what I see as the fundamental position of the relationship between the Prime Minister and departmental ministers”.⁴²

32. Rather than isolated instances, these specialist units seem symptomatic of the unclear boundaries between the Prime Ministerial resource of Number 10 and the supposedly collective resource of the Cabinet Office more generally. Blick and Jones note how the Cabinet Office’s objectives were quietly revised over the course of the Blair Government to increase its role in supporting the Prime Minister.⁴³ In the departmental objectives for the

38 [Q53 \(Professor Geoff Mulgan\)](#)

39 A. Blick and G. Jones *Premiership: The Development, Nature and Power of the British Prime Minister* 2010, Imprint Academic, p.145

40 [Q4 \(Patrick Diamond\)](#)

41 Constitution Committee [The Cabinet Office and the Centre of Government](#) HL Paper 30, 4th Report of Session 2009–10, p.55

42 Evidence to House of Lords Constitution Committee inquiry on The Cabinet Office and the Centre of Government 4 November 2009, [Q110](#)

43 A. Blick and G. Jones *Premiership: The Development, Nature and Power of the British Prime Minister* 2010, Imprint Academic, p.147–8

Cabinet Office set out in Spending Review papers, objectives relating to providing support to the Prime Minister gained prominence whilst those referring to supporting the Cabinet or collective decision-making were correspondingly reduced or removed altogether.⁴⁴

33. The Cabinet Office's current main departmental objectives do not explicitly mention the Cabinet, referring instead to, first "the Prime Minister" and, then, "the Government".⁴⁵ The Cabinet Office's webpage states that its role is to "support the Prime Minister and ensure the effective running of government".⁴⁶

34. The extension in 2020 of parts of the Number 10 Policy Unit into the Cabinet Office to form a "Control Centre" or "Collaboration Hub", styled on NASA's Mission Control, was interpreted in the media as the latest step in bringing the Cabinet Office more directly under the control of Number 10.⁴⁷ Though he suggested that the reality may be a little more mundane than the more excitable headlines that accompanied its establishment, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster told the Committee that the purpose of this merged unit is to further strengthen the Prime Minister's position over the Cabinet:

In essence, it is a way of co-locating some of those who work in the Cabinet Office secretariat and who are responsible for preparing the papers for Cabinet committees and for Government decisions, with individuals from the Prime Minister's Policy Unit, in order to make sure that the policies that are at the heart of the Government and the material that is generated for Ministers to make decisions can be shared in the same room. It is another manifestation of something that has happened throughout the years, and I think across administrations, where the centre works together in order to make sure the Prime Minister's priorities are delivered.⁴⁸

35. **The lack of a statutory definition of the roles of the Prime Minister or the Cabinet in the UK has been reflected in the evolution of the Office of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Office. As Prime Ministers have sought to increase their strategic leadership and policy role, the Office of the Prime Minister (Number 10) has expanded and adapted to reflect that. They have also drawn on the supposedly collective resource of the Cabinet Office in the process.**

36. **There should be a clearer delineation between those resources provided to support the Prime Minister and the support for collective government and cross-government activity more generally.**

44 A. Blick and G. Jones A. Blick and G. Jones *Premiership: The Development, Nature and Power of the British Prime Minister* 2010, Imprint Academic, p.147–8

45 Cabinet Office [Annual Report and Accounts 2019–20](#), p.21

46 <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/cabinet-office> Further on, it does add that it supports both the Prime Minister and the Cabinet.

47 "Dominic Cummings moves No 10 staff to heart of Whitehall" [The Times](#) 13 August 2020

48 PACAC [Oral evidence: The Work of the Cabinet Office](#) HC 118, 10 September 2020 Q325

3 Accountability

A lack of transparency

37. Whilst Number 10's operational role is clearly not simply that of a business unit in the Cabinet Office, it is treated so in terms of accountability. As a consequence, there is limited information about who works in Number 10, what they are doing and how much it costs to run the office.

38. As a Cabinet Office business unit, the Annual Report and Accounts also cover Number 10. However, they shine little light on what it is doing or how much it spends. The Annual Report and Accounts reveal that the Cabinet Office spent almost £236.5 million and employed 1,544 people in "support[ing] the design and implementation of HM Government's policies and the Prime Minister's priorities" objective.⁴⁹ However, this includes not only all the elements of the Cabinet Office that play a role in fulfilling that objective, including Number 10 and the Economic and Domestic Affairs Secretariat, but also units as diverse as the Office for Veterans Affairs and the Race Disparity Unit.⁵⁰ Consequently, the balance between the Prime Ministerial resource of Number 10 and the supposedly collective resource of the Cabinet Office is left unclear. Whilst other units include a narrative section in the Cabinet Office Annual Report, albeit a short one, there is none for the Office of the Prime Minister.⁵¹ In the past, the Government has made more detailed information about the Downing Street operation publicly available. When the House of Lords Constitution Committee held an inquiry into the centre of government in the 2005 Parliament, the Government's written evidence included reasonably detailed information on staffing and structure.⁵² However, in response to more recent Written Questions, governments have simply emphasised that the Office of the Prime Minister is part of the Cabinet Office and referred to the overall Cabinet Office staffing.⁵³ This is in contrast to the response to questions about other Cabinet Office business units. For example, details of the staffing and budget of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat were released without apparent objection.⁵⁴

39. Elsewhere, the Cabinet Office's *Annual Report on Special Advisers* provides an annually updated list of the special advisers working for all ministers, including the Prime Minister, as well as their salary bands. The most recent report shows that, as of December 2020, the Prime Minister had 52 Spads, though not what roles they fulfil.⁵⁵

40. Because the support for the Prime Minister and the support for the Government more broadly are incorporated into the same, single objective in the Cabinet Office's Single Departmental Plan, it is impossible to tell from the Annual Report and Accounts how much support, in terms of staff and budget, is dedicated to the Prime Minister. Disaggregating support for the Prime Minister and for the rest of Government would not fully resolve the problems of transparency and accountability that we have highlighted.

49 Cabinet Office [Annual Report and Accounts 2019–20](#), p.61 and p.54

50 Cabinet Office [Annual Report and Accounts 2019–20](#), p.16

51 Cabinet Office [Annual Report and Accounts 2019–20](#), p.21–2

52 Constitution Committee [The Cabinet Office and the Centre of Government](#) HL Paper 30, 4th Report of Session 2009–10 Supplementary Letter from Sir Gus O'Donnell KCB p.161–170

53 <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2017-03-30/70093>

54 <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2019-01-10/207215>

55 Cabinet Office [Annual Report on Special Advisers 2020](#) 15 December 2020, p.5–7

The staffing and budget relating to the Office of the Prime Minister may still be subsumed within parts of the wider Cabinet Office, for example. Nor would it provide the more detailed information about structure and senior roles within Number 10. However, it would show the extent of the Cabinet Office support to the Prime Minister including, though not limited to, Number 10.

41. *The Office of the Prime Minister is nominally a business unit of the Cabinet Office. However, it currently it appears to operate with even less transparency than other Cabinet Office business units. The Cabinet Office Annual Report and Accounts do not include a narrative report on the Office of the Prime Minister as they do for its other business units. And governments have declined to respond to Parliamentary Questions about its organisation. This is not acceptable.*

42. *We do not consider the status of the Office of Prime Minister as a business unit to be an accurate reflection of the role that it plays. Yet it currently operates with even less transparency that this status suggests. For so long as the Government maintains that it is a business unit of the Cabinet Office, the Government should report on its activities in the Annual Report and Accounts as it does for its other business units. And in its response to Parliamentary Questions, it should provide information as it does for its other business units.*

43. *In its Single Departmental Plan, the objectives of supporting the Prime Minister should be disaggregated from the support provided to the Cabinet or the Government more generally.*

A Department for the Prime Minister?

44. If the Office of the Prime Minister was treated as a government department in its own right rather than as a component of the Cabinet Office, it would address some of the accountability issues that concerns have been raised about in this report. Insofar as the Cabinet Office already serves the Prime Minister first, it would formalise that role, removing the ambiguity in the relationship of Number 10 and the Cabinet Office and the Cabinet Office's role in supporting Prime Ministers and Cabinet. Establishing a Prime Minister's Department would mean that Annual Report and Accounts are produced and subject to scrutiny by a Select Committee and the National Audit Office, for instance.

45. At times, Number 10 has acquired some of the characteristics of a government department in its own right. Before becoming Cabinet Secretary, Lord Heywood was the Permanent Secretary and, Simon Case, the current Cabinet Secretary was also a Permanent Secretary in Downing Street. However, Downing Street Permanent Secretaries have differed from their departmental counterparts in that they have not held Accounting Officer responsibility, which would make them accountable to Parliament for the use of public money.⁵⁶ In his written evidence, Dr Blick suggested that Number 10, with its relatively high proportion of political appointees, their high turnover and its small size, could not be sensibly treated as a department in its own right, suggesting that "it lacks the settled status and institutional memory of other Whitehall departments".⁵⁷

56 Departmental Permanent Secretaries are not the only officials at Permanent Secretary grade.

57 Dr Andrew Blick (Reader in Politics and Contemporary History and Head of Department of Political Economy at King's College London) ([PMO0001](#)), para. 20

46. There have been periodic proposals for a rather larger Department of the Prime Minister to be established along the lines of Australia's Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C). Harold Macmillan apparently considered doing so, for example.⁵⁸ During Tony Blair's Prime Ministership, Sir Michael Barber, another former Blair advisor who has also been recruited to advise the current Government, also advocated a larger and stronger department supporting the Prime Minister.⁵⁹ John—later Lord—Birt, another Downing Street advisor during the Blair premiership, drew up plans to merge Number 10 and the Cabinet Office, co-locating the merged department in purpose-built premises with the Number 10 building used for ceremonial purposes.⁶⁰ Such a department might also include parts of HM Treasury to form a more coherent centre of government.⁶¹ Were this to occur, the merged body would certainly be coherent enough and of sufficient size to justify its status as a department.

47. Nonetheless, despite its usefulness in addressing our concerns about accountability, we found little enthusiasm for the creation of a separate Department for the Prime Minister. It should also be noted that those advocating the creation of such a department have not done so to increase the transparency and accountability of Prime Ministers and their support structures, but rather to further strengthen the capacity of Prime Ministers to lead their governments, and significant downsides were flagged. The importance of those working directly to the Prime Minister being able to credibly articulate the Prime Minister's view was emphasised. Sir John Redwood told us:

When Cabinet Ministers or senior officials wanted to talk to me, I was very clear that I was only worth talking to if I knew the mind of the Prime Minister. I met the Prime Minister most days of the week. I was very close to her and gave her a lot of advice daily on the subjects that were before her. It was my job to know her mind.⁶²

The implication of this is that the team directly supporting the Prime Minister should be small enough to be able to liaise directly with their Prime Minister on a regular basis in order that they can truly know their mind. Polly Mackenzie told us:

A crucial part of that is them having a team around them that is small enough that every individual in it can develop a personal relationship of some sort with the Prime Minister in order to ... know the Prime Minister's mind.⁶³

Creating a dedicated department risked that support growing and becoming more bureaucratic and too large to have that routine contact with the Prime Minister (Dr Diamond warned of the dangers of a "congested centre").⁶⁴ Jonathan Powell told us:

We looked twice in our time at creating a Department of the Prime Minister. I can make the argument for it, but on reflection and looking around the

58 M. Barber *Instruction to Deliver* Politico's 2007, p.296

59 M. Barber *Instruction to Deliver* Politico's 2007, p.315–324

60 Outlined in chapter 11 of S. Heywood *'What Does Jeremy Think?': Jeremy Heywood and the Making of Modern Britain* William Collins 2021

61 [Q84 \(Jonathan Powell\)](#)

62 [Q74 \(Sir John Redwood\)](#)

63 [Q84 \(Polly Mackenzie\)](#)

64 [Q9 \(Patrick Diamond\)](#)

world at other things, I think it would be a mistake in our system to have a large, cumbersome, heavily-staffed centre of Government. I think there are diminishing returns from that.⁶⁵

48. Machinery of Government changes on this scale, perhaps involving not just Number 10 and the Cabinet Office but also HM Treasury, would constitute a significant upheaval in Whitehall and a substantial change to the existing distribution of functions between departments, upheaval which would not necessarily be warranted by the outcomes. Professor Mulgan regarded the departmental structure as far less important than the functions that the centre of government should perform. It is, he suggested, a “second order” issue.⁶⁶ In his written submission, Dr Blick notes that, although a number of Prime Ministers have considered creating a Prime Minister's Department, none have done so. Whilst this might be because they have felt that the logistical and political upheaval involved in such a move has outweighed the benefits, he suggests it might be because they have ultimately preferred the flexibility of the current arrangements.⁶⁷

49. We have heard little evidence to support the creation of a separate Department for the Prime Minister. The current Office of the Prime Minister is too small and much of its workforce too transient to be sensibly treated as a distinct department. The creation of a larger department, bringing together Number 10, the Cabinet Office and perhaps parts of HM Treasury has its supporters. However, the detail of this and how it might work are beyond the remit of this inquiry. Moreover, at least some of the benefits could be achieved through better collective working and a clearer specification of the respective roles of Number 10 and the Cabinet Office.

50. Whilst the creation of a separate department would help to resolve some of the accountability issues that have concerned us in this inquiry, these could be resolved more easily through greater transparency within the existing arrangements.

Special Advisers

51. Dr Diamond highlighted that, rather than being full of Machiavellian special advisors, Number 10 is actually a very civil service-led institution.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, it has a far higher proportion of Spads than other parts of government. Whereas most Cabinet members have one or two Spads, the Prime Minister currently employs around 50, almost half of the total number employed by the Government.⁶⁹ The Chancellor of the Exchequer currently “shares” his seven Spads with the Prime Minister. In addition, there have been recent examples where individuals have been hired as contractors to fulfil what to all intents and purposes appear to be Spad roles. There is little information about how many of these there might be nor what they are doing.⁷⁰

65 [Q84 \(Jonathan Powell\)](#)

66 [Q84 \(Sir Geoff Mulgan\)](#)

67 Dr Andrew Blick (Reader in Politics and Contemporary History and Head of Department of Political Economy at King's College London) ([PMO0001](#))

68 [Q3 \(Patrick Diamond\)](#)

69 Unless otherwise stated, figures in this section are taken from Cabinet Office [Annual Report on Special Advisers 2020](#) 15 December 2020

70 [Q19 \(Alex Thomas\)](#)

52. Not only are there far more Spads in Number 10 than in other departments, they are more senior. Of the 13 Spads in the top pay band, PB4 and paid between £96,000 and £145,000, currently employed by the Government, 11 are in Number 10 and the remaining two are “shared” with the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Number 10 also employs 26 Spads at PB3, paid between £73,000 - £102,000, with just six across all other departments. It should also be noted that some influential Spads have been prepared to take on the role unpaid.

53. Reflecting the higher pay, Number 10 Spads have played significant roles in the operation of the governments they serve that have, at times, gone beyond the usual advisory, intermediary or gatekeeping roles Spads play. Under Tony Blair’s premiership, an Order in Council was used to give Alastair Campbell and Jonathan Powell powers to direct civil servants normally reserved for ministers.⁷¹ Campbell used this authority to overhaul Government communications. Dr Diamond noted the significant influence that the Number 10 Spad Andrew (now Lord) Adonis had on education policy between 1997 and 2005.⁷² More recently, Lord Frost led negotiations with the European Commission as a Spad, only becoming a minister after some 18 months in government. Until his recent departure, Lee Cain, the Prime Minister’s Director of Communications in Number 10, had joint control of communications across government. And the imprint of Dominic Cummings, the Prime Minister’s former Chief Adviser, is clear in areas including civil service reform and research funding. He has also apparently had significant influence on certain procurement decisions.⁷³ He also took on recruitment and line management of Spads across government.⁷⁴

54. These examples show the way in which the role of some senior Spads in Number 10 has evolved into a quasi-executive one. Yet there is no means to ensure that Spads are accountable to Parliament for the decisions they have taken. Spads have appeared before select committees: Lord Frost did appear as part of the scrutiny of Brexit negotiations, for instance.⁷⁵ But successive Governments have adhered to the Osmotherly Rules which decree that it is up to the ministers to decide whether, and if so, which civil servants should appear before select committees⁷⁶ As Spads are employed as temporary civil servants, they are covered by the Osmotherly Rules which state that it is up to the Minister which officials should appear before select committees and so can be shielded from appearing when it suits the Government.⁷⁷ It should be noted that the Osmotherly Rules have never been formally accepted by Parliament.

55. In his written submission, Dr Bennister (University of Lincoln) suggested that the Prime Minister’s Chief of Staff and Chief Policy Advisor, or their equivalents, should routinely appear before this Committee.⁷⁸ Dr Blick suggested that either a junior minister or a senior special advisor should be delegated by the Prime Minister to answer to a select

71 [HC Deb, 22 April 2004, c604W](#)

72 [Q5 \(Patrick Diamond\)](#)

73 “Dominic Cummings’ role in contract award a ‘concern’, court told” [Financial Times](#) 15 February 2021;

“Resignation of No 10 adviser puts focus on Boris Johnson’s governance” [Financial Times](#) 18 February 2020

74 T. Durrant, N. Blacklaws and K. Zodgekar [Special advisers and the Johnson government How the Prime Minister and his team are changing the role](#) 2020, p.30

75 Committee on the Future Relationship with the European Union [Oral evidence: Progress of the negotiations on the UK’s future relationship with the EU](#) HC 203, 7 October 2020

76 There is an expectation that departmental Permanent Secretaries, as Accounting Officers, and officials named as Senior Responsible Owners for specific major projects should appear.

77 Cabinet Office [Giving Evidence to Select Committees: Guidance for Civil Servants](#) October 2014

78 Dr Mark Bennister ([PMO0002](#))

committee for the operation of Number 10. He suggests the Liaison Committee's role in scrutinising the Prime Minister could be developed with the establishment of a sub-committee for the task. It could, he suggests, even extend to pre-appointment hearings for senior Prime Ministerial Spads.⁷⁹

56. Increasing the direct accountability of the most senior Spads in Number 10 in this way would reflect the quasi-executive role that some have assumed. However, to do so would be to accept this quasi-executive role. The principle that "advisers advise, ministers decide" should remain the practice and Ministers, including the Prime Minister, should remain accountable to Parliament for the conduct of their advisers. To this end, much greater clarity around the roles that Spads can play and their relationship with officials may be needed. The Committee will be undertaking a dedicated inquiry into Special Advisers later in the Parliament when we will consider this in more detail.

57. The role of Special Advisers in Number 10 has evolved to such a degree that some have played a quasi-executive role. This is wrong. It undermines both ministerial accountability to Parliament and collective responsibility on the part of Cabinet. Ministers, including the Prime Minister, should remain fully accountable for the actions of the Special Advisers. It is the responsibility of Prime Ministers to ensure that their Special Advisers work within the proper parameters of their role and of senior officials as well as of other Cabinet members, to reinforce this.

79 Dr Andrew Blick (Reader in Politics and Contemporary History and Head of Department of Political Economy at King's College London) ([PMO0001](#))

Conclusions and recommendations

The Office of the Prime Minister

1. The lack of a statutory definition of the roles of the Prime Minister or the Cabinet in the UK has been reflected in the evolution of the Office of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Office. As Prime Ministers have sought to increase their strategic leadership and policy role, the Office of the Prime Minister (Number 10) has expanded and adapted to reflect that. They have also drawn on the supposedly collective resource of the Cabinet Office in the process. (Paragraph 35)
2. There should be a clearer delineation between those resources provided to support the Prime Minister and the support for collective government and cross-government activity more generally. (Paragraph 36)

Accountability

3. *The Office of the Prime Minister is nominally a business unit of the Cabinet Office. However, it currently it appears to operate with even less transparency than other Cabinet Office business units. The Cabinet Office Annual Report and Accounts do not include a narrative report on the Office of the Prime Minister as they do for its other business units. And governments have declined to respond to Parliamentary Questions about its organisation. This is not acceptable.* (Paragraph 41)
4. *We do not consider the status of the Office of Prime Minister as a business unit to be an accurate reflection of the role that it plays. Yet it currently operates with even less transparency that this status suggests. For so long as the Government maintains that it is a business unit of the Cabinet Office, the Government should report on its activities in the Annual Report and Accounts as it does for its other business units. And in its response to Parliamentary Questions, it should provide information as it does for its other business units.* (Paragraph 42)
5. *In its Single Departmental Plan, the objectives of supporting the Prime Minister should be disaggregated from the support provided to the Cabinet or the Government more generally.* (Paragraph 43)
6. *We have heard little evidence to support the creation of a separate Department for the Prime Minister. The current Office of the Prime Minister is too small and much of its workforce too transient to be sensibly treated as a distinct department. The creation of a larger department, bringing together Number 10, the Cabinet Office and perhaps parts of HM Treasury has its supporters. However, the detail of this and how it might work are beyond the remit of this inquiry. Moreover, at least some of the benefits could be achieved through better collective working and a clearer specification of the respective roles of Number 10 and the Cabinet Office.* (Paragraph 49)
7. *Whilst the creation of a separate department would help to resolve some of the accountability issues that have concerned us in this inquiry, these could be resolved more easily through greater transparency within the existing arrangements.* (Paragraph 50)

8. *Increasing the direct accountability of the most senior Spads in Number 10 in this way would reflect the quasi-executive role that some have assumed. However, to do so would be to accept this quasi-executive role. The principle that “advisers advise, ministers decide” should remain the practice and Ministers, including the Prime Minister, should remain accountable to Parliament for the conduct of their advisers. To this end, much greater clarity around the roles that Spads can play and their relationship with officials may be needed. The Committee will be undertaking a dedicated inquiry into Special Advisers later in the Parliament when we will consider this in more detail. (Paragraph 56)*
9. *The role of Special Advisers in Number 10 has evolved to such a degree that some have played a quasi-executive role. This is wrong. It undermines both ministerial accountability to Parliament and collective responsibility on the part of Cabinet. Ministers, including the Prime Minister, should remain fully accountable for the actions of the Special Advisers. It is the responsibility of Prime Ministers to ensure that their Special Advisers work within the proper parameters of their role and of senior officials as well as of other Cabinet members, to reinforce this. (Paragraph 57)*

Formal minutes

Thursday 27 May 2021

Members present:

Mr William Wragg, in the Chair

| | |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| Ronnie Cowan | Tom Randall |
| Jackie Doyle-Price | Lloyd Russell-Moyle |
| Rachel Hopkins | Karin Smyth |
| Mr David Jones | John Stevenson |
| John McDonnell | |

Draft Report (*The role and status of the Prime Minister's Office*), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 57 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

[Adjourned till 8 June 2021 at 8.55am.]

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Tuesday 13 October 2020

Dr Catherine Haddon, Senior Fellow, Institute for Government; **Alex Thomas**, Programme Director, Institute for Government; **Dr Patrick Diamond**, Senior Lecturer, Queen Mary University of London

[Q1–28](#)

Tuesday 10 November 2020

Fiona Hill CBE, Former Prime Minister's Chief of Staff; **Polly Mackenzie**, former Director of Policy to the Deputy Prime Minister; **Jonathan Powell**, Former Prime Minister's Chief of Staff; **Rt Hon Sir John Redwood MP**, Former Head of No.10 Policy Unit; **Prof Sir Geoff Mulgan CBE**, Former Prime Minister's Director of Policy to the Prime Minister

[Q29–84](#)

Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

PMO numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Bennister, Dr Mark (Senior Lecturer in Politics, School of Social and Political Sciences, Director, Lincoln Parliamentary Research Centre University of Lincoln) ([PMO0002](#))
- 2 Blick, Dr Andrew (Reader in Politics and Contemporary History and Head of Department of Political Economy, King's College London) ([PMO0001](#))
- 3 Redwood MP, Rt Hon Sir John ([PMO0003](#))

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Session 2019–21

| Number | Title | Reference |
|-------------|--|-----------|
| 1st | Appointment of Rt Hon Lord Pickles as Chair of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments | HC 168 |
| 2nd | Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman Scrutiny 2018–19 | HC 117 |
| 3rd | Delivering the Government's infrastructure commitments through major projects | HC 125 |
| 4th | Parliamentary Scrutiny of the Government's handling of Covid-19 | HC 377 |
| 5th | A Public Inquiry into the Government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic | HC 541 |
| 6th | The Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 | HC 167 |
| 7th | Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman Scrutiny 2019–20 | HC 843 |
| 8th | Government transparency and accountability during Covid 19: The data underpinning decisions | HC 803 |
| 1st Special | Government transparency and accountability during Covid 19: The data underpinning decisions: Government's response to the Committee's Eighth Report of Session 2019–21 | HC 234 |