

## Written evidence from Dr Mark Bennister<sup>1</sup> (PMO 02)

### Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee The role and status of the Prime Minister's Office inquiry

#### **1. To what extent does the formal status of Number 10 as part of the Cabinet Office reflect its operational role?**

1.1 The lines are very much blurred. The operational role of Number 10 is to serve the Prime Minister of the day. The Cabinet Office serves the Government. However, successive Prime Ministers have sought to strengthen their resources in Number 10 and utilise resources within the Cabinet Office. The fact that the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) is formally part of the Cabinet Office does not have a significant impact on its operational role supporting the Prime Minister.

1.2 The private office in Number 10 has generally fulfilled a consistent function in connecting the Prime Minister to the rest of Whitehall, whilst policy advice arrangements in Number 10 have fluctuated, depending on the political context and leadership style of the Prime Minister in power. Without any formal structural change to the status of the PMO, increases in capacity and resources such as ad hoc policy units or appointment of key advisors (for instance on foreign policy) amounts to 'institution stretch.'<sup>2</sup>

#### **2. What is Number 10's relationship with the Cabinet Office? How has this changed over time and what is the most effective relationship?**

2.1 Successive Prime Ministers have bemoaned the lack of resources at the centre. Number 10 is a rather bizarre place to work for the head of the executive. It is, as many have pointed out, 'extraordinarily ill-suited to be the headquarters of a modern government.'<sup>3</sup> The small size of Number 10 Downing Street limits the total number of staff who can have proximity to the PM, therefore the adjacent Cabinet Office tends to host many staff who are directly supporting the Prime Minister.

2.2 Over time, the structural organisation of Number 10 has reflected each Prime Minister's personal style. Harold Wilson established the policy unit, but it was Tony Blair who developed the scope and support for central policy advice. Subsequent Prime Ministers have adapted the Blair model. This may also be context dependent, based on the issues of the day eg managing the Coalition (cross party working under David Cameron) or Brexit (greater parliamentary support under Theresa May).

2.3 As Jonathan Powell has reflected, such fluidity around the Prime Minister can be advantageous: 'Number 10 should be the gearstick in the PM's hand: light and responsive. And the Cabinet Office should be the drive shaft making sure the wheels of government are all moving in the same direction and at the same speed.'<sup>4</sup> There has

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<sup>2</sup> See Bennister, M. 2012. Prime Ministers in Power: Political leadership in Britain and Australia, and Bennister, M., 2009. 'Tony Blair as Prime Minister' in *The Blair Legacy* (pp. 165-177).

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Powell in Harris, J. and Rutter, J., 2014. Centre Forward. Institute for Government.p16.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Powell in Harris, J. and Rutter, J., 2014. Centre Forward. Institute for Government.p59

always been a level of fluidity in the relationship between Number 10 and the Cabinet Office, for instance Gordon Brown and David Cameron both borrowed capacity from the Cabinet Office on global and European issues. Tony Blair developed his own policy units and sought to provide an alternative source of policy advice and capacity to challenge the vast resources the Treasury.

- 2.4 Effectiveness in the relationship is hard to quantify, though it is important that the political and administrative personnel in Number 10 develop good working relationships to support the Prime Minister. The organisation of the Office of Prime Minister reflects the incumbent's personal style and political appointees often also reflect the leadership style of the Prime Minister (as delegator, controller etc). Some Prime Ministers may favour greater collaboration with civil servants and develop more effective working arrangements, others may create greater tension and conflict in their working relationships, by favouring a close coterie of advisors. People rather than positions often matter more in the centre, particularly if key individuals have the close ear of the Prime Minister and are central to policy development and presentation.
- 2.5 An effective relationship is not one that seeks to direct or control the rest of government, but one that facilitates engagement with competing policy ideas. If this is not the case then groupthink and policy failure, driven dogmatically from the centre, can fester. Relationships need to work across departments at a bureaucratic level and also at a political level to ensure coordination.

### **3. Are the mechanisms for scrutinising and holding Number 10 to account adequate and, if not, how can they be improved?**

- 3.1 There are no established mechanisms for scrutinising the internal workings of Number 10. The fluidity and opaque nature of appointments, roles and responsibilities in the Prime Minister's Office mitigate against formal accountability. However, the Prime Minister should be scrutinised more thoroughly with regard to who works in the PMO, what they do, and the internal decision-making processes.
- 3.2 Previous administrations have published staff lists, organograms, and management charts to at least give an indication of the inner workings. The publication of such details would at the very least provide a helpful window into the resources and mechanisms at the heart of government.
- 3.3 The Liaison Committee sessions with the Prime Minister would be the appropriate place for the Prime Minister to be scrutinised over the workings of the PMO.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff and Chief Policy Advisor should routinely give evidence to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee along with other senior advisors.

### **4. Does Number 10 meet the threshold for being a Government department?**

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<sup>5</sup> See Kelso, A., Bennister, M. and Larkin, P., 2016. The shifting landscape of prime ministerial accountability to parliament: An analysis of Liaison Committee scrutiny sessions. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 18(3), pp.740-754; '[The Liaison Committee: Taking Evidence from the Prime Minister](#)' Kelly, R. and Bennister, M. (2020); and Bennister, M (2019) [Evidence to House of Commons Inquiry into the effectiveness and influence of the select committee](#)

- 4.1 No. Number 10 is a hybrid, supporting office, within the Cabinet Office. In contrast Australia has a large Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and Canada has the Privy Council Office. These countries have additional political offices to support the Prime Minister, but large central departments. In the UK, the PMO in Downing St is flexible and fluid hybrid of civil servants and political appointees.
- 4.2 Yet, common with previous Prime Ministers the current incumbent has sought to extent capacity into the Cabinet Office.<sup>6</sup> Press reports (August 2020) interpreted the physical move of policy unit staff into the Cabinet Office as an attempt to create a prime ministerial department by stealth.<sup>7</sup> Some reports suggest the aim is to merge Numbers 10 and 11 to create a single team in support of the Prime Minister. These arguments have been heard before (particularly under Tony Blair), they are partly driven by the perception that the Prime Minister has less formal resources to draw on compared to other departments and has traditionally had a facilitating and coordinating role, rather than directional.
- 4.3 At present effectiveness at the centre is hampered by a lack of transparency and a reluctance to utilise Number 10 as a central hub to facilitate, coordinate and engage in a collaborative fashion. Prime Ministers feel that they do not have sufficient control over the levers of power and seek, particularly after a significant election victory, to assert themselves and their subordinates over colleagues and the civil service.

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2020/03/whos-charge-inside-no-10-maverick-advisers-running-britain>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.civilserviceworld.com/news/article/cummings-and-no10-policy-unit-to-move-to-cabinet-office>