7. Cabinet government: Australian style¹

Patrick Weller AO

So Tony Blair has gone. It is said of Tony Blair that he killed the cabinet in Britain, that he held a few meetings that didn't last very long and that in any one year there were about half a dozen decisions made by cabinet—in a year, not in a meeting. Gordon Brown will come into office and change the way the decisions get made in Britain. Not because he needs to, but because he has to, in order to illustrate that he is a different sort of leader. So the shape of cabinet will change, even if the outcomes might not, or at least it will change initially, because leaders can shape cabinets to their own style and their own preoccupations. Brown will be different. His former head of department called him a Stalinist, or said that he was Stalinist in the way that he approached decision making, allowing no opposition, no debate. It will be interesting to see if he tries to run the English government as Prime Minister the same way as he acted when he was Chancellor.

But if the British system of organising and running cabinet is compared with the Australian style, it's really quite different. Cabinet here still appears to exist. The ministers meet regularly, they have a formal agenda, a working committee system and a process by which the majority of issues are at least discussed in cabinet, even if some of the decisions might have been preordained and decided beforehand.

I want to talk about the contrasts between the British and the Australian system. As Rudyard Kipling said, 'What can they know of England who only England know?' If we actually look only at the Australian cabinet, we take for granted so many things that are surprising about the way the cabinet works. A comparison with Britain encourages us to look at the things that happen here and ask why they don't happen in Britain. Then it is possible to understand better the dynamics that push the Australian system.

It is also useful to ask how Australia has changed. By instinct, I'm a historian, so I look at the contrasts, at the different ways in which prime ministers have operated cabinets, at the different pressures on cabinet that have existed over the hundred or so years of our federal politics. We know it has changed and will change. We know that if Howard goes some time between now and the year 2015, the new Prime Minister, whether it be Costello, Rudd or somebody not yet in the Parliament, will run the cabinet differently, in part to show that they're an individual. But they will be operating in Australia with the constraints that

have been created by 100 years of history, just as in Britain Gordon Brown will have to take account of the long history of England in how he chooses to operate the system there. Comparisons across nations and across time help us understand something about the way cabinet works.

Peter Shergold has said that only Australia maintains the true traditions of cabinet government. Only Australia believes in collective decision making, in contrast with Canada and Britain. In Canada, cabinet has been called a focus group. The cabinet committees will meet to discuss new proposals and, at the end of the day, they decide to support them or not support them. But there's no money attached, and they are effectively put in a folder. Around one budget time, the British Prime Minister, the Minister for Finance (our Treasurer) sent out a questionnaire to ministers saying, you have agreed to fund 50 programs, please nominate your top 10. As ministers filled out the questionnaire, there was a little bit of game-playing about, 'well, they're going to fund that one anyway, so I'll choose another one'. The Privy Council Office tallied up the results, but never told the ministers what the outcome was. The Minister for Finance just announced in the budget what was going to be funded. The stories are that in Britain, Tony Blair at one cabinet meeting begged Gordon Brown to tell him what was in the budget. I can't quite imagine John Howard and Peter Costello working that way. The traditions, it seems to me, are very different and essentially much more collective still in this country than elsewhere.

So what is it that we're looking at? Cabinet government is an arena, not a set of rules by itself, not a simple institution. It's a process by which people work. At one stage, I asked senior officials in three countries to say what cabinet government was. Let me give you their replies.

Canada: Cabinet government is the arrangements the Prime Minister makes to ensure that decisions are made in the interests of the general, rather than the individual minister, with a view to presenting a unified program for legislation and supply.

Britain: Cabinet government is a shorthand term for the process by which governments determine their policy and ensures the political will to implement them.

Australia: Cabinet government is collective government and must establish a coherent set of policies consistent with its strategic directions; it needs policy coherence and political support.

They are all public service views, but they touch on what seem to be the two key components of what cabinets do: gain political support and get some level of policy decision or policy coherence. It's politics and it's policy; it's not one or the other. It's the place where the political, the policy and the administrative interests intersect. People who argue that cabinet spends too much time on

politics seem, to me, to miss the point that that's very much what they're about the whole time.

The other point about those interesting definitions is that, even though they come from public servants, they are effectively process neutral. They tell you what you must do; they make no suggestions how you must do it. There's no instruction about the way cabinets ought to operate, just what the outcomes will be. And that's because it's difficult to find any coherent view about the best way to operate. It's a question I'll come back to.

One of the questions that is often posed is: should things be discussed by cabinet? Probably yes. Then by whom should they be discussed? What is 'the cabinet' in these situations? Is it a full cabinet, a cabinet made up of all the ministers or all the cabinet ministers, since most countries have a distinction between who's in cabinet and who is not? Or something less? Every system will agree, but perhaps not all the ministers. Every system has a war cabinet when there's a fight on. Every system has reduced to small numbers the people whom it wants to discuss strategic and military decision making. So Australia in 1941 had a war cabinet consisting of seven or eight people who took most of the crucial decisions. It was briefed by the military. It was briefed by senior public servants. It had the advantage of maintaining a small group of people with some sort of strategic view. It also had the political advantage for John Curtin that he didn't have to put Eddie Ward and Arthur Caldwell in there, so that he could run it without fearing they were going to leak the whole time. So it served a political and a suitably administrative purpose at the same time.

Australia has had 20 years' experience of the Expenditure Review Committee process, by which a small group of ministers examines budgetary proposals each year, supported largely by the Department of Finance. It's regarded as a sort of inner-expenditure cabinet, which can make the tough decisions. Howard instituted a National Security Committee, which is responsible currently for overseeing the way that issues in Iraq and Afghanistan and other security problems are taken into account and it incorporates its own supporting organisation of senior staff. So there's never been an occasion when a particular forum or a particular group alone constitutes 'the cabinet'. It's organised by prime ministers on different occasions in a way that they can best ensure the job is done.

Structures are devices to reach sensible decisions and maintain the necessary support for the decisions that you're going to make; it's a combination of power and good information. Getting support for good policies is significant because good policies without support go nowhere.

If we go back to 70 or 80 years ago, we see process even then. There is nothing new about a national security council or national security committee. It has a lineage that goes back quite a long time. It always raises questions about the

power of prime ministers in contrast to the power of cabinets. The critics talk about the presidentialisation of the prime ministership, as though it reflects an increase in the Prime Minister's power. That is really a silly term, since most American presidents would dearly love to have the same power as any Australia prime minister. They would love to have the guaranteed support that exists within the Parliament and the cabinet for what they wish to do.

The presidentialisation concept raises questions about individual power; we're much better talking about centralisation of power. Even then a sense of history will quickly destroy any notion of trends towards greater authority for Australian prime ministers. Billy Hughes went overseas for 15 months while he was Prime Minister. He left in about April 1918 and came back in August 1919, which would be difficult to do today. He ran the country by telegram, which meant of course that the messages had to be coded, sent, decoded, read, considered by cabinet, coded, sent back, decoded and considered by the Prime Minister. At one stage, Hughes said, 'I don't want Cabinet to make any decisions without consulting me first.' The then Acting Prime Minister, a careful, methodical person called W. A. Watt, exploded. He said, 'You can't run a country if everything has to go to and from Britain.' Watt said, 'I sent you the details of the last meeting in a telegram' to America; it cost £100 to send that telegram, in 1918 values. Only later came the wonderful contraption of the overseas telephone. When Joe Lyons was in London, he arranged a phone call to the cabinet in the cabinet room. It took three days to organise. Hughes used to make decisions; Watt used to complain that cabinet found out what the Australian Government had decided by reading the newspapers (shades of CNN 100 years later). Hughes was announcing decisions to the press and then the Australian cabinet was asked to respond to them. Billy Hughes was maverick, individualistic; he had a crazy way of running cabinet and he had more power than any Australian prime minister has ever had before or since in terms of getting away with what he wanted to do because he scared the hell out of all his colleagues. He was quite a character, when you actually look at the way that he chose to operate.

But there's another way of operating, another way in which you can run cabinet from the prime ministership, and let me quote about a prime minister who did it by a very different strategy. He said, 'We adopted the idea of a definite agenda and the circulation of papers by Ministers in respect to any item they put down.' He had an arrangement that any minister with an item listed had to see the Prime Minister before the meeting. This, he argued,

worked admirably...Notwithstanding the provision that the papers had to be circulated by the Minister, it was obvious at Cabinet meetings that the majority of his colleagues had not read them. With our system, however, that wasn't frightfully material. I always allowed a discussion for half an hour, or some limited period, and then came into the ring

myself, being fully informed in the matter by reason of my private conversation with the Minister concerned beforehand. The weight of the Prime Minister definitely on the side of the Minister, in the face of the rest of the Cabinet—the majority of whom had not read the paper and did not know what it was all about—proved it practice to be quite decisive and we got through a great deal of work in minimum time.

So who was this Prime Minister who ran a very collective system, in which everyone was permitted to talk, everyone was permitted to participate and he decided in advance exactly what was going to happen? That was Stanley Bruce, who came into office in 1923 with the inclinations of a businessman to try to run government efficiently, although eventually of course his cabinet got into more and more political trouble and it collapsed. I suspect that's the more common feature of prime ministers in cabinet. It's not a choice between the individual and the collective; it's how the individual uses the collective.

When I went to see Malcolm Fraser to talk to him about writing a book on the way he ran his government, he said to me, 'Why do you want to write the book?' I said, 'Well, your image is of a totally dominant prime minister, but everyone I talk to emphasised how much you consulted.' He laughed. He said, 'Just because I consulted, it didn't mean I didn't dominate, you know.' And, of course, that's precisely how he chose to run his cabinet; he consulted exhaustively, he consulted until people were prepared to accept his particular proposals. When he didn't like what they were proposing, he would put it off, he'd ask for another paper, he'd argue that time was needed to think about this a bit more, he would decide to call a meeting later that day. There was a whole range of tactics that he produced to ensure that his views were actually heard, but he worked through the cabinet in a way that many of his equivalents in other countries never felt the obligation to do.

What's happened of course since the days of Hughes and Bruce is that the circumstances have changed—not only the political circumstances, but all those other things: the media, the access to prime ministers, the notion that anything a prime minister says, whether deliberate or otherwise, can rapidly be circulated right around the country within seconds on the Internet, or by other mechanisms. A prime minister can be asked questions on any item at any time. Opinion polls tell them what people think rather than them relying on their backbench or other people to report on how the government is going. Imagine what Billy Hughes would have done with those advantages. Imagine how he would have manipulated the media. Imagine how he would have controlled the flow of information. Imagine how, in his own, I suspect, unique way, he would have managed to use the mechanisms to be just as dominant as any prime minister possibly could be in the past, or in the future.

Centralisation depends on style, on the different ways of running things. But I suspect when we talk about the greater information for prime ministers and greater support for prime ministers, some of it at least is a case of running hard to keep up, not to get ahead. Prime ministers need to understand the immediacy of the pressures that are landing on them rather than operating some time in the future. Robert Menzies came out once from a meeting with the US President, he had a press conference and somebody said to him, 'Mr Menzies, you've had private conversations with the President?' 'Yes.' 'Can you tell us what you talked about?' He said, 'Son, you've answered your own question.' The reporter said, 'What do you mean?' Menzies said, 'They were private conversations. Do you expect me to tell you before I tell the Australian Parliament?' He could get away with it then; it would be much harder to do so now.

So how has the Australian cabinet changed over this period? First, there's one distinct line that is continuous: the bureaucracy surrounding cabinet has grown more complex and more distinct over 100 years. At those first meetings of cabinet, the Prime Minister used to keep the minutes; he used to write down on one side of the minute book the topics, across the top the people who turned up and the decisions on the opposite page—'delayed', 'deferred', 'agreed', or something. And that was the only record; we've still got some of those notebooks. Occasionally, we can see the frustration: conciliation and arbitration, deferred, deferred, discussed, discussed, and after about 10 meetings, it says, 'Kingston resigns, decision finalised at last' underlined. A huge sigh of relief springs out of the page. But gradually prime ministers start formalising the process of government. Eventually cabinet received the support that occurred in Britain in the First World War. The first official to sit in cabinet sat in the war cabinet in 1939–40. The first secretary to sit in the full cabinet was Frank Strahan in 1941. Gradually, official numbers moved from one to two to three to four, as officers sat there to take notes of what was being decided. The handbooks, the rules of cabinet, started at half a page, half a page in which Bruce actually discussed with the head of cabinet what would happen, what would go in and how it would be done. There are now two or three handbooks, as people add to the rules that define the way that cabinets work and seek to maintain some sort of control of the processes. It works to some extent but not always.

Sometimes mavericks can never be controlled. Let me read one cabinet submission in 1936—hazard a guess about what it might be discussing.

We are faced with a situation which demands serious thinking and courageous action. What is the greatest problem of nations today? We are faced with world unrest which is causing great anxiety. We have fierce economic wars between countries. We have the piling up of armaments and behind all these we have the separation of peoples into political camps of the most extreme kind.

Armaments? Defence expenditure? Foreign affairs? No, Billy Hughes was Minister of Health and was proposing the introduction of school milk. How you make the connection, I've really no idea.

But there were different times, of course, in which others again tried to add to the rules. Let me quote a comment from John Bunting about how cabinet should be run. There was particular concern in the late 1950s that the cabinet load was becoming too onerous, even if by modern standards it was scarcely onerous at all. He particularly objected to the number of papers being presented by the Treasury, and he wrote this to his superior:

These papers either waste time or the Cabinet gallops through them. And galloping, once started, becomes the fashion. They are then apt to gallop when they should work...I don't want to pose as a reformer. For one thing, there are certain virtues, from the point of view of the Prime Minister and Treasurer, for example, in the confusion.

There is a recognition the cabinet is not about getting things right, it's about getting things done. A prime minister can appreciate that no-one except himself and the Treasurer is probably briefed on what they're discussing and thus has some genuine advantages with which he likes to operate. So an examination of the rules provides some idea of why they're put there and for what purpose they're being applied. To quote Sir John Bunting, I like the slightly paternalistic view of Menzies, who says to Bunting at one stage when he is proposing new rules (you can imagine Menzies, can't you?):

Lad, the thing is, if you're taking over from someone, to assume that he knew what he was doing. You can disagree later if you want to and make a change, but if you're wise about it, you will discover his reasons for his actions before you disagree. You may find those reasons convincing. In any case it's always a gross error to assume that your predecessor was a species of a fool.

There is a linear line of the organisation of cabinet, which makes it much more bureaucratised than it's ever been before. The informality of the early cabinet, when you had nine people sitting around a table arguing without the benefit of papers on a range of items, has now largely disappeared.

A second question, though, is how could you do it better? There's been a struggle for 100 years to work out how best to organise cabinet to get the best results. We tend to assume that cabinets know what they're doing; I suspect the closer you get to cabinet, the more you appreciate the difficulties that cabinet has of understanding the issues, and understanding exactly what it is that they're trying to decide.

Hugh Heclo used a lovely notion of governments 'puzzling'—the government is a sort of collective puzzlement on society's behalf. I think that's largely true

in many of the issues that come before cabinet. When they were starting to introduce satellites, there were 36 meetings of cabinet or its committees to try to work out what on earth this meant. What were their implications? They couldn't understand them because nobody really knew what they were. So on a range of issues, there have been 100 years of attempts to sort out how to deal with information. How do ministers absorb it? How do they come up with sensible decisions? The first cabinet committees were set up in 1903; cabinets have been setting them up ever since as ways of allowing people to look at particular problems. The basic problems are systemic: a lack of time, a lack of capacity to absorb information or occasionally a reluctance to read too much material. There is no single solution that can satisfy those sorts of issues, so prime ministers are constantly looking at different ways, different committees, larger and smaller cabinets, supporting groups of officials, strategic cabinets—all of these have been attempted at different times. None of them by themselves has solved the problems, because it's basically an insoluble problem, which is going to be readjusted to suit the individuals and particularly the Prime Minister's style and interests.

The third point about cabinet has never changed. It's a political forum in which ministers contest not only the items, but for their own position. Cabinet, someone said, is a bull ring, in which everyone has their place and ensures they aren't knocked off too often. In those first years, Kingston and Forrest couldn't stand the sight of each other and fought long and bitterly over the conciliation and arbitration bill; their animosity was reflected time and time again in cabinets in which people fought tense battles for the sake of the policy and for the sake of their own careers.

Cabinet is a tough forum in which people are operating all the time. That cannot change. Our system of government is one of the few in which the Prime Minister's putative successors are probably sitting around the table, all conscious of the fact that they want to make sure that some day in the future they get there.

So there is a long history of fights in cabinet, which can get dramatically bitter—for example, over conscription. Also in the Great Depression, the Scullin Government fragmented and cabinet was constantly buffered between a Senate that would pass nothing and a caucus that would approve nothing. The image of cabinet tick-tacking endlessly and fruitlessly with caucus is an illustration of how badly cabinet government can sometimes work.

The question is: why, given all those problems, do we still have the system of cabinet government in Australia, which exists in a much more collective style than is true in Britain? What are the dynamics in Australia that keep cabinet discussing things collectively, whereas in Britain it's been handled much more through committees and bilaterally and in Canada it has become little more than a focus group?

Three or four reasons can explain. First, cabinet still, in Australia, has some sort of representational role. We are a federation that requires that state voices still be heard or at least not be excluded too often. So we've always had different states represented in the ministry and nearly always in the cabinet.

Second, there's an egalitarian tradition that I suspect is cautious of giving too much power to leaders—dramatically so in the case of the Labor Party. The Australian Labor Party, from a very early stage, decided that ministers were the delegates of caucus and could be instructed by caucus. In the battles that went on between 1910 and 1913, 1914 and 1915, 1929 and 1931, there were occasions when the demands of caucus effectively destroyed the government. Curtin and Chifley, better politicians than Hughes and Fisher, were able, to some extent, to work through the party in order to maintain the controls that they needed. Not until the Hawke/Keating Government did the caucus gradually fall into a more submissive role, accepting that if they wanted to stay in Parliament, they could not constantly seek to direct cabinet.

But even in the Liberal Party, even in coalition governments, there was long a tradition that people would listen in party committees. Even prime ministers attend party committees. In 1941 in particular, Menzies had a constant battle with his party room about whether he should stay in Australia or whether he should go back to Britain, eventually to the extent that they drove him out of the Prime Minister's job. So there's an egalitarian tradition that doesn't accept the royal prerogative as readily as happened, certainly, in Britain.

Third, there's location. Everyone works out of Parliament House. They meet each other on a regular basis. There's a much greater notion of a group activity in the Australian Parliament, whereas in Britain they are spread around Whitehall. They see each other less often. They talk to each other less frequently. There's a hothouse atmosphere in Canberra that requires that people know what's going on.

But the key factor that maintains cabinet collective government in Australia is the method by which parties select and remove leaders. From a very early stage, the tradition was accepted that the caucus selected the leader and the caucus could remove the leader. In Canada, since 1925, all Canadian leaders have been elected by convention. As it takes a convention to elect a leader and a convention to remove a leader, prime ministers there would say to their colleagues, 'You didn't elect me and you can't get rid of me'. The only way a Canadian prime minister can be removed is through the calling of a leadership convention and a vote of no confidence; that process will destroy the government so critics are more restrained. In Britain, for a long time, conservative leaders 'emerged', but now in both parties there is an external convention that elects them—a conference that is broader than the parliamentary party. So for a prime minister to be removed, critics have to organise...well, no prime minister has been

removed by party revolt since the franchise was widened. Thatcher lost because the selection then, at a particular moment, was in the hands of the parliamentary party. No longer. It's virtually impossible to get rid of a British prime minister without destroying the government. Why did Gordon Brown wait for so long? Because he had no choice.

When it comes to removing a prime minister in Australia, ask Paul Keating. When he had the numbers, he used them. Ask Peter Costello. If he had had the numbers, he would have used them. Look at the strategies of the three potential leaders in the past 15 years across three countries. In the Canadian Chrétien Government, Paul Martin was the leader in waiting. He became frustrated; after 10 years, Chrétien wouldn't go. In fact, Chrétien said, 'If you start campaigning, I'll stay in office longer' and there was nothing the critics could do about it. Paul Martin left the Parliament and campaigned for the leadership in the party outside. After he won the party leadership at a convention, he had to win a seat and only then take up his position as Prime Minister. He left and campaigned. Gordon Brown didn't have a mechanism for removing Blair. He had to wait him out or start a revolt in the party and the cabinet, which was full of Blairites because Blair had chosen them. He had to stay in the House of Commons to be eligible when Blair eventually resigned. So he stayed and fumed.

Keating and Costello conspired and hoped to assassinate, at least potentially, because the mechanism was there. If aspirants have the numbers within the party, they can take the Prime Minister out on any occasion. Now turn that position around on its head. If that is the way that the system works, what do prime ministers need? And the answer is: the continuing positive support of their senior colleagues. They need the continuing support of cabinet colleagues to ensure that their position remains strong. They have to keep talking to the parliamentary party because they're the ones who elected them in the first place. Australian government becomes collective because that is a matter of survival for prime ministers. The party chooses, the party can remove, the party can replace. The dynamics of the party make collective cabinet essential, because otherwise a prime minister finds himself at odds with the most powerful people, including his potential successor.

The consequence is that no prime minister in Australia will ever try to operate again the way that Billy Hughes did, unless they are highly confident of their position (and eventually of course even Hughes fell foul of the Country Party). I suspect that, although his party claimed to be prepared to support him, they weren't that sorry to see him go. No prime minister now could survive spending as much time overseas or could act continually in as arbitrary a fashion without consultation with the cabinet.

So it's the dynamics of the party and the dynamics of government; it's the history of politics and administration and the rules of succession that underpin the

notions of a collective cabinet process in Australia. As long as the position continues that members of cabinet and their supporters in the party can make or break prime ministers, the prime ministers will be conscious of those rules and make sure that that happens as seldom as possible. So maintaining the party's support, working with cabinet, maintaining a degree of contentment in cabinet, consulting ministers even if only for the sake of going through the processes, ensuring they know what's happening—that's all part of the process. It's that mixture of politics and policy that makes cabinet government significant.

John Howard commented in his dark days of opposition:

One of the tensions I find as a senior minister in the Fraser government [is] the balance between the political role and the administrative role. The extent to which too frequent a number of Cabinet meetings and too cumbersome an administrative procedure can paralyse one's political activity and one's political effectiveness, it's a real constraint.

Too much policy discussion in cabinet and the politics can get forgotten. Too much politics and the administration can decline. Getting that balance right is one of the constant challenges for cabinets in Australia.

ENDNOTES

¹ This essay was originally presented as an ANZSOG Public Lecture on 16 May 2007.