



Future
Governance
Forum

INTO POWER 02

The Conservative Party's 2010 transition
from opposition to government

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Contents

About The Future Governance Forum	2
About the author & acknowledgements	3
Executive summary	4
Key recommendations	6
Introductory note	8
Chapter One: Before the election - preparing for power	9
The big picture	9
The detail	11
Manifesto, election, coalition	15
Chapter Two: Into government - the distribution of power	17
10 Downing Street	18
The Treasury	22
Business plans in action	23
Chapter Three: Early reform drives	25
The Treasury: cutting the deficit	25
The Cabinet Office: government efficiency	26
10 Downing Street: the Big Society	27
Education: academisation	28
Work and Pensions: Universal Credit	31
Health: NHS reorganisation	33
Chapter Four: Lessons for today	34
Purpose	34
Power	34
Pace	36
Pressure	37
Note on citations	40

About The Future Governance Forum

The Future Governance Forum is a new, progressive, non-profit and non-partisan think tank. We are here to provide the intellectual and practical infrastructure vital to national renewal and the revival of progressive government in the UK.

Our goal is to shape a comprehensive new operating model for the way the country works, delivering effectively across national, devolved, regional and local government. We bring together people and institutions with the expertise to develop and implement new models of partnership, policy development and service delivery.

Our current programmes of work explore:

- **Mission Critical:** how can governments develop missions as more than a signal of intent, but a theory and a practice of government?
- **Impactful Devolution:** how can government meaningfully and permanently devolve power to regional and local level in one of the most centralised countries in the world?
- **Into Power:** how should an administration be set up, and its people empowered, to deliver on its promises?
- **Rebuilding the Nation:** how can we utilise innovative models of public and private investment to deliver future policy objectives?
- **Systems Change:** how can the UK's system of government be reformed to better facilitate not obstruct delivery?

By prioritising these questions we are thinking about new progressive models of governance for the long term.

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Executive summary

The current state of the opinion polls suggests that 2024 could be a year in which one governing party in the UK is replaced by another. This is a surprisingly rare event in recent British political history: it has happened just twice in the last 40 years. It means that institutional knowledge of transitions – within the political parties and the civil service – is not necessarily very deep.

The Future Governance Forum's *Into Power* series is intended to help those preparing for a potential change of government to learn the lessons of other similar experiences. [Our first report in the series](#) looked at recent transitions in the USA (2020) and Australia (2022). This report looks closer to home, but further back in time, to see what can be learned from the last moment power changed hands here in the UK – when David Cameron's Conservative Party came into office in 2010.

Chapter One traces the three stages of Cameron's modernisation of the Conservative Party between 2005 and 2010: detoxification, taking the fight to Labour and setting out an alternative programme for government. This finds echoes in the process Keir Starmer's Labour Party has put itself through since 2020.

At a departmental level, the Conservatives' preparations for office were detailed, thorough and business-like, including the drawing-up of 'business plans', which informed the access talks between prospective ministers and senior civil servants – a process that is currently underway once again. The party's initial overall aim was to repair the social fabric – building a 'Big Society' – but in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis in 2008, this goal had to compete with a commitment to tackle the Government's ballooning deficit. These objectives were never integrated, and the party faced the electorate with a mix of sharply focused policy and an uncertain overall purpose: something Cameron himself felt contributed to the party falling short of an overall majority.

Chapter Two seeks to recapture the culture shock of a party entering office after a long period in opposition, with a ministerial team that had little experience of the demands of national government. Here, too, there is a potential parallel with 2024. In 2010, this set of experiences ranged from uncertainties over appointments and seating arrangements to the way that tight opposition teams, who were used to informal daily contact, were dispersed across Whitehall, with relationships suddenly subject to formal processes.

This chapter also explores how, in the initial phase of returning to government, the Conservatives' preparations paid off, from the departmental business plans to the creation of new institutions like the National Security Council and the Office for Budget Responsibility. The emergence of the Quad showed a willingness to seize on organic innovations, but the abolition of the Downing Street Strategy and Delivery Units, and the hollowing out of the Policy Unit, had fewer positive consequences. The speed at which all this was done offers lessons for a possible Labour government, given its plans to create an Industrial Strategy Council and other new bodies. This sequence of events also highlights

the need to pay attention to the beliefs that are embedded in new institutions, and to the uses and limitations of business plans.

Chapter Three explores how the Conservatives' competing priorities fared under the pressure of entering government. The aim of cutting the deficit rapidly became the government's dominant theme, while the Cabinet Office strove for greater efficiency and to centralise procurement. The Cameron project's Big Society plans largely withered. This was in part a consequence of the greater emphasis on deficit reduction, but also of a lack of prioritisation, and too little sense of how policy could be developed and delivered. This (and the fate of the Conservatives' 2019 'levelling up' promises) suggest pitfalls that a new Labour government should avoid if it wants to drive political and economic renewal across the country.

Once the 2010 transition was complete, major reforming departments began work, under light-touch supervision from Downing Street. This chapter focuses in some detail on the Conservatives' drive to reform education. It offers examples of when moving fast is achievable and worthwhile (academisation) and when it is a recipe for error (abolishing Building Schools for the Future). We also explore these issues through two other reforms. First, the experience of the ministerial team at the Department of Work and Pensions, as it worked to introduce a hugely complex reform of the benefits system, in the context of spending cuts and the other goals which further complicated the process. Second, the reorganisation of the National Health Service, which revealed a lack of central grip on the magnitude and contentiousness of the plans, partly because they were so complex.

Finally, **Chapter Four** draws out lessons from all this for 2024. These fall into four categories:

- If there is a contradiction at the heart of the new government's aims, the transition to power will soon reveal it. A prospective government must agree on, and clearly articulate, its overriding **purpose**.
- It is very difficult to achieve lasting change without a theory of **power**. This requires a clear sense both of how power needs to be (re)distributed and of how to deploy the machinery of government to deliver this.
- The point at which each goal should be initiated, and the **pace** at which it is to be pursued, should be set on its own terms, not on the basis of either generalised enthusiasm or caution.
- The transition into government brings great **pressure** to bear on new ministers' and advisers' working lives. Some of this can be eased by preparation, but the new government will also need to brace for surprises.

These themes give rise to the specific key recommendations which follow.

Key recommendations

Purpose

It is crucial for a new administration to arrive in office with a clear, overriding purpose. Competing priorities will create fault lines running through the government.

A prospective government's leadership team should agree on why they want power. This central purpose should be presented to the public as a clear narrative of change. Once in office, this purpose should guide the government, and be seen to guide it, through difficult decisions.

Power

A party aspiring to form the next government needs to establish a clear theory of power: where it sits and how it should be distributed, both in government and in the country. This involves identifying the concentrations of power that will block the government, preventing it from achieving its purpose, and finding ways to overcome them.

This will require strategic leadership, perhaps focused in an inner cabinet, but certainly backed by sufficient capacity to monitor delivery across government. This theory of power can be embodied by creating new institutions, but the new government should be self-confident enough to keep those elements of its predecessor's regime that serve its theory of power or make only the changes necessary for the new administration to do what it wants. Incoming governments should not instinctively reject whole structures just because they 'weren't made here'.

Prospective ministers should strive to understand their departments and government process in advance. In office, they should develop relationships with civil servants which balance trust and scepticism, avoiding both naïve reverence and paranoid hostility.

Pace

The opposition party must have a plan for its first few days in office as well as the first few months. This should involve identifying:

- Those complex or long-term policies that will need to be started when the new government's political capital is at its height, partly to ensure that they can bear at least some fruit before going back to the polls to seek a second term.
- Those policies that are sufficiently straightforward and well-prepared that they can be delivered swiftly without mishap, to demonstrate early on that the government is capable of improving voters' lives.
- Those programmes of change that are best pursued incrementally, because they involve gradually transforming how Britain thinks.

Where there are things the new administration wants a government department to stop doing, they should take time to think through how this will work and consider unintended consequences. It is important to remember that U-turning in government is far more costly than in opposition.

Pressure

Incoming government ministers and advisers need to be prepared for life in office to feel utterly unlike life in opposition.

Shadow ministers should draw up a business plan (or similar) for their department ahead of time. This should also be clear about things the incoming Secretary of State wants the department to stop doing.

The leadership team should be prepared for the impact of being dispersed across Whitehall and consider which existing structures it can carry over from opposition to keep those relationships as intact as possible.

A new government should prepare to face the unexpected: it should be ready to lose people, ensure there are no single points of failure for key government missions, and think through how to react to and exploit early crises.

Introductory note

This paper draws on a series of interviews conducted in February and March 2024, supplemented with reference to books based on interviews about, and/or personal experience of, the handover of power from Labour to a Conservative-led government following the UK general election of May 2010.

The focus is on the process of political and administrative transition into power from the point of view of the Conservative Party. It looks at the outcomes of the specific changes introduced, but also on how power changed hands, both from one party to another and within the Conservative operation as it entered government.

On that basis, as far as possible it does not focus on the formation of the coalition with the Liberal Democrats, nor how that shaped Conservative teams' experience of transition.

Chapter One: Before the election

- preparing for power

The big picture

As it approached the 2010 election, the Conservative Party was strong on detailed implementation planning. However, beneath this lay an unresolved contradiction about its goals. It resembled an impressively-designed house, built on a fault line.

Cameron's initial approach



David Cameron delivers his acceptance speech as new leader of the Conservative party, December 6, 2005.

David Cameron won the Conservative leadership in 2005 and during his first three years in the role he successfully modernised the party's offer to voters, despite significant opposition from those members who preferred a continued focus on immigration and the EU.

Aside from detoxifying his party's image and beginning to widen the demographic range of candidates selected, Cameron's team drew on a range of sources to craft an arresting new policy platform. As chair of a root-and-branch policy review, former Shadow Home Secretary Oliver Letwin oversaw six policy commissions, covering the environment and 'quality of life', national and international security, globalisation and global poverty, economic competitiveness, public service improvement, and social justice. This last commission was overseen by the party's former leader, Iain Duncan Smith, and drew on the work of his Centre for Social Justice. The director of the policy research department, James O'Shaughnessy, had previously worked at another recently founded think tank, Policy Exchange.

In the wake of these commissions, one of Policy Exchange's founders, Shadow Education Secretary¹ Michael Gove, was the first to produce a green paper, *Raising the bar, closing the gap*², outlining his plan to create a wave of new academies. Shadow Health Secretary Andrew Lansley was quietly developing a radical GP-centred restructuring of the NHS; Shadow Chancellor George Osborne talked of sharing "the proceeds of growth"³; and Cameron spoke of the importance of "general well-being"⁴.

The Big Society

To the extent that there was a guiding idea here, it was provided by the man who had spearheaded the party's image change: Cameron's long-time intellectual ally, Steve Hilton, with whom he had worked at Conservative Central Office. The 'Big Society' proposed that the state should be less intrusive and the market less exploitative. The goal was to re-empower individuals, families and communities, councils and charities, professionals

1 Strictly, Gove was shadow secretary of state for the Department of Children, Schools and Families, in line with the redesignation of the Department of Education in 2007, after the old Department of Education and Skills lost the skills element of its responsibilities. When the coalition government took office in 2010, the Department of Education title was restored. For the purposes of clarity and continuity, and given Gove's own view of his role, he is described as shadow education secretary throughout this report.

2 <https://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Education/documents/2007/11/20/newopps.pdf>

3 Guardian, '[Speech by the shadow chancellor to the Policy Exchange think-tank](#)', 17 July 2006.

4 Guardian, '[The Conservative leader's address to the National Family and Parenting Institute](#)', 20 June 2006.

and service-users, repairing the frayed bonds that should hold society together. This chimed to some extent with other rethinking articulated by figures such as Iain Duncan Smith and Oliver Letwin, and the former ministers Francis Maude and David Willetts.

However, Cameron, conscious of his team's privileged backgrounds, also brought in a figure with very different ideas: communications director Andy Coulson, former editor of the *News of the World*. Coulson embodied a much more sternly pragmatic approach to policy and messaging, which would come to challenge Hilton's, especially after 2008, when the norms and expectations of 2000s British politics suffered a seismic shock.

The impact of the 2008 financial crash

The Big Society was predicated on the continuation of the long period of growth – the so-called 'Great Moderation' – that had lasted since the mid-1990s, when Cameron had been a special adviser in the Major government. However, by the end of 2008, the Global Financial Crisis had triggered the Great Recession; in its wake pay and productivity flat-lined. In response to the crash, as Gordon Brown later explained, the Labour government “deliberately ran a deficit to keep people out of unemployment, to stop mortgage repossessions, to stop business bankruptcies.”⁵

The Conservatives responded by shifting their focus, as Cameron's Deputy Chief of Staff Kate Fall has written, from Britain's “broken society” to its “broken economy”.⁶ In 2007 they opposed the costly rescue of Northern Rock, trained their fire on Labour's high levels of spending and began talking openly about the need for a more austere approach to reduce the deficit, which by April 2009 was heading for £175 billion. They successfully recast the national economic debate, helped by Chancellor Alistair Darling's acknowledgement as the election approached that deep cuts were needed.⁷

As one former senior adviser recalls, the Conservatives “had not accumulated that many hard commitments by the time the crash arrived.” This meant that most policy detail going into the general election was developed in the light of the party's post-2008 prioritisation of deficit reduction.

Nonetheless, there seems broad agreement that the crash left a contradiction at the core of the Conservatives' pitch to the electorate. As Fall wrote, the sharp shift in focus from the Big Society to austerity “created much of the disharmony in the team in the lead-up to the 2010 general election.”⁸ Hilton resisted the turn away from his plans for decentralisation and volunteering, but the Big Society began to become a way to gloss cuts to public services. Matthew D'Ancona's 2013 account of the coalition, *In It Together*, tracks how the modernising message was “crowded out by the argument about economic recovery, the structural deficit... and the need to contain public spending.”⁹ In their assessment of the Cameron project, historians Anthony Seldon and Peter Snowdon write that by Christmas 2009, “Cameron's camp was divided.

5 New Statesman, [‘Gordon Brown: “The solution to this crisis is still global”](#), 22 April 2020.

6 K. Fall, *The Gatekeeper* (2021 edition), 36-37.

7 BBC News, [‘Darling concedes cuts could be tougher than 1980s’](#), 25 March 2010.

8 Fall, 37.

9 M. D'Ancona, *In It Together: The Inside Story of the Coalition Government* (2013), 13.

On one side stood Osborne and Coulson, and on the other Hilton, Letwin... It was a hopeless position.”¹⁰ It seems fair to conclude that this fault line was allowed to develop because the competing priorities – the “broken society” and the “broken economy” – were not brought together in a single coherent analysis, as though the economy and society were somehow separable.

Arguably, Cameron did briefly embrace such an analysis in a speech at the World Economic Forum at Davos in January 2009, in which he argued that the crash meant, “We are forced to re-consider the old economic orthodoxy.” He argued for the restoration of society through the creation of “vibrant, local economies – even if that means standing in the way of the global corporate juggernauts... standing up to companies who make life harder for parents and families” and “recapitalising the poor rather than just the banks.”¹¹

With hindsight, some of this was a harbinger of the Conservatives' 2019 ‘levelling up’ platform and, conceivably, it may have provided a way to address growing public disillusionment with politics, shortly to be exacerbated by the MPs' expenses scandal. However, by the time of the election campaign just over a year later, the emphasis was back on the need for austerity.

The detail

Its internal contradictions notwithstanding, the Conservative Party's preparations for power at a departmental level were detailed, focused and business-like. This was overseen by an implementation unit under two of the modernising founders of Policy Exchange: parliamentary candidate Nick Boles and Francis Maude, Shadow Minister for the Cabinet Office.

Preparing novice ministers

After over a decade in opposition, Maude was one of the few people with ministerial experience still in frontline Conservative politics: between 1989 and 1992 he had served as Minister of State for Europe and Financial Secretary to the Treasury. In his view, the previous two transitions, in 1979 and 1997, had led to insufficiently brisk first steps by the new governments. Margaret Thatcher, he told the Guardian in July 2010, regretted “not pushing ahead vigorously enough, and quickly enough, in terms of reform,” while Tony Blair's first administration “wasted its first five years.”¹² His goal, Maude (now Baron Maude of Horsham) recalls today, was to prepare a team largely lacking ministerial experience to “hit the ground running, because your first 100 days are crucially important,” and new ministers have tended to arrive in office very poorly prepared “for what's going to hit them.” Former civil servants were brought in to advise potential ministers and Maude says he himself had learnt still-relevant lessons from his previous stint in Whitehall, which he passed on. One was that, “You will often be told you can't do things,” which is frequently “not true”. Another was that new ministers should:

¹⁰ A. Seldon and P. Snowden, *Cameron at 10: The Verdict* (2016 edition), 17-18.

¹¹ Conservative Home, ‘[David Cameron's Davos Speech](#)’, 30 January 2009.

¹² Guardian, ‘[Francis Maude drives the pace of coalition's deep spending cuts](#)’, 30 July 2010.

Work out which are the things which have their own momentum, which you need to steer and guide and be informed about, but not drive. And which are the things to which there is resistance, which... need to be driven. You need as few in that category as possible, and as many as possible in the former.

Frequently, the issues that need driving are “where you get soft compliance from Whitehall, where people will say ‘Yes, yes, yes’ - and then nothing happens.”

Business plans

The implementation team included management consultants on secondment, some of whom would go on to become government advisers. With their help, shadow cabinet ministers drew up ‘business plans’ for their initial work in government. Maude, Hilton and others then worked through these, interviewing each prospective minister about “priorities, milestones, anticipated risks, likely interactions with other departments and who would be accountable for delivering which parts of the policy programme in government.”¹³

At the same time, Maude was preparing for his own role at the Cabinet Office, working with the shadow Treasury team on how to cut government costs. This involved securing the agreement of Shadow Chief Secretary Philip Hammond to move central government’s procurement function from the Treasury to the Cabinet Office.

Non-executive directors

Maude reports that they also prepared to apply a business-informed approach to the departmental boards established under the Blair government. The former CEO of BP, Lord Browne, was asked to lead an exercise to prepare the ground to replace public-sector non-executive directors with people with business expertise, to “give ministers some ability to reality-check what they’re told.” One former official, however, expresses concern that some of those appointed had no experience of running large, complex organisations and that some were party donors.

A shadow minister prepares

How well-prepared did these processes leave the junior members of the opposition front bench? David Gauke, then a Shadow Minister in the Treasury team, recalls attending a series of events conducted with the recently founded Institute for Government (IfG) - one of which, he says, involved an address from Labour’s then Transport Secretary, Andrew Adonis - as well as conversations with the former Cabinet Secretary Andrew Turnbull. He had more informal conversations with more senior MPs, including Shadow Chancellor George Osborne (who had never been a minister, but who had been political secretary to the leader of the opposition from 1997 to 2001).

13 P. Cowley and D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2010*, 89-90.

However, a piece of advice Gauke singles out as particularly useful came from a friend from outside politics, who had experience of working with Whitehall. This person recommended that Gauke give his prospective officials a detailed “list of questions that you’d like an answer to on your first day in the office.”

Access talks: passing on the business plans

One crucial aspect of any opposition’s preparation for a potential move into government is the opening of formal, confidential access talks between shadow ministers and senior civil servants in the months before a likely election. The overt purpose of these is for the opposition to brief the civil service on their plans; civil servants are not allowed, at this point, to offer advice on policy. Maude asserts that in 2009-10, the Conservatives conducted their side of this “in a way that was frankly much more professional than it had ever been done before.” Shadow ministers’ business plans were a key element of this. At the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), Director of Strategy Helen MacNamara found that:

The Conservative Party was very well-prepared in 2009. They had their list of the things it was agreed that the department was going to be doing - [shadow culture secretary] Jeremy Hunt had his five priorities. Our main focus... was to get him to put the Olympics on his list.

On the basis of these priorities, they were then able to clarify with Hunt “what ‘good’ would look like, what he wanted and expected in terms of what we needed to have ready.” They also sought to establish what the prospective new ministerial team would want the department to stop doing.

Likewise, Sir David Bell, then Permanent Secretary of the Department for Children, Schools and Families,¹⁴ found Shadow Education Secretary Michael Gove “had a clear agenda for government.” It was evident, Bell says, that:

Education reform was a government priority, so there was an expectation on the department to deliver quickly. He came with well-formed ideas he refined over time. The last access meeting was on the day the election was called at Portcullis House. He gave me a list of ten things he wanted done. This meant we could shape the work we did in the purdah [pre-election] period, so that he was very well-briefed when he came in.



Michael Gove, newly appointed Secretary of State for Education, arrives at 10 Downing Street for the first cabinet meeting, May 13, 2010.

According to one of the Conservatives’ then-education advisers, Sam Freedman, Gove’s team had even drafted a bill to expedite their first priority: to allow good and outstanding schools to become academies without consultation with local authorities, subject to clearance from the Secretary of State. During talks with Bell’s civil servants, Freedman learned that one of the Gove team’s assumptions - that when a new academy was formed, the local authority lost the funding and it went to the school - was wrong:

¹⁴ As noted above, this was the name given to the government department covering education between 2007 and 2010.

“They told me that the local authorities were keeping the money, then [the government was] adding in money for the academy, because Labour didn’t want a fight with local authorities.” This, Freedman remembers, significantly changed “the economics of what we were planning to do.” This advance warning allowed him to rethink before entering government.

Access talks: building trust

As these accounts suggest, the underlying utility of access talks is not just to convey potential ministers’ priorities, but to build trust between key players.

One aspect of this springs from the rarity of parties moving straight from opposition to government over the last 40 years. Between 1951 and 1974, this happened four times; between 1979 and 2009, it only happened twice. In 2010, Sir Nicholas Macpherson, then Permanent Secretary of the Treasury, was concerned not only with preparations to instigate the Conservatives’ priorities (spending cuts, financial service regulation reform, the creation of a new Office of Budget Responsibility), but with the fact that, “There would be a cultural challenge: that a lot of the Treasury would only have worked under a Labour government.” As he noted in a 2011 lecture at Nuffield College, Oxford, “Just 2.5% of the Treasury’s workforce [had] joined the department before 1979 and 15% before 1997.”¹⁵

Macpherson was one of those who had been at the Treasury when Kenneth Clarke departed as Chancellor and Gordon Brown arrived so early in the morning that a cleaner had had to let him in. To prepare his teams, Macpherson drew on his memories of the culture shock of moving from Clarke’s relaxed approach to the intensity of Brown’s, and on his historical knowledge of the ideological shock of the change in 1979 from social democrat Denis Healey to the Thatcherite Geoffrey Howe. This involved bringing in veterans of those two transitions and inviting them to share their experiences with current staff.

There was also a more personal aspect to this. As Seldon and Snowdon have pointed out, George Osborne initially saw Macpherson as “Gordon’s man” and his “initial impressions were not positive”¹⁶ to the point that Osborne planned to find a new Permanent Secretary. However, over the course of their formal access meetings, supplemented by a couple of informal dinners, things changed. Unlike the incumbent permanent secretaries who greeted the new governments in 1979 and 1997, Macpherson remained in post for the duration of the 2010 parliament. As Macpherson (now Baron Macpherson of Earl’s Court) observes, the access talks were “an opportunity to begin to form a relationship” and not only to “listen to the words,” but also to:

Just analyse a bit, how the words were deployed. You can even get a sense of what really matters to people. So, actually, it’s the sort of informal aspects of those contacts, which can be quite useful. It’s a time for a bit of emotional intelligence.

He also found it useful to note “who attends the meetings,” because “you begin to get a sense of who matters.”

¹⁵ N. Macpherson, ‘[The Treasury and the Transition to the New Government](#)’, 18 June 2011

¹⁶ Seldon and Snowdon, 33.

At DCMS, Helen MacNamara formed the impression that the Conservative ministerial team had made the effort to develop “a really good sense of the department - they knew the key people, the landscape.”

Nonetheless, like Macpherson, she was concerned to address the risk that incoming ministers “would think, having been working for Labour, that we’d find it impossible to work for Conservatives.” She negotiated the text of the departmental business plan with one of the seconded consultants who was working for the team running the Conservatives’ transition process. MacNamara “had to make sure the department was all lined up and then do this negotiation with her, so that things became achievable. I know that Jeremy Hunt had signed off a version of the business plan before the general election. It was a smart thing to do - a list that everyone had pre-agreed.”

Manifesto, election, coalition



David Cameron giving a speech to party supporters at the last rally of the general election campaign in Bristol, 5 May 2010.

The Conservatives’ manifesto embodied both the sharply focused departmental policy preparations and the rather more blurred vision the party had to offer the country.

Hilton’s desire to present a transformative agenda was still present, starting on the cover, which was emblazoned with “AN INVITATION TO JOIN THE GOVERNMENT OF BRITAIN.” As one ex-senior adviser recalls, this was “sprung on everyone at the last minute by Steve and I remember Andy Coulson thinking it was absolutely nuts.” The Conservatives’ primary goal of cutting the structural deficit in one parliament was spelt out, but that left the remaining Big Society policies looking more like ways to ameliorate cuts than a route to renewing the country’s social fabric. An interviewee who had been closely involved in the Conservative campaign judged that, “What people wanted was competence and effective leadership... They didn’t want grand schemes or the Obama vision of hope and change.”¹⁷

Departmental priorities, such as Gove’s academisation plans, were included. However, for reasons that are explored in Chapter Three, what would become two of the Cameron government’s biggest reforms - Universal Credit and a huge reorganisation of the NHS - did not feature. Overall, there was no unifying, transformative, worked-through idea for how power could be redistributed, and Britain’s economy and society rebuilt, to meet the problems of the post-crash world. In this respect, it had much in common with Labour’s manifesto.

This was reflected in the result. The Conservatives gained 113 seats: a huge advance, but not quite enough to secure a majority. Instead, Britain had elected its first hung parliament since the crises of February 1974. According to Matthew D’Ancona, Cameron “was sure that sheer confusion about what sort of ‘change’, precisely, he presented had cost him a great many votes.”¹⁸ Cameron later wrote that, in his view, they had not won a majority because ‘There was too much ‘and’ in our campaign -the Big Society *and* austerity; cutting some public services *and* increasing others; continuing to modernise *and* hammering Brown and Labour.’¹⁹ He succeeded, however, in forming

¹⁷ Quoted in Seldon and Snowdon, 149.

¹⁸ D’Ancona, 14.

¹⁹ D. Cameron, *For the Record*, 132.

a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, underpinned by a detailed Coalition Agreement, which superseded the party manifestos.

On election day, 6 May, Cameron's core team had met to go through their initial plans for "the first three days, first week, first month". On 10 May, as coalition talks progressed towards a conclusion, the Downing Street Permanent Secretary Jeremy Heywood went to meet Cameron's Chief of Staff Ed Llewellyn and his Deputy Kate Fall to discuss their "initial thoughts on what a Cameron Number 10 would look like."

Heywood approved of their idea of continuing the core team's daily 8.30am and 4pm meetings once in government. He found Conservative plans to slim down the Policy Unit and scrap the Strategy Unit and Delivery Unit more troubling, as he considered these bodies "effective". Heywood was told that "the centre will be cut back" and that "Ministers will be left to run their own departments so long as they implement the manifesto commitments and play ball with Francis [Maude]'s new efficiency group."²⁰

Both the sharp focus on departmental policy implementation, and the leadership's uncertainty over its reason to enter government beyond reducing the deficit, were to be carried across the threshold into office.

Summary

Between winning the Conservative leadership in 2005 and facing the electorate in 2010, David Cameron and his team had succeeded in transforming the party's image, shifting the terms of debate with the government and setting out an alternative programme for office.

At an individual and departmental level, the party's preparations were impressively thorough: the development of business plans, the use of access talks both to convey these to civil servants and to build trust, and the preparation of prospective ministers who had no experience of governing.

However, the post-crash division over the overriding purpose of entering government - whether to transform society by restoring the social fabric, or to reduce the deficit by reasserting tight fiscal discipline - remained unresolved, even as the Conservatives returned to office after 13 years.

²⁰ Quoted in S. Heywood, *What Does Jeremy Think?: Jeremy Heywood and the Making of Modern Britain*, 295 [dialogue is not verbatim].

Chapter Two: Into government - the distribution of power

Opposition is theory; government is practice. Sooner or later, contact with reality puts everything a new administration has prepared to the test - from appointment decisions and personal relationships to policy goals and patterns of control.

Initial appointments



Theresa May (right), newly appointed Home Secretary, and Philip Hammond (left) newly appointed Transport Secretary, arrive at 10 Downing Street for the first cabinet meeting, May 13, 2010.

On Wednesday 12 May, cabinet appointments were finalised with civil service guidance, based on the provisional list drafted by Cameron and his team on election day.

One key question was whether frontbenchers would be appointed to the roles they had shadowed. This is a question that faces individual political parties when they move into power as majority governments, but in 2010 it was made even more complicated by the fact that this was a coalition government and the Conservatives would have to accommodate Liberal Democrat appointments, too. Some Conservative shadows didn't make it into the Cabinet because of this, but in other cases Cameron made changes within his own team. He reportedly chose not to appoint Chris Grayling as Home Secretary on the grounds that he "was not up to the job."²¹ Instead, the new prime minister appointed Theresa May, who had been Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary. In her place at DWP, Cameron appointed Iain Duncan Smith. This was in part an attempt to soothe right-wing Conservatives' unhappiness about the coalition, but was also prompted by the fact that Duncan Smith had led the party's social justice policy commission, as part of his long-term concern with this theme.

First experiences of office

Those entering government for the first time in mid-May 2010 talk of it as a surreal experience, of feeling like impostors and of the way that, as Fall puts it, the "government machine separates and formalises relationships."²²

David Gauke, who was appointed Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, found himself having to adjust to the high status suddenly conferred by a minister's leadership role in a large department, in comparison to opposition. He recalls finding it strange to be contacting one of his ministerial colleagues, with whom he was used to meeting and talking informally, via their respective private offices. He notes that private offices often struggle with the requirement to make time in ministers' busy diaries for them to go to the Commons to vote, but he suggests that - alongside the democratic imperative of voting on legislation - the chance to chat with colleagues while going through the lobbies is a problem-solving mechanism. Particularly as he became more senior, he found that:

²¹ D'Ancona, 25.

²² Fall, 83.

Sometimes you'd have a department fighting with another department [with] one department's officials saying that a minister feels very strongly about this. [Going to vote] can be the opportunity where one minister talks to another and says, 'Actually, I'm much more relaxed about this than my officials are.'

At the same time, Gauke stresses the surprise of discovering the "extraordinary privilege" of having "a private office of bright, enthusiastic young people who go into work every day... wanting to help you, wanting to further your objectives," and the degree to which departments are ready to act as ministers' specialised sources of information.

A senior minister, returning to government after 13 years in opposition, was struck by the way that, "There are more constraints than people surging into government expect." He was surprised by the sharp increase in "the level of legal scrutiny and legal challenge of every decision," particularly under the then-new Equalities Act, and by the hurdles created by the Freedom of Information Act. New ministers, he suggests, are well-advised to keep trivial personal details such as food preferences to private conversations, to avoid FOI requests for written accounts by journalists keen to "take the piss." There are, of course, risks in taking this too far in the other direction: conducting what would once have been formal policy decision-making processes on WhatsApp, for example.

One ex-special adviser compares opposition to a small business and remembers the culture shock of moving from that to "the biggest organisation in the country": a much slower-moving vehicle, with many more stakeholders, all expecting to be consulted. It takes time, they recall, to understand the processes of government – submissions, write-rounds, the structure of the civil service – as well as competing power agendas within Whitehall.

Another former special adviser was struck by adapting to the sense that decisions were being made somewhere in a machine with which they were not at all familiar. They started to realise "the different tenor and character of the various departments" and how this exacerbated the distance between colleagues, meaning, "People feel more licence to brief against each other." They recall seeing colleagues' first experience of being in government and under fire from the media over a particular issue. This is not something opposition prepares you for, they observe. It "physically shocks people"; they look "pale and drained".

10 Downing Street

At a basic, personal level, with the support of the civil service, the core Cameron team's transfer from opposition into office seems to have gone relatively smoothly. The continuation of their practice of meeting twice daily, at 8.30am and 4pm, was successful. However, despite the lengthy and detailed preparations for transition, there does not appear to have been much planning for how the office spaces would be organised – several accounts describe people pitching up and picking places to work ad hoc. In this instance, it does

not seem to have had too damaging an impact, perhaps because of the strikingly good relations between the new prime minister and chancellor, and the way their teams functioned as one group. However, having chosen her desk in this way, Kate Fall notes that the interior of 10-12 Downing Street “lends itself to closed doors and inner circles” and an “unhealthy sense of being left out”.²³

Reducing or scrapping existing institutions: the Policy, Strategy and Delivery Units

The crucial change from the Blair/Brown emphasis on tight Downing Street control of Whitehall was Cameron's decision to decentralise, restoring ‘cabinet government’. Partly necessitated by the formalities of coalition, this included a re-invigoration of the cabinet committee system. However, much work was still done bilaterally between the Treasury and individual departments. Macpherson found that the revival of cabinet committees made less difference than he expected. The creation of the Quad (see below), for instance, proved more decisive.

Cameron and his team decided to radically reduce the size of the prime minister's Policy Unit, and to abolish the Strategy and Delivery Units altogether. This was partly on the basis that Oliver Letwin, now Minister of State for Government Policy, remembered how much smaller the Policy Unit had been under Prime Minister Thatcher, when he worked there in the mid-1980s.

In the intervening quarter of a century, however, much had changed. Heywood and Cabinet Secretary Gus O'Donnell advised that this sudden shift would weaken the centre's capacity to “steer Whitehall effectively”²⁴ and “drive change through.”²⁵ Seldon and Snowdon note that Steve Hilton opposed this move and became “frustrated that [the Number 10 operation] lacks the right machinery to pursue his policy ideas.”²⁶ James O'Shaughnessy was put in charge of what remained of the Policy Unit, but was apparently not given a clear leadership role. One senior minister confirms that, bar “the highest profile” issues, Number 10 “did leave you to get on with things”: something with which he, at least, was comfortable. However, as is explored in Chapter Three, this lack of grip at the centre carried risks.

One immediate hint of the shrinking of the Policy Unit was its effect on the appointment of special advisers on Wednesday 12 May. Sam Freedman had been expecting to become the education adviser in Number 10, as a continuation of his formal role in opposition, but no one was appointed to the post. Meanwhile, Andy Coulson blocked the Shadow Education Secretary Michael Gove from appointing another of his advisers, Dominic Cummings, who then called Freedman and told him to join Gove at the Department for Education (DfE), where Freedman was given a civil service role as an adviser. In Freedman's view, this was one indication that, even at this early stage, Number 10 was in “chaos”.

Charlotte Pickles, then working at the Central for Social Justice, recalls an even more unexpected beginning to her role as an adviser to Iain Duncan Smith at DWP, himself a surprise appointment. She found herself in a government car

²³ Fall, 122.

²⁴ Heywood, 316.

²⁵ Quoted in Seldon and Snowdon, 151.

²⁶ Seldon and Snowdon, 151.

with Duncan Smith and his new principal private secretary, arriving at the department to be greeted by the Permanent Secretary. This meant Pickles started with “no concept of the parameters” of her new role as a special advisor, much as a conversation with a former Labour special adviser gave her a sense that the role was surprisingly powerful. Advisers arrive in government with a wide range of backgrounds and priorities. Pickles reflects that, in her case, because she came straight from working on policy development in a think tank, she avoided becoming distracted by trying to “get my ministers to be [seen] in a particularly flattering light... to the detriment of delivery.” This was reinforced by the fact that Duncan Smith was in an unusual position: as an ex-leader he had taken the role solely to pursue his favoured policies, rather than to advance his ambitions.

A significant early indication that a lack of Number 10 oversight might be a problem was the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' highly unpopular move in late 2010 to sell off a significant proportion of Britain's woodlands. O'Shaughnessy could only protest that his Policy Unit was too small to have spotted the problem in advance. Without a Delivery Unit, meanwhile, Heywood “tried to use the coalition's departmental business plans as a chasing device,” but this “proved relatively ineffective.”²⁷ Cameron would later concede that scrapping the Delivery Unit, at least, was “a mistake” and one which was eventually reversed.²⁸

Creating new institutions: the National Security Council

By contrast, another early-stage reversal of Blairite practices showcased the new prime minister at his most effective.

In 2005, Cameron had pledged to end Blair's informal ‘sofa government’ approach to decision-making, widely criticised for its role in the invasion of Iraq. This would be based on a National Security Council (NSC), inspired to a degree by the US model. The proposal led to a policy review, a green paper and, finally, a manifesto commitment.

As well as re-formalising decision-making, this was an attempt to update it in response to the changing nature of threats to national security. As Cameron wrote later: “It no longer made sense to consider foreign policy on its own. The challenges we faced required a response from across government, not just the Foreign Office. Particularly with the rise of threats from what the experts like to call ‘non-state actors’ - basically terrorists - we needed to combine diplomatic, military and counter-extremist thinking.”²⁹ This would involve breaking from cabinet committee tradition by bringing the chief of the defence staff, the chair of the joint intelligence committee, and the heads of the intelligence and security agencies into a regular collective meeting with ministers.

Plans for the NSC, and for a new role of national security adviser, took shape during access talks between Shadow Foreign Secretary William Hague and the then Permanent Secretary of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Sir Peter Ricketts. Ricketts was concerned to avoid creating “a new layer of bureaucracy added between departments and the prime minister,” and so planned for

²⁷ Heywood, 334.

²⁸ D. Cameron, *For the Record*, 135.

²⁹ Cameron, 142.

“a smallish enabling secretariat in the model of the government secretariat serving the cabinet, which was then dependent on the department to do the heavy lifting of policy analysis and recommendations.” Following these talks, Hague recommended to Cameron that he appoint Ricketts as the first national security adviser.

Strikingly, Cameron had pledged to hold the first NSC meeting on his very first day in office, which entailed something of a scramble. After losing his chosen office to the newly appointed deputy prime minister, Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg, Ricketts hurried to set up shop in rudimentary anterooms in the Cabinet Office. In contrast to some of what was happening in Downing Street at the same time, he gave careful consideration to where the national security adviser should be based. As Lord Ricketts recalls:

I think Cameron expected [the national security adviser] would be in Number 10 along with all the other people in Number 10 working directly to him. I was absolutely sure it should be in the Cabinet Office, because as soon as you're in Number 10, you're a courtier to the PM, in the maelstrom of the management of the PM's life. And I wanted a national security adviser partly to have space to think more widely than the crisis of the day, partly to show other ministerial members of the NSC that I wasn't just a PM staffer - but... an honest broker between the PM and other ministerial members of the committee.

In Ricketts' view, the NSC under Cameron was able “to avoid groupthink by encouraging frank debate between the ministers and advisers in order to question assumptions and to challenge official advice.”³⁰ In part because Cameron insisted it meet weekly after Cabinet, ministers “developed a familiarity with subjects ranging well beyond their departmental briefs, which put them in a good position to make cross-cutting judgements on priorities.”

Ricketts also suggests, however, that in this period, the NSC was better at “doing” than “reflecting”.³¹ He saw the NSC and its new secretariat as offering a way to improve strategic thinking by tackling the “growing need for prioritisation” on national security.³² He and his team immediately began conducting a systematic assessment of the security threats facing the UK, on the basis not just of severity, but likelihood and time-scale.

30 P. Ricketts, *Hard Choices: The Making and Unmaking of Global Britain*, 104.

31 Ricketts, 104, 105.

32 Ricketts, 103.

The Treasury

Creating new institutions: the Office of Budget Responsibility

The NSC was not the only new institution the Conservatives had planned to create in order to formalise aspects of government they saw as having been overly informal under Labour. Unlike the NSC, however, the Conservative Treasury team's plan to create an independent Office of Budget Responsibility (OBR) was kept as a surprise and finally announced on 17 May 2010.

The OBR was charged with producing growth forecasts beyond the reach of political pressure. In several respects, its creation resembled New Labour's surprise move in 1997 to make the Bank of England independent. Both were products of a developing consensus in the academic literature, but they were also both pieces of political theatre - pointed acts of relinquishing power. As Macpherson puts it, this was "consistent with the consensus of the early nineties, the sort of globalist liberal institutional framework, that there are some decisions which you should leave to technocrats, because you'll get better outcomes."

Bar some initial criticism, implementation went smoothly, with legislation formally establishing it passed in 2011. The OBR swiftly asserted its independence from the coalition government. As Macpherson's remarks suggest, the case for its creation was that it would de-politicise forecasting, freeing it from ministerial pressure. The counter-argument, however, is that it institutionalised certain orthodox ideas on the importance of fiscal restraint, entrenching an irreducibly political set of priorities and limits.

Creating new institutions: the Quad

Under Labour, Number 10 and the Treasury had operated as rival centres of power. With the formation of the new government, the immediate scaling-back of Number 10 left the Treasury dominant - all the more so because it had a clear, overriding mission to reduce the structural deficit.

However, as one former senior adviser remembers, this was "tempered by the fact that there was so much harmony between Number 10 and Number 11," which "operated as one team." As Nicholas Macpherson saw it:

If you're in the Treasury, you just want to get on with things, and you don't really want to have an opposing centre of power and influence. On the other hand, actually having some challenge, particularly of a political nature, can be helpful. I don't think it made much difference, partly because Cameron and Osborne, and indeed Letwin, had this incredibly close relationship - they'd meet twice a day. And I think they had a very clear idea of what they wanted to do in that period. And I'm not sure a bigger [Number 10] machine would have made much difference.

One of the main means through which Number 10 and the Treasury jointly exerted a degree of control over departmental activity was the 'Quad'. This developed organically out of the weekly meetings between Cameron and Clegg, when each invited their opposite numbers in the Treasury to attend - Chancellor Osborne and Chief Secretary Danny Alexander.

This new body “proved so successful a device for making decisions” that it came to be used “to navigate all the central issues of the government.”³³ On the one hand, this gave the Treasury significant power; on the other, it gave the Cabinet Office, via the prime minister and deputy prime minister, a say over every budget and spending review.

Business plans in action

It would be interesting to speculate about how all this would have worked, had relations between Numbers 10 and 11 been less trusting. Looking back from 2024 at what followed later in the 2010s, Matthew D’Ancona observes that it was a mistake to exclude the government’s most powerful woman, Home Secretary Theresa May, from the inner circle. Sam Freedman argues that while the Quad was a constructive innovation, it did not make up for Downing Street’s lack of knowledge of what was happening across government, in the absence of the Strategy and Delivery Units, and with the Policy Unit much reduced in size.

At DCMS, Helen MacNamara found the transition was made more straightforward by the fact that the Conservatives’ shadow ministerial team and their long-time advisers came into government together – and also because DCMS was one of only two departments with no Liberal Democrat minister. This meant that Jeremy Hunt’s team arrived with a working knowledge of the department’s organisational structure, some sense of its internal culture, and established contacts with key figures in the culture, media and sport sectors, as well a clear set of priorities. Unlike some in other departments, MacNamara recalls that Number 10 did keep DCMS under scrutiny, partly through the business plan process.

More broadly, she argues that the business plans provided a “very good way of holding [things] together” as the Conservative opposition entered government and personnel were suddenly dispersed. This approach, she thinks, got them through the first year with “everyone knowing what they’re doing... joined up between Number 10 and the Treasury.” It was “a smart way of handling the transition” – much as, eventually, “things start to dissipate, and you end up dealing more directly on issues.”

She suggests that the business plans were also useful because they “gave the politicians a really good sense of whether their departments were listening and had got it. The departments that found the business plan process most challenging were the departments that found the [new] government most challenging.”

Another former official takes a different view. They observe that the business plans were intended to effect a philosophical shift from “outcome-based policy making” to “input/output-focused delivery”. This was based on a conservative view that outcomes are created by society (families, businesses, etc). This reversed the logic underpinning New Labour’s Public Service Agreements, which had focused on outcomes. At worst, they suggest, business plans were little more than to-do lists: “It wasn’t a very effective way of thinking about complex policy questions, still less societal outcomes or what a government stands for.”

33 Fall, 116.

In 2015, MacNamara conducted a review of how the transition had gone in 2010 across Whitehall and found that the pre-election talks provided a crucial opportunity to build relationships in advance:

On both sides, where it went best it was where people were respectful and nice and put some effort into finding out about the people they would be dealing with, and no one regretted investing in the relationships and finding ways to building them early on. The big problem generally is trust and the space for the civil service to be able to offer advice.

Establishing minister-civil service trust

Frequently, in the first year of a government, MacNamara argues, as problems arise it is difficult for civil servants “to build a relationship of trust” while at the same time giving forthright advice. Officials worry that advising new ministers that what they want to do won’t work will make them think this is a sign that the civil service is not on their side. At best, she reports, civil servants were “able to advise against doing certain things, while maintaining trust and having a really good relationship,” as confirmed when ministers said afterwards, “Thank goodness you stopped us doing that.” The difficulty, MacNamara suggests, is that there is only so much trust capital available for a department to spend.

Summary

In the initial phase of returning to government, the Conservatives’ preparations paid off, from the development of departmental business plans and relationships with the civil service, to the creation of new institutions like the NSC and the OBR, although there was scope for more clarity on relatively minor matters, such as advisor appointments and office locations. The emergence of the Quad showed a willingness to embrace and make good use of more organic innovations, but the abolition of the Downing Street Strategy and Delivery Units, and the hollowing-out of the Policy Unit, had fewer positive consequences. All of this unfolded as several departments embarked on major reform drives.

Chapter Three: Early reform drives

Once the 2010 transition was complete, major reforming departments began work, under light-touch supervision from Downing Street. Given all the planning and preparation of business plans, it is striking that some of the largest-scale reform efforts had not featured in the Conservatives' manifesto, but arose instead from the enthusiasms of individual ministers. Meanwhile, the Cameron team's two competing instincts – deficit reduction and the Big Society – fared very differently under the pressures of power.

The Treasury

Cutting the deficit

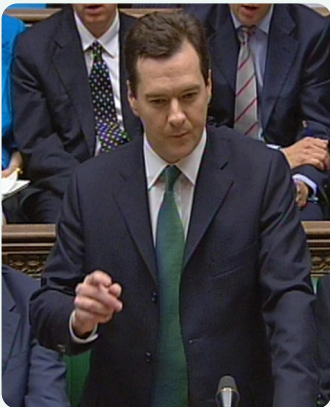
As one former adviser observes, “What people don't really quite clock when you're in opposition is just how powerful the Treasury is.” In 2010, this was reinforced not only by the weakening of Number 10, but by the fact that the government's primary goal was to do as much as possible to clear the structural deficit by the end of the parliament. Osborne was reportedly “impressed by the Treasury's determination to enforce its will across Whitehall.”³⁴

The first stage of this was the announcement, less than two weeks into the new government, of £6.2 billion ‘in-year’ cuts. During the pre-election period, Osborne had asked the Treasury to prepare to do this, should the Conservatives win. Sir Nicholas Macpherson saw this as a test of his department's ability to come up with a package of cuts robust enough for the new government. As he recalls, the cuts announced were “pretty much what the Treasury recommended.”

The second stage was an emergency budget, delivered on 22 June 2010, outlining a much wider range of cuts. During the election, the Treasury had developed three cuts packages of escalating size, the most extreme of which, Macpherson says, involved “doing things like abolishing the Royal Navy.” The rationale for this was that:

I didn't want the Treasury to be thought to be (a), unimaginative, or to be (b), seen as too narrow in its thinking. I wanted to ensure that in a sense, we would outflank even the most small-statist Conservative government. And that wasn't because the Treasury had an agenda... our job is to advise and to say, ‘Look, these are the sort of things you would need to do if you were going to do X.’

One argument Osborne made in discussions about how stern the budget's cuts should be was that his proposals were “still less aggressive than several of the Treasury's options”.³⁵ This apparently moderate pitch reads differently in the knowledge that one of those options involved scrapping an entire armed service. Before taking office, Osborne had wanted to bring in Jeremy Heywood to the Treasury to replace Macpherson. Now, however, Heywood said he was so “concerned about the scale of benefit reductions and cuts in departmental costs that would be required to achieve this hugely ambitious target” that he advised the prime minister that there was ‘a real risk... that after announcing



Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, delivers his emergency budget in the House of Commons, 22 June 2010.

³⁴ Seldon and Snowdon, 42.

³⁵ Heywood, 317.

the numbers, they would be unable to deliver them.’³⁶ When it came, the emergency budget included £11 billion in welfare spending reductions, including a three-year child benefit freeze.

In the third stage, the spending review announced on 20 October, Osborne set out details of an average 19% cut to departmental budgets over four years, plus a further £7 billion cut to the welfare budget. Some of these totals had been arrived at only after hard-fought negotiations, particularly with the Home Office under Theresa May and the Department of Work and Pensions under Iain Duncan Smith.

The Cabinet Office

Government efficiency



Francis Maude, Minister for the Cabinet Office, speaking at the Conservative Party Conference at The ICC Birmingham, 3 October 2010.

As the new Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office, one of Francis Maude's roles was improving government efficiency, partly as a means of contributing to cutting spending. He recalls being horrified to learn that, "Despite there being 800 people employed at the centre of government on procurement, they couldn't tell me who were the 20 biggest suppliers to government." He therefore wrote to the CEOs of the companies he thought were the likeliest candidates to ask them what contracts they had with Whitehall:

In the first year, when we got those returns in, which were pretty accurate, they were way out of kilter with what we'd expected and enabled us to do very substantive renegotiations with the suppliers, which enabled us in the first year to save £800 million in cash terms from those 20 biggest suppliers.

Having secured Treasury agreement, he introduced a "functional model", which was predicated on achieving "real time control of spending" and under which "the implementation functions, procurement projects, IT and digital, HR reported much more strongly to the centre." One element of this was finding personnel capable of leading these functions effectively. Maude says he took George Osborne's commitments that the government would address its expenditure on consultants, advertising and marketing, and used them as a way to insist on spending reductions. This, he says, enabled savings by 2015 of around £52 billion. However, Sam Freedman recalls that these protocols "caused lots of long-term costs via micro-management." He cites the fact that the Department of Education was forbidden from allocating money from its budget to television advertising for teacher training, a decision which was "reversed years later as it became apparent it was seriously harming recruitment."

³⁶ Heywood, 318.

10 Downing Street

The Big Society



Steve Hilton (Centre), the Conservatives Director of Strategy, leaves Battersea Power Station following the launch of the Conservative manifesto, 13 April 2010.

Steve Hilton's Big Society schemes were already on the back foot as the Conservatives came into power; the demands of government combined with the hollowing out of Number 10 largely finished them off. Hilton wanted to redistribute power nationally, but appears to have had little sense of how to make Whitehall work to achieve his goals. His approach fell somewhere between the Silicon Valley rallying cry 'Move Fast and Break Things' and the Maoist revolutionary slogan 'Bombard the Headquarters'. He reportedly did not foster alliances or persuade people; he refused a job title and was given to shouting and "commissioning random work streams."³⁷ In contrast to the worked-through departmental business plans – a process in which he had been involved – he appeared to want to do everything at once.

One interpretation of this is that Hilton's agenda had little substance to it and it certainly seems to have struggled to come to terms with the implications of the crash for free-market economics. However, given the events of the subsequent decade, it is worth considering whether he had identified serious issues: a need to modernise the state, to decentralise power to "individuals, neighbourhoods and local institutions",³⁸ to repair the social fabric.

According to Seldon and Snowdon, Jeremy Heywood was "galvanized by working with Hilton" and, at least while he had the backing of the prime minister, made "a big effort to support him".³⁹ And Hilton's work led to the creation of two new institutions: the National Citizen Service, a volunteering programme for 16 to 17-year-olds, and Big Society Capital, which finances organisations that tackle social issues. Overall, however, the government's energies remained fixated on its drive to reduce the deficit. In the 1990s and 2000s, David Willetts (now Lord Willetts) was a pioneering Conservative moderniser and in 2010 became Minister of State for Universities and Science. He has since noted that after 2008, the Big Society's meaning shifted:

There was a danger that, instead of us saying, 'We believe in community action and strong institutions as goods in themselves,' it became instead, 'We'll cut spending and hand it over to you guys instead.' It becomes a justification of retrenchment: 'charities will pick up the slack of shrinking government.'⁴⁰

Indeed, Hilton's focus now seemed less on the social fabric, more on a neo-Thatcherite drive to shrink the civil service by 70% or more and to scrap labour regulations.

Hilton's increasing marginalisation was crystallised by the fact that George Osborne eventually excluded him from meetings with Cameron and from sight of key papers. The riots of summer 2011 briefly revived his project, but by March 2012 he had departed for California. He became the latest once-key Conservative figure to leave within the government's first two years. Hilton's strategic and ideological opponent, Andy Coulson, resigned over the phone hacking scandal in January 2011; James O'Shaughnessy left his post as the prime minister's Director of Policy that October.

³⁷ Fall, 127.

³⁸ D'Ancona, 202.

³⁹ Seldon and Snowdon, 153.

⁴⁰ Interview with David Willetts, quoted in P. Tinline, *The Death of Consensus*, 262.

Seldon and Snowdon report that within three months of Hilton's exit, "Forward-thinking mandarins [were] mourning the loss of the impetus, urgency and fresh thinking he provided."⁴¹ When Cameron was told he couldn't talk about the Big Society, he retorted: "It's our idea for reforming the country. We can't just drop it. It's what we are all about!"⁴² The austerity agenda was now the government's sole transformative idea, with the exception of a few radical department-specific reforms, such as Michael Gove's plans for education.

Education

Academisation

The work of Michael Gove and his team offers the best case study, both positive and negative, of decisive action in the early phase of the government that took office in 2010. They moved swiftly to enable large-scale conversion of schools into academies and achieved their stated goals. However, in other areas of the department's work, the perceived need to move quickly, as with cancelling expensive building projects, had more problematic consequences. Taken together, their first year in office offers useful lessons on when to hit the ground running and when ministerial teams would be better advised to bide their time.

Conditions for effective delivery

By May 2010, Gove had a clear sense of what he wanted to achieve as Secretary of State for Education. He had shadowed the role for three years, during which time he and his advisers had developed detailed policies on various aspects of the education system, including radically increasing independence from local authorities through academisation. These ideas had been laid out in 2007 in *Raising the bar, closing the gap* and in the Conservative Party's manifesto. He and his team had used the access talks to hone and trouble-shoot their plans, and to begin establishing relationships with key officials. Gove was trusted by the prime minister, which seems to have helped him move quickly. As the department's then Permanent Secretary, Sir David Bell, observes, this was very similar to the situation in the Department for Children, Schools and Families before the election under Labour's Ed Balls, who, like Gove was "a big figure, very close to the prime minister, allowed to do his own thing..."

The Academies Act

Gove's first priority was to legislate to allow schools rated 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted to become academies, subject only to the permission of the Secretary of State, without consulting their local authorities. The aim was to pass an Academies Bill to this effect before the summer recess. As Gove's then-adviser Sam Freedman recalls, they had even drafted a bill in readiness. The legislation the civil servants then wrote "was quite different, but the fact we'd gone that far meant they realised we wanted to move quickly and were clear on what we wanted to do." The final draft was ready within a few weeks, which "allowed Michael to go and argue with the chief whip that we should have the first slot" in the parliamentary legislation schedule, which was duly secured.

⁴¹ Seldon and Snowdon, 161.

⁴² Quoted in Seldon and Snowdon, 162.

This was possible because the bill was simply designed to extend a new freedom to schools, not to construct a complex new organisational architecture, and Bell remembers visiting schools that had already converted to academy status by the start of the new school year in September 2010, within four months of the general election.



Michael Gove visiting the Globe Academy in Southwark, 13 September 2010.

One former Department of Education official recalls that “Gove and his special advisers maintained a ruthless focus on a few priorities, happy to largely ignore some parts of the department – or leave those to more junior ministers – in so far as that was possible.” In his judgement, this was “actually very effective in giving a sense of purpose and direction to the department’s civil service.” Similarly, Bell notes that Gove was very clear that there were areas of government activity he did not want the department to be involved in – broadly, the state acting as a surrogate parent – and he put his ministerial team’s one Liberal Democrat in charge of an area in which he was less interested. More broadly, policy was operated at two pointedly different speeds: while some areas were rapidly pushed forward, others were initially referred to expert-led commissions.

The swift, large-scale creation of academies did, however, generate unanticipated problems. Bell recalls that Gove’s schools minister Lord (Jonathan) Hill was “more aware of the practical implementation issues.” However, when Bell asked Gove himself how he was going to manage a situation in which thousands of schools rapidly became academies, the Education Secretary replied, “with a twinkle” that that was a “Whitehall question”.

Sam Freedman says they were working on the assumption “that we would come back a few years later and... iron out all the problems that emerged,” but that this “never happened.” This has left unresolved technical problems in the system even now, such as the fact that neither local authorities nor government can close an academy, creating a perverse incentive for schools with falling rolls to become academies to avoid closure. Likewise, academies act as their own admissions authorities, allowing them to finesse their intakes.

Building Schools for the Future

The Department of Education was under pressure to address the £55 billion cost of the Labour-created Building Schools for the Future programme to invest in secondary school buildings. This entailed the department signing contracts with private partners, a whole local authority at a time; each contract was worth many millions of pounds.

As Freedman remembers, “It was presented to us as though there was an urgency around it, because lots of these contracts were coming up for signature over the coming months before the Spending Review happened. Therefore, you have to make an immediate decision on it.” Thus, on 5 July, Gove cancelled the entire scheme. In Bell’s judgement, this decision was driven by the fact that, “The Treasury imperative was absolute.”

Freedman regrets that they did not simply suspend the programme for six months, allowing time for a more nuanced approach, but “No one just said to us, ‘Just stop signing contracts. Give yourself a bit of time to figure it out.’” As it was, after Gove announced the building programme was to be scrapped, he soon found himself having to apologise to the Commons for mistakenly having told MPs that 25 projects would still be going ahead, when in fact they were

being cancelled. Bell assured MPs that this was not a consequence of civil service sabotage, but of the speed at which his staff had had to work, to the point where “the pace overwhelmed us” and the Secretary of State was given incorrect information. Whereas passing the Academies Act at speed was a relatively simple move, thoroughly prepared, scrapping Building Schools for the Future was a complicated operation, prepared in a matter of weeks. The contrast in outcomes is therefore hardly surprising, but this speed-induced failure seriously damaged trust between Gove’s team and their civil servants.

Fear of spies and sabotage

This breakdown in trust was exacerbated by persistent leaking to the press in the first few months, both around Building Schools for the Future and more generally. Verbatim accounts of meetings regularly appeared in the press. According to Matthew D’Ancona, Gove worried that, after 13 years of Labour, his department was full of “moles”.⁴³ In Freedman’s view, the leaking was a serious problem, causing Gove much embarrassment, but it was the responsibility of a very few individuals. Had the majority of their civil servants not been keen to deliver the new ministerial team’s policies, they would not have been able to move as quickly as they did.

However, encouraged by Dominic Cummings, Gove eventually lost trust in the department as a whole. Bell thought the leaking was “catastrophic” and did “massive damage... to trust in the civil service”. Given that some members of staff did find the new government’s approach “hard to take”, he reflects that it was, “Not unreasonable for the new government to think, ‘They’re out to get us.’” As Freedman recalls, the result was that the decision-making groups got smaller and smaller, and that a generalised belief that civil servants are against you means you alienate the 99% of people who are trying to do a good job.

The ‘Blob’

Gove’s approach to reform was underpinned by a clear theory of power: how it had to be redistributed and the resistance that had to be overcome to achieve this. In this narrative, the ‘education establishment’ - the local education authorities, the teaching unions, the Department for Education itself - functioned as a single, obstructive vested interest, nicknamed the ‘Blob’ after the carnivorous alien in a 1958 American science fiction movie.

On the one hand, this helped focus his team’s efforts; on the other, it generated problems of its own. As one former official remembers:

While the idea of a ‘Blob’ is overdone and unhelpfully combative, there is definitely some truth in the idea that different departments have established organisational views or orthodoxies. For example, the DfE Gove inherited certainly had some long-held views shaped by an education establishment, as well as quite a lot of naturally left-leaning staff.

Strikingly, Bell agrees that, “There was probably a political value in caricaturing the education establishment as the ‘Blob’ and maybe as a way to make the initial push forwards.” However, he is not convinced that the notion of a “small band of determined men [who] bring about the revolution” is a viable way of sustaining change.

⁴³ D’Ancona, 122.

Work and Pensions

Universal Credit



Ian Duncan Smith arrives at 10 Downing Street, 12 May 2010.

Ian Duncan Smith's unexpected appointment as Work and Pensions Secretary provided an opportunity to introduce a radical idea developed by the Centre for Social Justice, the think tank he had co-founded six years earlier. 'Universal Credit' would replace Gordon Brown's tax credits system, preserving its linkage between tax and welfare, while simplifying the system by integrating in-work and out-of-work benefits. The underlying goal was to eliminate perverse incentives which discouraged unemployed people from going back to work.

In some respects, the idea was of a piece with the socially-oriented rethinking of Steve Hilton (whose ultimate departure Duncan Smith regretted). Cameron welcomed the idea. Although not in the Conservative manifesto, the basic concept was "embraced by all three main political parties."⁴⁴

As Duncan Smith's then-adviser Charlotte Pickles remembers it, the DWP was enthusiastic about moving from being a processing department to leading a drive to tackle poverty. There were, however, three significant reasons why introducing this reform was unlikely to be straightforward:

- The labyrinthine complexity involved in integrating multiple huge systems;
- Treasury scepticism (in the wake of the gruelling experience of setting up tax credits under Labour); and
- The fact that the DWP was required to make budget cuts at the same time.

According to one ex-senior adviser, the new system "almost died before it was born" when the Quad was aghast to learn of the array of losers it would create. A system was duly developed to ensure no one would lose out as they transferred onto Universal Credit.

Some also criticise the way both officials and politicians used the opportunity of creating a new system to add in ideological desirables, such as a shift from weekly to monthly payments. (This was on the grounds that it would help to train unemployed people for how they would have to manage their finances once in work.) In their 2014 study *The Blunders of Our Governments*, Ivor Crewe and Anthony King list a litany of other issues, from poor project management to IT problems, compounded by the rapid turnover of senior officials. They quote Francis Maude's 2014 observation that, "It was a brilliant policy, but the implementation was pretty lamentable."⁴⁵

Despite the fact that Duncan Smith had been concerned not to introduce the policy too quickly, that is effectively what happened: the introduction was subject to repeated delays, to the point where in 2014 Crewe and King expressed severe scepticism about whether it would ever happen. (It did.)

In some respects, Universal Credit crystallised the conflict at the heart of the Cameron government: repairing society versus deficit reduction. Could the

⁴⁴ A. King and I. Crewe, *The Blunders of Our Governments*, 434.

⁴⁵ ITV interview, reported in the *Guardian*, 9 January, 2014, quoted in King and Crewe, 433.

problems this necessarily generated have been avoided by processing the cuts required by the Treasury first and only then embarking on radical reform? Charlotte Pickles argues that this would simply have meant it would never have happened:

If there are massive changes you want to make, you have to start on day one. Your political capital gets less after that... The territorial marking of fiefdoms gets worse. The beginning of a government is the point at which at least people are notionally more likely to work together. That gets harder.

Alternatively, could a more realistic timescale have been set in train by conceding from the outset that reform of this complexity and scale would take a decade, as it eventually did? That, one former senior adviser says, would be “totally anathema” to Britain’s press and political culture, “however unwise it might be.”

Given that the problems arose in part through a clash of government objectives, Pickles argues that a more viable solution would have been to use the Quad not just to manage spending cuts, but to set clear overarching goals:

Government runs on power structures and so you can move the furniture around as much as you want, but if you haven’t got the power focused on the priorities, then you’re just not going to be able to achieve the really big things.

She argues that such an assertion of central control should have been used not to exempt the DWP from cuts, but to protect the Universal Credit model. One way of making implementation less difficult, she suggests, would have been to act to reduce “the big drivers of cost” to the benefits system, by building more social housing, tackling low pay and helping more disabled people back to work.

Health

NHS reorganisation

The third large-scale reform in a major domestic department offers an instructive comparison to what happened with academisation and Universal Credit. Like Gove and Duncan Smith, the incoming Health Secretary Andrew Lansley was trusted by the prime minister and he had a highly developed plan: to reorganise the NHS on the basis of GP-led commissioning and to hand control from the health secretary to a newly created chief executive role. Like Duncan Smith’s scheme, this was not in the Conservative manifesto⁴⁶ and involved complex restructuring of existing systems. Like Gove, Lansley had held his brief for a long time in opposition and expected to find himself up against a resistant department, and was therefore keen to push forwards at speed, with no green paper in advance.

⁴⁶ The 2010 Conservative manifesto, *Invitation to Join the Government of Britain*, does contain brief references to a “reform plan” to “decentralise power”, to giving GPs “the power to hold patients’ budgets and commission care on their behalf” and to “creating an independent NHS board to allocate resources and provide commissioning guidelines.” However, there is no clear indication of the scale and complexity of the plans, as demonstrated by the surprise of the party’s own leaders when this became apparent:

<https://general-election-2010.co.uk/2010-general-election-manifestos/Conservative-Party-Manifesto-2010.pdf>



David Cameron and Health Secretary Andrew Lansley (right), during a round table discussion on the future of the NHS at 10 Downing Street, 20 February 2012.

Unlike his two fellow ministers' reforms, however, Lansley's has not lasted: it was largely reversed by the Conservatives' own 2022 Health and Care Act. Seldon and Snowdon describe it as "the biggest cock-up of Cameron's premiership".⁴⁷ Why did this happen? Cameron had promised that there would be "no more top-down reorganisations"⁴⁸ of the NHS, a point reaffirmed in the Coalition Agreement; Osborne was reportedly given to saying that the Conservatives' health policy was simply: "We love the NHS."

Lansley had been open about the changes he was planning. The problem was that, with so much happening at once, the significance of the proposals and the political risk they entailed was missed, in part because the reforms were so complex. The legislation was finally passed in 2012, after a pause for 'listening' to the chorus of objections and over a thousand amendments.

In the wake of the unexpected issues over the Lansley reforms and the pressures of the October 2010 spending review, the Policy Unit was reconstructed. Given the strictures of coalition, it could not be a Conservative-only body; having a separate unit for the Liberal Democrats was thought too costly. Instead, in March 2011, a civil servant, Paul Kirby, was appointed to head the unit, now staffed by "around a dozen"⁴⁹ officials. This team worked alongside Kris Murrin, who had overseen the Conservatives' transition into government, but both Murrin and Kirby reported to Jeremy Heywood. (In April 2013, the Prime Minister then changed the role of the Policy Unit again, so that it would work solely to support the Conservatives.) The Delivery Unit, meanwhile, was also revived, as the 'Implementation Unit'. According to Jill Rutter of the Institute for Government, Heywood had "hidden the Delivery Unit in the Treasury until Cameron realised his early mistake."⁵⁰

Summary

The Conservatives' aim of cutting the deficit rapidly became the government's dominant theme, while its Big Society plans largely withered. This was in part a consequence of the greater emphasis on deficit reduction, but also of a lack of prioritisation, and too little sense of how policy could be developed and delivered. Major reforming departments were empowered to press ahead with their plans, whether or not they were in the manifesto. These were eventually delivered, at varying speeds, and with varying results. The need for greater capacity in Downing Street to develop policy and oversee delivery led to attempts to reverse the early moves to radically reduce that capacity, but this arguably came too late.

⁴⁷ Seldon and Snowdon, 181.

⁴⁸ Quoted in D'Ancona, 26.

⁴⁹ D'Ancona, 202.

⁵⁰ J. Rutter, 'The smartest guy in the room: an appreciation of Jeremy Heywood', 5 November 2018: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/article/comment/smartest-guy-room-appreciation-jeremy-heywood>

Chapter Four: Lessons for today

The lessons that emerge from these accounts of the Conservative Party's transition into government in 2010 fall into four categories:

- The crucial importance of arriving with an agreed, overriding **purpose**;
- The need to have a clear theory of **power**;
- Factors involved in judging the **pace** at which to begin work; and
- Preparation to withstand the **pressure** of arriving in office.

Purpose

If there is a contradiction at the heart of the new government's aims, the transition to power will soon reveal its true priority, exposing gaps between transformative rhetoric and timid policy.

Just as those who are serious about politics recognise it is about government, those who are serious about government recognise that it is irreducibly political. Governing means making invidious decisions and difficult trade-offs, selecting whom you want to antagonise least. To navigate this, a prospective government must know why it wants to be there in the first place.

Lessons for today

The prospective government's purpose should be established in narrative form before it takes office, making clear to the electorate how such a government would improve their lives. It is worth identifying a single image that captures what this would look like.

Once this overriding purpose is established, it should be socialised across the leadership team and Shadow Cabinet, so everyone is agreed on why they want to go into government. This whole-of-government purpose can then be enacted through a limited number of cross-cutting missions, driven by departmental-level objectives. If vivid clarity of purpose guides how the new government makes difficult decisions, it will be easier to justify them.

Power

It is very difficult to achieve lasting change without a theory of power. There are two aspects to this: a clear sense both of how power needs to be (re)distributed and how to deploy the machinery of government to deliver this.

Power within Britain

This follows from the government's purpose: great reforming administrations often need to break up concentrations of power. A new government must identify who has the power to block what it wants to achieve. Then it must craft the arguments and narrative needed to overcome this without undue conflict.

Power within government

Civil servants want to know not only what the government's purpose is, but where power lies. Confusion on this point helps no one.

A prospective new government should establish a clear theory of power, at both whole-of-government and departmental level. Where does power currently sit in these structures and where does the new government want it to sit?

As the role of prime minister has expanded and intensified, multiple voices have advocated the creation of a stronger, more strategic central operation to answer precisely these questions about the distribution of power.⁵¹ This is less a question of staffing numbers, more of the depth of expertise available to the prime minister in key areas. Nor does it equate to trying to manage every detail from Downing Street.

Lessons for today

A new government should have the self-confidence to keep those elements of its predecessor's regime that serve its theory of power or make only the changes necessary for it to do what it wants. It should not instinctively reject whole structures just because they 'weren't made here'.

The early establishment of the National Security Council provides a model for the creation of a new decision-making body, prompted by a clear sense of purpose (though that need not happen on 'day one'). It was inserted into existing structures with an expert eye on where it should be located both organisationally and physically, and on avoiding unnecessarily antagonising existing elements of the government machine. This may be relevant to the current Labour opposition, given it is proposing to establish several new institutions in government, including an Industrial Strategy Council, an Office for Value for Money and a Council for Economic Growth.

The 2010-era Quad provides a model for an executive decision-making body with a broader remit than its original iteration. Reports that the 2024 Labour Party is considering an 'executive cabinet' consisting of prime minister, chancellor of the exchequer, deputy prime minister and chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster reflect this. However, in a single-party government, it would need its own founding rationale, given the Quad's origins as a way to manage the coalition.

As with the Quad, a new government should stay open to innovation so that if new possibilities emerge that are consistent with its theory of power, it can act on them.

Outside expertise can usefully be brought in, as through the non-executive director role on departmental boards, provided those appointed bring both expertise and constructive independence of mind. This is applicable to the Labour Party's reported plans, should it win power, to establish 'mission boards' involving figures from business, trade unions and charities.

It is worth being watchful for the civil service both being too ready to say a goal is unachievable and being over-eager to please new ministers. New ministers should avoid unquestioning deference to advice on what is possible. However, nor should they adopt a generalised rebel mentality, seeing an entire department's staff - or even Whitehall as a whole - as a single inert or hostile force. What an incoming minister needs is a nuanced, evidence-based theory of how power works and how to deploy it.

⁵¹ See, for example, Sir Anthony Seldon's *The Impossible Office?* (2021) and *Power with Purpose* (2024), the recent year-long study conducted by the Institute for Government's Commission on the Centre of Government, in which Seldon participated: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/power-with-purpose-centre-commission>

Entering office with a clear understanding of the processes of government – submissions, write-rounds, delivery structures, the role of local authorities – will help new ministerial teams avoid both naivety and conspiracy theory. Distinguishing between apparent and actual barriers is vital.

With this knowledge in place, new ministerial teams should arrive with a clear outline not just of what they want to achieve but how, and should be ready to communicate this clearly and in detail to their new civil servants.

Some departmental work has its own momentum, and needs monitoring and steering. New ministers should distinguish all this from those projects which they themselves will need to drive forwards, overcoming obstacles.

In circumstances where a new minister has the trust of the prime minister and a clear, widely understood set of achievable priorities, a lack of close attention from Downing Street is no bad thing. Without such assurances, a laissez-faire approach carries risks, just as micro-management does. Strategic leadership avoids both pitfalls, but – as the IfG among others has argued and as set out above – it must be based on a clear purpose.

Business plans or lists of initial priorities (including identifying things an incoming minister would like his or her department to stop doing) are very useful preparation for the early phase in office, but not as a means for achieving and monitoring delivery over the course of a whole parliament. A prospective government also needs to decide whether any such list is to be focused on inputs or outcomes.

Pace

Some goals benefit from being pursued immediately – sometimes at speed – while approaching other objectives that way invites disaster. The point at which each goal should be initiated, and the pace at which it is to be pursued, should each be set on its own terms, not on the basis of either generalised enthusiasm or caution, nor guesswork about the likely length of the parliament. There are a number of factors worth considering in deciding how to approach this.

There is a brief window at the start of a parliament when introducing radical change is most feasible; when the new government's political capital is at its height and before new divisions have developed; while the next election is still potentially half a decade away. It is therefore worth assessing policy priorities to determine which can only be achieved if initiated early and which of those should be delivered at speed.

Reasons to start early

Some reforms will unavoidably take longer than a single parliament. In circumstances where winning a second term seems a reasonable expectation, it is worth erring on the side of optimism – without complacency or arrogance – and beginning such a process as early as possible, to allow time to proceed as slowly as necessary. This will afford more chance to demonstrate significant progress ahead of a general election and so make the case for another term to complete the job.

Once a minister has left a given situation unaddressed for a time, they risk tacitly accepting the status quo, which may make changing it more politically

costly – unless they have clearly signalled from the start that a change is coming. As argued in The Future Governance Forum's previous paper, *Into Power 01*, new governments should plan what they intend to do not just in the first 100 days, but in the first 96 hours.⁵²

However, generally speaking, renaming departments does very little to benefit the public. It is much better to concentrate on actual government.

Reasons to work quickly

Delivering a specific change early in the life of a government demonstrates that change is achievable more broadly. This can help to generate momentum and to build public confidence, laying the groundwork for more ambitious objectives as the parliament progresses.

Relatively straightforward changes that could be delivered quickly might include: reforms which enable existing stakeholders to act (without requiring the design or redesign of a complex system), expansions of individual and collective rights, and the replacement of leaders of public bodies over whom government has power of appointment.

Taking the above points into account, if a given policy has been thoroughly prepared in opposition and through the access talks, it is more likely to be achievable at speed.

Reasons to go slowly

The reasons to go slowly and steadily are at least as compelling as those to go at full speed; getting the distinction right is a vital part of the first stages of a government's decision-making.

Radical change is sometimes best achieved a stage at a time, each one dispelling unjustified fears and building widespread acceptance, before taking the process further.

It is much more difficult and more painful to U-turn in government than in opposition. Once a decision has been made, the civil service will set to work implementing it. Changing that decision means unwinding all this, with all the waste of taxpayers' money that is likely to involve. The minister concerned will also need to make a statement to the Commons, followed by taking hours of humiliating questions.

It may be more possible to pause for reflection than the immediate pressures of the situation suggest. Senior ministers should be aware of the consequences that may ensue from pressuring junior ministers to make hurried decisions and should be prepared to probe how necessary it really is to proceed at speed.

Stopping government activities – by cutting budgets, ditching regulations or scrapping institutions, for example – is not as straightforward as it looks. Ministers should understand the purpose of the thing they propose to abolish before proceeding. In particular, new ministers should beware scrapping the creations of their predecessors unless there is a substantive reason to do so.

⁵² The Future Governance Forum, *Into Power 01: Lessons from Australia and the United States*, <https://www.futuregovernanceforum.co.uk/resource/into-power-01/>, February 2024, 24.

Legislating quickly may necessitate follow-up legislation to fix unexpected bugs. Ministers should assess realistically whether they will have the time and opportunity for this before events intervene or the team that crafted the original bill is dispersed.

Pressure

The transition from opposition to government brings a range of new pressures to bear on new ministers' and advisers' working lives. Some of these can be eased by preparation.

As far as possible, shadow ministerial teams should be given the chance to make good on their preparatory work in opposition by being kept in the same brief when they move into government.

New ministers and advisers should arrive with an up-to-date working knowledge of how their new department is structured, its internal culture and how trusting its key internal relationships are. They should also have begun to build relationships with key stakeholder organisations in their department's field.

They should have used the opportunity of access talks to begin building relationships with key officials. This will mean those officials feel able to give them candid advice from the start, without being suspected of residual loyalty to the party that has just left office.

Newly arrived advisers should aim to work with civil servants on a trust basis, fostering a thoughtful atmosphere which allows for the testing of ideas. New ministers should have the confidence to encourage both groups to tell them hard truths from the start.

New ministerial teams arrive with their own priorities, but they also inherit ongoing departmental responsibilities, which will absorb time and will catch out the unwary. They should arrive knowing what these responsibilities involve.

New ministers should be ready for the tight relationships developed in opposition to be put under strain by separation into departments, and contact becoming formalised and infrequent. This could be ameliorated by continuing daily core team meetings into government.

The best way to spot problems early is by speaking to those who have learned the hard way in the past. Especially early on, the quivering antennae of those with past ministerial experience should be heeded.

There will, however, be early shocks and crises. This begins with the unpredictable make-up of the parliamentary parties chosen by the electorate and the consequences that will unfold from this. The new government will also need to be ready for other surprises.

The pressure of power and the scrutiny it brings will expose unexpected frailties, whether ideological or personal. A new government should expect to lose key personnel in the first year or so. As far as possible, nothing crucial to the achievement of the new government's goals should be solely dependent on one individual.

The new government should be ready to exploit the inevitable early crises and

to forestall their opponents doing so. The first question to ask is: what aspect of our mission does this now mean we can advance more effectively than before? As *Into Power 01* explored, Australian Prime Minister Albanese found himself having to attend a meeting with the US, India and Japan in his first week in office - and was able to turn this to his advantage.⁵³

Conclusion

In 2012, the editor of the *New Statesman*, Jason Cowley, contrasted the Cameron government with that of his most effective post-war Conservative predecessor. Margaret Thatcher, Cowley wrote, “had a story to tell the electorate of where she’d come from and how she intended to remake the nation.” Recent historical studies have rightly emphasised Thatcher’s caution: trade union law reform proceeded step by step through her decade in power, for example. The 1980 Employment Act made controversial but relatively modest changes; two years later, once this first piece of legislation had changed the bounds of the possible, a second, more radical Employment Act followed. Likewise, the privatisation programme began seriously only after her second election victory. But all of this was clearly in pursuit of the same basic purpose, the same redistribution of power.

In this sense, Cameron’s approach was the opposite of Thatcher’s. While the 2010 government had clear missions at a departmental level, its overall purpose was never quite settled. At one point, asked why he wanted to be prime minister, Cameron reportedly remarked that he thought he’d be rather good at it. Cameron’s leadership ambitions crystallised in a period of relative political calm; Thatcher’s, by contrast, took shape amid the crises of the 1970s. This tougher beginning meant that, while her administration felt its way forwards, it did so with a clear, unwavering aim: to remake the economy around private enterprise and society around individual responsibility.


All new governments, especially those taking office after a prolonged period of flux and crisis, should aspire to emulate this clarity of purpose.


⁵³ *Into Power 01*, 25.

Note on citations

All quotations are from interviews conducted in February and March 2024, unless otherwise indicated. Interviews are not individually footnoted. All names cited in the footnotes refer to the published works named.



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