

Chapter 1

Understanding Cabinet Government

‘It’s what we call influence and not power.’ A Dutch minister was describing how Dutch prime ministers exercise authority within the Netherlands cabinet government. He was emphasizing the collective commitment. Prime ministers may lead; they do not command. They never have a free hand. Cabinet government in parliamentary democracies is surrounded by rules, procedures, guidelines, conventions, and laws; we discuss many of them in this book. But the Dutch cabinet minister wanted to stress that what makes cabinet government work is not so much the rules and procedures as the capacity of individuals to interpret them in ways that ultimately facilitate collective decision-making. Cabinet government is about relationships. It is about influence. Its functions are determined as much by personality as by rules. Effective strategies are contingent.

For example, in 1976, the British cabinet met for a five-day debate on whether to accept the terms being imposed by the IMF before it would provide a loan. The occasion is cited by some, such as adviser David Lipsey, as a classic example of cabinet government in action.¹ Peter Hennessy too regards it as a success, but not because it decided on a preferred policy.² Rather it was successful because there were no resignations. It was cabinet process as a means of political management, not policy choice. On the other hand, Edmund Dell, a minister in that cabinet, thought it was a ‘farce, and a dangerous farce at that’ because the prime minister and chancellor of the exchequer had already decided what needed to be done

¹ D. Lipsey, Evidence to House of Lords Committee, *Report and Evidence, The Cabinet Office and the Centre of Government*, HL Paper 30 (London: HM Stationary Office, 2010).

² P. Hennessy, *Cabinet* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 91. See also Hennessy, *The Prime Minister* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), 385–8.

and used the cabinet meetings only to allow the opposing ministers to gradually appreciate its inevitability.³ How should this event be read? The ambiguities and multiple interpretations of cabinet government have seldom been so marked.

Collective or cabinet government—as a way of ‘doing’ government—has not only survived over the past two centuries, it has been constantly replicated. Today, cabinet government remains the key *formal* executive decision-making form in parliamentary systems across the world. Yet the effectiveness and centrality of cabinet government is widely contested. In some jurisdictions, cabinet government appears to be thriving, whilst in others it is seen in both popular and academic literature as ineffective or under pressure.

In a twenty-first-century world in which politics is frequently labelled as broken, why does cabinet government survive at all? Its structures and traditions at first glance seem directly at odds with the pace of modern government, with the responsive demands of a 24/7 media, and with the growth of populism in many democracies. Part of the answer lies in the realization that cabinet government is in reality constantly flexible. It is capable of evolving to meet the needs of each new government. Like plasticine, it retains its core attributes whilst being moulded into different shapes at will. Prime ministers who like structure and process can build that into their governing style through formal cabinet committees, sub-committees, and firm rules. Prime ministers who prefer to work in small groups can retain the rubber stamp of cabinet agreement whilst retreating to a style of sofa government or some form of kitchen cabinet where prime ministers liaise with a chosen few rather than with ministers as a collectivity. All can still be called cabinet government and represent a form of collective decision-making. That is the crucial characteristic of cabinet government. It is collective in some form, even if at times the process masks the reality of a different style of decision-

³ E. Dell, ‘Collective Responsibility: Fact, Fiction or Façade?’, in *Policy and Practice: The Experience of Government* (London: RIPA, 1981), 27–48.

making. The key notion remains collective responsibility, the idea that many views may be expressed while issues are considered, but once a decision is made, then all those in the governing system are committed to support it in public. But how is that achieved, through what processes, and for what purposes? If the old civil service saying that control over *how* an end is achieved is tantamount to determining *what* is achieved, we should never take those means as a given.

There is, and can be, no job description for running a cabinet government. Collective processes are there to be utilized, to be contested. There may be handbooks, guidelines, and codes of conduct. Sometimes there are constitutional conventions that are accepted, and sometimes those conventions retain a carefully blurred ambiguity; they are seldom static and never entirely authoritative. There are arguments about what is proper, what is effective, and what is acceptable in the processes that governments adopt. How do different systems of cabinet government develop and maintain their collective commitment? How often do they try and fail to do so? Both questions explore the different dynamics that drive the processes and practices of governing and underpin our analysis here.

In this book, we explore the practices of cabinet government across five democratic countries that each has a different system of government, whilst each retaining some form of collective decision-making through a ‘cabinet’ of ministers. Australia, Denmark, The Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom have not only unique systems of government, but dramatically different styles of cabinet decision-making. Our goal is to understand how the political forces that shape collective cabinet decision-making vary between winner-takes-all majoritarian systems and multi-party consensus-based systems in which broad coalitions must find ways to govern together.

We seek to tease out the answers to three questions:

What are the dilemmas that challenge cabinet governments?

How do they differ over time in any one polity and across polities?

Why do practitioners face the similar dilemmas despite different constitutional and institutional architecture?

We argue that constitutional and institutional analyses alone are not adequate to answer these questions. We need to better understand the beliefs and practices of those involved in governing if we are to unravel the continuing dilemmas at the core of government. Cabinet government is not an end in itself (except in the sense of holding on to office). An effective process of governing is a necessary, but not sufficient foundation if ministers want to ‘make a difference’. Understanding the processes and practices of cabinet government are a necessary first step to explaining collective government.

What is ‘Cabinet Government’?

There is no settled agreement among scholars on a precise definition of cabinet government—and especially not a definition that can command support across the many systems of democratic government that we cover here. Blondel notes it is hard to determine what is a cabinet.⁴ Indeed, many of the standard accounts make no attempt to define what does or does not constitute cabinet government. They take it as given and then want to explain how that cabinet government works.⁵ Their analyses of good practice may later be used as reference points for descriptions of proper behaviour and even described as conventions, but they provide no model. We understand their problem. Richard Crossman, as

⁴ J. Blondel, ‘Understanding Ministers and Their Role in Cabinet Decisionmaking’ in J. Blondel and F. Muller-Rommel (eds), *Governing Together* (New York: St Martins, 1993).

⁵ I. Jennings, *Cabinet Government* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1936); J. P. Macintosh, *The British Cabinet* (London: Stevens, 1962); S. Encel, *Cabinet Government in Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1962).

a sceptical practitioner and academic, thinks the academic analysts mostly do not understand the dynamics of political decision-making. In 1970, he dismissed most of these accounts, arguing: ‘there is a gap between the literary legend, the paper description of politics, and the reality. It is a gap which begins with the description given by journalists, who are describing politics from outside, and which is then confirmed by the academics who read the journalists’ articles and regard them as accounts of what happened.’⁶ Accounts have undoubtedly improved since 1970; we know far more, both in general and in particular cases, about the way cabinet government is organised and run. Nevertheless, ministers and their advisers still tell us that those outside only know a small proportion of what happens in government.

That problem can be exacerbated by the fuzziness of government language. If we say that ‘cabinet has decided’, what do we mean? It can be any one of many interpretations. It can refer to:

- A *meeting* of the ‘full’ cabinet;
- A *group* of cabinet ministers or a cabinet committee;
- A *decision* (or minute, depending on local terminology); or
- A *system of government*.

So, what are we seeking to explain when we talk of cabinet government? Like our predecessors we are loathe to simply pronounce one definition. There are two reasons. First, a definition would imply that one country, the nearest fit to our definition, somehow has more ‘proper’ or ‘legitimate’ cabinet government than others, and that would not be a defensible position. Second, it would pre-empt any analysis; we would be asking whether a country conformed to our presumptuous definition, rather than asking the much more interesting question: how do they work?

⁶ R. H. S. Crossman, *Inside View* (London: Cape, 1972), 29.

In seeking a definition we turned to the practitioners themselves for their understanding of what cabinet government means to them. Officials answered consistently along the following lines:

- ‘Cabinet government is a shorthand term for the process by which government determines its policy and ensures the political will to implement it’;
- ‘Cabinet has two main functions: policy coherence and political support’.

The first is from a cabinet secretary in Britain, the second from the secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet in Australia.⁷ Both stress the need for decisions on policy and the assurance of political support, which both cabinet secretaries see as the two essentials for successful *outcomes*. Both were neutral about how and where the issues should be debated and determined. They wanted a *process* that achieved those ends.

Jeremy Heywood, a more recent secretary to cabinet, when asked whether cabinet government still existed in Britain, asserted the same concept as a set of principles:

It partly depends on whether you mean cabinet government as a meeting once a week or cabinet government as a set of principles.... *It just manifests itself in different ways*. Every single decision coming through one meeting a week at which there are 20–25 people is not a test of whether cabinet government is dead.⁸

Ministers and advisers, as will be evident in the comments later in the book, took a similar line; cabinet government can be seen in the processes adopted, whether standing or *ad hoc*, through which governments make decisions and ensure collective support. These interpretations provide a starting point from which we can assess the way cabinet

⁷ Cited in P. Weller, ‘Cabinet Government: An Elusive Ideal?’, *Public Administration*, 81 (2003): 701–22

⁸ J. Heywood, Evidence to House of Lords Committee, *The Cabinet Office and the Centre of Government, Report with Evidence*, HL Paper 30 (London: HM Stationary Office, 2010), 158 (emphasis added).

governments work across political systems. They identify the core issues of appropriate process, the need for political support, and the search for policy answers. We can ask in the conclusions whether these ideas are consistently seen as accurate or adequate. In addition, we acknowledge there will be on occasion more immediate calculations that cabinet governments seek to solve: government cohesion, political weight, media pressure, coalition tensions, expertise, lack of time, external crisis, and multiple demands.⁹

Yet the evidence on how cabinet government balances these calculations is scarce. Cabinet is an inherently secretive forum. Records are held in confidence for decades. Our task in this book is to peel back a little of this secrecy by seeking to understand cabinet decision-making through the eyes of those who have operated within it.

There can be a wide range of forums where cabinet discussion can take place, as we outline in Table 1.1.

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Table 1.1 The spectrum of forums for cabinet government and potential attendees

1. Ministry: meeting of all ministers: ministerial retreats
2. Full cabinet meetings as exclusively a ministers' forum: ministers and supporting officials from Cabinet Office only
3. Full cabinet meetings: ministers, officials as above plus advisers as observers
4. Cabinet committee as preparatory forum with recommendations (sometimes as a formality) to full cabinet meetings: ministers, advisers, and officials

⁹ A. King and I. Crewe, *The Blunders of our Governments* (London: Oneworld, 2013).

5. Cabinet committees with decision-making powers: NSC, ERC, War cabinets: ministers, officials and, advisers
6. Inner Cabinet: officially recognized committee with officials, advisers, and decisions: SBPC, coordination committee, Danish Coordination Committee
7. Political cabinet: ministers from one party meet, sometimes with advisers and other party notables, to discuss the political conditions and when there are no officials present and no minutes or records are kept
8. Star chambers: recorded by officials, membership decided by the prime minister; deliberately separate from and not reporting to the cabinet forum, commonly focused on managing public expenditure and the economy
9. Inner circle: PM getting commitment and support from ministerial colleagues: ministers and both political and public service advisers
10. Sofa government (also known as bilaterals, and one-to-ones): meetings of PMs, ministers, and advisers to debate specific issues

This list makes no pretensions to be complete. It is not intended to represent the full range of meetings in any one country. Rather, it is an amalgam of sites identified across the countries covered in this book.

This array of sites provides some initial conjectures of the levers that can be pulled. We are interested in *how* cabinet and collective government is maintained across five systems. The range of sites and practices involved suggests some of the ways in which leaders may seek to bring different groups and opinions together. They will determine the attendance (who is invited), the rules that will be applied (the process), the terms in which the

particular problem is defined, the urgency of the issues (whether political or external), sheer reality (who can be brought together quickly?), and who has the political weight to be involved. Cabinet governments are always the consequences of choices of who should be involved and to what degree. The division of ministers themselves into cabinet ministers and non-cabinet ministers is as much a deliberate selection as is any cabinet committee or *ad hoc* meeting of a select few in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). The power of patronage may be relevant, even effective sometimes. The processes also identify some of the complications. All the power does not rest with one position or person; others have resources and assets that they can draw on. Coalition partners or party heavyweights have levers that they can pull in debates, one of which can be the maintenance of a coalition arrangement when the leader is dependent on their support. There is always the option of a resignation or defection where the impact is disproportionate to the sheer numbers. The parliamentary numbers may have to be constantly calculated. Neustadt's proposition that the power of the president is the power to persuade resonates in parliamentary systems because leaders must seek to rule, at least in part, by consent.¹⁰

Prime ministers prefer to work in those forums where they can best achieve what they seek. They are not concerned about positions and rules unless they help to achieve their objectives. If we are to understand our five countries, then we need to move through the kaleidoscopic array of meetings and practices to ask how cabinet government is managed, how objectives are reached, and how the beliefs and practices of actors affect those outcomes. That is the essence of collective cabinet government.

The settings in which conventions of cabinet decision-making are applied vary widely in terms of regime type and historical context. Lijphart's classic typology of regime types in

¹⁰ R. Neustadt, *Presidential Power* (New York: Free Press, 1960), 28.

Western Europe focused on the distinction between majoritarian systems in which one party dominates the legislature through its numbers and multi-party systems in which the need for negotiated outcomes is embedded through a proportional voting system.¹¹ Lijphart argues that the style and setting of cabinet government can play a central role in consensus style decision-making when their membership draws on a number of different parties. Others concur. Blondel and Müller-Rommel published a series of three edited books that contain a number of country studies of European cabinets, reflecting a similar interest in the strengths of multi-party cabinet formation.¹² A few identify ‘ideal types’ of cabinet based on ‘external signifiers’ such as the number of meetings, who attends, whether there are sub-groups, and so on.¹³

In this book, we look past these external signifiers to show what cabinet government looks like from the inside out. We supplement the available public material by interviewing the ministers who have worked in cabinets and the officials and advisers who assisted them, examining through their eyes what collective decision-making requires, how cabinet should be regarded, and whether processes work. In Chapters 7 to 11 we work through the shared

¹¹ A. Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999). For a later formulation, see F. Hendrik, *Vital Democracy, in action*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013)

¹² J. Blondel and F. Muller-Rommel (eds), *Cabinets in Western Europe* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988); *Governing Together* (New York: St Martin’s, 1993); *Cabinets in Eastern Europe* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001).

¹³ See M. Vercesi, ‘Cabinets and Decision-Making Processes: Re-assessing the Literature’, *Journal of Comparative Studies* 8(4) (2012). Other studies make important contributions by utilizing quantitative and qualitative data on the fate of cabinet ministers. For example, M. Laver and K. A. Shepsle, *Making and Breaking Governments* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) examine coalition building for cabinets. K. Dowding and P. Dumont (eds), *The Selection of Ministers in Europe: Hiring and Firing* (London: Routledge, 2009) explore the rise and fall of ministers.

dilemmas that every form of cabinet government confronts as it navigates those wider systems.

Theoretical Approaches

There are many ways to study cabinet government and collective decision-making, and scholars from a variety of theoretical approaches and disciplinary traditions have sought to do so. Each approach is based on an academic discipline and consequently asks a series of questions appropriate to their discipline, whether they are historians, constitutional lawyers or political scientists. The disciplines become prisms through which to understand cabinet government.

- Cabinet as a constitutional actor, part of the political architecture, enmeshed with parliament and party: a constitutional lawyer's interpretation;
- Cabinet as a formal administrative institution, based on rules and routines: a public administration interpretation;
- Cabinet as a forum for making policy decisions: a policy analysis account;
- Cabinet as a political battleground, a contest for power, position, and reputation: a political science analysis; and
- Cabinet as one forum among many for determining and coordinating outcomes: a core executive or network approach.¹⁴

It is not our intention to extensively map each scholarly tradition here. However, they do indicate the complexities of the challenge. Each approach has its own legitimate interest, and will focus on their areas of expertise. Ministers do not have so distinct a choice. They cannot just decide which perspective to adopt. They must balance them all and then mesh them into a single response. If there is a policy imperative, is there adequate information, what are the

¹⁴ Weller, 'Cabinet Government: An Elusive Ideal?', 704–8.

implications for the political balance, can it be adequately administered and delivered, is it legal? The options may be contradictory, the possibilities of unforeseen consequences always lurking in the background. Welcome to the world of cabinet government where disciplinary perspectives collide. We need to interpret cabinet government as a vehicle that combines all those functions. We cannot regard it exclusively as, for instance, just a policy maker or a legal institution. Cabinet governments are inevitably assessed on their ability to combine all of them, not whether they do just one of them effectively.

There are other categorizations too.¹⁵ Here we choose to synthesize these traditions of scholarship into three broad schools, distinguished by the ontological drivers which shape their focus on different aspects of cabinet government broadly construed. These are the constitutionalist, the institutionalist, and the interpretivist perspectives.

Constitutionalist

Constitutionalism's unit of analysis is the law. It traces back the laws and conventions that regulate how government must comport itself as defined by statute, common law (in the British case), or convention. Constitutionalism's underpinnings are of necessity realist and positivist, but importantly they are also inherently normative. They are about how things *should* be done based on history and precedent. Lawyers and constitutional historians in each country under study here have created texts that are seen as foundation stones for drawing the boundaries of governance. In Britain, for example, we could cite here nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers that are continuously referred to as the authoritative arbiters of

¹⁵ Andeweg, for instance, lists functional, structural, and operational approaches. R. Andeweg, 'Collegiality and Collectivity: Cabinets, Cabinet Committees and Cabinet Ministers', in P. Weller, H. Bakvis, and R. A. W. Rhodes (eds), *The Hollow Crown: Countervailing Trends in Core Executives* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 58–83; see also R. Andeweg, R. Elgie, L. Helms, J. Kaarbo, and F. Müller-Rommel (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Executives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

conventions.¹⁶ Descriptive accounts metamorphize into prescriptions of established and proper procedures, written with the authority of considered gravitas. For some, but by no means all, cabinet government describes not just a particular pattern of coordination and political support but also a normative ideal, a constitutional theory of how the centre of the UK state *ought to* operate (Dicey and Jennings are often cited as the source for authoritative interpretations).

Institutionalist

Institutionalism draws from many disciplines and traditions, but its core underpinning is that it seeks to study the component parts of executive government as interacting blocks of structures, and that those structures come with defined boundaries and forms. Institutionalist approaches argue that the way to understand government is to study its architecture, to map hierarchies of departments, and to emphasize institutional continuities. For the study of cabinet government in particular this means analysing the machinery, such as Australia's Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) and how it drives cabinet processes at the heart of government. Just as an archaeologist unearths structural evidence from which to hypothesize how things work, institutionalists excavate the structures of cabinet government in order to show how one part fits in with another.

The institutionalist account follows the machinations of power through the lens of process and hierarchy. Here we would position the likes of John Mackintosh's seminal and classic work *Cabinet Government*, in which he argues:

¹⁶ See for example, W. Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (London: Fontana, 1963), A. V. Dicey, *Introduction to the Study of the Law of the Constitution* (London: Macmillan, 1915); I. R. Jennings, *The Law and the Constitution* (London: University of London Press, 1959). For a recent account, see Andrew Blick, *The Codes of the Constitution* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2016). See also P. Strangio, P. 't Hart, and J. Walter, *The Pivot of Power: Australian Prime Ministers and Political Leadership 1949-2016* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2017).

The country is governed by the Prime Minister who leads, coordinates and maintains a series of Ministers, all of whom are advised and backed by the Civil Service. Some decisions are taken by the Prime Minister alone, some in consultation between him and Senior Ministers. Others are left to heads of departments, the Cabinet, Cabinet Committees, or the permanent official. There is no simple catchphrase that can describe this form of government, but it may be pictured as a cone. The Prime Minister stands at the apex, supported by and giving power to a widening series of rings of senior ministers, the Cabinet, its Committees, Non-Cabinet ministers, and departments.¹⁷

Macintosh does not argue that the prime minister made all the decisions. He suggests that the decisions could be made in many forums that included ministers, committees, and permanent officials. The prime minister is at the apex of the cone.

Mackintosh's analysis left the door wide open for Richard Crossman to evoke that 'simple catchphrase' and dramatize his findings by claiming 'Cabinet government has been transformed into prime ministerial government.'¹⁸

In his second edition, Mackintosh gives a nuanced acknowledgment of Crossman's description when he concludes:

It is impossible to establish conclusively the precise weight or influence of one office or body out of an elaborate series all of which have some share in the decision-making process ... But so far, the politics of the 1960s have strengthened rather than weakened or altered the lines of development which

¹⁷ Macintosh, *The British Cabinet*, 451–2.

¹⁸ R. Crossman, 'Introduction', to W. Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (London: Fontana, 1963), 51.

have led contemporary British Government to be described as Prime Ministerial rather than Cabinet Government.¹⁹

This debate about whether British government is prime ministerial became a staple of British Politics 101. It was inevitably indecisive. As Anthony King noted, neither side specified in any detail what the terms meant; the argument constituted one illustration or another to counter an alternative case.²⁰ ‘Most of the debate has been conducted at the level of a barroom brawl. Some good points have been made, just as at least a few good punches are landed in most barroom brawls. But remarkably little new evidence has been forthcoming’.²¹

There have been a number of developments as different authors seek to reinterpret the core debate. One strand asks whether the collective notion within traditional conceptions of cabinet government has been displaced by a ‘presidential’ style of leadership.²² The underlying premise is that if leaders are strong, then cabinet government must be diminished. Others provide new categories: so prime ministers exercise personalised power or are process driven.²³ They are all essentially about the same issue: the position and practices of leaders within a collective government. It is not our intention to contest the view that individual leaders sometimes dominate cabinets and will occasionally make a ‘captain’s call’ without

¹⁹ J. P. Macintosh, *The British Cabinet*, 2nd edn (London: Stevens, 1968), 627.

²⁰ A. King, ‘Executives’, in N. Polsby and F. Greenstein (eds), *A Handbook of Political Science*, Volume 5, (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1975), 232.

²¹ For a review of the literature, see R. A. W. Rhodes, ‘Core Executives, Prime Ministers, Statecraft and Court Politics: Towards Convergence’, in Glyn Davis and R. A. W. Rhodes (eds), *The Craft of Governing: Essays in Honour of Professor Patrick Weller* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2015), 53–72.

²² T. Pogunjke and P. Webb (eds), *The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); cf. K. Dowding, ‘The Prime Ministerialisation of the British Prime Minister’, *Parliamentary Affairs* 66(3) (2013): 617–35.

²³ P. Strangio et al, *Settling the Office*, Melbourne University press, 2016

consultation. Big issues that define governments or are imposed from outside do emerge. On those occasions, leaders will set the direction and dominate the political landscape. They always have. But even in extreme cases, they still need at least the acquiescence of their colleagues, if not their positive support. As Savoie writes of Canada, some issues get attention because they are seen as important by prime ministers whilst other issues go through more routine consultative cabinet processes.²⁴ The important caveat to note is that both kinds of issues require some collective support, even where the means to achieve it are different. The choice is not between prime ministerial or cabinet government, between the individual and the collective.²⁵ The issue is when and in what circumstances collective decisions are achieved, how the process differs from topic to topic, from time to time, and from place to place, and in each of these cases to what extent the collective ethic determines the outcomes.

The debates can never go far because they imply a false dichotomy, between a dominant prime minister and a cabinet that is involved in everything. That was never true. As Macintosh argues, decisions, and the processes that underpin them, can be found in many forums. Prime ministers will want to ensure the support of their ministers and will as often work through cabinet as they will bypass them. The practices will differ from time to time, government to government, and country to country. Events too often are interpreted according to the case they are meant to bolster.

It is not exclusively a Westminster debate. If lively in Britain, it is repeated in muted form in Australia.²⁶ With single member electorates or majority single-party governments (or

²⁴ D. Savoie, *Court Government and the Collapse of Accountability in Canada and the United Kingdom* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2008), 17.

²⁵ See, for example, M. Foley, *The British Presidency* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

²⁶ P. Strangio, P. 't Hart, and J. Walter, *The Pivot of Power: Australian Prime Ministers and Political Leadership 1949-2016* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2017); P. Weller, *Malcolm Fraser PM* (Melbourne:

pseudo-coalitions in Australia), the Westminster-styled governments traditionally have strong executives and institutionally powerful leaders. The debate is of less concern in European capitals where prime ministers must work in coalitions. Even here, the growth of leader-centred politics has led to debates about prime ministerial pre-eminence.²⁷ The contributors to chapters on the Netherlands and Denmark in Poguntke and Webb's edited volume talk of the 'presidentialization' of the leaders in those countries.²⁸ In Switzerland where the federal president is elected for a year on rotation, it is reflected in the caution with which presidential initiatives are received. There is also a continuing belief that constitutional changes, such as an increase in the size of the federal council, should be received with caution. The danger is that otherwise the president might develop into a British prime minister, a proposition, not unreasonably, that the Swiss regard as terrifying.

Contributions to the institutionalist literature have come from many quarters, including historians who chart the development of the institution, public administration scholars who seek to understand how institutions work, and political scientists who try to unravel the power struggles and political calculations. They are supported by extensive biographies and diaries that identify the daily working of the institutions.²⁹ These works do not fit any simple category, although institutional elements pervade their analyses.

Penguin, 1989); P. Weller, *Cabinet Government in Australia, 1901–2006* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007).

²⁷ R. A. W. Rhodes and E.-J. Van Dorp, 'Challenging the "Weak" Prime Minister Myth: Mapping Dutch Court Politics', *Public Administration* (forthcoming).

²⁸ Poguntke and Webb, *The Presidentialization of Politics*, Chapters 6 and 7.

²⁹ R. H. S. Crossman, *Diaries of a Cabinet Minister* (London: Hamish Hamilton and Jonathan Cape, 1975); B. Castle, *The Castle Diaries* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984); G. Evans, *Inside the Hawke-Keating Governments: A Cabinet Diary* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2014); N. Blewett, *A Cabinet Diary* (Adelaide: Wakefield, 1999); T. Blair, *A Journey* (London: Hutchinson, 2010); G. Brown, *My Life, Our Times*

The Core Executive

The institutionalist agenda has benefitted from a number of initiatives. One, starting in the 1990s, was the concept of the core executive. It provided a new perspective to the study of executive government, arguing for the need to identify who was involved, and what resources they could bring to the negotiating table when the need for coordination arose. It did not dispute the evidence built over the years but wanted an alternative, more nuanced, emphasis.

The core executive referred to

all those organizations and structures which primarily serve to pull together and integrate central government policies, or act as final arbiters within the executive of conflicts between different elements of the government machine.³⁰

The stress on the core executive drew attention to the people who were the innermost centre of British central government, members of the ‘complex web’ of

institutions, networks and practices surrounding the prime minister, cabinet, cabinet committees and their official counterparts, less formalized ministerial ‘clubs’ or meetings, bilateral negotiations, and interdepartmental committees. It also includes some major coordinating departments—chiefly, the Cabinet Office, the Treasury, the Foreign Office, the law officers, and the security and intelligence services.³¹

(London: Bodley Head, 2017); D. Cameron, *For the Record* (London: William Collins, 2019); Kevin Rudd, *The PM Years* (Sydney: Macmillan, 2018); Malcolm Turnbull, *A Bigger Picture: An Autobiography* (Richmond, VIC: Hardie Grant Book, 2020).

³⁰ R. Rhodes and P. Dunleavy, ‘Core Executive Studies in Britain’, *Public Administration* 68(1994): 4.

³¹ Rhodes and Dunleavy, ‘Core Executive Studies’, 4.

Formal positions are not necessarily significant. What matters is what people are able to do. Advisers to the prime minister could be more influential on specific occasions than senior ministers because of the contribution they make, the information they have, and the opportunities they have to put their views. The key people are not necessarily those in positions of nominal authority, but those who have significant resources. Resources and capacity— whether expertise, information, or simply a reputation for sound judgement— matter. So do the perceptions of those key actors. Who is influential can change from policy arena to policy arena.

The core executive concept stresses power (who decides?), location (where are decisions made?), relationships (how do the key players interact?), and resources (what do they bring to the table?). It extends the debate to all the forums at the centre where crucial interventions occurred, particularly where coordination of government activities was enforced. With its emphasis on the *how*, the *who*, and the *resources*, it has proved transferable, not only to other parliamentary systems,³² but also to different regimes such as China,³³ even if the phrase has yet to become part of the practitioners' parlance.

Different actors bring different skills and authority, but their use can be contingent. Let us provide an example. Years ago Robert Parker argued that in Westminster systems there is no distinction between the *roles* that people can play.³⁴ Ministers, advisers, and civil servants may all be involved in developing ideas, identifying policy options, choosing from among the alternatives. The only difference between them, in his view, was that where there

³² G. Peters, R. A. W. Rhodes, and V. Wright (eds), *Administering the Summit* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

³³ S. Heilman, 'China's core executive', Mercator Institute for China Studies, Working Paper 2016/17; Y. Xu and P. Weller, 'Problems of Government: The State Council in China', *The China Journal*, 76 (2016): 1–24.

³⁴ R. S. Parker, 'The Public Service Inquiries and Responsible Government', in R. F. I. Smith and P. Weller (eds), *Public Service Inquiries in Australia* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1978).

was a divergence of opinion, the ministers, as the people who were elected, had the final word. Their authority derived from the electorate. Some meetings of senior officials, shadowing a standing cabinet committee, for instance, will filter and judge the papers before them and agree on the single set of recommendations they will present to the ministerial committee; that makes them influential in shaping policies. Nevertheless it will still be the ministers whose authority is required to authorize the decision. Some ministers may be essentially passive, accepting without demur the propositions set before them. They may do no more than sign off; they are still needed to do that. That is the key to their influence. Even the most powerful official or adviser, in every system, eventually acts with the authority of the elected minister, however obtained. Senior officials have skills, expertise, experience, and opportunity. For them the challenge is often how to engineer the political support for good ideas they have developed and want to advance.

There are limits to the notion of the core executive. Andeweg disputes that coordination is a 'defining function' of cabinet government and complains that it is unclear what is and what is not covered by the term.³⁵ Elgie concludes that core executive studies are 'less innovative than they might at first appear' because they can appear as 'updated version of the old prime ministerial vs. cabinet government argument'.³⁶ There is force in these criticisms so we extend the notion of the core executive in three directions: first, networks, and then through an interpretivist lens, situated agency, and court government.

³⁵ Andeweg, 'Collegiality and Collectivity', 59.

³⁶ R. Elgie, 'Core Executive Studies Two Decades On', *Public Administration*, 89 (2011): 64–77.

Networks

First, drawing on the work of Burch and Holliday, the core executive can be seen as a set of interlocking networks.³⁷ The prime minister is the focal point of these networks; the innermost network links the set of networks that comprise the core executive. Prime ministers now have more central resources, most notably political advisers and direct technological access, to support their work. The growth in central resources might suggest that the power of the centre has increased. We do not dismiss the proposition but also want to explore how the power of the centre fluctuates depending on the personalities of individuals at the centre, their resources, and the context in which they are acting. In short, the core executive is a set of interlocking networks in which the roles of actors and organizations are contingent and no one pattern of executive politics prevails. All prime ministers will use networks. They will not depend exclusively on hierarchical orders, although they may be adequate some of the time. As conditions demand they will talk to anyone who can assist.

The Interpretivist Approach

The interpretivist approach then adds an additional dimension. Where institutionalism takes structures as its focus, and constitutionalism takes law, interpretivism takes individual actors. Crossman's complaint cited earlier about the inadequacy of political analysis was derived from a discussion with a biographer of the nineteenth-century British prime minister Benjamin Disraeli. 'How often did the prime minister see the chief whip?', Crossman asked. 'One does not know that sort of thing, I wish we did,' replied the biographer.³⁸ Yet to

³⁷ M. Burch and I. Holliday, *The British Cabinet System* (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall/Wheatsheaf, 1996); M. Burch and Halliday, 'The Blair Government and the Core Executive', *Government and Opposition*, 39 (2004): 1–21.

³⁸ Crossman, *Inside View*, 29.

Crossman, an active politician before all else, those interactions, the ways that prime ministers managed political processes, were often the key to their success. Different prime ministers in the one country act within the same constitutional and institutional frameworks but with a variety of results. How the individuals understand their environment matters. In these accounts the appreciation of political choice is built from the bottom up. It does not start with normative principles, asking what should be done. Rather the account asks what people do, how they manage their daily tasks, how they interpret the dilemmas they face. We seek to build a picture of their world, looking over their shoulder, as Neustadt put it.³⁹

The interpretivist corpus therefore begins by asking not how things should be, or what the law says they are, or indeed how they are formally structured, but rather how do the individuals involved see their roles in making them work. What does cabinet government mean to them? The examination of cabinet government as a process through an interpretivist lens asks *how* the centre of government is managed as a means of ensuring collective will. With cabinet government, it is important to find out who is involved in the processes (plural) for developing a collective position. We want to understand how they do it, through which channels, and how the collective position is then maintained. In short, it is an actor-centric approach that asks when, where, and why do several actors play a role in collective decision-making?

In executive studies, the interpretive approach has underpinned a decade of theory building in discussions of situated agency and ‘court government’.

³⁹ Neustadt, *Presidential Power*, 4.

Situated agency

The idea of the situated agent⁴⁰ is where the different theoretical strands of historical institutionalism and interpretivism intersect: in an appreciation that agents matter but they must work within an institutional situation that shapes their actions.⁴¹ An interpretive approach shifts analysis away from institutions, functions, and roles to the actions and practices of actors. To understand actions and practices, we need to grasp the beliefs and preferences of the people involved. Central to this task is unpacking the ‘webs of meaning’ that people spin for themselves. It focuses on the social construction of a practice through the ability of individuals to create, and act on, meanings. Individuals are situated in webs of beliefs handed down as traditions. Situated agents are individuals within institutions who use local reasoning consciously and subconsciously to reflect on and modify their contingent heritage. The way actors exercise agency is not unlimited, however, but is shaped by the traditions, beliefs, and practices they inherit and the dilemmas they encounter.

The concept of *tradition* explains why people come to believe what they do. People understand their experiences using theories they have inherited. This social heritage is the necessary, ever-evolving background to the beliefs people adopt and the actions they perform. So, a tradition is a set of understandings someone receives during a continuing, even at times episodic, socialization. Although tradition is unavoidable, it is only a starting point, not something that determines later actions. Traditions are an unavoidable presence in everything people do, but they are mainly a first influence on people.

Beliefs provide actors with interpretations of their surroundings. Beliefs do not emerge in a vacuum. They are part of a shared social inheritance and construction. Actors do

⁴⁰ M. Bevir and R. A. W. Rhodes, *Interpreting British Governance* (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁴¹ S. Bell, ‘Do We Really Need a New “Constructivist Interpretation” to Explain Institutional Change?’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 41(4) (2011): 883–906.

not operate on a clean slate. Often, institutions are said to have a concrete, fixed form; that is, they have operating rules or procedures that govern the actions of the individuals (aka departmental views). It leads observers to understate the effects of contingency, internal conflict, and the several contending constructions of how things do or should work around here. If we think of institutions in this way, we do not interpret what institutions mean to the people who work in them. Rather, we assume these allegedly objective rules prescribe or cause behaviour. There are two problems with this assumption. First, people not only wilfully choose to disobey a rule, but also they subvert, ignore, and avoid them. Second, we cannot read off peoples' beliefs and desires from their social location. Rules are always open to interpretation. It is not just a question of literal meaning but also a question of to whom the rule applies, and whether the rule should be applied in any given situation.⁴² As Laws observes, outsiders studying an organization 'are no more able to offer a single and coherent account of the way in which it orders itself' than its managers.⁴³ Therefore, we expect to find multiple accounts because, when we include cultural factors or beliefs, then rules do not fix meanings or determine the actions of its members. Instead, we ask how beliefs and actions are created and recreated to reproduce and modify institutions constantly. We no longer cast explanations as if behaviour was the result of rules but as the multiple, diverse ways in which people understand, react to, interpret, and reinterpret rules. In sum, we treat institutions as embedded beliefs and practices,

A *practice* is a set of actions that display a pattern that can remain relatively stable across time. Such notions as institution and structure can be used as a metaphor for the way actions coalesce into stable practices. They provide an easy conglomerate as we cannot in

⁴² R. A. W. Rhodes, *Everyday Life in British Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

⁴³ J. Law, 'Organization, Narrative and Strategy', in J. Hassard and M. Parker (eds), *Towards a New Theory of Organizations* (London: Routledge, 1994), 248–68.

practice deconstruct the belief patterns of each interviewee within one institution, let alone across institutions and across diverse countries. They can also lead observers to treat institutions or structures as real, reified entities. We use them with care.

Court government

Another interpretivist development is to take on board the ideas of high politics and court government.

The notions have three sources. For Cowling 'high politics' refers to the political leadership network that encompasses politicians, public servants, and political advisers.⁴⁴ He focuses on the *realpolitik* of the governing elite, on 'the relationship between ideas and political practices', and on 'short term politicking or tactical manoeuvring'. Thus, for Cowling 'high politics' was 'a matter of rhetoric and manoeuvre' by statesmen. He explores the tension between 'situational necessity and the intentions of politicians'.

Cowling asks, 'What influences played upon, what intentions were maintained, what prevision was possible and what success was achieved by the leading actors on the political stage?'⁴⁵ His approach is characterized by 'relativistic individualism' and an emphasis on historical contingency.⁴⁶ As Williamson observes, Cowling's 'most noted and notorious contribution to political history' was high politics and his insistence that political leaders had 'relative autonomy, with substantial independence in taking decisions'.⁴⁷

Savoie defines 'court government' as 'the prime minister and a small group of carefully selected courtiers'. His account also covers the 'shift from formal decision-making processes in

⁴⁴ M. Cowling, *The Impact of Labour 1920–1924* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1971), 3–4.

⁴⁵ Cowling *The Impact of Labour*, 3–4.

⁴⁶ P. Ghosh, 'Towards the Verdict of History: Mr Cowling's Doctrine', in M. Bentley (ed.), *Public and Private Doctrine: Essays in British History Presented to Maurice Cowling* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 273–321.

⁴⁷ P. Williamson, 'Maurice Cowling and Modern British Political History', in R. Crowcroft, S. J. D. Green, and R. Whiting (eds), *Philosophy, Politics and Religion in British Democracy: Maurice Cowling and Conservatism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 108–52.

Cabinet ... to informal processes involving only a handful of actors'.⁴⁸ 't Hart goes a step further, distinguishing between the court as think tank, as sanctuary, as arena, and as ritual. The court as think tank focuses on the collection, interpretation, and use of information. The court as sanctuary focuses on psychological, especially emotional, support for the leader and courtiers. The court as arena is a stage for bargaining and conflict resolution. The court as ritual provides legitimacy for the policies and actions of an informal inner circle.⁴⁹ The centre of government is likely to fulfil all of these functions at one time or another; the key point is that in all these formulations, the number of participants is limited.

Historically, the term 'court' is conventionally used to refer to a monarch and their immediate entourage. The phrase evokes the time when dynastic monarchs, chosen by hereditary and cocooned by divine right, ruled for life. The courtiers who served them used every stratagem to place themselves in positions of influence, aiming to be the principal adviser with the ear of the monarch. The politics of these courts were determined primarily by royal whim, not only by rules, formal position, or expertise. The royal lover could become the royal adviser; failure could mean exile or death. Political advising was uncertain, contingent, ubiquitous, and stressful.⁵⁰ Now we acknowledge that those royal rulers, and that world of court politics, have gone, but we contend that the nature of politics at the centre has not, that the machinations associated with court politics still prevail. To capture this activity, but to avoid

⁴⁸ Savoie, D. *Court Government and the Collapse of Accountability in Canada and the United Kingdom*. (Toronto, University of Toronto Press 2008).

⁴⁹ P. 'tHart, *Understanding Political Leadership* (London: Palgrave, 2014), 76–81.

⁵⁰ For a classic example, see S. Sebag Montefiore, *Catherine the Great* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001); for an example of modern presidential politics, chart Lyndon Johnson's political style in Robert Caro, *The Passing of Power* (New York: Bodley Head, 2012). For a fictional account, see Hilary Mantel's brilliant evocation of the Tudor Court in her trilogy, *Wolf Hall* (London, Fourth Estate, 2009), *Bring out the Bodies* (London, Fourth Estate, 2012), and *The Mirror and the Light* (London: Fourth Estate, 2020).

unwelcome connotations, we refer to present-day versions of the court as the ‘inner circle’. In so doing, we adopt Peter Hennessy’s idea of inner and outer circles.⁵¹ Hennessy wanted to determine who the key players were across the range of government activities and for the Blair governments he identifies the changing composition of up to five concentric circles of influence. He develops a single chart for each year. If the concept is applied across sectors, we would expect to find that the inner circles are different. Those who are consulted on strategic political problems may not be involved on specific education or health initiatives. The idea is useful because it is not accompanied by the baggage of more evocative metaphors like ‘court politics’ or more frequently used expressions like ‘inner cabinets’.⁵²

The concepts of the core executive, networks, and court politics can be seen to emphasize slightly different political practices. They are complementary, rather than alternative, approaches. The core executive stresses that title does not determine influence; access and resources may be as significant. Networks emphasize that decisions are not made just through hierarchies and formal lines of authority; traditions, beliefs, and practices can shape the way that participants as situated agents respond. Court politics are a reminder of the continuing presence of political manoeuvring, of jockeying for influence, of temporary successes and thwarted ambitions.

⁵¹ P. Hennessy, *Prime Minister* (London: Penguin, 2000); and A. Seldon with R. Newell, *May at 10* (London: Biteback, 2019).

⁵² Formal titles are an unreliable indicator of influence. For example, the attempts to determine ministerial standing by their membership of cabinet committees fail because some committees rarely meet or decide anything important. First, we have to discover whether the committees are themselves significant. See N. Allen and N. Siklodi, ‘Objectivity and Falsehood: Assessing Measures of Positional Influence with Members of David Cameron’s Cabinet’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 22(2) (2020): 220–37.

Dilemmas as Plausible Conjectures

This selection of theoretical frameworks drawn from interpretivist conceptual principles provides the scholarly inheritance against which we frame our empirical work. Our way in and through this wide body of theory is to study the ways in which actors understand their experience, by focussing on dilemmas. Dilemmas represent the choices that actors have to make, some occasional, others continuing, when they have to decide how to govern. They are derived from the literature and tested with in our interviews with practitioners. Much of the time in central government there is no obvious answer to such questions as: What traditions and practices should I follow? What beliefs are important? The 'dilemma' is the change agent that forces actors to reconsider their beliefs and reinterpret traditions, to ask how they should proceed. Dilemmas provide a powerful analytical tool precisely because they allow for comparative assessments which draw out the quirks of individual systems without undermining the comparative insights.

This book adopts an interpretivist approach but specifically takes as its unit of analysis the dilemmas of cabinet government, and how actors are able to arrive at collective decisions to meet them. Some dilemmas are negotiated through court-like interactions between the prime minister's office and other departments or ministers, while others are resolved by drawing together rival power centres through a process of compromise-making that privileges those actors able to build and wield influence rather than 'formal' power. These dilemmas are partly rooted in the conventions and legalistic understandings of how things 'should work', which rise to the surface at the moment of disjuncture caused when a tradition proves inconvenient for solving the particular problem at hand. Actors at those moments reinterpret tradition and bend it to meet the exigencies of the moment.

The studies of cabinet government and interpretive theory focus on positions, practices, traditions, expectations, and rules, and on beliefs and practices, respectively. From

these different starting points both emphasize the complex processes involved in collective government. We draw plausible conjectures from both to explore how cabinet government is managed in five different systems of government. Plausible conjectures are to interpretive research what generalizations are to naturalist research. They are general statements that are plausible because they rest on good reasons and the reasons are good because they are inferred from relevant information.⁵³

Countries may differ in the way that they define political problems, and in the operating assumptions that they bring to bear on those problems. Still, we contend all must manage this common set of dilemmas, and these dilemmas are at the heart of this book. We identified them from current debates about, and literature on, the workings of cabinet government. The following list is a starting point. They are our plausible conjectures about what to look for initially in our interview transcripts. We knew we would introduce many a nuance to the following bare summaries. We entertained the possibility that some may not be common dilemmas. We were open to the possibility of surprises, to dilemmas and responses that we had not anticipated. But we had to start somewhere.

The Process Dilemma: Predictability vs Political Imperatives

How do prime ministers, ministers, and officials manage governing in a way that is both predictable and responds to the exigencies of specific events while maintaining political consensus?

The studies of cabinet government direct our attention to the formal and informal processes: to the rules, conventions, understandings, and procedures that underpin predictability. Collective government means achieving consent and marshalling support in

⁵³ R. Boudon, 'Towards a Synthetic Theory of Rationality', *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, 7(1) (1993): 5–19.

the most unpredictable of circumstances. We examine how formal and informal processes work in each country by examining manuals, handbooks, and rules that create expectations about how collective government is managed and how they are interpreted and inconsistently enforced. We explore how officials have developed routines to meet challenges, and to what extent they use constructive ambiguity to maintain consensus in regimes that can threaten to unravel. We ask whether they are effective in both finding solutions and maintaining consent.

The policy dilemma: puzzling v political risk

How do collective governments determine policies? Do they innovate and expose themselves to political risk? Or are they pragmatic, making changes in response to circumstances in incremental steps?

Government can collectively ‘puzzle’ on the community’s behalf by framing new policies or they can stick with existing policy agendas. Collective government is a set of practices for identifying and defining problems, sieving information, analysing policy options, determining policy priorities, and deciding what and what not to do.

The political dilemma: self-interest vs cohesion

How do cabinet processes manage the inherent tensions in collective government decision-making, promoting their own interests while maintaining the cohesion support necessary for the government survival?

How do political leaders balance the political forces that might split the government whether that be the ambitions of parties, putative successors, coalition partners, or parliamentary rebels? The essence of political life is this contest over position, strategies, values, and interests. Cabinet government provides the means for building consensus, for reconciling divergent interests, ambitions, and personalities. The circumstances differ: from single-party governments in Britain (much of the time but by no means always) to coalitions in the Netherlands and Denmark to the all-party non-coalition in Switzerland. Collective

responsibility remains a core belief for all of them. Maintaining collective processes are part of a continuing challenge; ministers all have a past and must solve problems in the present while usually hoping to have a future. Coalitions must compromise if they are to survive, and not all do. The breaking points may be different across systems, and leaks are one indication of system stress.

The leadership dilemma: command v persuasion

What levers are available for a prime minister to steer, even direct, their governments? Is leadership based on the power to persuade or on the prime ministers' predominance of resources, including their political capital? Does predominance (hard power) corrode persuasion (soft power)?

The issue of whether prime ministers have become presidents may be a Westminster obsession but emerging leader-centred collective government in the consensual coalition democracies is a persistent theme we need to explore; we can balance the findings with an appreciation that in other places there is an enduring concern that leaders do not, or at least should not, become any more powerful. So, we ask whether leaders in both systems now rely more on soft than hard power; do they steer rather than command?

The accountability dilemma: maintaining support v making unpopular decisions

In parliamentary democracies, the constitutional convention is that collective government relies on the support of the parties from which ministers are drawn, answers to the parliaments to which they are accountable, depends on the parliament to pass their legislation, and faces regular elections. This inherited tradition of accountabilities sets the parameters to action. Such parameters are not immutable. How do collective governments

satisfy the demands for accountability from parties, parliaments, and electorates while taking the unpopular yet unavoidable decisions involved in ruling any country?

Governments must act and, as with the Global Financial Crisis and the populist reaction it provoked, their actions can undermine their accountabilities. Ruling can involve toxic decisions that corrode both political reputation and accountability, yet rulers must give the appearance of decisiveness even when there is no obvious response or solution.

Summary

We used these plausible conjectures to develop the questions asked in our semi-structured interviews. We adjusted the questions subsequently to take account of those interviews. There is never a single, a simple, or even a correct answer to these dilemmas. They will be contingent on circumstance and personality. They will also be shaped by the history, traditions, and practices, which the members of the government have inherited, which they then interpret and apply. The dilemmas go the heart of the way that cabinet government is run. There are always choices to be made, and searches for a suitable balance between the alternatives. What all governments must do is ‘puzzle’ (to use Hugh Hecló’s evocative phrase⁵⁴) both about what they should do, and how they should do it.

These dilemmas lie at the core of cabinet government, ever-present and inevitable. In addition, governments must meet a series of specific challenges that will vary over time. Decision-making in crises make demands on process that more measured times can avoid. Each generation has its own set of challenges. In the past twenty years, cabinet governments have had to respond to the ‘easy’ solutions presented by populists, for whom facts are malleable. They must live with a 24-hour media that runs beyond their capacity to manage. In part, they have created a hyper-partisanship that leaves little middle ground because the

⁵⁴ H. Hecló, *Modern Social Politics in Britain and Sweden* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).

parties endlessly take uncompromising stands on key issues. And there are external threats such as the coronavirus, terrorism, and climate change that disrupt every plan, dream, or policy a government had determined to follow. Are old means adequate? What are the available tools to determine a response when many are dying of a virus for which there is yet no vaccine? These sudden emergencies make the routine processes of governing seem ponderous, and the dilemmas even more excruciating. How should cabinet governments respond when faced with what Kay and King call ‘radical uncertainty’?⁵⁵ These are the circumstances in which cabinet governments must work, necessarily reacting before they can collect the data, anticipating the direction they guess these known unknowns will take, while responsive to their electorates, accountable to parliaments in one form or other, and conscious of the need for survival. Covid 19 provided the devastating case of policy making on the run without the knowledge needed but with no time to collect it.

These key dilemmas therefore provide the continuing framework within which decisions must be made. This book opens up the black box of cabinet government to see how these dilemmas are managed across five parliamentary systems. All have different traditions and institutional structures, but all need to determine how collective support can be won and maintained. It examines different regimes to identify patterns of cabinet decision-making under conditions of present-day governance.

The book is organized in two sections. In Part I, we provide a brief summary of the traditions and myths about executive government that shape collective decision-making in each of the five countries under study. These brief summaries are designed to provide a skeletal structure for readers to understand how the key components of each country work. Then, in Part II, we organize the analysis around the key dilemmas described above. We want

⁵⁵ J. Kay and M. King. *Radical Uncertainty: Decision-Making for an Unknowable Future* (London: Bridge Street Press, 2020).

to see how the different countries manage the dilemmas of collective government, how they adjust to meet challenges, how they utilize practices and traditions to assist in their daily problems of governing.

Approach and Methods

We utilize a combination of traditional historical analysis and interviews. We employ an abductive approach: that is, we puzzle about the data in an iterative process that moves between observations and analysis to develop new explanations around the concepts of mutating traditions and shared dilemmas. We identify the different traditions that shape cabinet processes and practices and the shared dilemmas encountered by those who have to make cabinet processes work. Traditions are living constructs; multiple interpretations of traditions are a given. In this rendering, traditions can appear as context-specific, hewn together from rich local knowledge in ways that seemingly mitigate the prospect of meaningful comparison. But the dilemmas of daily practice that emerge from these divergent local traditions can share surprising and fruitful affinities. So this is our starting point; interviewees often have a nuanced appreciation of practices and can highlight different and unanticipated dilemmas.

Actors interpret their environment; they try to take advantage of opportunities as they seek to change the way the rules and practices are interpreted and applied; expectations change; conventions act as guidelines, not straitjackets. By reflecting *with* actors, we uncover the choices and questions they confront. And by understanding how they *see* these choices, as a reflection of the webs of belief in which they are embedded, we can seek to explain why actors do what they do. By appreciating their language and meanings we can better interpret their working world and their circumstances. When we ask how those in other countries manage the same dilemmas, we necessarily explore the reasons why their experience is either

similar or different, unlocking the comparative dimension of this approach. This activity is constant, iterative, and negotiated. We stress what the actors *can* do, not what they *should* do.

In any research timing can be crucial. We did the majority of our interviewing in 2016 and 2017. Our analysis seeks to reflect the political circumstances of the last 30 years. Our position is that, if the dilemmas of collective government are indeed as influential as we assert, they will survive occasional changes of political fortune. We are not trying to write a commentary on current affairs. These choices have consequences. In Denmark coalition governments have been predominant for most of the past 30 years. Our interviewees explained the way that consensus politics worked, emphasising the functioning of the cabinet committee system and the implications for prime ministers. Then in 2019 a single party minority government was formed and that changed many of the dynamics, including the working of the committee system and the relations of the prime minister with all her ministers. Our analysis remains founded on the consensus coalition form, which may well become the norm at any time when political fortunes change. Both in Denmark and elsewhere we sometimes allude to recent events, relying primarily on public information and the very occasional personal communication, but our emphasis remains on that 30 year period up to 2018. We had to stop somewhere too!

We drew on several sources to explore the project's three components. For the historical component, which examines the roots, development, and evolution of the traditions of collective decision-making in each jurisdiction, we used the following:

- a. Government papers and parliamentary records available through Hansard or its equivalent in each jurisdiction;
- b. Biographies, diaries, and autobiographies to consider the alternative accounts of particular events and attitudes to cabinet and collective processes; and

c. Secondary literature on prime minister and cabinet, drawing on numeric data when available.⁵⁶

To unpack the second component of beliefs and practices of cabinet and collective government of contemporary actors, we conducted interviews with practitioners at the centre of governments they included ministers, senior civil servants, or advisers (see Table 1.2). We asked them to reflect on the incidents and calculations that underpin collective cabinet government. The interviews allow us to explore the everyday practice around specific events.

We draw extensively on previous field work conducted by all three co-authors in Australia and the UK on past projects.⁵⁷ Over those years we have undertaken around 400

⁵⁶ See, for example, K. Dowding and P. Dumont, *The Selection of Ministers in Europe: Hiring and Firing* (London/New York: Routledge, 2009); and R. Shaw and C. Eichbaum, *Ministers, Minders and Mandarins: An International Study of Relationships at the Executive Summit of Parliamentary Democracies* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2018).

⁵⁷ For a selection of those earlier works, see G. Hawker, R. F. I. Smith and Patrick Weller, *Politics and Policy in Australia* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1979); Rhodes, *Everyday Life in British Government*; R. A. W. Rhodes and A. Tiernan, *Lessons in Government* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2014); R. A. W. Rhodes and P. Weller (eds), *The Changing World of Top Officials: Mandarins or Valets?* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001); P. Weller and M. Grattan, *Can Ministers Cope? Australian Ministers at Work* (Sydney: Hutchinson, 1981); P. Weller, *First among Equals: Prime Ministers in Westminster Systems* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin Australia, 1985); Weller, *Malcolm Fraser PM*; P. Weller, *Dodging Raindrops: John Button: A Political Biography* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1999); P. Weller, *Australia's Mandarins: The Frank and the Fearless?* (London: Allen and Unwin 2001); Weller, 'Cabinet Government: An Elusive Ideal?'; Weller, *Cabinet Government in Australia*; R. A. W. Rhodes, J. Wanna, and P. Weller, *Westminster Compared* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); A. Tiernan and P. Weller, *Learning to be a Minister* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2010); P. Weller, J. Scott, and B. Stevens, *From Post Box to Power House: A Centenary History of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2011); P. Weller, *Kevin Rudd, Twice Prime Minister* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2014); P. Weller, *The Prime*

interviews with prime ministers, ministers, permanent secretaries, senior officials, and advisers in both countries. These works provide a solid basis for our work and we supplemented that foundation with a small number of additional interviews in the UK and Australia; we regard our work as cumulative, gradually building a picture of the way that governing works across all countries. Table 1.2 provides the details of the interviews we undertook in the three countries on which we are working for the first time.

INSERT TABLE 1.2 ABOUT HERE

Table 1.2 Number of interviews by country and position of interviewee

	Denmark	Netherlands	Switzerland
Prime Ministers and Cabinet Ministers	7	10	3
Public Servants	13	12	4
Political Adviser	0	2	
Helicopters	1	2	
TOTALS	21	26	7

We used a common semi-structured interview schedule. All transcripts were checked against the recording. As the first step, we adapted the process fine-tuned over forty years to reveal the key themes. We read the transcripts to identify the themes, dilemmas, and traditions that, from the literature, we would expect. Then we re-read the interviews identifying the individual cases that illustrate how the interviewees understood these problems and how they were shaped. As the interviews were semi-structured, the course of the discussion varied as our interviewees followed their line of argument in different ways and in turn provoked specific follow-up questions. Answers and comments are always contingent on the context of the discussion. The purpose of the schedule in Appendix B is not

Ministers' Craft: Why Some Succeed and Others Fail in Westminster Systems (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); D. C. Grube, *Megaphone Bureaucracy: Speaking Truth to Power in the Age of the New Normal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); D. C. Grube, *Prime Ministers and Rhetorical Governance* (London: Palgrave 2013).

to imply we pursued any rigid process but to act as an aide-memoire to consult as a means of reminding us what needed to be covered and what was still outstanding. There is no substitute in such cases for the interviewers remembering the context of the comments, hence the need for an abductive approach, constantly going back to our sources.⁵⁸

When reporting the interviews here, we made minor corrections to the English. All interviews were conducted on a citation but not for attribution basis. All interviews were transcribed. Transcripts were divided into thematic categories, guided by earlier work on British ministers and civil servants. We identify each interview by the interviewee's position—prime minister or minister (MN), public servant (PS), or political adviser (PA)—and a country: Netherlands (NL), Denmark (DK), Switzerland (CH), United Kingdom (UK), and Australia (AU). So DK MN is a Danish minister and UK PA is a British political adviser.⁵⁹

All methods have their strengths and weaknesses and elite interviews are no exception. The danger with thematic analysis is that the researcher latches onto the vivid example that dramatizes the point. And we do. However, we provide also a handful of more prosaic supporting quotes. We do not claim that our interviews constitute a representative sample. They comprise those people willing to speak. For every person who agreed to be interviewed, we had another who refused. PMs, serving and retired, were especially elusive.

⁵⁸ This set of practices, honed over the years, has recently been called 'thematic analysis'. It systematizes what we have done over the years. See V. Braun and V. Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2006): 77–101.

⁵⁹ In this project we developed a codebook for use with NVivo. In drawing up the codebook, we were guided also by earlier work on British ministers and civil servants. We used NVivo for an analysis of the interviews undertaken in Denmark and The Netherlands. In Switzerland, we applied the same themes and categories manually without the aid of the software given the smaller n. The current version of the codebook is reproduced as Appendix A.

When we did get the interviews, interviewees insisted on anonymity. It is not only a question of access but also of secrecy. Many of the topics are ‘delicate’. Ministers and public servants work hard to build their reputations and we respect their right to protect them.

Elite interviews are an essential part of any attempt to understand the inner workings of government. There is nothing ‘mere’ about their descriptions of life in government because their voices should be heard.⁶⁰ We triangulate the interview data whenever possible both with other interviewees and with documentary sources, biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs. The interviews are a core component of this book and they are a source of rich data. They provide vivid and sustainable accounts on which we can build our plausible conjectures about the way that the systems work

The third component is the formal and informal rules and guidelines for collective decision-making—the embedded practices. We analysed the ‘rules’ of government written down in cabinet manuals and handbooks, codes of behaviour, and ethics guidelines.⁶¹ Our concern is not just the current rules; we also show how their development over the past forty years has shaped their standing and how they have been enforced.

The Country Selection

We study five different polities—Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The emphasis in our case selection was on divergence in the governing context. The settings in which these cabinet governments work vary widely in terms of regime type and historical context. Lijphart’s classic typology of regime types in Western Europe focused on the distinction between majoritarian systems in which one party

⁶⁰ J. Gerring, ‘Mere Description’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 42(4) (2012): 721–46.

⁶¹ See, for example, A. Baker, *Prime Ministers and the Rule Book* (London: Politico's, 2000); *Cabinet Handbook* (Canberra: Department of Premier and Cabinet, 1st edn, 1983); and *Questions of Procedure for Ministers (QPM)* (London: Cabinet Office, first published 1992).

dominates the legislature through its numbers and multi-party consensual systems in which the need for negotiated outcomes is embedded through a proportional voting system. He also distinguished between unitary and federal systems. Lijphart argued that cabinets can play a greater central role in consensus style decision-making when their membership drew on several different parties.⁶² We used two criteria for our country selections. We wanted countries that shared a set of parliamentary and democratic norms but across a range of governing contexts. First, we selected established democracies, with different levels of accountability to parliaments, rather than the cabinets of developing countries or in authoritarian regimes, in order to limit variations in the stages of development of governing institutions. Second, by focusing on jurisdictions with long histories of cabinet government, we can establish more comparable patterns of cabinet practice over time. The different governing contexts will also reveal the variations in the ways key actors interpret the practices of cabinet government. Lijphart's schema (majoritarian/consensual and unitary/federal) provided four quadrants, from each of which we drew one country:

- one majoritarian/unitary: United Kingdom;
- one majoritarian/federal: Australia;
- one consensual/unitary: Denmark;
- one consensual/federal: Switzerland.

We add the Netherlands because there seemed to be ambiguities about its positioning. It had a long-established system of proportional representation (PR) where power is negotiated between the many parties elected and reflected in multi-party cabinets in a governing coalition. The Netherlands is a unitary state, but the traditional pillarization of Dutch society

⁶² Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracies*; see also R. Taagepera, 'Arend Lijphart and Dimensions of Democracy', in M Markus (ed.), *Democracy and Institutions: The Life Work of Arend Lijphart* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000) for a development of Lijphart's original schema.

provided potential components of a quasi-federal structure but determined by social connections not geography.

Cabinet governments in the five countries have much in common: parliamentary oversight, collective responsibility, and support from civil services. They also have distinct variations: proportional representation versus single-member electorates, coalition or single-party governments, different processes of decision-making. If we were to put them on a spectrum determined, for instance, by the levels of centralization, at first sight it would have Britain at one end, with Australia comparatively close but towards the middle, Denmark and the Netherlands in the centre, and Switzerland as the outlier at the other end.

We have not imposed an identical format on each chapter because we try to capture the diverse practices that countries have adopted.. We identify traditions and their key myths. We try to capture the essence of executive politics in their complex specificity while providing enough context for an understanding of the environment in which issues are considered and decisions made. We start with the most centralized country, the UK, and move to the least centralized, Switzerland.

We need to make our own position clear. We tried to start by making no assumptions about the superiority of one national practice over another, or at least we did not do so *ab initio*. We want to avoid the national chauvinism that assumes familiar practices in one's own country are necessarily the best. As authors we are most familiar with the parliamentary Westminster systems of Australia and the UK. Of the three of us, one was educated in the UK but has lived and worked in Australia; one was educated in Australia and now works in Britain; the third was educated and now works in the UK but spent a decade in senior positions in Australia. We are all instinctively familiar with the ways of the Westminster forms of government, aware of their idiosyncrasies and more generally of the unstated assumptions that shape the ways they work. Both countries speak a version of English, both

in reference to local argots and politics-speak. That does not mean that we are necessarily persuaded, with Lord Hailsham, that cabinet government was of ‘one of the permanent gifts conferred by British political genius on the science and art of civilized government’.⁶³ Nor do we espouse the attribution of the infinite wisdom to those colonial politicians who constructed the Australian constitution and its narrow derivative vision. (And yes, some Australian politicians have lauded their predecessors in those terms). Indeed, our problem may be the opposite. We are so aware of their shortcomings that the grass may readily seem greener elsewhere. We have tried to educate ourselves with the traditions and practices of politics in the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Denmark, working with scholars working in the countries who helped to organize our interviews and guided us through local terms and practices. But, however much we read, that effort can never provide the same depth of knowledge or instinctive capacity to interpret hidden meanings between the lines of political discourse that we have for the UK or Australia. Consequently, if the politics in the European countries seem more reasonable and considered, that may be because we do not see the undercurrents of political bastardry that exist there too, not because they are better, although by the end of the research we thought we could make a case that they probably were!⁶⁴ We can but try to maintain our balance.

⁶³ Cited in P. Hennessy, *The Hidden Wiring: Unearthing the British Constitution* (London: Indigo, 1996), 98.

Hyperbole? Hubris? Complacency? Myopia?

⁶⁴ Watching *Borgen* can be a great introduction to the undercurrents of Danish political practice, and an antidote to any assumption that politics is somehow better elsewhere. It is all the more persuasive, perhaps, if combined with a little, but only a little, knowledge. Like *Yes Minister* it is seductive, but which truths does it uncover?