

The Prime Minister in the Hot Seat. The Executive Power in the United Kingdom from World War I to the Aftermath of World War II

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Introduction

In the twentieth century, the relationship between the powers of the state – monarchy, Cabinet, parliament and people – underwent profound changes. Also the relationship between monarchy and Cabinet changed: the executive power came to rest with the Cabinet and in particular with the Prime Minister. The social circumstances around the First World War in 1914 announced systemic developments towards World War II and also foreshadowed the post war constitutional relationships. This period closes at the end of the seventies, with the arrival of Thatcher.

1. A Shift in the Position of the Executive Power

The First World War is seen as a turning point in the history of the United Kingdom.

The great sacrifices for the war, the huge commitment of men and women, and the enormous capital expenditure on equipment. It was the First Total War, in which society was largely transformed for delivering the war effort necessary to combat the axis-powers. Organising this kind of mobilization was a considerable effort from executive power, which made it necessary to centralize government¹.

However, even before the war, British society faced major challenges. The existing Liberal and Conservative party incorporated the tradition of the nineteenth century and before. Those parties had to adapt to new societal trends, although the old elite would prefer to have continuity. They had to confront the protests from women, the working class and Irish nationalists, who all asked to be represented fairly. Those people asked to have a share in society, its politics, economy and welfare. In fact, they requested government to take itself a more active role. This meant more state intervention and that caused resistance from the

establishment, because increased state intervention would restrict its power and also be costly.

First, the emancipation of the working class. At the end of the nineteenth century, the working class emerged as a political, economical and social force. This power became visible through the rise of trade unions. Also with the founding of the Labour Party in 1900, the working class turned into a national political force. Between the party and the trade unions close bonds existed, as the party was dependent on the unions for funds and parliamentary candidates. In the general elections of 1910 Labour won 42 of 670 seats in parliament. With the organisation of labourers, and with increased cost of living, industrial unrest increased. National strikes broke out on the railways in 1911 and in the coal mines the following year. Several clashes between strikers and police took place. The worst year for disputes was 1912 when over 40 million working days were lost².

Secondly, women were advocating their right to vote in public elections. Since 1897 'suffragists' had tried to campaign in a constitutional way by peaceful lobbying, with the well-known representative Millicent Fawcett as chair of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). Opposite, the so-called 'suffragettes' started to stand up for women's rights in an aggressive manner. The most prominent group of suffragettes was the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), founded in 1903 by Emmeline Pankhurst. Their campaigns were intimidating and increasingly shocking. They organised demonstrations, disrupted political meetings, chained themselves to railings, vandalised on the street, smashed windows of West End clubs and

committed arson in houses of politicians, such as the one of Lloyd George. Many suffragettes ended up in prison, where they often went on hunger strike. Because the authorities did not want them to die as a kind of martyr, they were force-fed. This was such a nasty intervention that public opinion turned in their favor. In 1913 the so-called 'Cat and Mouse Act' was passed, so that severely malnourished people were released, but would be picked up again when they had recovered. In June 1913, suffragette Emily Davison threw herself before the horse of king George V during the Epsom Derby. Her death was a shocking event, also because she as a martyr had involved the royal power. The accident was actually about the power of the people opposite the Crown.

Thirdly, in 1914 the third Home Rule Bill had passed Westminster to establish self-government for the Irish people. The Bill provided for a parliament in Dublin for the whole of Ireland. The dominant anglo-philic elite in the northern province Ulster was a protestant minority in catholic surroundings and feared a loss of power and status. They were supported by the leader of the Conservative Party, Andrew Bonar Law, and their leaders established the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) of some 90,000 men. In reaction to the establishment of the UVF, the Irish nationalists formed their own volunteer army, the Irish Nationalist Volunteers (INV). Because of these private armies, it was feared that a civil war could break out, when a parliament was installed.

King George V warned on 21 July 1914 that «the cry of civil war is on the lips of the most responsible and sober-minded of my people»³. Some days later, a detachment of the King's Own Scottish Borderers fired on

a crowd in Dublin which they suspected of being arms dealers for the Irish nationalists. They killed four civilians and wounded many others. This caused anger in Ireland and was in the news in Britain under terrifying headlines, like 'Slaughter in Ireland' and 'Fighting in Dublin'.

In August 1914 however, the outbreak of the war ended this society divided. The labourers and unions, the militant women and the Irish nationalists united behind the British cause to fight the war against Germany. Britain's relative position in the world economy had declined after 1880. The decline was the inevitable result of the rest of the world becoming more industrialised. In 1913 though, it was still the largest exporter of manufactured goods, accounting for 30 percent of the World Total. Moreover, Britain was also the largest importer of food and raw materials. So, the country provided a market for the world. Britain was economically in a good position when World War I was to break out.

Early reforms

Interesting enough, state intervention already had taken place with the reforms of the Liberal government from 1906 under the radical Henry Campbell-Bannerman. CB, as he was known, introduced free school meals for all children. He also empowered local authorities to purchase agricultural land from private landlords. He was Britain's first Prime Minister, but unfortunately he died in 1908 due to ill-health. His successor Herbert Henry Asquith was also dedicated to a reformist policy. Important acts implemented were the Old

Age Pensions Act of 1908, which gave an allowance to people over seventy, and the National Insurance Act of 1911 against sickness and unemployment. These Acts can be seen as the beginnings of modern social welfare in Britain. The Liberal Party rejected the old laissez-faire policies by enacting interventionist state policies against poverty.

In 1911 the Parliamentary Act was passed, by which the power of the House of Lords was curtailed, and instead the House of Commons became dominant in the British constitutional system. This meant that the cabinet of ministers was exclusively and fully responsible to parliament. Notably, King George V helped the government to get the law passed, because the House of Lords opposed the act, because of its implications that the balance of powers was directed towards the electorate and its representatives. The king created hundreds of peers in the House of Lords to overcome its negative majority. By that the primary function of the House of Commons changed into a controlling and legislative body of government.

The House of Lords remained an old institute, not at least because of the old representatives of the nobility. Although this institution was not really democratic, it would not be possible to reform it for more than 100 years. Since the House had little impact, there was little need for it. The House did not constitute a threat to the executive power⁴. Now, the monarchy faded into the background, while the cabinet of ministers was responsible for government, controlled by parliament and monitored by the electorate⁵. An active government was expected from the Cabinet.

2. *Defence of the Realm: the Executive Power Strengthened*

The outbreak of the First World War led to a change of the constitutional balance in the United Kingdom, with the executive branch acquiring unprecedented powers via the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA). This legislation, passed without significant parliamentary debate, marked a substantial, though temporary, shift from parliamentary sovereignty towards cabinet government. As Asquith was more of a committed chair than a dynamic leader, he was forced in 1915 to form a coalition government with the Conservative and Labour Party. Due to a lack of guidance and military defeats, David Lloyd George replaced Asquith as Prime Minister in the fall of 1916.

Special Powers to the Cabinet

DORA, enacted on August 8, 1914, just four days after the declaration of war, functioned as an enabling act that allowed the government to rule by decree through so-called Orders in Council. This meant the executive could create new, law-like regulations without the lengthy process of parliamentary approval. DORA bestowed special powers to the Cabinet. The scope of DORA was vast and expanded as the war progressed. Initially aimed at military security, such as preventing espionage and securing ports, the powers were eventually used to regulate virtually every aspect of public life: from rationing and press censorship, to banning kite flying and whistling for taxis. A significant amendment also allowed the government to confiscate factories and land for

war production. DORA legalised, among other things, the trial of civilians by military courts, which constituted a break with traditional civil liberties.

In daily practice, the Cabinet preferred to use authoritative powers as less as possible. It favoured indirect powers. The reason was that the ministers were afraid that the use of DORA would alienate the people from the common cause. The Cabinet needed a favourable public opinion and the support of the people. Thus, there was a trend towards democracy as public opinion became more important, also because the constituency would determine the outcome of the elections.

Besides DORA, in 1914 all kinds of acts were passed, such as the Prize Court Act, the Postponement of Payments Act, the Military Service Acts, the Munitions of War Acts and other, most wartime related legislation. People did not always accept the rules, filed lawsuits or asked for compensation. Property or business owners filed lawsuits against the government, which suffered a number of defeats in the courts over the legality of regulations and orders it issued, such as to claim land and buildings. Organised labour challenged unreasonable rent or labour controls by a political activist approach and in this way were successful in achieving law reforms.

In reality people did not always comply to regulations and orders. For example, they broke the food control regulations and the drinking restrictions. They went on strike, they did not 'put that light out', or they deserted from the army. It is not clear to what extent this was the case. There is no research into this behaviour yet and it is probably of little use as many cases probably went unreported⁶.

In the face of the common enemy, government and citizens essentially worked together. It was not simply a top-down management by the government. Between government and national representatives of labour and capital, collaboration and negotiation took place. It was not only the military-industrial complex, but also the consumer-trade union complex that was in charge. Application of laws, such as DORA, was often done by local authorities, which allowed for a situational approach. In this way, government tried to deal more conveniently with dissenting opinions and opposition to its measures. For example, the government allowed patriotic militias to disrupt meetings of anti-war activists, instead of using DORA power to prohibit them.

A War Cabinet

The way in which the Cabinet worked during the First World War can be seen as marking the beginnings of modern government in Britain. The somewhat casual and relaxed way inherited from the eighteenth century proved to be inadequate in a world that was becoming increasingly faster due to communication by telegraph and telephone. In addition, such communication enabled central political decision-making⁷.

The government remained answerable to Parliament, as was shown by the Maurice debate in May 1918 when Lloyd George had to answer allegations that he had misled the House on several military issues. The discipline of balanced budgets lapsed. War expenses were covered by parliamentary votes of credit. By this development, the control

of expenditures by the Treasury became ineffective in the absence of detailed estimates. Only after the war Treasury control over the departments' expenditure was restored.

The Cabinet changed between 1914 and 1916, as the full Cabinet of over twenty ministers ceased to meet and gave way to a War Cabinet of between five and seven persons. The activities of the ministries of Munitions, Shipping and Food represented a significant move from a market economy towards a command economy. In 1916 the Cabinet Office was created as a secretariat for the meetings of the Cabinet and its committees. From then on, the Cabinet meetings were organised more systematically, with a planning, agenda and minutes⁸.

The Monarchy Behind the Scenes

Monarchism was an important cultural force for the British war effort and was a key element in the wartime creation of the idea of a specifically 'British' home front. The king and the royal family were seen as an important wartime symbol of 'home'. They contributed to home front cohesion through wartime work, including fundraising, visiting the wounded, and stimulating working-class satisfaction through royal visits to munitions factories, mines and shipbuilding industries.

The royal family was largely successful in dealing with the challenges that waging 'total war' presented for the monarchy. Monarchism was one of the 'unspoken assumptions' of the British war effort, as can be seen from the ubiquitous expression 'For King and Country'. This term was so omni-

DEFENCE OF THE REALM. E.P. 8.			
MINISTRY OF FOOD.			
BREACHES OF THE RATIONING ORDER			
The undermentioned convictions have been recently obtained:—			
Court	Date	Nature of Offence	Result
HENDON - -	29th Aug., 1918	Unlawfully obtaining and using ration books -	3 Months' Imprisonment
WEST HAM -	29th Aug., 1918	Being a retailer & failing to detach proper number of coupons	Fined £20
SMETHWICK -	22nd July, 1918	Obtaining meat in excess quantities - - -	Fined £50 & £5 5s. costs
OLD STREET -	4th Sept., 1918	Being a retailer selling to unregistered customer	Fined £72 & £5 5s. costs
OLD STREET -	4th Sept., 1918	Not detaching sufficient coupons for meat sold -	Fined £25 & £2 2s. costs
CHESTER-LE-STREET	4th Sept., 1918	Being a retailer returning number of registered customers in excess of counterfoils deposited - - -	Fined £50 & £3 5s. costs
HIGH WYCOMBE	7th Sept., 1918	Making false statement on application for and using Ration Books unlawfully - - - - -	Fined £40 & £6 4s. costs
Enforcement Branch, Local Authorities Division, MINISTRY OF FOOD. September, 1918.			

Poster of the Defence of the Realm (DORA), Ministry of Food. Breaches of the Rationing Order, September 1918

present in official and popular war culture at the time, e.g. on recruitment posters, as to have become a cliché for later generations. The monarchy was to a large degree sacralised, even in the sense that the king was seen as the intermediation with God as the only giver of victory⁹.

In the wartime press the Britain's monarchy was presented as egalitarian and democratic, as it treated all subjects equally. The importance of the monarchy being seen not to discriminate on class grounds was a key wartime strategy upon which King George V constantly insisted and which proved immensely successful in bolstering support for the monarchy. Such royal efforts in the war to reach out for the support of the working classes were not only meant for a united front. By 1917 with the Russian revolutions, these efforts were also meant to address the risk of war weariness spilling over into revolution. Lloyd George's popularity and

charisma were a source of deep concern to the king who feared that the Prime Minister might have authoritarian tendencies.

Crown, Cabinet, Commons and constituency balanced and complemented each other. Already before the war, the king realised the shifting trend towards increased democracy and that this necessitated a more democratic style of monarchy, which would be seen as supportive of parliamentary government and interacting with all kind of people. He also anticipated the voting rights for a larger part of the male population and also for women. For this purpose, new honours were introduced so that more ordinary people could receive royal recognition, including the Military Medal in 1916 and the Order of the British Empire in 1917. In 1917 the royal dynasty was renamed Windsor. This invention of tradition masked the radical nature of what was effectively an attempt to reposition the monarchy, includ-

ing a departure from its German roots. In this way new relationships arose between the constitutional powers.

In the 1918 general elections, the party that gained the third highest number of votes was Sinn Féin, which campaigned for Irish independence. Sinn Féin publicly claimed to be the party embodying the legacy of the leaders of the Easter Rising in 1916, which was the first armed conflict since the Irish Rebellion of 1798. The leaders of the rising, who signed the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, were killed so brutally by the British army that their quest for independence gained support among the Irish population. The bloody War of Independence from 1919 till 1921 led to the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 as a dominion within the British Empire. The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 divided the island, with the north, Ulster, remaining part of the United Kingdom. Full sovereignty followed with the Republic of Ireland Act in 1949.

3. *The Executive Power in the Interwar Period: A Return to 'Normalcy'?*

After the war, most people longed back for the pre-war society. They tried to reconstruct the liberal non-interventionist state with the free market. So the intensified wartime control was suspended for the traditional role of government. Nevertheless, people were also used to the interventionist approach¹⁰.

David Lloyd George's strategy in 1918 was to win the elections with the support of the Conservatives and a group of Liberals loyal to him and to defeat the Labour party. The elections of December 1918 introduced

universal suffrage for men over the age of twenty-one and for women over the age of thirty. In 1928 also women over the age of twenty-one would get the vote. The age limit for women provided for a gradual transition in the way that they could not dominate the majority of the electorate.

Lloyd George conformed to the new electorate and the political challenges. He promoted a program of social reform focused on housing, education and health that would outdo the Labour Party and show that the government would treat all classes equally. The aim was a 'a land fit for heroes to live in'. It was a statement of national unity, social reform and patriotism¹¹.

The coalition government of Lloyd George won. He saw himself confronted with an overwhelming load of political issues, international ones such as the negotiations at Versailles and the menace of Bolshevism, but more pressing domestic ones such as demobilisation of troops, increasing costs of living, strikes, the implications of a wider franchise, the war of independence in Ireland.

The events in Russia in 1917, and the Spartacist uprising in Berlin from the 5th to 12th of January 1919, provided a warning. At the end of January 1919, Glasgow was confronted with Red Clydeside, the trade union movement around the banks of the River Clyde. The Clyde Workers' Committee issued a 'call to arms' for a forty-hour working week, included improved conditions for the workers. On 31 January, a massive rally took place in the city centre of Glasgow. The police tried to clear the way, which led to violence and a series of charges with batons. The Sheriff called for military aid, but when mainly Scottish and veteran troops arrived, violence was already extincted.

British industries faced growing international competition. Employers had to reduce their costs to compete, and tried to cut wages which provoked labour unrest. Instead of free trade, more attention was paid to internal affairs, especially the need of domestic consumption. In January 1918, a Consumers Council was created to advise the Ministry of Food. It developed a socialist policy of consumption. The experience of the war showed that the economy could be planned and regulated to create a greater sense of fairness.

Reforms After the War

The period between the First and Second World War was marked by a fundamental tension in the exercise of executive power. Government started with the process of demobilization and the dismantling of the war state immediately following the armistice of November 1918. Instead of DORA came the Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act 1919. This act legally obligated employers to restore pre-war trade union practices that had been suspended during the war to speed up munitions production. A direct consequence was that thousands of women, who had filled vital industrial roles during the war, were dismissed from their jobs to make way for returning soldiers. Other war measures, such as food rationing, remained in place until 1921 due to persistent shortages, but the general trend was one of deregulation.

On the other hand, return to normalcy seemed impossible. The war had further normalized the idea that the state, and especially the executive power, could have

an active role in managing society and the economy. This interventionism left a lasting legacy, particularly in the form of the Emergency Powers Act 1920. Faced with post-war labour unrest, such as the Liverpool police strike in 1919, the government realized it needed a new instrument to maintain public order once DORA ceased to apply. The EPA granted the government permanent powers to declare a state of emergency in the event of serious disruptions to vital services, such as strikes in the mining industry or at the railways. It allowed the executive to act quickly via Orders in Council.

The Cabinet paid also attention to social reforms. The Education Act did instruct local authorities to provide schools for all ages. The housing programme was far from perfect, but it marked a major intervention. The public spending on healthcare, education and welfare remained at a higher level than before the war, driven by Prime Minister Lloyd George's promise of 'a land fit for heroes'. While implementation often fell short due to spending cuts, the responsibility of government for social security gradually expanded. The return to the Gold Standard in 1925 by Winston Churchill was a last attempt to revert to pre-war economic orthodoxy. However, the stock market crash in 1929 and the Great Depression thereafter made it clear that a purely *laissez-faire* approach was insufficient. This led to new forms of state intervention in the 1930s, such as the introduction of reciprocal, preferential tariff rates between the UK and its dominions, formalised after the 1932 Ottawa Conference. A step further away from the liberal free trade tradition.

The executive power in the UK during the interwar period balanced between the

nostalgia for the past with a free market and a limited state, and the desire for the interventionist approach that DORA had further supported. The Emergency Powers Act and subsequent economic measures demonstrated that a way was paved for the executive to expand further state involvement, which would make possible a welfare state after World War II.

The Executive Power and the Fascist Challenge of the 1930s

In the early 1930s the United Kingdom faced a fascist movement, led by Sir Oswald Mosley. This party claimed that fascism offered a more effective answer to the economic and social problems in society. The British executive power's initial response to this challenge was cautious. In the end specific legislative measures were taken to maintain public order, ultimately leading to proscription during the war.

Oswald Mosley, a former Member of Parliament for both the Conservatives and Labour, founded the New Party in 1931. In January 1932, after a visit to Benito Mussolini in Italy, he changed the name of the party into the British Union of Fascists (BUF). Inspired by the success of Mussolini in Italy, the BUF advocated for a centralised, authoritarian state and a planned economy to tackle the unemployment that arose following the Great Depression. They criticised the parliamentary system as ineffective and sluggish.

Mosley copied Mussolini's Squadristi by forming his own paramilitary force: the Blackshirts. This group was known for its violence. Fascists attempted to exploit

economic anxieties by blaming minorities, which led to a militant anti-Jewish campaign. The violence against Jews and political opponents did not fit into the existing British political culture. Clashes with anti-fascist leftwing groups occurred regularly. Initially, the BUF enjoyed some support, including from press magnate Lord Rothermere, and was estimated to have 50,000 members at its peak in 1934. A crucial turning point in public perception formed the Olympia Rally in 1934, when anti-fascist demonstrators were violently removed by the Blackshirts. The public outrage over this violence significantly reduced the BUF's support and positive press coverage.

The Battle of Cable Street on October 4, 1936 led to further denunciation of the BUF. On this day, Mosley was planning a march through East End of London, traditionally the district of the Jewish community. With a petition signed by 100,000 people, The Jewish People Council appealed to the Minister of the Interior to ban the march. As politicians did not succeed in banning the march, people of East End decided to defend themselves. The communist newspaper *Daily Worker* called on people to block the march. Also the Irish dock workers decided to help against the fascist intimidation. Mosley rallied his supporters at the Tower of London. They were accompanied by six thousand police officers, partly on horses, to clear the way.

As the route was blocked, Mosley led the march via Cable Street. In Cable Street the fascists encountered barricades, and boiling water and rotting fruit was thrown from the windows from the upper floors. After fighting broke out, the police withdrew and advised Mosley to do the same, which he

complied with. The anti-fascists considered this withdrawal as a victory, and parties were held in East End.

The British National Government led by Conservative Stanley Baldwin from 1935 till 1937 and thereafter by his successor Neville Chamberlain, was faced with the question of how to deal with a movement that was openly anti-democratic but attempted to position itself within the bounds of the law. The escalation of violence and the growing concern for public order, particularly following the events at Cable Street, forced the government into action. In 1936 parliament passed the Public Order Act, which gave the executive the power to regulate the route of public processions, or to ban them to prevent disorder. This law provided for the prohibition of paramilitary organisations, and banned the wearing of political uniforms in public spaces. The law was specifically aimed at BUF's Blackshirts. Their ability to dominate street politics, was significantly diminished by this legislation. After Cable Street, Mosley's party was not fancy anymore.

The executive power decided to prohibit the BUF definitively with the outbreak of the Second World War. The government feared that British fascists would act as a 'fifth column' of Nazi power and undermine the British war effort. In May 1940, Mosley and other leading BUF members were arrested and interned without trial under emergency law. The political movement had been effectively disabled. Thus, the executive power in the UK responded to the fascist challenge quite late, with legislative measures to maintain public order. When the war broke out, the BUF was eliminated as a potential internal security threat.

4. *The Second World War: the Executive Power at its Zenith*

At the outbreak of war in September 1939, Neville Chamberlain formed the Chamberlain war ministry. As a consequence of the failed intervention in the Norwegian Campaign from April till June 1940, Chamberlain lost the confidence of Parliament. Winston Churchill succeeded him and formed a national coalition government that included all major parties, including Labour and Liberals.

During the Second World War, the executive power in the United Kingdom underwent a profound transformation, with the government allotted extraordinary powers to ensure a national war effort. This shift was characterised by the formation of a national unity government under Winston Churchill and the introduction of far-reaching legislation that deeply intervened in the daily lives of citizens.

The executive power was expanded by the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act in 1939, passed just before the declaration of war. On the basis of this act, the government had the authority to take almost any action deemed necessary or desirable for public safety, the defence of the realm, the maintenance of public order, and the efficient prosecution of the war through defence regulations.

This government was led by a small War Cabinet, like in the first World War, which had proven to be the most effective. The Churchill War Cabinet consisted of only five members to facilitate rapid decision-making. Only two members remained constant throughout the war: Churchill himself as Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, and Labour leader Clement Attlee as Depu-

ty Prime Minister and Lord Privy Seal, later Lord President of the Council. Other key figures in the Churchill wartime coalition from 1940 to 1945, such as Labour's 'Minister of Labour' Ernest Bevin and Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, ensured broad political and public support.

In 1940, the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act was further extended, giving the government even greater control over all the nation's human and material resources, in such a way that it made possible a total warfare state. The executive power expanded its control over virtually every aspect of society, with traditional individual freedoms temporarily curtailed in the name of national survival. This included strict censorship and control over the flow of information through the Ministry of Information.

The difference with the First World War was the extent to which civilians were affected, not the extent of their commitment. Also in the first World War society transformed for the sake of winning the war, with total commitment of the population, such as economic mobilization with industry converted for mass production of weapons and ammunition, and population rationing. During the Second World War there was more of a drive for destruction, which was made possible by the state of the art at that time, for example aircraft, tanks and radio communications. The result was many more civilian casualties from bombing of cities and genocide.

Under the leadership of Bevin, the Cabinet efficiently organised the entire British workforce for the war effort, deploying millions of men and women into essential war industries, agriculture, and the armed forces. The government directed the econ-

omy through planning and subsidies, and even banned strikes to maintain production levels.

During the Second World War, the British executive power saw an unprecedented centralisation of authority, made possible by emergency legislation and supported by a national unity government. This drastic expansion of state power was widely accepted by the public and Parliament as a necessary measure to achieve victory. These powers enabled the executive to effectively coordinate the total warfare effort.

Sense of a Common Cause

The Second World War created a unity in Great-Britain, and in a sense also in the British Empire. The accession of Winston Churchill to the British premiership in May 1940 meant that all energy of government was put into the war effort. As a descendant of the combative John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough, he wrote a book about his great-great-grandfather. Winston symbolized the old conservative tradition with a belief in freedom of choice and decisiveness. In his first speech as Prime Minister, Churchill made clear to the House of Commons that the goal of his government was 'V'; victory of the war¹².

With his use of rhetoric, Churchill underlined the importance of a feeling of solidarity and belonging. He called for the cause of freedom and democracy, which across the Empire was answered with extraordinary acceptance and even enthusiasm for the war effort. The positive side of British imperialism, with its peacetime free press, civil rights, habeas corpus, cultivation of

élites, and vague promises of self-government, paid enormous dividends during the war. The Statute of Westminster in 1931 had provided for full autonomy of the Dominions, but the former colonies such as Australia, New Zealand and South Africa joined Britain at war, because they felt a bond of unity in this regard.

A People's War

During the Battle of Britain in 1940, Sir Ivor Jennings wrote *The British Constitution*, in which he argued that government is formed by the majority in parliament, which in turn is chosen by general elections. According to him, public opinion is the most important deciding force in politics, so that the decisions of the Cabinet depend not so much on parliamentary support, as well as on the effect these may have on the public opinion¹³. After the World War, constituency government became even more important than parliamentary government. Ministerial responsibility transformed from parliamentary accountability to public exposure. As political force, the constituency became more important than Cabinet, Commons and Crown.

At the time many contemporaries felt that the scale and impact of the war changed the composition of the Empire. In 1942 the Governor of Uganda, Sir Charles Dundas, compared the war to the one in 1914-1918 and concluded that it would have «an even more rousing influence, chiefly political and social, and it will be sheer blindness not to foresee the logical consequences»¹⁴. The feeling that colonial politics needed a new approach, was also seeping through

the Colonial Office. Its people started to believe in the idea of government-sponsored 'development', which could result on the one hand in more economic efficiency and productivity, and on the other hand in improved living standards and reduced social and political unrest in the colonies. They hoped that this approach would show, especially to the United States, that their country was willing to respect people's right to self-determination¹⁵.

The World War II period is significant for the powers around ministerial responsibility in the UK, because it was to a significant extent a people's war. So the people with their voting rights partly determined the course of the war. They supported war monger Churchill, but when the war was successfully concluded, they disposed of him. During the war he was a very powerful Prime Minister, probably the most powerful in centuries, but he could only use that power to win the war. After that he had to give it up. It looks like J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. It is not easy for a person to cope with such a transition, but this time Churchill did it relatively easily because of his successes in the war¹⁶.

5. *The Executive After World War II: Decolonization and Domestic Change*

The end of the war marked a swift return to parliamentary sovereignty. The 1945 elections resulted in a landslide victory for the Labour Party. Winston Churchill's success story was not strong enough to keep him in the office. Why not?

The insight of the philosopher Adam Smith (1723-1790) that the economy was a

market in which only supply and demand played a role, which was influential from the second half of the nineteenth century, proved to be inadequate for society. After the stock market crash of 1929 and the depression in the 1930s, John Maynard Keynes had demonstrated that government could have a positive role in stimulating the economy. As a result of the collective effort during the war, the attention of people and government had been shifted towards the need of a welfare state. After the war, there was overwhelming support for nationalisation, because a mixed economy and Keynesian economic policies were thought of as feasible for the future.

In 1940 Minister of Labour Bevin had asked economist William Beveridge (1879-1963) to become a civil servant for organising British manpower in wartime. In this position Beveridge was asked to chair a committee to survey existing social insurance and allied services, and to make recommendations. So in 1942 he presented the report *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, in which a system of insurances with a pay-as-you-earn scheme to combat poverty and sickness was pleaded for.

The report proposed that all people of working age should pay a weekly national insurance contribution. In return, benefits would be paid to people who were sick, unemployed, retired or widowed. The system would provide a minimum standard of living. The idea was that welfare institutions would increase the competitiveness of British industry, as it was not realistic to assume that individual employers could both maintain full employment as well as full demand for their products. He defined full employment as unemployment of no more than 3 percent, and saw it als the pivot of the

social welfare programme expressed in the report.

After the war, the Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee used the executive's authority to address post-war poverty and social inequality. The Labour government implemented the recommendations of the Beveridge Report. Moreover, reacting to Adam Smith's conception of the market, the Labour government nationalized key industries such as the Bank of England, coal mines, railways, and utilities. It marked the official beginning of the national welfare state, such as establishing the National Health Service, a provision of health care for free. It meant a further expansion of the National Insurance Act passed in 1911. Also other social measures were taken such as the establishment of pension funds.

In comparison to the period before the Second World War, the executive power was significantly expanded. The Attlee administration decided to set in motion both the nationalisation of industry, as well as the decolonization, which in a way were also calculated interests. They nationalized industries so that the state's role became more influential on economy and society. For the main part, the attention of British politics shifted to the interior. It was a logical consequence of the war. The people were war-weary. Moreover, politicians had neglected internal affairs. Now, it was time to prioritize British citizens in the first place. Externally, the colonies became assertive and began demanding rights. The British people felt less bound to the colonies. Thus, the British empire came almost silently to a close. However, the social effects of ending the British empire, became visible by massive immigration and would have a long-lasting effect on society and politics.

Times were a Different

Globally, the post-war Labour government of Clement Attlee (1945–1951) and subsequent Conservative administrations, had to confront the reality of the diminishing Britain's power in the world. The United States and the Soviet Union emerged as new superpowers, and the anti-colonial stance of the US made the retention of colonies politically less viable. Strong nationalist movements demanding independence had emerged in many colonies, including India, Malaya, and Kenya. The British government lacked the military or economic power to retain these territories against their will.

The executive responded with a swift process of decolonization. India and Pakistan gained independence in summer 1947, followed quickly by Burma and Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, in early 1948. The Suez Crisis (1956) was a clear turning point. The Anglo-French invasion of Egypt was condemned by the US, demonstrating that Britain could no longer act as an independent world power without American support. This accelerated the withdrawal from most remaining colonial possessions in Africa and Asia in the following years.

While liquidating the British Raj – crown rule – the Cabinet came to common understanding about the approach to decolonization: «Withdrawal from India need not appear to be forced upon us by our weakness nor to be the first step in the dissolution of the Empire»¹⁷. Whatever the outcome, it would be presented to the public as the result of British policy. In this manner, the British people, and especially the executive power, would be demonstrating that it was in control. The Cabinet wanted to convey that the British people determined their own destiny.

The government would secure cooperation with moderate nationalists by transferring power before the intransigents took the initiative. For example, in Eastern and Central Africa, it seemed more prudent to settle with African liberation movements before war broke out between blacks and whites, or before the Africans would ask the Russians for help. Thus, influence would be maintained by transferring power as much as possible to moderate forces. British imperialism would be changed into cooperation.

The British executive ultimately succeeded in the transition from an imperial world power to a modern nation-state, in which the former dominions played a role within the framework of a common wealth. This transformation was shaped by the Cabinet, because the Crown in the sense of the monarch was impartial, parliament was partisan and voters could not see it. Strategy and positioning is something for ministers; civil servants could have ideas, but not lead. The number of people under British rule in the two decades after 1945 was reduced from 700 million people to 5 million, of which 3 million were concentrated in Hong Kong¹⁸. The British Empire was transformed in the Commonwealth; a voluntary partnership with the British monarch as symbolic head.

Simultaneously with the decline of the empire, the executive focused its attention on the domestic reconstruction. The fifties were an 'age of austerity' with continued rationing and high taxes necessary to stabilize the economy. A degree of political consensus between the Labour and Conservative parties ensured that the basic structures of the welfare state and the mixed economy endured for decades. During the Second World War Churchill was bursting with energy, but when he came back to the executive office

in the fifties he seemed another man, almost devoid of energy. The reason why was not only he meanwhile was ten years older. Politics had changed. Churchill told Walter Graebner in 1954 about his exhausting life as Prime Minister in peacetime: «We always knew exactly where we stood, and we had the power to act as we thought best. Now everything is different. There is so much patter, patter, patter, chatter, chatter, chatter, it's a wonder anything ever gets done»¹⁹.

Besides that, Churchill denied the social changes that the war had brought about in the country. The same applied to the colonies. However, whether it was blindness is doubtful. It seems he could not distance himself from the world in which he was raised. He had fought in India, Africa and elsewhere, and as a ruler had sought his pastime in the game of polo. He was a descendant of the noble family Marlborough, about which he had written a book. This kind of illustrious families had been important, but their role in society was now largely played out. As had become apparent after the war, he as a victor of World War II was even wiped out of office by the socialists. The old deference towards great men had almost disappeared. Also, the values that he himself valued so much, were not that relevant anymore. But his sense of serving the national interest undoubtedly won out over his illusions.

Crises and Constraints: the Executive Power during the 1960s and 1970s

The 1960s and 1970s were decades of profound political, economic, and social change in the United Kingdom. Against the back-

drop of decolonisation, economic turbulence, and shifting party politics, the nature and exercise of executive power – the authority of the Prime Minister and Cabinet – underwent significant crises. While the British constitution remained uncoded, the conventions and political realities of the time shaped a distinctive balance between the executive, parliament, and the public.

From 1957 Harold Macmillan formed a Conservative government, which emitted stability and authority. Yet by the mid-decade, the political mood shifted: Harold Wilson's Labour Government (1964–1970) sought to modernise Britain, emphasising science, technology, and social reform. The Wilson's administration aimed for centralising. He relied heavily on a small circle of advisers and used the Cabinet strategically rather than as a collective decision-making body. The executive expanded its role in economic planning, with the creation of bodies like the Department of Economic Affairs. In 1967 economic difficulties, including the balance of payments crisis and devaluation of the pound, revealed the limits of executive control over the economy. In this decade, the executive appeared confident and reformist, but its ambitions were often limited by the economic realities.

The 1970s were far more turbulent, and executive power was repeatedly tested. Edward Heath's Conservative Government (1970–1974) pursued radical economic reforms and took the UK into the European Economic Community in 1973. Yet industrial unrest, especially the miners' strikes, forced the executive into confrontation with powerful trade unions. The 1974 miners' strike led to the famous 'Three-Day Week' and an early general election, showing how organised labour could challenge executive authority.

The 1960s and 1970s revealed a paradox. Formally, the executive retained wide constitutional powers, including control over the legislative agenda and foreign policy. Practically, its authority was increasingly constrained by economic dependence and the assertiveness of trade unions. This period also saw growing role of public opinion.

Harold Wilson's short return (1974-1976) and, because of his early-stage Alzheimer's disease, his successor James Callaghan's premiership (1976-1979) were marked by fragile parliamentary majorities, forcing the executive to negotiate constantly with smaller parties. The Winter of Discontent (1978-79) showed the executive's inability to control wage demands and inflation, eroding public confidence.

From the First World War, the UK executive tried to hold on to centralised control, but by the late 1970s it was often on the defensive, hampered by economic crises, to which the population and the press wanted an answer. The shift from Wilson's early optimism to Callaghan's embattled final years illustrates how the executive power in the UK depends on the other state powers, organised interests and the socio-economic situation.

Thatcherism: New Executive Leadership in the UK

Margaret Thatcher's premiership (1979-1990) transformed the British executive by centralizing power, dismantling the post-war consensus, and introducing aggressive neoliberal reforms. She shifted the UK from state-led industry to a free-market

economy, privatizing major utilities, such as British Telecom, Gas, Steel, and curbing trade union power.

Paradoxically the move to economic internationalism was made possible by previous state investment, by the success of the state, not by its failure. Thatcher inherited, uniquely in modern British history, a nation self-sufficient in food, an exporter of wheat and meat. She also inherited a nation which was about to become, for the first time since 1939, a net exporter of energy. This epochal post-war transformation was barely registered in political discourse or the history books²⁰.

The implications were extraordinary: the UK no longer needed to be a net exporter of manufactures. Furthermore, the devastations to the productive economy caused by government policy were only sustainable because the government inherited a newly comprehensive and, by historical British standards, generous welfare state created in the 1970s. There was an extensive safety net onto which many millions could and did fall. The official number of unemployed rose to more than 10 per cent and stayed at that level for years. The number of people on invalidity and sickness benefit doubled between 1980 and 1993²¹.

Thatcher found the organisation of the Cabinet office too bureaucratic. She was of the opinion that in the Cabinet and its committees too much issues were dealt with. Therefore, she started to take decisions in small groups of ministers. After her victory in the 1983 general election, she even more contributed to the demolition of the structure of the meetings of the Cabinet and its committees. So the power of the Prime Minister became more apparent. It was also visible in the way decision-making was

done: she liked to announce her decisions at the start of a meeting and then challenged her ministers to disagree²².

Both differences and similarities marked the varieties of neoliberalism promoted by Conservative and New Labour social policies between the late 1970s and the turn of the millennium. In its employment policies, Blair's government (1997-2007) retained Thatcher's disciplinarian stipulation that the unemployed 'actively' seek work or risk losing their benefits. New Labour pursued Thatcherite economic policy, because Blair's and subsequently Brown's governments (2007-2010) still placed considerable trust in free market forces to reduce unemployment. The socialists saw their policy as a third way between a free marketplace and a state-led economy, as they offered those searching for work support in the form of training and advice²³.

The performance and extent of the executive power depended on economic and social conditions, and the party in power. From Thatcher on, efficiency was an important aspect of the policy of the executive. The Prime Minister developed into a dominant power, and the Crown, in the sense of the monarch, faded even more into the background.

6. *Summary of Executive Power in the UK: 1914-1979*

The evolution of executive power in the United Kingdom from the First World War to the late 1970s reflects a tension between the state powers. While the UK's uncoded constitution preserved parliamentary sovereignty and the fusion of powers, the bal-

ance between Cabinet, Crown, Commons and constituency shifted in response to war, economic change, and social upheaval.

The First World War brought an expansion of executive authority. The Prime Minister and Cabinet centralised decision-making, controlling the economy, industry, and public life through emergency legislation such as the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA). Coalition governments under Asquith and later Lloyd George blurred party lines, with Lloyd George exercising a highly presidential style of leadership.

In the Interwar Period the executive power contracted somewhat, but its role remained elevated compared to pre-1914 norms. Governments faced economic instability. As a consequence, the Labour Party rose as a major political force and displaced as such the Liberal Party. In 1924 and 1929 the Labour Party formed a minority government under leadership of Ramsay MacDonald.

In 1929 the stock market crash in New York took place, followed by the Depression of the 1930's. From the beginnings of the 1930's an international threat of fascism occurred. Interestingly enough, this threat was mainly addressed nationally. In the UK the government intervened late, but effective. The international tensions increased and the approach of war strengthened the executive power.

To address the Second World War, a war-time coalition was made under the leadership of Winston Churchill. In this period the executive power reached its zenith; only such a destructive war could be its legitimization. At the same time the welfare state was shaped by Bevin, Beveridge and Attlee.

In the 1960s and 1970s centralisation and constraint characterized the executive

power. The Labour government of Harold Wilson, based on a strong majority, sought to modernise Britain. However, already his government was confronted with economic crises, limiting the executive's ambitions. Subsequent governments were confronted with industrial unrest, oil shocks, inflation, and weak parliamentary majorities. Trade unions functioned as powerful counterweights to the executive, which was politically weakened. This negative spiral was broken with the more assertive leadership style of the Thatcher era.

Concluding, wars and external threats tended to strengthen the power of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, while economic crises, minority governments, and organised social forces often weakened them. An external threat unites people. Then people need a strong leadership and it is granted by the voters and parliament. In weak economic times, voters and parliament are more powerful, because voters feel it immediately and parliament indirectly because members of parliament are blamed for it. So in the end, it is a play of four c's: Cabinet, Crown, Commons and constituency, or more precise: the executive power, being the Cabinet and its leader the Prime Minister, the independent and supervisory power, being the Crown, the legislative and controlling power, being the House of Parliament, and the legitimizing power, being the voters and citizen movements, such as the media and the unions.

In the relationship between the state powers, deference, meaning self-restraint for the common good and being respectful of institutions, plays a legitimising role²⁴. Since World War II, deference with respect to Crown seemed only symbolic, because the Royal Family had almost no political

power anymore, and the Prime Minister replaced the monarch instead. The fear of George V that Lloyd George was too popular has come true in this respect. But more powerful are the constituencies, so the public opinion. However, for the functioning of the state powers, even the Crown, it is important that they respect each other.

From the First World War to the Thatcher era, the relationships between the state powers show how the executive power in the UK changed from Cabinet government, in which the Cabinet was accountable towards Parliament, towards a Cabinet government dominated by the Prime Minister, accountable towards Parliament and especially the constituencies. Besides the constituencies, the position of the Prime Minister developed as the most powerful state power, but even then the Prime Minister stands in a relationship to Parliament, constituencies and the Crown. His powers are not absolute, because his powers, which are interwoven with those of the Cabinet, can change.

- ¹ C. Pennell, *The United Kingdom in 1914*, in H. Strachan (ed.), *The British Home Front and the First World War*, Cambridge, CUP, 2023, pp. 28–46, here p. 28.
- ² Ivi, p. 31.
- ³ Quotation in ivi, p. 32.
- ⁴ Ch. Ballinger, *The House of Lords 1911–2011. A Century of Non-Reform*, Oxford, OUP, 2012, pp. 209–210.
- ⁵ D. Slijkerman, *Ministerial Responsibility as a Safety Valve for the Constitutional Powers in Great Britain from the Seventeenth Century Onwards*, in «Journal of Constitutional History», 31, 2016, pp. 223–249, here pp. 238–239.
- ⁶ G.R. Rubin, *The Defence of the Realm Act and Other Emergency Laws*, in Strachan (ed.), *The British Home Front and the First World War*, cit., pp. 78–94, here p. 91.
- ⁷ G. Peden, *The Growth of Cabinet Government*, in ivi, pp. 63–77, here p. 63.
- ⁸ Slijkerman, *Ministerial Responsibility*, cit., p. 238.
- ⁹ H. Jones, *The Monarchy*, in Strachan (ed.), *The British Home Front and the First World War*, cit., pp. 49–62, here p. 52.
- ¹⁰ A. Keil, *A Very British Dictatorship: The Defence of the Realm Act in Britain, 1914–1920*, in «First World War Studies», n. 14, 2023/1, pp. 51–70.
- ¹¹ M. Daunton, *The United Kingdom in 1919*, in Strachan (ed.), *The British Home Front and the First World War*, cit., pp. 601–633, here p. 604.
- ¹² K. Jeffery, *The Second World War*, in J. Brown e.a. (eds.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume IV: The Twentieth Century*, Oxford, OUP, 1999, pp. 306–328, here p. 307.
- ¹³ I. Jennings, *The British Constitution*, Cambridge, CUP, 1961⁴, p. 146.
- ¹⁴ Quotation in Jeffery, *The Second World War*, cit., p. 320.
- ¹⁵ Ivi, p. 325.
- ¹⁶ R. Jenkins, *Churchill*, London, Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2001, pp. 797–800, 825–826.
- ¹⁷ Quotation in W.M. Roger Louis, *The Dissolution of the British Empire*, in Brown, *The Oxford History*, cit., pp. 329–356, here p. 329.
- ¹⁸ Ivi, p. 330.
- ¹⁹ W. Graebner, *My Dear Mr. Churchill*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1965, p. 19.
- ²⁰ D. Edgerton, *What came between new liberalism and neoliberalism? Rethinking Keynesianism, the welfare state and social democracy*, in A. Davies, B. Jackson, F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite (eds.), *The Neoliberal Age? Britain since the 1970s*, London, UCL Press, 2021, pp. 30–51, here p. 82.
- ²¹ Ivi, p. 46.
- ²² A. Seldon, *The Cabinet System*, in V. Bogdanor (ed.), *The British Constitution in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford, OUP, 2005, pp. 97–137, 123–124.
- ²³ B. Rieger, *British varieties of neoliberalism: unemployment policy from Thatcher to Blair*, in Davies etc., *The Neoliberal Age? Britain since the 1970s*, cit., pp. 112–132, here pp. 128–130.
- ²⁴ C. Marshall, *Political Deference in a Democratic Age. British Politics and the Constitution from the Eighteenth Century to Brexit*, Cham, Springer, 2021, pp. 1–2.