



THE UK PRIME MINISTER: A PRESIDENT IN ALL BUT NAME?

Events: In March 2003, the Iraq War started with an invasion launched by the USA and the UK. The UK's involvement in this war was a remarkable example of prime-ministerial power. It showed the then-prime minister, Tony Blair, at his most determined, zealous, even messianic. Blair persisted with his determination to 'stand by the USA', despite mass anti-war demonstrations on the streets of London and other major UK cities, and despite suffering the largest backbench revolt against any government in over a century. What is more, this was a war of choice for Blair. Many in Washington had expected the UK to back away from military action once the Security Council of the United Nations had failed to pass a resolution specifically authorizing the war, and they had planned accordingly. The UK's involvement in the Iraq War was therefore a personal decision on the part of Blair: he did it because he thought it was the right thing to do. But he also did it because he could do it: his position as prime minister allowed him to do it.

Significance: For many, the decision to go to war in this instance was a clear reflection of the fact that the UK no longer had a prime minister, but a president. Personal leadership had replaced collective leadership – the prime minister was in charge, not the cabinet or Parliament. In a trend dating back to Harold Wilson in the 1960s and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, Blair had been able to emancipate himself from the constraints that typically apply to a parliamentary executive. With two landslide election victories behind him (in 1997 and 2001), Blair had little to fear from a cabinet that was, in the main, unwilling to challenge his authority, or from a Parliament in which Labour's majority was so large that it effectively immunized him from backbench pressure. Although the UK does not have a separately elected executive, a combination of the media's portrayal of politics in terms of personality and image, rather than ideas and policies, and the tendency of parties to use their leaders as their 'brand image', has led to the growth of personalized election campaigns in which the victorious leader comes to claim a personal mandate on the basis of their electoral success. This has led to the growth of 'spatial leadership';



that is, the tendency of leaders to distance themselves from their parties and governments either by presenting themselves as 'outsiders', or by developing a personal ideological stance.

However, significant though these trends may be, it is difficult to argue that they have rebalanced the structural dynamics of the UK's parliamentary executive. Although Blair's decision in 2003 was, in itself, a remarkable example of prime-ministerial power, it cast a dark shadow over the rest of his premiership, ultimately leading to the end of his political career. After 2003, Blair's poll ratings plummeted, and Labour's majority in the 2005 general election was slashed from 166 to just 65. A mood of restiveness and unease took hold on Labour's backbenches and was expressed in increasingly frequent backbench revolts. Tensions also grew within the cabinet, especially as the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, and his allies became more open about pursuing their political ambitions. Shortly before the 2005 election, Blair became the first prime minister to, in effect, pre-announce his own resignation. He did this by promising that, if he were re-elected for a third term in office, he would not seek a fourth term. This promise was duly carried out when he resigned in June 2007. Presidential tendencies may have allowed Blair to make the fateful 2003 decision in the first place, but the fact that UK prime ministers are always forced to operate within a cabinet and parliamentary system meant that he was unable to escape the consequences of that decision.