



HISTORY & POLICY

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***Abolish 'Department of the Prime Minister', historians urge Brown
- Five lessons from history to guide new Prime Minister***

A new *History & Policy* paper published today calls on Gordon Brown to follow in the footsteps of Lloyd George, Wilson and Major by adopting a radically different style of Government from his predecessor.

Professor Emeritus George Jones of the LSE and Dr Andrew Blick argue Brown can make his mark as a leader by abolishing Blair's semi-official 'Department of the Prime Minister', withdrawing from the minute detail of public service reform and focusing on the most pressing policy challenges, such as counter-terrorism and the environment.

Professor Jones said:

“Many past Prime Ministers – from David Lloyd George to Harold Wilson and John Major – have established contrasting identities from their predecessors. New bodies such as the Delivery Unit have enabled Blair to make unprecedented prime-ministerial interventions in public services. Brown should make it clear he intends to do the opposite. He should resist the siren voices - such as Sir Michael Barber, former head of the Delivery Unit - urging him to formalise a ‘Department of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet’. In turn he can achieve more by attempting less.”

Dr Blick said:

“Blair constructed a vast prime-ministerial team to bypass Cabinet. But history shows that collective government is the best way to develop and test policy, ensuring it is practically and politically effective. History is littered with premiers who isolated Cabinet from decision-making - Chamberlain, Eden and Thatcher - to disastrous effect.

“We welcome the news that there will be a senior civil servant appointed to oversee collective government. But for Gordon Brown to achieve a real change of style he must completely dismantle the ‘Department of the Prime Minister’, which has come to symbolise Government under Blair.”

In *The ‘Department of the Prime Minister’ - should it continue?*, published on the [History & Policy website](#) today, Professor Jones and Dr Blick reveal five lessons from history to help Brown negotiate the pitfalls of power:

1. Change of style

Lloyd George presented himself as the forceful solution to the directionless war leadership of Asquith. Harold Wilson was the modernising antidote to the aristocratic Alec Douglas-Home. John Major provided a conciliatory contrast to the domineering Margaret Thatcher, while Blair offered the dynamism lacking under Major. If Brown can perform a similar feat, his chances of renewing the Labour government and winning another term of office will be enhanced.

2. Devolve power

There are historical precedents for devolving powers away from the Prime Minister. Prime-ministerial control of the Treasury was relinquished to the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the mid-nineteenth century. The creation of the Cabinet Office in 1916 moved responsibility for the collective core of Government away from No. 10. Today’s Office of National Statistics has its origins in a body attached directly to Churchill during the Second World War. Brown should follow these precedents and abolish Blair’s ‘Department of the Prime Minister’.

3. Attempt less

Prime Ministers and their aides can achieve more by attempting less. Former premiers and their aides, from William Pitt the Younger to Heath’s ‘Deputy Prime Minister’ William Armstrong, have suffered breakdowns and even death because of No. 10 overstretch. Despite the vast team at his disposal, Blair has not achieved what he most wanted: the quest for modernised public services continues. Brown should end No. 10 interference in the minutiae of public service delivery and focus instead on the most pressing contemporary issues.

4. Collective government

Prime Ministers in a position of strength have often sucked power away from Parliament, Cabinet and the Civil Service, but suffered the consequences when circumstances changed. Lloyd George was ousted in 1922 when his centralising style no longer suited the times;

Thatcher's famously non-consensual approach bred resentment and eventually led to her downfall. In contrast, James Callaghan was well-served by his collegiate approach during the International Monetary Fund Crisis of 1976. Brown is taking over a party and Government suffering reduced popularity and without a personal electoral mandate; history suggests he should lead through discussing and bargaining, not dictating.

5. Defend the team

Prime ministers' staff have been the subject of controversy ever since the 1730s when Sir Robert Walpole's assistants were viciously caricatured by opposition satirists Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding and Alexander Pope. Brown should expect to have to explain and defend the way his team operates.

Notes to Editors

1. *The 'Department of the Prime Minister' - should it continue?* is available on the [History & Policy](#) website.
2. George Jones is Emeritus Professor of Government at the [London School of Economics and Political Science](#). Dr Andrew Blick is a policy officer for [Democratic Audit](#), based at the University of Essex. They are currently writing *The Prime Ministers' People: At Power's Elbow from before Walpole to the present*.
3. *History & Policy* is an independent initiative working for better public policy through an understanding of history, see www.historyandpolicy.org for further details. *History & Policy* is funded through a charitable grant from the Philanthropic Collaborative.
4. The initiative was founded by historians at the Universities of Cambridge and London and is based in the Centre for Contemporary British History, at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London.
5. The [London School of Economics and Political Science](#) (LSE) is a world class centre for its concentration of teaching and research across the full range of the social, political and economic sciences. Founded in 1895 by Beatrice and Sidney Webb, LSE has an outstanding reputation for academic excellence and, from its foundation, has aimed to be a laboratory of the social sciences, a place where ideas are developed, analysed, evaluated and disseminated around the globe.
6. Professor Jones can be contacted on 020 7272 3519. Dr Blick can be contacted on 07939 042 650. For further information or to request an interview with a historian, please contact: Mel Porter, External Relations Officer, History & Policy, tel: 020 7862 8768, email: mel.porter@sas.ac.uk.