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Organizational Capacity and Prime Ministerial Effectiveness: Observations from Australia

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One thing that distinguishes a champion sports person from their peers is that they seem to be unhurried, calm. They seem to be on top of things, to have a lot more time to do things, to prepare for things than their colleagues. And that's how it is with [John] Howard. Howard never seems, or very rarely, seems harried or rushed. He's almost always on top of the subject; the questions that might be put to him are anticipated; his position on issues is deliberate and calculated. He rarely gets caught by surprise and he is very effective in bringing to bear, I think, rewards and sanctions on people (Allan Hawke, 21 February 2003).

Introduction

Dr Allan Hawke, a former diplomat, Secretary of the Department of Defence and briefly, Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Paul Keating, offered this assessment of John Howard's leadership during an interview in 2003. At that time, John Howard was seven years into the Australian prime ministership, approaching the zenith of his political power. According to Hawke, Howard, in many ways, was the author of his own success:

Howard has been a politician for a very long time and comes to the prime ministership later in life. I would say he's more comfortable and relaxed about his position now than he's ever been. He's more on top of the agenda, he knows more about issues than most of his ministerial colleagues, he's got better judgment; he's got a better feel for the politics of the issues so far as the implications for the Australian people, but also in terms of party politics of these issues than anyone I have ever seen.

But Hawke noted too the importance of Howard's Prime Minister's Office (PMO) in supporting the leader, enabling him to become 'comfortable and relaxed' in the role:

Personally I think the Howard PMO is [the best] organized and effective probably since the Hawke government. They are a very professional outfit ... They are very effective in getting the briefings and getting the Prime Minister briefed on issues.

John Howard's extraordinary success as prime minister for more than a decade often obscures the fact that his government's first eighteen months in office was dogged by mistakes and political controversy, mostly of its own making (see Tiernan 2007a: Chapter 7). Howard's transition was a marked contrast to the experience of his predecessor Bob Hawke, whose first year in office was a triumph – in the scope of his policy achievements, the discipline maintained

across his ministry and his engagement of the public service in the government's reform agenda.

Despite implementing significant changes to advisory and support arrangements, intended to assert control over policy and administration, ministerial inexperience, ministerial and ministerial staff indiscipline and a failure to establish effective relationships with the public service and with the media saw the new government struggle to gain political traction (see Tiernan 2006, 2007a). A series of scandals brought the loss of seven ministers and two prime ministerial staffers, including Howard confidante and CoS, Grahame Morris. With his support faltering and facing open speculation about his competence and suitability for the leadership, Howard took decisive action to bolster his government's political skills and personal staff capacity, beginning with a major restructure of his Prime Minister's Office (from now on PMO). The experience was formative, both for Howard as prime minister and for his senior staff. According to his CoS, Arthur Sinodinos:

One of the lessons we drew out of that was that you've got to keep dominating the agenda and moving the agenda on and using incumbency to do that.

More than half-way through his first term, Howard seized political and organizational control of his government – laying the foundations for a successful prime ministership and three subsequent election victories. Into his fourth term, having seen off three Opposition leaders, Howard appeared unassailable – described by commentators and scholars alike as a predominant prime minister in almost total command of his government and his party (Kelly 2006; Tiernan 2007a, 2007b).

Howard's pursuit of an organizational response to the problems of his first term is a testament to both his organizational skills and his capacity to learn from experience (Tiernan 2006: 315). These abilities became more obvious in his second term, though they were

nascent in his first. Indeed, Howard had thought a good deal about the government that he would run; how he would manage the business of Cabinet and strike a balance between short-term demands and long-term priorities. He had, after all, been Treasurer in the Fraser government; had drawn lessons from his loss of the Opposition leadership in 1989; and had contributed to the Liberal Party's soul-searching in the wake of its devastating loss of the 'unloseable' 1993 election (see Tiernan 2007a: Chapter 5). But though Howard brought to the prime ministership strong ideas and theories about governing, he was unable to give them effect during that early period in office. It is generally agreed that Howard developed the arrangements he needed, and which worked for him, with the help and support of his CoS, Arthur Sinodinos, whose tenure in the CoS role coincided with the height of Howard's political success. After Sinodinos departed the PMO in December 2006, the prime minister's performance was less sure-footed, prompting many to question the extent to which the loss of his CoS had undermined Howard's leadership capacity and performance.

More than a decade on, at around the same stage of his first term, Kevin Rudd was ousted as prime minister in a spectacular party-room coup. He had swept to power in November 2007 on a wave of optimism and goodwill. With consistently high public approval ratings, having achieved a relatively orderly transition and moved quickly to implement his election commitments, Rudd might have expected to lead a long-term government, in the Australian tradition. Rudd committed his government to high standards of integrity and accountability from ministers and their staff, promising to develop cooperative relationships with the public service. Labor ministers contrasted their discipline and competence with the 'shambolic' performance of the Howard ministry at the same stage (Tiernan and Weller 2010: 65). Yet in June 2010, having alienated his colleagues, the public service and stakeholders in business and elsewhere, and with his public support plummeting after a series of policy reversals, Rudd was dumped. His troubles were widely attributed to the performance of his

private office. However, unlike Howard, Rudd was not afforded an opportunity to demonstrate his capacity to learn and change in the job.

Rudd's performance was compared unfavourably with the governing style of Prime Minister Bob Hawke, whose private office was renowned for its professionalism and effectiveness over the eight and a half years of his tenure. Incoming Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, pledged to return to the 'Hawke model' of governance. She emphasized due process and consultation with Cabinet colleagues. She called also for more effective engagement with the public service, particularly the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) which, it emerged, had been frozen out by Rudd for months. The besieged leader had retreated to an ever-smaller coterie of trusted advisers in the PMO. Rudd refused to meet even with the Secretary of PM&C, who he had himself appointed.

As Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard had enjoyed a reputation for calm efficiency, for having discipline and focus that enabled her to get through the mountain of paperwork associated with her mega-portfolio of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations. As Acting PM, her demeanour and work habits were in stark contrast to Kevin Rudd's. It was rumoured the public service and ministers' offices would hold briefs and submissions until they knew Gillard would be acting PM when they could be certain of getting a decision or direction more promptly than from Rudd or his office. When she took the leadership in June 2010, expectations were high.

Yet despite her commitment to restore discipline and process, almost from the time of her unexpected elevation to the prime ministership and her emergence from the August 2010 federal election as leader of a precarious minority government, Gillard struggled. Her problems were attributed to the constraints and compromises inherent to the deals she'd struck to regain the Treasury benches; to persuading a public bewildered by Rudd's execution at the hands of

his Labor colleagues, and to the need to get the machinery of government working again after the chaos and dysfunction of Rudd's time as leader. But by early 2012, the malaise that engulfed Gillard was being explained by the incompetence and poor performance of her private office. Despite policy and legislative achievements, Gillard's leadership came under open threat from her predecessor, a Caucus made increasingly skittish by consistently poor opinion polls, and her talent for scoring 'own goals' when opportunities to gain political traction seemed in her government's grasp. She prevailed, but the period since has seen no improvement in her political fortunes, nor perceptions of her competence. A pall hangs over her embattled leadership. Commentators and an increasing number of Labor parliamentarians openly question Gillard's political and policy judgment; her management of Cabinet and Caucus; her demonstrated inability to prosecute a political argument; and particularly, her handling of relationships with business and other stakeholders. With leadership speculation still rampant and Labor facing an electoral wipeout at the September 14 poll, some of the most virulent criticism focuses on the quality of support Gillard receives from her increasingly defensive inner circle.

John Howard's eventual success was grounded in the combination of personal skills and experience, including his renowned ability to learn, and his ability to develop of a system of advice and support that suited him (see Tiernan 2006, 2007a, 2007b). He is unique among recent Australian prime ministers in successfully evolving advisory arrangements that suited and worked for him. Neither his Labor predecessor, Paul Keating, nor his successors, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, has developed structures capable of supporting their leadership. Howard is an outlier too among other political leaders. For different reasons, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown each struggled to find arrangements that suited them and could compensate for their weaknesses (Seldon and Lodge 2011; Theakston 2011). David Cameron is a work in progress, but almost three years into his tenure, serious questions have been raised about the

quality of his advisers in Number 10 and about the Prime Minister's judgment in respect of key appointments, notably his former Communications Director, Andy Coulson (see, for example, Seldon 2011).

That recent prime ministers have encountered similar dilemmas at comparable phases of their tenure highlights an organizational imperative at the heart of contemporary leadership. On taking office, prime ministers must seize the institutional advantages that potentially flow from their predecessors' efforts to augment and strengthen their advisory and support arrangements. In addition to the political and leadership skills that have brought them to the role, much depends on prime ministers' organizational capacity – their ability to take control of the machinery of government and use it to achieve their political and policy goals

Organizational capacity is a theoretical idea drawn from US presidential studies literature, where its salience is well established and well understood. In this paper, we adapt it to the Westminster context and explore its relevance to two Australian prime ministers: the contrasting cases of John Howard and Kevin Rudd. We argue that organizational capacity is a crucial but currently underemphasised resource for prime ministerial effectiveness.

Methods

The paper draws on an extensive dataset comprising interviews with ministers, political staffers – including but not exclusively prime ministers' Chiefs of Staff, and senior officials from Australian federal governments from Fraser to Gillard.¹ It responds specifically to Rhodes and Wanna's (2009: 130) challenge to Australian political scientists to present studies of the political executive that are based on original fieldwork and theoretically informed. It responds too to Lodge and Wegrich (2012: 214) who urge political scientists to give 'renewed attention to the administrative factor, not just in terms of public programmes, but also in the organizational

factor that underpins life within, for example, political parties, legislative committees or international organizations and institutions’.

Though the paper employs theoretical concepts from core executive studies and the presidential studies literature, we argue the need for Australian perspectives in debates about the networks of support at the heart of the core executive. Currently British perspectives predominate. Scholars acknowledge the ‘peculiarities’, or as Marsh (2012: 51) notes, quoting the editors of the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, ‘the twin and mutually reinforcing flaws of ‘false particularism’ and ‘false universalism’ of British politics. This renders British perspectives, on their own, inadequate for conceptualizing developments in other Westminster-style systems. Australia offers an interesting and useful case because it embraces a far larger, spatially separate and institutionalised partisan private office staff than is available in other ‘old dominion’ countries (Tiernan 2007a). The trend to centralisation noted in other Westminster-style systems (see for example, Savoie 2008) is arguably more pronounced in Australia, facilitated by the institutional resources of the centre. The system of advice and support to Australian prime ministers is a hybrid. It comprises large numbers of partisan personal staff (currently totalling 423 across the ministry) and a tradition of dedicated departmental support for the prime minister dating back more than a century (Weller et al 2011). The Australian Prime Minister’s Office has 53 staff,² while the Department of PM&C has an ongoing staff of more than 600, plus staff appointed to taskforces and special projects.³ As such, the Australian core executive is a more compelling site for testing the utility of the concept of organizational capacity than the UK. Loud complaints about the augmentation of prime ministerial resources notwithstanding, the support system for British prime ministers is modest by comparison and presents far less of an organizational challenge than confronts Australian political leaders.

Perspectives on leadership effectiveness

Scholars of executive government have emphasized different aspects in their efforts to account for prime ministerial success or failure. In Westminster-style systems there has been a trend to evaluate leadership performance comparatively (Hennessy 2000), and increasingly, adapting the American method of elite surveys, through the use of ranking exercises (see, for example, Theakston and Gill 2011, 2006). Ranking and rating prime ministers and speculating on their personal qualities and leadership styles has long been popular in journalism, biography and occasionally in popular non-fiction. Leaders themselves have entered the race to defend and protect their reputations. A litany of autobiographies, authorized biographies and memoirs has been released to provide post-hoc rationalization and justification of decisions taken and achievements won (see, for example, from a long list, Blair 2010 and Brown 2010 in Britain, Mulroney 2007 and Chretien 2007 in Canada and in Australia, Howard 2010).

As the changing context of executive governance has intensified the pressures and expectations on prime ministers, political scientists have sought new models and frameworks for assessing their performance. Some have looked to the presidential studies literature (Theakston 2011); others to ideas of 'statecraft' (Buller and James 2012; Marsh 2012) and others to theories with historical resonance – 'court politics' (Rhodes 2011; Rhodes and Tiernan 2012, 2013b, Walter 2010). Despite differences of emphasis, approach and method all accept that resource dependence characterizes relationships within the core executive (Elgie 2011), and most recognise, like Allan Hawke, that to successfully navigate a complex and fragmented leadership context, prime ministers need a mix of personal and political skills (Heffernan 2003, 2005; Theakston 2011) Bowles et al (2007, 385-86) argue that the increasingly centralized and personalized nature of political leadership within the British executive highlights the 'skills, character and experience' of individual prime ministers in understanding their success, or not, in office.

Proponents of the prime ministerial predominance thesis – a variant of the core executive perspective, recognize individual skills, but they note too the institutional advantages the flow from efforts to strengthen central capacity (Burch and Holliday 1996, 2004). For example, Heffernan (2003) elaborates the personal and institutional power resources available to prime ministers and on which their potential to dominate depends. Personal power resources include: reputation, skill and ability; association with actual or anticipated political success; public popularity; and high standing in his or her party (Heffernan 2003: 351). These are resources an individual prime minister ‘*can*, but *may not* possess [emphasis original]... The possession of personal resources is never guaranteed. They come and go, are acquired and squandered, are won and lost’ (Heffernan 2003: 356). It follows that the more resources a prime minister has, or can accumulate, the greater their potential for predominance.

Institutional power resources derive from prime minister’s location at the centre of the most important core executive networks. For Heffernan (2003: 356-57) these include: political centrality and policy reach; legitimate authority and prestige; knowledge and expertise; the ability to alter the preferences of other actors and institutions; and agenda control. Other institutional power resources come with the job. They include:

- Being the legal head of government, having the right of proposal and veto, to delegate powers and responsibilities to ministers and departments through the use of Crown prerogatives, and having the right to be consulted, either directly or indirectly, about all significant matters relating to government policy;
- Setting the policy agenda through leadership of the government, control of the cabinet and cabinet committee system and influence over the Whitehall apparatus;
- Organising a de facto prime ministerial department, strengthening Downing Street and the Cabinet Office; and
- Setting the government’s political agenda through the news media using Downing Street as a ‘bully pulpit’.

Proponents of the prime ministerial predominance thesis assume that these developments, which have parallels at the summit of different types of political systems as leaders seek to

respond to common imperatives (Peters, Rhodes and Wright 2000), have strengthened prime ministers at the expense of Cabinet and other players (Bennister 2007; Walter and Strangio 2007). Though they highlight the resources available to political leaders, and note the importance of personality and political skill, these analyses do not address the capacity to organize and manage the state apparatus and the impact on prime ministerial performance.

Since power-dependence characterises core executive relationships, it follows that attention should focus on the distribution and dispersal of resources and shifting patterns of dependence between multiple actors. So, the unit of analysis in core executive studies cannot be solely the prime minister, nor can it be just the Cabinet; power is more widely dispersed. The prime minister remains a key actor who, by virtue of his/her access to institutional and personal resources and position at the centre of key networks (Heffernan 2003; 2005), has potential to exercise significant power. The experiences of Tony Blair, John Howard and Kevin Rudd, who at key points in time were regarded as 'predominant' prime ministers, remind us that dynamic forces shape, constrain and sometimes deliberately undermine leaders' ability to get their own way. Due consideration therefore must be given to relations between leaders and their colleagues in Cabinet, the party-room, and other 'followers' who depend on them, but on whom they also depend.

Presidential Studies

The literature on Westminster governments has noted the pluralisation of advice, the institutionalization of central advisory units, and the attendant challenges for coordination and in managing new dependencies. In Westminster systems, prime ministers and ministers traditionally looked to the career public service for policy advice and for structures and routines to support their decision-making. Under the pressures of modern governance they have relied increasingly on staff in their private offices. The task of supporting ministers is now shared between partisan personal staff, non-partisan career officials, external consultants and others.

The configuration of ministerial support systems has become more varied, requiring the management of the advisory system. Everywhere the response has been to augment the resources available to the leader. A growing body of literature has documented the institutionalization of the core executive; the accretion of staffing and support units at the summit. Peters, Rhodes and Wright (1999: 15) note that:

Everywhere we see the institutionalization of staffing arrangements, with the institutions of the head of the executive being accorded formal status and increasing prestige... Growth, institutionalization, as well as politicization and hybridization are common features of the staffing of summits. Yet the convergent trends mask the existence of persistent and profound national differences. These differences are visible at several levels: structure, size, composition, and internal organization and culture - and they are rooted in both the different mix of functions pursued by each country's summit staff and in different governmental traditions

There is ample evidence that the Australian prime ministership has also become increasingly institutionalized. It is most apparent in the system of advice and support to Australian prime ministers. The Department of PM&C has supported Australian leaders for more than a century across the spectrum of their prerogatives and priorities (Weller et al 2011). Since the 1970s, successive prime ministers have fostered the development of a large and inherently partisan private office the PMO, in which the position of CoS has an enduring and important role. The Keating and Howard prime ministerships were critical stages in the development and consolidation of the institutional prime ministership. Actors and institutions within the Australian core executive, including the public service, have adapted to these new institutional dynamics. Thus, by 2007, a strongly centralized model of prime ministerial leadership, supported by a large, active and functionally specialized and tactically focused PMO, a politically partisan Cabinet Policy Unit responsible for long-term strategy, together with the Department of PM&C had been standard operating procedure for more than a decade, and was recognized for contributing significantly to Howard's longevity and political success (Tiernan 2006).

There are many pressures for strengthening the summit. They include the 24/7 news cycle and the personalization of politics; the exigencies of global economic shocks and security threats; increasing demands for domestic policy coordination; and the pluralisation of policy advice (Peters, Rhodes and Wright 2000: 6-11). The emergence and growing importance of political staff is a response to these pressures and the need to coordinate inputs from multiple sources (Eichbaum and Shaw 2010; Tiernan 2007a). The consequences of the institutionalization of the core executive are a matter of dispute. Some authors assume that the growth of staff support has strengthened prime ministers at the expense of ministers, Cabinet and other players, allowing them to become predominant (Elgie 2011; Bennister 2007; Walter and Strangio 2007). Others refute this 'presidentialization' thesis (and for citations and critique, see Rhodes, Wanna and Weller 2009). The development and growth of personal staffing arrangements could extend leaders' capacity, but definitely it creates a new set of organization and management challenges (Tiernan 2007a).

Much of the Australian literature is descriptive and there is much wailing and gnashing of teeth over the decline of ministerial accountability, the lack of frank and fearless advice, and the power of the prime minister. The scholarship on Australian and British politics lacks 'distinctive perspectives on, and theories of, leadership that transcend the personalization of power' (Bowles et al: 373). Yet insights about the challenges facing executive leadership are available in the literature on the US presidency, which as Bowles et al (2007: 373) note, has developed 'a well-defined, if not always agreed upon, set of variables, frameworks and theories for understanding the capacity, scope, context, space, timing and sequencing of executive power'.

American scholars trace the emergence of the institutional presidency to the 1940s, noting a dramatic acceleration to the mid-1970 (Burke 2009). So, by Nixon's presidency, there

was evidence that staffing arrangements were organized according to a 'standard model' (Walcott and Hult 2005). Despite misgivings about the pathologies of Richard Nixon's White House, this model had been largely adopted by his successors (Burke 2009). As Rockman (2000: 172) notes:

Some Presidents still wish to be their own Chief of Staff, but everything in their environment tells them this is no longer possible... This tells us something about how both the presidency and the political environment within which it is situated, has evolved.

The persistence of organization and staffing arrangements from one president to the next, and the systemic similarities between the advisory systems of US Presidents indicates that the office (the institution of the presidency) itself and not simply the personality and style of an individual president, is an appropriate focus for analysis.

In his book *The Presidential Difference*, Fred Greenstein (2004) presents a six-point framework for analyzing the political and personal qualities and skills of US presidents, their characters and leadership styles and their successes and failures in office. He assesses and compares presidential performance in relation to their:

- Proficiency as public communicators
- Organizational capacity
- Political skills
- Policy vision
- Cognitive style; and
- Emotional intelligence.

Among these attributes, presidential scholars have singled out 'organizational efficiency' (Kerbel 2001), 'organization and management' (Burke 2000) and 'organizational capacity' (Greenstein 2004) as important bargaining resources available to presidents, which can

contribute to or undermine their prospects for success. Organizational capacity 'helps' presidents to cope with the demands of leadership, specifically the 'bargaining uncertainty' that confronts them in a system of separated powers (Neustadt, 1991; Dickinson 1997).

Presidential overload has long been seen as a key driver of institutionalization - as evidenced by the steady evolution of a large, functionally specialized Executive Office of President supporting the leader (see Patterson 2010). Based on their study of the evolution of presidential advisory arrangements from 1924-92, Ragsdale and Theis (1997) identify four features that, when apparent at high levels, are indicators of institutionalisation. These are:

- Autonomy: the independence of the presidency from other units;
- Adaptability: the longevity of units in the presidency;
- Complexity: the differentiation of sub-units and staff in the office; and
- Coherence: efforts to make manageable the volume of work.

They argue institutionalisation is the outcomes of the interplay between individual interests within the organization and aspects of the environment (Ragsdale and Theis 1997: 1280), and note that government activity, congressional action and individual presidents affect the degree of institutionalisation across these four dimensions.

Dickinson and Lebo (2007) contest that the growth and institutionalisation of the presidential staffing system is mainly attributable to an expansion of governmental responsibilities. They argue instead that 'White House staff growth is largely driven by successive presidents' search for assistance in managing interactions with Congress, the media and the public, as well as by the long-term institutional rivalry between the president and Congress, and only marginally by an expansion in the size or workload of the federal government' (Dickinson and Lebo 2007, 207). Presidents have responded to 'a more fluid, less stable and distinctly more partisan bargaining environment' by 'embracing tactics formerly

restricted to political campaigns'. This accounts for the 'mixed' nature of staff growth and the 'politicisation' of the presidential branch away from the vision of the advisory system envisaged by the Brownlow Commission (Dickinson and Lebo 2007: 218).

So, in the United States, the concept of the 'institutional presidency' is well established (Burke 2000). It recognizes that 'leadership in the modern presidency is not carried out by the president alone, but rather by presidents with their associates. It depends therefore on both the president's strengths and weaknesses and on the quality of the aides' support' (Greenstein 2004). Scholars of the institutional presidency have described the development of staffing structures and advisory arrangements that increase the resources available to a President to discharge the range of duties and obligations that accrue to the office, by increasing the number of agents acting on his behalf. These studies chart the growth in size and organizational complexity of the units that support the president within the 'presidential branch' (Burke 2009; Pfiffner 1996).

Organizational capacity

Scholars of executive governance in Westminster-style political systems are often skeptical about the utility of concepts and ideas drawn from presidential studies, citing differences between the two types of systems (see, for example, Buller and James 2012; Rhodes and Wanna 2009). However, the fragmentation of executive authority, the institutionalization of the core executive, the pluralisation of advice and the increasingly personal and leader-centred nature of prime ministerial leadership make American models relevant in this context. Institutional pluralisation and fragmentation create pressures for coordination and coherence. Resource dependency, mutuality, bargaining and exchange are shared imperatives facing political leaders. So, at least some facets of the presidential studies literature are relevant to Westminster polities. Given that the summits face common

challenges, the literature on 'organizational capacity' is central to the analysis of institutionalization and prime ministerial effectiveness.

Various scholars have highlighted the potential of the presidential studies literature, particularly in offering frameworks for 'understanding and analysing the components of prime ministerial style and skills, within a framework permitting comparison, generalization and evaluation' (Theakston 2011: 79). Thus, he assesses Gordon Brown's premiership using Greenstein's model. He argues that 'allowing for constitutional, institutional and political differences between the US and British systems, it is possible to apply the Greenstein model to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of British prime ministers and provide insights into the reasons for success and failure in Number 10' (Theakston 2011: 82). So, accepting the argument that at least some facets of the presidential studies literature is relevant to Westminster politics, and that an increasingly institutionalised core executive requires management, we argue that 'organizational capacity' is a necessary part of the prime ministerial skill set and critical to prime ministerial effectiveness.

Organizational capacity has been variously defined. According to Greenstein (2004), it includes:

- The ability to forge a team and get the most out of it.
- Ensuring presidents get the advice they need to hear.
- Proficiency in creating effective institutional arrangements.

Of course, there are more expansive and ambitious perspectives. For example, Kerbel (2001) offers us the '5Cs':

- Conflict resolution (how Presidents manage dissent and disagreement and use conflict to achieve their goals).

- Coordination (this encompasses the flow of information, advice and options; the effectiveness of routines, including for planning and priority setting; clear lines of authority and responsibility; consultation).
- Capability (this includes the quality and calibre of the people who surround the president – their knowledge, experience and expertise and credibility).
- Communication (internally with the White House Office and Executive Office, which is critical because of its size and specialisation. Closely linked with coordination, within and between sub-units, the senior staff and with the President).
- Cooperation (primarily concerned with Congress, this recognises that Presidents have to bargain and negotiate to get their own way. Effective persuasion relies on interpersonal factors, but also on coordinating factors within the White House organization, such as preparation, facilitating access and follow-through).

Kerbel (1991) uses the contrasting cases of Presidents Carter and Reagan to demonstrate that perceptions of disorganization or amateurism reflect poorly on the President, affecting how actors approach and respond to the administration. Organizational efficiency is something the president can control, since he selects the senior staff and relies on them, particularly the Chief of Staff, to put in place arrangements that will foster positive evaluations of White House effectiveness and help to fulfil his agenda (Pfiffner 1996, Sullivan 2004). Burke (2000) emphasises who serves, how the staff is organized and how it operates day-to-day, noting these issues are especially important during the transition. There is broad acceptance that growth and institutionalisation has had organizational consequences, notably the need to govern and manage the presidential staff (Pfiffner 1996). Rockman (1996: 353) sums up the link between organization and effectiveness when he observes that:

Staffing and organization will not solve all problems or perhaps even many of them... But an effectively run White House can lead to an effectively run government and it can minimise what tennis buffs would call unforced errors.

We are not unique in seeing the potential of the concept of organizational capacity in a Westminster context. Theakston (2011) adapts Greenstein's characterization of organizational capacity: 'the ability to forge an effective advisory system in the White House' and 'design effective institutional arrangements' to the British context. In Theakston's formulation, the units requiring effective organization encompass 'the prime minister and the Number 10 staff, the machinery of government and the organization and use of the Cabinet system'. (Theakston 2011: 85).

Since the 1980s, a large, functionally specialized and activist personal staffing system has coexisted with the public service departments traditionally responsible for supporting the Australian prime minister. The epicenter of the prime minister's court is the Prime Minister's Office, which since relocation to the new Parliament House in 1988 has grown from 30 to its current complement of 53 staff. Tiernan (2007a) has documented the institutionalization of the Australian PMO, highlighting significant continuities in the structure and organization of prime ministers' offices and noting that Prime Ministers from Fraser to Gillard have retained the same basic contours within their offices. Over time the PMO has become a political office – its functions focused on supporting the prime minister in a complex, contested and increasingly professional political environment (Rhodes and Tiernan 2013a). The system that supports the Australian prime minister is broader than what is attempted by the centre in Britain It is a political office that has the added complexity of policy and seeking coordination/coherence.

The size and scale of the ministerial staffing system, led (in practice if not in theory) by the prime minister's Chief of Staff, and the networks of offices and relationships that form the 'centre' of the core executive, create imperatives for organization and management (Tiernan 2006) that are more significant than is currently the case in Britain. Given the well documented

growth of central advisory units, we define organizational capacity in the Australian context as the prime minister's ability to:

- Forge an effective team – this includes recruiting a suitably experienced CoS and selecting quality staff to serve in the PMO and across the ministerial staffing system more generally.
- Coordinate – to cooperate and work with others by maintaining effective relationships within and outside of government.
- Ensure the prime minister has access to quality advice – this includes organizing the flow of advice, creating effective arrangements for priority-setting, decisions and strategy.
- Manage the prime minister's office.
- Communicate the government's 'narrative'.
- Exert political management over parliament, the party and pressure groups.

We now examine the utility of these ideas using the contrasting cases of prime ministers John Howard and Kevin Rudd.

From order to chaos: assessing the organizational capacities of John Howard and Kevin Rudd

In the early phases of their prime ministerships, John Howard and Kevin Rudd confronted similar difficulties in developing advisory and support arrangements that suited them. Arguably the Rudd government's transition from Opposition to government was smoother and more successful than Howard's in 1996 (Tiernan 2008), but eighteen months into their respective leaderships, each was beset by difficulties associated with the organization and management of their private offices and relations with their official advisers in public service. We have seen that Howard responded to a series of setbacks by making

organizational and personnel changes that strengthened the information and advice available to him across politics, policy and issues management; his ability to coordinate across government; and to communicate his government's priorities and message. What explains this? In the section that follows, we demonstrate the different elements of organizational capacity that together underpinned Howard's effectiveness as prime minister. We contrast his experience with that of his successor, whose prime ministership ended in ignominy, just twenty months into his tenure.

Forging an effective team

Howard's choice of Arthur Sinodinos as Chief of Staff, after experiments with having two political loyalists – Nicole Feely and Grahame Morris in the role, is widely perceived as decisive in first stabilizing and then bolstering Howard's leadership (Rhodes and Tiernan 2013a; Tiernan 2007). Sinodinos has been described as the 'gold standard' for Chiefs of Staff. His background in the Commonwealth Treasury meant he brought extensive knowledge of government and strong networks to the CoS role, in addition to the relationship of confidence and trust he had developed with Howard over many years on his private staff. Sinodinos himself has emphasized the importance of the 'team' of senior staff in Howard's PMO:

One of the things that I think worked in the Howard Office was that the senior advisors were relatively senior people, who were pretty experienced in their own right.

Tony Nutt came in a role called Principal Private Secretary, which was essentially a political liaison role and to some extent also, a backbench liaison role. Helping coordinate government communications... He [Nutt] did a lot of political work. He specialised in that area, but he was quite a senior person who'd had a long history in the organization.

In the press office, the press people were relatively senior, particularly Tony O'Leary who worked in the press gallery a long time. The senior advisors, people like Michael Thawley who'd been senior in government when Don [Russell, CoS to Paul Keating] was there as well.

The stature of these people meant that the way the office was run it was in one sense collegial, because as senior people they had the right of access to the PM depending on what their issues were. It wasn't hierarchical.

Kevin Rudd was not afforded the same opportunities as Howard to learn and adapt his governing style, at least in part because of his inability to forge an effective team. He was unable to establish close working relationships with the many experienced ministerial staffers who returned to support Labor's transition to government in 2007, including his first CoS, David Epstein. Rudd's frenetic and often intemperate style and his relentless demands on staff and officials saw rates of staff turnover that were unusually high – even by ministerial office standards. The steady exodus of experienced senior staffers was reportedly motivated by frustration at their inability to influence the PM, his inability to maintain a stable set of priorities, or to think beyond the daily news cycle (see Button 2012, Chapter 3). Especially problematic for officials and staff in Rudd's PMO was the leader's tendency to rely on three young loyalists: Alister Jordan, who replaced Epstein as CoS in November 2008, Press Secretary Lachlan Harris and Economics Adviser Andrew Charlton (see for example, Cassidy 2010).

Coordination

Rudd continued the practice of maintaining a large, active and functionally specialized PMO, headed by the CoS, initially David Epstein. It had broad responsibilities across policy, politics and communications, particularly media management. An election commitment to reduce ministerial staff numbers by 30 per cent to 1996 levels was implemented except within the PMO. While the broad structure and organization of the office was maintained, there were two important changes. First, the PPS role that under Howard was held by Tony Nutt was redefined as Deputy Chief of Staff. This designation was replicated in the offices of the three most senior ministers (Deputy Prime Minister, Treasurer and Minister for Finance). Second, the

Policy group was organized more hierarchically, with a Director forming part of a 'leadership' team under the Deputy CoS.

A third major change had profound implications for the PMO, not all of which were (or it is arguable are yet) fully apprehended by Labor. This was the decision to abolish the Cabinet Policy Unit. Instead of reinstating the Secretary of PM&C as Cabinet Secretary, as had been canvassed by Labor in its 2004 public administration platform, Rudd appointed a minister, initially John Faulkner, as Cabinet Secretary and Special Minister of State. Support for the Cabinet and its committees continued to be provided by PM&C, but it was unclear where responsibility for strategy and long-term priorities had been assigned. Likely they weren't, thus defaulting to the PMO. But with a major institutional capacity removed and PM&C battling to develop new routines to support an activist prime minister; and as turnover at senior levels denuded the department of some of its most experienced and trusted officials, the task fell to Rudd, his CoS and an office ill-equipped to pick this function up in addition to its responsibilities for tactics and day-to-day management of a new and inexperienced government.

Access to quality advice

Howard's relationship with the public service was initially poor and according to some observers, deliberately distant. His decision to summarily dismiss six departmental secretaries and to appoint the combative Max Moore-Wilton as Secretary of PM&C created unease among officials. He signalled that policy was the province of ministers, while the public service would be responsible for implementing the decisions of the Cabinet. Howard appointed a succession of senior, experienced people to the politically appointed position of Cabinet Secretary and head of Howard's Cabinet Policy Unit. Over time, as the process of mutual adjustment took its course, the Prime Minister's relationship with his department improved, but although the Secretary was an important member of the advisory system, neither Moore-Wilton nor his

successor Dr Peter Shergold, enjoyed the same level of access or influence as staff in the PMO or CPU. Arthur Sinodinos told us:

All secretaries of PM&C dream of the day when they can roll this [the preeminent role the PMO now has in advising PMs] all back. I think Max [Moore-Wilton], in his dreams always did hope he could do that. Shergold was always far more diplomatic on that and always found a way to work in with the office.

But in the best sort of structures what happens is that if you create a bit of openness among the senior players, in terms of information, sharing information, so it doesn't look like people are playing games around keeping information to themselves. You do tend to find that people are open and they reciprocate and it works better.

If you create that sort of trust, the Secretary of PM&C doesn't need to always speak to the PM about something, he'll ring up you or a relevant advisor and say, look, I'm worried about x. I may talk to the PM about it, but have you guys thought about it. It creates an easy sort of atmosphere.

Rudd's ability to ensure he had access to quality advice was likely not assisted by the decision of Secretary of PM&C, Dr Peter Shergold, to retire. His contract was up after five years in the role, but Labor figures expressed 'disappointment' that Shergold stayed only a few weeks into the transition before heading off on a period of leave in January 2008 and leaving formally in March. January is traditionally when Australians take summer holidays. It was not unreasonable the Secretary should have planned a break – surely the new government would want to draw breath after a long campaign. It left an incoming Prime Minister impatient to start implementing his agenda lacking critical support and institutional memory. But perhaps too there were portents of difficulties to come. Almost from the outset, Rudd, his senior ministers and senior ministerial staff complained PM&C had lost capacity; that the Australian Public Service had been run down and had limited ability to produce advice and options that were 'strategic, creative and forward-looking' (Tiernan 2011). Senior Labor figures argue there was no one in the department's senior ranks to step into the breach. After speculation that he would prevail on former Goss government colleague, Professor Glyn Davis, Rudd selected then Secretary of the Victorian Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Terry Moran to head his

department. Moran arrived in March 2008 and immediately introduced sweeping changes, including significant changes to the senior leadership of the department that further disrupted and fragmented its institutional memory.

But although Moran was Rudd's appointment, neither could he sustain a working relationship with the prime minister. During the final months of his prime ministership, Rudd ceased contact with PM&C – neither speaking to nor meeting with Moran for more than four months.

Manage the prime minister's office

Rudd's difficulties have been attributed to his personality – his inability and unwillingness to delegate; a tendency for indecision that seems paradoxical given his performance at the height of the global financial crisis (Taylor and Uren 2010). Former Rudd staffers who worked with him closely suggested he appeared to lack a framework for being prime minister – a sense of the issues that he should and should not become involved in; and the level of detail at which it is appropriate for a prime minister to become engaged. Advice about this is generally forthcoming from PM&C and for prime ministers whose CoS had public service backgrounds, their private office. The staff who stayed with Rudd beyond 2009 had no such skills or experience.

Like Jimmy Carter as US President, Rudd's obsessive engagement in issues of detail made it impossible to maintain a focus on priorities, or to stick to his program and schedule. His habitual lateness; delays and cancellation of meetings; and expectation that people would wait (perhaps hours) until he was ready to see them, fuelled resentment – among public servants, stakeholders and, as he would later find to his detriment, colleagues in the ministry and Caucus.

It is difficult to separate criticisms of Rudd's office from those of the prime minister. Several Cabinet ministers perceived that Rudd's 'troika' of young advisers enjoyed higher status and greater input than they, and certainly more than senior officials. Then Parliamentary Secretary, former ALP National Secretary Gary Gray summed up the feelings of many ministerial colleagues when he observed:

[Alister] Jordan was intelligent, thoughtful and hardworking, but he was given a role nobody should have been given. It completely skewed the deployment of skills that he had. Lachlan Harris [the press secretary] had a job brief that should never have been invented. No modern government can control its every utterance. We became a Cabinet who could not publicly argue its case.

Rudd's office was incapable of managing the power put into their hands by the Prime Minister, and by the way, by extension, by the Cabinet. The ministers did whatever the leader's office wanted because that was a pathway to promotion or an easier life. Alister only had to stare at them and they backed off like kittens. They lost all their dignity. And probably to this day, Jordan and Harris don't understand how the current they created ended Rudd's prime ministership. Ultimate power has to stay with the Caucus. That's the bottom line (quoted in Cassidy 2010: 119-20).

Julia Gillard provided a damning assessment of Rudd's management at a press conference ahead of his ill-fated challenge to her leadership in February 2012:

Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister always had very difficult and very chaotic work patterns. In my view, Kevin Rudd is an excellent campaigner and he was an excellent campaigner in 2007. Indeed, a remarkable campaigner in 2007.

But government requires different skills. Government requires consistency, purpose, method, discipline, inclusion, consultation; it requires you to lead a big team and to lead it well. Kevin Rudd, as Prime Minister, struggled to do that and by the days of 2010 that struggle had resulted in paralysis in the government.

In those circumstances I did ask Kevin Rudd for a leadership ballot and in that leadership ballot Kevin Rudd assessed he had so little support that did not choose to contest it.

That is the people who knew him best and knew the most about his prime ministership had determined that he no longer had their support. That's

what motivated me in 2010, it was about the interests of the nation and providing good government

(Prime Minister's Press Conference, Adelaide, 23 February 2012).

Communicate the government's 'narrative'

It was noted that under John Howard, the political became the predominant focus of the PMO (Rhodes and Tiernan 2013a). Even broadly connoted, the criticism is implied – suggesting there is another, different way of governing, where leaders remain aloof from the influence of polls and pollsters and continue on a policy path unsullied by opposition or contrary views. Interestingly, it is a criticism leveled at most recent and serving democratic leaders (Kane and Patapan 2010), including perhaps particularly, Kevin Rudd. Rudd's focus on the political – sustaining the approach that had worked so successfully in opposition in government, confounded his colleagues and analysts alike. He came to office with a reputation for being a 'policy wonk', with a well-considered narrative for what he wanted to do and themes that would define his government. In office, he seemed unable to choose between them – endeavouring to prosecute many agendas at once – all under grandly ambitious titles and banners. For example, rather than pursuing action on climate change within an economic framework, Rudd branded it as 'the greatest moral challenge' facing his government – leaving him nowhere to go and the public bewildered, when he backed away from his commitment in early 2010. Similarly, stimulus spending on schools was branded 'Building the Education Revolution'. Both are cited as evidence of the primacy of politics over policy in the government's overall approach and of its inability to shift from campaigning to governing.

Howard was assiduous in his management of the media, but his choice of medium was strategic and carefully controlled. He had a clear preference for talkback radio and reaching out 'over the heads' of the Canberra press gallery. The importance of having a clear sense of government priorities and a 'narrative' that he could prosecute during his

frequent media appearances, was a lesson from the political difficulties he experienced in 1997. Howard's experience and that of his staff might have been the difference, but we can't discount the authority that developed with electoral success. The media environment that Howard occupied was vastly different from that inhabited by Rudd and his successor Julia Gillard (see Tiernan and Weller 2010). Although the 24/7 news cycle had begun to ramp up in earnest, Howard's leadership preceded the explosion of online and social media that underpinned Rudd's electoral appeal, but became a double-edged sword that helped to undermine his leadership.

Exert political management over parliament, the party and pressure groups.

Howard remained attentive to his colleagues throughout his prime minister, save perhaps until the last few months. This was a lesson he had learned the hard way when he was dumped as Opposition Leader in 1989 for being insufficiently consultative. Howard used his office - particularly his CoS and PPS, to keep in touch with his ministers and the party-room, constantly taking soundings from them about the issues and how they and their constituents thought the government was performing. According to his second CoS and long-term political confidante, Grahame Morris:

In Howard's case, you had a massive transition of the man himself from a difficult period in the mid '80s to Prime Minister in the mid '90s. To me the difference was 'man management'. He used to place great importance on the party room meeting, on the cabinet, on the leadership meetings and on the tactics meeting. So you sort of had three big touch points most days, or certainly most weeks with the colleagues.

In stark contrast, Rudd alienated and enraged his colleagues. He was dismissive, ill-tempered, sometimes abusive and punitive. He had a tendency to 'freeze out' advisers, officials and stakeholder representatives who crossed him. So consistent were complaints about Rudd's behaviour that journalist David Marr (2010) conclude the Prime Minister was a person with 'rage at his core'. Marr was being deliberately provocative, but his essay 'Power

trip: the political journey of Kevin Rudd' (Marr 2010) crystallised what hitherto had been well known among Canberra insiders and of course too, in Queensland from his reputation in the Goss government. Rudd's Minister for Communications, Senator Stephen Conroy observed:

Kevin Rudd had contempt for the Cabinet, contempt for the Cabinet members, contempt for the Caucus, contempt for the Parliament. And ultimately what brought him down a year or two ago was the Australian public worked out that he had contempt for them as well (Interview with Senator Stephen Conroy, *Today*, 23 February 2012).

His former Treasurer confirmed Rudd's dysfunctional management and difficult personal style were long-standing concerns for senior colleagues. He told an interviewer that:

I, along with a number of senior ministers, was constantly talking with Kevin Rudd about the inability to progress the business of Government, particularly through 2010 and late 2009. These matters were raised with him. The fact is there isn't an easy way of explaining to people why there was such great dissatisfaction, not just in the caucus, but also among Senior Cabinet colleagues who were working with him...

What was occurring, particularly through late 2009 and early 2010, is that the Prime Minister was increasingly not consulting with his Cabinet and not behaving in a respectful way and not taking fundamental decisions (Wayne Swan, on *Meet the Press*, 26 February 2012).

Organizational capacity and prime ministerial effectiveness

John Howard was a leader who grew into the prime ministership after initial difficulties with the help and support of his advisory system, notably his PMO and CoS. Howard's experience illustrates that organizational capacity if not innate, can be learned (Burke 2000).

Kevin Rudd by contrast was a leader who appeared to have great promise. He boasted to Commonwealth senior officials that he was the only Australian prime minister to have had experience as a diplomat, a senior official and a Chief of Staff (Rudd 2008). Yet in many ways he was an outsider. Kevin from Queensland had only eight years parliamentary experience before becoming Opposition Leader in December 2006, compared with Howard

who in 1996 marked 22 years including five as a minister. Rudd's tendency to rely on personal loyalists whose lacked networks in Canberra and experience of federal government presents obvious parallels to a phenomenon of 'outsiders' in Washington:

There is a temptation [for an incoming president] to surround [him]self with political cronies from their home state. One measure of the maturation of a new President is how quickly he makes the transition to more seasoned, Washington-savvy staff.

If a President comes out of the transition with a well organized staff and decision process that fits his needs, this may mitigate, but not remove, inadequacies rooted in personality traits and inexperience. When a weak staff serves an insecure president forced outside the comfort zone of his experience, the probability of failure rises exponentially.

(Harrison Wellford 2007: 73).

In the absence of organization, coordination and discipline, you get 'court politics' (Rhodes and Tiernan 2013b), where interactions and personalities replace routines to the detriment of coordination and coherence. We know Rudd operated very loosely with a diminishing circle of staff with no fixed portfolio of responsibilities. In the absence of organization with something as complex as the prime ministership, you get pathology. The parallels between Rudd and Jimmy Carter are clear. Both had staff who though personally loyal, lacked experience and networks. Like Carter, Rudd lacked staff and senior officials who were 'Canberra-savvy'. Kevin Rudd's prime ministership provides empirical support from Australia for presidential studies' scholar John Burke's (2000, 222) conclusion that:

Ultimately ... a president who is unable to manage the White House will probably be unable to manage much else.

All of this suggests a need to better understand organizational capacity. Is it, as the Americans have long suggested, a critical skill for political leadership? Does it underpin the ability of prime ministers to exploit the resources available to them given their position at the centre of core executive networks? Ask John Howard, and the answer would be a resounding

yes. In sharp contrast, it is not clear that either Rudd or Gillard understood the need for this kind of support or had the ability to learn the requisite skills.

Institutional memory matters in the institutional presidency and the institutional prime ministership. Leaders would do well to know what's gone before. Greenstein (in Sullivan 2004: 122) argues 'each new administration tries to organize itself in such a way that it avoids a problem that the previous administration had, but they always misunderstand and get it wrong'. Moreover, as we have seen in the Howard and Rudd cases, leaders often do not fully understand their advisory needs, certainly not in the early phases of their tenure and perhaps not until they experience a crisis or reach their second term. Hence we might argue that it is unreasonable for commentators to judge so harshly organizational capacity in the early phases of a new leader's tenure. Of course, this is when their potential to achieve what they want to is greatest. Perhaps then we need to challenge the wisdom of resisting transition planning and encourage them to do it more explicitly and attentively. Also we might encourage leaders to give proper consideration to personnel, skills, suitability, routines and fit. If they don't want to do this themselves, they can delegate it – to their Chief of Staff or an appropriately experienced senior minister or party elder, experienced in the ways of Canberra.

Conclusion

How useful is organizational capacity in understanding prime ministerial effectiveness and success? We argue it is clearly necessary, but not sufficient. Rather it is a facet of statecraft (see Powell 2010; Rhodes 2013). Recognizing that multiple factors such as time, luck and context impact on leadership effectiveness and performance, Strangio, 'tHart and Walter (2013) argue the need for integrated approach which recognizes that prime ministerial power and performance depend 'on colleagues, on followers, on favours won, trust gained, enmity contained, needs fulfilled and always conditional (on the historical moment, on political culture

and climate, on institutional conditions and institutional change'. However, Rhodes (2013) advocates an interpretive approach that focuses on 'court politics'; on the social construction of prime ministerial leadership by prime ministers and by others; and on the assessment of prime ministerial performance. In other words, 'PMs are locked into webs of dependence, spinning webs of significance (Rhodes 2013). Their performance needs to be evaluated in the context of the political leadership network(s), which they construct, including within their own support systems.

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¹ We draw on a database of elite interviews with ministers, ministerial staffers and senior officials in Australian federal governments developed by Tiernan and colleagues over the past decade. It includes transcripts from two lengthy workshops involving 11 former Chiefs of Staff to Australian prime ministers from Fraser to Rudd, held in late 2009. For full details see Rhodes and Tiernan (2013a)

² Ministerial staff numbers are reported annually in the *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1984 Annual Report*. They are updated twice-yearly in documents tabled at the Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee's Estimates hearings. These numbers are drawn from the *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act Annual Report 2011-12*. Available at:

http://www.finance.gov.au/publications/mops_annual_reports/2011-2012/docs/MOPS_Annual_Report.pdf

³ *Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Annual Report 2011-12*. Available at: http://www.dpmc.gov.au/annual_reports/2011-12/part-3/03-management-of-human-resources.htm#figure-3-1