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Cabinet government: The least bad system of government?¹

Patrick Weller

Isaiah Berlin (1953) once classified people as either hedgehogs or foxes. The hedgehogs knew one big thing; the foxes knew many things. The categories led to innumerable games as people were classified. How best to describe the ideas and interests that people had, and the way that they developed their cases and arguments. Festschriften provide the excuse to indulge, look back on a person's body of work and try to decide whether to identify a single thread or to acknowledge the diversity of their contribution.

John Wanna must surely justify the fox title. We first met in Christchurch in 1983 when I visited the university to talk to Professor Keith Jackson, one of the established figures in New Zealand politics, about Kiwi prime ministers. Keith gathered a few of his colleagues for lunch before we headed off to the ski fields, discussing politics on the chair lifts on the way up each time. John was one of those at the lunch and recalls better than I do the conversation we had. He claims I asked him what he was doing there; I can't believe I was so tactless. We then recruited him to

1 For a later development of these themes, see Patrick Weller, Dennis Grube and R. A. W. Rhodes (forthcoming).

Griffith; he had a book on trade union politics and came to Griffith to develop a strand on government–business relations. That was more than 33 years ago, so we have known each other a long time.

Since then he has ranged widely and fruitfully. He has books on public policy, public sector management and, most impressively, on budgeting. The last became his tour de force. What other academic chose to spend a sabbatical in the Department of Finance? And what other political scientist would the Department of Finance be prepared to host, providing a room and support for John and his research assistant, Charles Broughton, (one of John's bright graduates that the department then recruited)? John also developed connections with the budget gurus elsewhere, adding a comparative component to his work. He started in Europe and now includes comparative work with China.

He wrote constantly for the press and talked on the radio, one of the talking heads whom journalists approach to provide an aura of authenticity to their passing impressions. John had the advantage that he always seemed to know what he was talking about.

I suppose I could be regarded as somewhat biased in any assessment. John and I have combined in writing four textbooks as well as *Comparing Westminster* (Rhodes, Wanna and Weller 2009). In our texts on *Public Policy in Australia* (Davis et al. 1988, second edition 1993), he was the resident Marxist writing on the role of the state. We have edited a number of volumes together and participated in numerous volumes, both jointly and separately. He was a stalwart of the Centre for Australian Public Sector Management and the Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance at Griffith University for more than a decade. So he has been a good colleague to work with; he always delivers (... eventually) and it always is illuminating and interesting to read. A fox indeed.

That is an easy segue to my broader subjects that provides variations on the fox theme: the cabinet system in Australia and elsewhere. My title is of course a misuse of Churchill's faint praise for democracy. My purpose is to suggest that, for all its failings, which are so enthusiastically and persuasively documented, cabinet government remains a more viable form of government in a parliamentary democracy than any of the alternatives. The reason is because cabinet government is the ultimate fox (if we can reify the institution for the moment). It has multiple competing functions; it may not be particularly good at any one of them but at its best it can cover the range of analytically distinct activities in a way that is

adequate. It is in the drawing together of these different perspectives that cabinet government gains its advantages and to which it can attribute its longevity; its flexibility and lack of rigid rules allow it to metamorphose as circumstances demand. Like jazz, it is predicated on extemporisation. We should not overstate the case; at its worst, cabinet processes can be as dysfunctional as any other form of government.

Practitioners consistently stress that they practice cabinet government. The critiques, often but not exclusively from academics, seek to reconceptualise the mode of government with new phrases that may become established among observers but obtain little traction among the politicians, public servants and advisers who have to make the system work. I would agree with John Wanna that our role is to understand how and why the system works and explain it in terms that practitioners understand and with which they can debate. If we go too far in reinventing language and concepts that become unique to academe, the debates become self-referential; if political science becomes exclusive in its theories, its language and its interests, we screen out all but the cognoscenti; if we become obsessed with theory and methodology to the exclusion of tackling real problems of politics, and if we become more interested in what we as academics do than what they as practitioners do, then we both court irrelevance and sever our links with those who actually do what we nominally choose to observe. Political scientists find it hard enough to be taken seriously as it is. Unlike economists we cannot deliver predictions enveloped in maths and models. I agree with Susan Strange's opinion:

Hard empirical work is needed in every aspect. There is no substitute for it. Only in doing so is it possible to acquire confidence to test for oneself the theoretical explanations put forward by others and to develop explanatory theories that are more than mere word-plays and metaphorical analogies. (Strange 1985, 22)

If our language and interests become arcane, unrelated to the common usage, no one else will care what we do. The loss is ours, not theirs.

We need too to beware the temptation to develop cute managerial solutions that can be presented as a way to make cabinet government work 'better'. We invariably do so in a way that denies cabinet government vulpine characteristics, the requirement that it simultaneously fulfils several functions. The challenge is not to identify better ways of doing one or other of its functions; that is comparatively easy but opens itself up to the

potential consequence that such a process will lead to a decline in other activities. Rather, the challenge for its critics must be to devise a system that can integrate all the activities of the cabinet government in a way that leads to an overall improvement of governance. That is the challenge I seek to tease out in this tribute to John in the confident assumption that he probably agrees with its main direction, even if not the details.

Explaining cabinet government

First, we need to avoid the trap of narrowly defining cabinet government in such a way that the definition restricts or pre-empts any analysis. If we say that 'cabinet has decided', what do we mean? It can be any one of many interpretations. It can refer to a *meeting* of the 'full' cabinet, a *group* of cabinet ministers or a cabinet committee. It can draw attention to a written cabinet *decision* (or minute, depending on local terminology). A cabinet decision could derive from an occasion where the prime minister suddenly decided to record the outcome of a meeting with a few ministers in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) as a formal decision, or even record a formal decision as a result of a series of phone calls to ministers without meeting them at all. The term *cabinet* can thus refer to a meeting, to a group of ministers, to a decision or a system of government. It is so ambiguous a term that we should try to avoid using it on its own.

There is a danger in seeking to limit the term to outcomes of particular meetings: a full cabinet in Britain or Canada, the Ministerial Council in the Netherlands, for example. In Britain the 'full' cabinet is a selection of senior ministers, about 25 per cent of the total. Some ministers will be given cabinet status, others will not but will be constant attendees. In Canada, all ministers are in cabinet; there is no 'inner' or 'full' cabinet. However, the numbers are so large that key discussions take place in priorities and planning committees. In the Netherlands the weekly Ministerial Council endorses decisions worked out in a series of committees and party meetings in the previous week; the Council is not expected to reopen discussion but to legitimise and authorise. In Australia, cabinet ministers include two-thirds of the ministers, but often are not involved in the work of expenditure committees. Prime ministers have established smaller coordination committees (Fraser) or strategic priorities and budget committees (Rudd) to consider key issues. To argue in any of these cases that discussions only constitute cabinet discussions if they take place in only one forum is not tenable.

The concept of ‘cabinet government’ is inevitably debated and contested, and it must be accepted as fluid. Who actually governs? In 1962 John Macintosh argued:

The country is governed by the Prime Minister who leads, coordinates and maintains a series of Ministers, all of whom are advised and backed by the Civil Service. Some decisions are taken by the Prime Minister alone, some in consultation between him and Senior Ministers, while others are left to heads of departments, the Cabinet, Cabinet Committees, or the permanent officials ... There is no simple catch-phrase that can describe this form of government, but it may be pictured as a cone. The Prime Minister stands at the apex, supported by and giving power to a widening series of rings of senior ministers, the Cabinet, its Committees, Non-Cabinet ministers, and departments. (1962, 451–452)

Macintosh’s conclusions are worth repeating because they are so much subtler than the caricature that later emerged from Richard Crossman’s search for a catchy headline. Macintosh did *not* argue that the prime minister made *all* the decisions, but that the decisions might be made in a wide variety of forums that included ministers, committees and permanent officials. The prime minister sat at the apex of the cone. Crossman, looking for that ‘simple catch-phrase’, came up with a proposition that the evidence did not justify when he translated Macintosh’s findings to the claim that ‘Cabinet government has been transformed into prime ministerial government’ (1963, 51).

Cabinet government is therefore best described as an adaptive process: continuing, often ambiguous, always potent. Practitioners appreciate the ambiguity because they know it is the only way the system can be made to work. Their concern is far more with *how* than with *whom*. They are not interested in limiting definitions but in actual practice. Take two definitions from experienced practitioners:

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

The first is from a cabinet secretary in Britain, the second from a secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet in Australia (cited in Weller 2003). Both stress the need for decisions on policy and the

assurance of political support, the two essentials for successful *outcomes*. Both were neutral about how and where the issues should be debated and determined. They wanted a process that achieved those ends. The brilliant, but recently deceased, secretary to the British cabinet, Jeremy Heywood, was asked whether cabinet government still existed in Britain. He asserted the same concept but as a set of principles:

It partly depends on whether you mean cabinet government as a meeting once a week or cabinet government as a set of principles ... *It just manifests itself in different ways*. Every single decision coming through one meeting a week at which there are 20–25 people is not a test of whether cabinet government is dead. (Heywood 2010, 158, emphasis added)

There is nothing new here. In one of his antipodean excursions to observe his beloved Australian politics, David Butler wrote of cabinet:

One trouble about discussion of cabinet power is the ambiguity of the word cabinet. Does it refer to the formal weekly or bi-weekly discussion of the twelve or sixteen or twenty-three or twenty-seven men [sic] sitting round the table? Or does it refer to the total cabinet system, with the routine circulation of papers and the opportunities for ministers to raise their doubts about impending policy decisions informally with their colleagues or with the Prime Minister's Department (in Britain the cabinet secretariat ...) or with the Prime Minister himself? (Butler 1973, 59)

If cabinet government is the process through which collective purpose is developed and maintained by the central members of the core executive, analysts should identify activities by what they seek to achieve, by what they do. There can be no simple assumption that some people have legitimacy in the process and others do not, but with one caveat. Whoever is involved in developing a proposal, and the numbers are likely to include a range of people within the core executive, in the end ministers must have a say, however nominal. They have the authority that is required to legitimise and finalise a process that other participants cannot wield. The label under which a meeting is held is less significant than what the participants decide. There can be a wide range of forums, and constellations of supports, where discussion can take place.

For illustrative purposes, here is a spectrum of the range of forums in which cabinet government can be delivered.

Spectrum of ‘cabinet government’ decision forums and likely attendees

1. The entire ministry: meetings of all ministers including ministerial retreats.
2. Full cabinet meetings as exclusively a ministers’ forum: ministers and supporting officials from Cabinet Office only.
3. Full cabinet meetings: ministers, officials as above plus advisers (public servants and/or political advisers) as observers.
4. Cabinet committee as preparatory forum with recommendations (sometimes pro forma) to full cabinet meetings: ministers, officials and advisers.
5. Cabinet committees with decision-making powers such as National Security Council, Expenditure Review Committee, war cabinets: ministers, officials and advisers.
6. Inner cabinet: officially recognised committee of ministers with officials and advisers: Strategic Budget and Priority Committee, coordination committee, Danish Prime Minister’s Strategic Committee.
7. Inner cabinet, unofficial: senior ministers with officials and advisers, taking final decisions: sometimes kitchen cabinets, David Cameron’s coalition ‘Quad’.
8. Inner cabinet, unofficial without officials: prime minister getting commitment and support from ministerial colleagues; ministers and advisers without officials reporting decisions: aka kitchen cabinets.
9. Meetings of prime minister, ministers and advisers to debate specific issues: Blair’s ‘sofa governments’.
10. Meetings of ministers from the same party (in coalition governments) to plan cabinet tactics: ministers and parliamentary leaders (where distinct).
11. Bilaterals: prime minister and ministers with officials on policy issues in portfolio; stocktakes.
12. Leaders’ group: senior ministers, parliamentary leaders, top party officials to discuss political strategy for government.
13. Core bilateral: prime minister and deputy prime minister and/or chancellor/treasurer.

14. Prime minister and PMO staff meeting including some ministers: Cameron and Osborne plus chief whip.
15. Prime minister and PMO staff meeting without other ministers.

This list makes no pretensions to be complete. It is not intended to represent the full range of meetings in any one country. Rather, it is an amalgam of sites identified across a range of countries. It seeks to move from the meeting with the widest representation to the most limited, but even that task is open to ambiguity. Cabinet processes are always the consequences of choices of who should be involved and to what degree. Should all ministers be members of the 'full' cabinet? If not, then a simple full cabinet meeting is itself a limited selection of ministers, as is a cabinet committee, an inner cabinet (whether official or not) and a meeting of ministers in the PMO.

The calculations may be administratively expedient (keep the number of attendees down to allow discussion), strategic (we want the key ministers and advisers only), political (they will leak), efficient (get decisions made by senior ministers, so the rest will fall into line), or sheer reality (we can get them together quickly). Some arrangements will combine several of those objectives. An inner cabinet, whether formal or informal, can bring political weight, effective decision-making and security, albeit at the cost of representativeness and a wider array of opinion. Many gatherings may serve a number of simultaneous functions. We can assert that cabinet government is not only what happens in cabinet meetings but in positive terms – there is no simple description – just an acknowledgement of the value of collective government and debate.

Again, note the common component: ministers. Meetings of senior officials may screen the documents to ensure they are ready for consideration. They may act as gatekeepers. They may exclude some propositions at an early stage. They may recommend preferred options. They will be massively influential in determining the agenda and the strategy. However, in the last resort they need ministerial approval, however limited the role ministers may play in the actual process. Ministers, even passive and dull ones, play an authorising role in cabinet processes.

This array of sites also identifies the range of levers that can be applied and by whom and some of the ways in which leaders may seek to bring different groups and opinions together. Some leaders may be able to determine the attendance (who is invited), the rules that will be applied (the process),

the terms in which the particular problem is defined, the urgency of the issues (whether politically or externally driven), and who has the political weight to be involved. These powers accrue in particular to prime ministers in Westminster systems where power is concentrated. That is far from the norm globally. In many countries, leaders have their powers circumscribed by coalition arrangements. Positions and policies may be part of the agreement and the freedom to change these may be restricted to leadership groups, not prime ministers alone. Ministers protected by such agreements may be freer to argue a case in the government's forums and the need to maintain the coalition becomes a central calculation. In the Netherlands there is an agreement that a policy will not be pursued if a coalition party, rather than an individual minister, is opposed. The cabinet process becomes one means for alleviating coalition tensions. The power of patronage may not be as effective in these cases. Those ministers who are appointed by another party do not owe their jobs to the prime minister; they cannot be so readily fired or reshuffled as a negotiation is required.

The cabinet processes in these cases reflect some of the complications. All the power does not rest with one position; others have resources and assets that they can apply. Coalition partners or party heavyweights have levers that they too can pull in debates on maintaining collective governments, where the leader is dependent on them. There is always the option of a resignation or defection where the impact is disproportionate to the sheer numbers. In situations where the government does not hold a clear majority in Westminster systems the parliamentary numbers may have to be constantly calculated. Where party discipline has collapsed, it just gets harder. In other proportional representative systems, that again is just the normal circumstances, where legislation has to be negotiated before it can be passed. Neustadt's proposition that the power of the president is the power to persuade has resonance in parliamentary systems where leaders must constantly use the available levers to ensure they rule, at least in part, by consent.

Can we be more precise about the nature or existence of cabinet government? Only with difficulty as there is a danger that the definition precludes more substantive discussion. The New Zealand Government, for instance, defines a cabinet meeting as an occasion when ministers discuss issues, with officials there to take notes of conclusions. Its Cabinet Office states that, if there are no officials, it is not a cabinet meeting, just a meeting of ministers. That might work in the small NZ system where all

ministers have offices in the Beehive, the administrative building attached to Parliament House. However, as other systems have a practice of officials frequently taking notes at ministers' meetings whatever their standing, the NZ definition does not translate readily to elsewhere.

We need to see cabinet government as a continuing process in which key players manage issues and people in a kaleidoscope of meetings and discussions to ensure that collective government is developed and continued. What matters is what is being achieved, not whatever formal title a meeting may attract. As Macintosh foreshadowed, decisions can be made in a multiplicity of places as a means of settling disputes, consolidating support and determining mutually acceptable outcomes.

The dilemmas of cabinet

Why is there such a need? Because cabinets must multitask and often are not in control of their own agenda; rather, they must react to events and circumstances thrust upon them. All the time they are required to balance often incompatible objectives and provide a result that has an air of certainty, confidence and precision. Lists of the functions that the cabinet process must fulfil can be readily identified. They include: clearing house, information exchange, arbiter between ministers, political decision-maker, coordinator, guardian of the strategy. Add to that crisis manager, and potentially a host of other functions. Some issues may be routine, requiring authorisation rather than debate. Often the issues are contested between ministers or their departments, between central agencies and spending departments, with state implications or political consequences. Issues come to cabinet because they are hard and cannot be determined at an official level or by individual ministers. The results will be 'on balance' decisions, seldom clear cut and never certain of success in their application. Ambiguity may infest actual cabinet debates, but the conclusions have to be presented as though they are the only feasible outcome. Expressing doubt can be politically corrosive. That is the nature of their position.

Those conclusions can be restated as a series of dilemmas with which all leaders and participants must grapple, dilemmas that need to sit at the heart of any analysis of cabinet government. They all require choices. They all hold the potential for catastrophe.

- The *process* dilemma. How best to run a government? Prime ministers must balance the representative legitimacy of the broad membership and the need for tight and effective decision-making. The dilemma is that they need both, but the two may work against each other. They must also determine in what forums decisions are made, by whom and through what procedures; these are the routines through which predictable decision-making can occur.
- The *policy* dilemma is to determine the best outcome or mix and match between the available criteria and options. It requires not only balancing good politics and good policy, but also puzzling over difficult issues where there is no right answer and where even the formulation of the problem is debated.
- The *political* dilemma is how to balance the political forces that might split the government. The ambitions of parties, putative successors, coalition partners and parliamentary rebels are always a calculation; the essence of political life is contest, values and disagreement.
- The *accountability* dilemma is how to keep the support and confidence of the party, the parliament and the electorate when tough, and potentially unpopular, decisions must be made.
- Finally, the *leadership* dilemma is what levers are available for a prime minister to lead; assuming that political leadership is based on the power to persuade, how and where that can occur.

Consider the consequences if any or all of the above are not adequately taken into account.

The routines of cabinet allow a process by which a broad range of activities can be managed through the systematic consideration of priorities, the presentation of data and the preparation of agreed positions at the official level. The idea is that cabinet forums are dedicated to those issues that only ministers can determine. What can be settled before the meeting should be. When the systems break down, when cabinet cannot manage the agenda, then there is likely to be gridlock. Nothing significant happens. Even though much of the management can be delegated to officials, there is still the need for the formal imprimatur of ministers as authorising agents. There is much to be said for the opinion of a Canadian official who reflected on the value of routines and due process:

I don't care if ministers actually read the memorandum or not. I care that the system has subjected it to the discipline of critique and comment and improvement and that our thinking has improved as a result. That doesn't necessarily mean sitting round a table in a meeting room. (quoted in Weller 2018, 154)

Solving problems is what is meant to drive cabinet. The sentiment that 'good policy is good politics' sounds encouraging, even if seldom actually applied. Shortage of time, inadequate information and divided positions can make solutions difficult. Bad policy, even if seen as a temporary placebo, may create problems in later years. Who determines what good policy is, and for what purpose it may be introduced, will always be contested. Buying votes with policies that contain devastating delayed long-term grenades for future governments may be common: are such policies good or bad?

Who cares about longer-term impacts? There are always issues about the immediate consequences in terms of political support. Malcolm Fraser argued that, if a fair proportion of his cabinet was unhappy with a proposal, then a similar proportion of the party was likely to be concerned too. And they were all meant to be on the same side. At a national level the opposition of aroused groups would be so much greater. So good policy has to be seen through the prism of political support. The decisions have to consider parliamentary and party support too. As long as governments are accountable, even the best policy needs to balance the good sense of the decision against the prejudgements, even prejudices, of those who will be required to vote on the measures.

The politics is of course a given. Cabinet processes are where political, economic and administrative perspectives intersect. Australian prime ministers have become even more sensitive to immediate stimuli. That is understandable, given the mortality rate. They know that rivals are sitting round the cabinet table, looking for signs of weakness and assuring themselves about their own ability to do so much better. Cabinet rooms, more than most meeting rooms, are havens of hubris.

Who implements cabinet decisions? In Australia it is seldom the federal government alone, but even if it is there is a need for policies to be practicable, or sufficiently flexible. More often there is a requirement to work with state governments and other organisations. And so the story can be ever expanded.

There may be better ways of developing the routines, so cabinet decisions are only made when all the information is available and analysed. There may be better policies, given more time, better research and a constructive debate dedicated to the single problem. At times it can happen, but rarely does. There may be a variety of tactical steps that can be taken to ensure the political support. In summary, it may be possible to do any one of these functions better if they were to be considered in isolation; indeed, it would generally be hard not to.

That is not an option that cabinets have. They may sometimes be too political or too technical. They may be so intent on getting the policies right that they give too little attention to the raw politics. All these positions can lead to problems. There can be no one correct stand or approach, no one ideal way of managing policy development or responding to a crisis. We need to accept that cabinet ministers need to balance these demands, and to judge issues on the effectiveness of the balance rather than focusing only on a particular aspect.

The rotating prime ministership over the past decade is taken as a sign that the process is broken. The primacy of internal party division and personal revenge has trumped the needs for policy development. Policies were always likely to be compromises, if not between governing factions, then between different conceptions of what the country needs: financial restraint or program delivery, equity against development. And so on.

Prime ministers, like jugglers, must balance these interests with the available tools: agenda setting, ministerial selection, public communication, developing narratives, corraling support. Their vulnerability to internal revolt, a function of party rules and circumscribed electorates, makes the constant (self-imposed) obsession with polls self-reinforcing. Coups against prime ministers, it is worth remembering, are a consequence of the unique set of rules developed in Australia; they are not universal. In other systems prime ministers may be less vulnerable to internal revolt. They have other pressures: maintaining coalitions, balancing their own party interest against the national needs for policy. Among the dilemmas they face, the need for support will be continuous, with its stress on the short term. There have in the past, with the same rules and nominal circumstances, been times when prime ministers can push their own barrow against majority cabinet opinion. When there is something they want, cabinet ministers would acquiesce, even when they disagreed. But not all the time.

The poverty of the metaphor

Writers cannot resist a good metaphor. They seldom work because metaphors tend to simplify what is, as I have suggested, a complex, multifaceted process. Cabinets have been described as sounding boards, as focus groups, as charades, as 'sofa government', as part of a system of court government. They may be all those things at different times, but they are never exclusively one or the other. In each case one characteristic is identified as emblematic and then the argument is run that that single activity symbolises the way that cabinet government works. Sometimes they fall into the rather silly assumption that cabinet government is what exclusively takes place in a formal cabinet meeting, which, as I suggested, underplays the kaleidoscopic rush and bustle of central government. Too often metaphors evoke a commonly used image that takes the reader perhaps further than the author would like.

So 'court politics' wants to draw attention to the internal politics of the executive centre and to the different beliefs and interest of the actors there but, by evoking the court, it evokes the monarch (even if it never describes the prime ministers as monarchs). The metaphor can then get out of hand. Courtiers depend utterly for their continued influence in the good favours of the monarch; even the great servants of the crown like Thomas Cromwell, Bismarck and Metternich lost office when they lost royal favour. There is simply no comparison to the relationship between courtiers and monarchs, and between ministers and prime ministers. Ministers have resources and ambitions that are just so different. That may be why, when they talk of the centre of government, actors at the centre of government often talk of cliques, of kitchen cabinets, of factions and of conspiracies, but in the 40 years I have been interviewing never of courts. They appreciate the fundamental difference between court politics and executive politics.

Metaphors can confuse, oversimplify or mislead. Cabinet processes are complicated enough as it stands. We do better by using the clear, mutually understandable language of practitioners and then demystifying the process that they pursue.

Cabinet as collective

There is a dictum attributed to Ben Chifley: ‘One man and a dozen fools are likely to govern better than one man alone’. Given the uneven quality of his ministers, he was well positioned to judge. Prime ministers cannot constantly dictate (unless they have already built up a strong position); they need to work *through* cabinet to ensure support and balance all the competing interests. After an early setback Fraser could not recall a time he was overruled by cabinet because he made sure that he had support for his position before issues came to cabinet, or sometimes went on and on till he could generate acquiescence. John Howard stated:

I was very keen on running an orthodox Westminster system; I rarely ambushed the cabinet except when it was an acceptable ambush such as declaring in Washington on 12 September that we’d stand beside the Americans. (Weller 2018, 153)

Their skills were managing those multiple dilemmas in ways that gave defensible policy and political support most of the time until their almost inevitable electoral loss. Both Fraser and Howard wanted the support of their cabinets, not only because they saw the benefits of a common voice. It was not a coincidence that they were the last two prime ministers who won government from opposition and maintained their leadership for the duration of their party’s term of office for seven and 11 years, respectively. They balanced those multiple dilemmas effectively. Hawke was a skilled chair of cabinet, insisting on unity and common policies, wherever they came from. Notably these cabinets appear far more united most of the time than their successors. Hence collective responsibility could be achieved. These prime ministers were able to make cabinet government work most of the time.

Richard Neustadt asserted that presidents wear many hats but do not distinguish when they act; he argued that the scholar needs to see the world through the president’s eyes, ‘from over the President’s shoulder’ (1960, xxi). Prime ministers must blend their multiple dilemmas to provide a coherent decision that combines political support, administrative feasibility and programmatic sense. The balance will slip from one to another, but they ignore any one of them to their peril. The benefit of well-managed cabinet government is that it is flexible enough to manage the trade-offs. At its best that is why it survives; that is why it must be and must appear as the fox in politics.

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