Ripping the Lattice:
How John Howard’s Dominance Impacts on Australia’s Governance

Draft paper

Political Power in Parliamentary Executives
Workshop 12 ECPR Joint Sessions Helsinki 2007

Mark Bennister
Department of Politics and Contemporary European Studies
University of Sussex
Falmer
Brighton BN1 9RH

+44 (0)20 8449 8566 (home)
+44 (0)7801 491 928 (mobile)
m.a.bennister@sussex.ac.uk

Please contact author for permission to cite
All comments welcome
Abstract

Ripping the lattice?
How John Howard's dominance impacts on Australia’s governance

Both intra-executive and extra-executive power in Australia is increasingly located centrally. The prime minister has considerable institutional power resources which he utilises to the full to drive through a largely pragmatic (though often divisive) policy agenda. The power resources of the Australian prime minister are primarily located in his control of cabinet, private office and supporting department (the department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, which has seen its central, coordinating role boosted in the past ten years) in addition to the traditional (though inexplicit) functions of patronage, prerogative and legitimate authority. On the extra-executive side the prime minister has become the embodiment of the 24/7 politician running a permanent campaign and integrating politics into his every move to outpace the Opposition, and dominate his compliant (and leadership-centred) party from an autonomous vantage point.

Understanding the process of government is an important factor in demonstrating how agents affect political and policy outcomes. This paper explores the exercise of contemporary power in the Australian core executive, drawing on qualitative data collected during a series of in depth elite interviews with a range of Australian commentators, politicians, and senior public servants.
The premiership that Howard operates is one which is a much more powerful institution than that operated by any of his predecessors in terms of capacity to control and coordinate the whole of the elected government (Former cabinet minister 2006).

He [Howard] has evolved and reinterpreted the office [of prime minister] so it’s both head of government but partly head of state as well. He has refined and developed the role of prime minister and given it a greater dimension. It’s actually very close to the people (Senior Australian political commentator 2006).

Introduction

The Westminster model of government is alive and well in Australia as ‘it provides a legitimising myth justifying the Commonwealth Government’s search to centralise power’ (Rhodes 2005). The prime minister, though, has to contend with a powerful upper house and state premiers with independent power bases (Weller 2003). The interdependent network model of governance developed by Rod Rhodes is reflected in John Uhr’s Australian ‘lattice of leadership’ concept whereby leadership is dispersed across institutional spheres, but constrained to work collectively by being held to account by leaders in another sphere (Uhr 2005). When one element of the model, typically executive government, becomes too dominant, the ethical constraint in Uhr’s lattice breaks down (Walter 2006b). Uhr admits that his lattice is normative (indeed he knows of no political entity modelled on the lattice) and driven by his doubts over executive supremacy. The lattice in the Australian context should provide many checks and balances, and examples of dispersed leadership, while the Constitution according to Uhr favours the doctrine of legislative supremacy against that of executive supremacy (2005, 81). As such, analysis of Howard’s impact on Australian governance tells us how Australia may be far from this dispersed model (or ideal type).

Both intra-executive and extra-executive power in Australia is increasingly located centrally. The prime minister has considerable institutional power resources which he utilises to the full to drive through a largely pragmatic (though often divisive) policy agenda. The power resources of the Australian prime minister are primarily located in his control of cabinet, private office and supporting department (the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, which has seen its central, coordinating role boosted in the past ten years) in addition to the traditional (though inexplicit) functions of patronage, prerogative and legitimate authority.

The response has been one where the current prime minister uses the cabinet as an instrument of ‘authority, of ministerial consultation, obedience and unity’ (Kelly 2006). Furthermore control of the Senate, gained in 2004, has freed Howard from the frustrations of an awkward upper house, whilst his subtle but persistent ‘new federal’ agenda has seen the Federal Government extend its reach into areas traditionally the responsibility of the states (Hollander 2006).

On the extra-executive level the prime minister has become the embodiment of the 24/7 politician running a permanent campaign and integrating politics into his every move to outpace the Opposition, and dominate his compliant (and leadership-centred) party from an autonomous vantage point (Kelly 2006). These agency factors, trading on identifiable leadership effects and consistently high personal approval ratings place Howard as the incumbent leader in an advantageous position.
Understanding the process of government is an important factor in demonstrating how agency affects political and policy outcomes. This paper will explore and interpret the exercise of contemporary power in the Australian core executive, drawing primarily on the experience of John Howard’s premiership. As supporting evidence the paper uses qualitative data collected during a series of in depth elite interviews with a range of Australian commentators, politicians, and senior public servants.

This individual case study will provide a fresh analysis of the nature of power in the core executive. Scholars will be able to consider how the Australian experience of the dominant Howard years has impacted on core executive governance. By exploring and interpreting the considerable (institutional and personal) power resources of the Australian prime minister this country case study can be placed alongside others in establishing the broad nature of executive power in parliamentary democracies and its impact on policymaking and governance.

The paper is divided into four sections. The introductory section looks at the framework for analysis and why Australia provides a good case study. The second largely empirical section, considers the institutional power resources available to the prime minister. The third section considers the personal resources utilised by the Australian prime minister. The fourth section draws this evidence together to assess the impact on Australian governance and how the Australian prime minister has overcome institutional constraints and veto points.

1. Understanding and exploring prime ministers

George Jones lamented that ‘despite such eminence the office of prime minister is little studied’ (1991). King similarly complained that ‘all of the books on the [British] prime ministership and cabinet together can easily be held in two hands’ (1985). This gap has been filled somewhat in Britain in the Blair years, but in Australia detailed study of the ‘forms, institutions and conventions through and by which political power is exercised at the centre of government is lacking’ (Weller 2005: 35). The study of political power is not as comprehensive as one would expect, bearing in mind that the prime minister is at the apex of power and the cabinet and executive are the very epitome of national authority (ibid). Furthermore, little is known about the mechanics of the Howard premiership. Inside accounts of the Howard government by former ministers have yet to appear and scholarly material is thin on the ground1.

Such a paucity of material should not however discourage investigation. To understand the impact of John Howard’s dominance on Australian governance we need to move beyond the ‘sterile’ textbook debate between cabinet and prime ministerial government characterised as arguing over whether a bottle was half full or half empty (King in Edwards 2004: ix). Heffernan (2005) describes the contemporary British prime minister in terms of the ‘political capital’ he or she may possess. Prime ministerial power resources he divides into the institutional and the personal. The importance of this approach is that it builds on earlier analysis of the British prime minister based on institutionalism derived from the Crossman-Mackintosh framework, but adding an emphasis on autonomy and constraints. Personal resources find common currency with

---

1 Weller suggests that Liberal ministers are less inclined to write memoirs and more inclined to display party loyalty (2007: 178).
presidential studies of prime ministers which have focused on the agency role of the individual. The resource approach roots analysis in core executive study (Rhodes and Dunleavy 1995; Rhodes 2000; Smith 1999, 2003) whilst accepting the possibility (when institutional and personal resources are married together) of prime ministerial dominance (Helms 2005; O’Malley 2007). Such analysis draws much from early literature by Blondel (1980 and 1989) and Elgie (1995) which acknowledged the way leaders utilise both the institutional and the personal.

Why Australia?
Clarity regarding the role and functions of prime ministers is as hard to find in Australia as it is in Britain. The existence of a relatively recent written Australian constitution (1900) does not assist, as the prime minister is not mentioned, and therefore is unable to rely on it for any formal power (Lucy 1993; Weller 2003). Whilst it is possible to identify important works of a biographical or factual-historical nature on Australian prime ministers, full and frank analysis of the development of the position and its changing nature is not so evident\(^2\). The Australian prime minister is understudied, but also as Pat Weller points out it is important to look at the prime minister outside the British experience.

That the prime minister is powerful and dominant is not in doubt, but there is little suggestion there that cabinet has been supplanted and little angst about excessive power of prime ministers. The interesting comparative question is why not? (Weller 2003: 702).

The underlying question is one of understanding and exploring the Australian prime minister, whose role and function is derived from the British experience. The key to power and predominance, as with the British premiership, lies in the discharge of informal resources, and the management of dependency relationships alongside formal structural resources.

With the influence of core executive studies, political analysis has begun to look beyond the traditional framework for the location of power whereby cabinet and the prime minister were the focus of attention. Now the broader networks of dependence are open to study. In the absence of any major scholarly works on the Australian prime minister since Weller’s 1992 book, we need to look elsewhere to piece together the narrative.

Australia’s system of government, though constitutionally one of responsible government, is in practice one of responsible party government. Ministers are more accountable to the prime minister and party than to parliament (Weller 2007). This bolsters an already powerful executive arm. Doubts about the adequacy of this executive supremacy have been raised by John Uhr, and form the basis for his concept of a lattice of leadership (2005). A healthy democracy would be one wherein power is dispersed along vertical and horizontal axes, so that it does not concentrate in any one spot, but rather strengthens the whole structure (ibid: 79). However, when one element of the

---

\(^2\) Two prime ministers have written detailed autobiographical accounts of their premierships (Whitlam 1985 and Hawke 1994); both provide essential background narratives to two of the most significant premierships of recent Australian political history. Two of the most important studies by political scientists have sought to understand the Australian premiership from contrasting angles. Weller on Malcolm Fraser (1989) looked at the available levers of power, whilst Walter on Gough Whitlam (1980) took a psychological approach to understanding leadership.
model becomes too dominant the ethical constraints in the lattice break down (Walter 2006b). We see this under John Howard as executive dominance has been enhanced. This has been achieved by a combination of structural factors (discipline and control exercised through cabinet), and the institutional constraints (parliament and the states) overridden.

2. Prime minister: institutional resources

Cabinet
Cabinet in Australia reflects an institutional and collegiate approach evident in Australian political culture, though it has not received the same level of analysis as its British counterpart.³ Traditionally cabinet has always met more frequently and made more collective decisions in Australia than in Britain (Weller 1985).

The cabinet is a product of convention and practice. It is not mentioned in the Australian Constitution, and its establishment and procedures are not subject to any legislation. It is for the government of the day, and in particular the prime minister, to determine the shape and structure of the cabinet system and how it is to operate (Cabinet Handbook PMC 2004, in Weller 2007: 219).

Big issues (such as military action in Iraq) are discussed at length and over time and rugged debate is expected (Weller 2003).⁴ Howard is a cabinet traditionalist and likes to use cabinet meetings as a sounding board, to test the public line on salient issues of the day, act as a pressure valve, and to bind colleagues into the party line (Tiernan 2006). According to one senior source, the difficulties Blair faced in cabinet over Iraq (whereby cabinet differences were played out publicly) and the decision to have a referendum on the EU Constitution (the then Foreign Secretary Jack Straw admitted that the decision to have a referendum overturning previous policy had not been discussed formally in cabinet (The Guardian 20 April 2004)) could not happen in Australia under Howard.⁵

Until procedures were streamlined in April 2002, allowing more time for strategic discussions, formal submissions to cabinet were long, detailed and tended to occupy most of the discussion time. Howard was keen to avoid the style of cabinet management of his Liberal predecessor Malcolm Fraser. Fraser demanded that cabinet discuss and decide on every significant issue, the process became cumbersome; meetings were long and the workload huge. Ministers, under Fraser complained that the cost of his zealous adherence to collective cabinet decision-making created ‘government by exhaustion’

---

³ Work on the Australian core executive is limited, although some material specifically on the Cabinet (Encel 1962; Weller 2007) deals with cabinet process in much the same way as Burch and Holliday (1996) do on the UK. It is worth noting that the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PMC) does provide greater access and transparency than the UK Cabinet Office and Number 10. PMC’s development and historical role is covered by Yeend (1979) writing as head of the department at the time.

⁴ The cabinet secretariat supported 57 cabinet meetings (including NSC and committee meetings) in 04-05. This compares with 120 in 97-98 and the high point of 141 in 99-00. Since the streamlining in 01-02 of cabinet submission which reduced full cabinet handling of many submissions, meetings have stayed constant at between 57 and 67 per year (PMC Annual Reports).

⁵ Private Information, confidential interview 10 May 2004.
Howard himself had been part of Fraser’s cabinet and came to office with a clear picture of how he wanted to manage it.

Cabinet support for Howard is organised, formal and important. It remains at the central apex of government. It has been streamlined and the committee structure is lean and focused.\(^6\) It now provides a much greater emphasis on delivery and its restructure allows more time for strategic discussion. The prime minister still has ultimate control of the agenda. Cabinet meets throughout the year, generally on Monday in parliamentary sitting weeks and on Tuesday in non-sitting weeks, although adherence to this pattern is not always possible. On occasions, when there is a significant amount of business, the Prime Minister will hold two day meetings of Cabinet, usually on a Monday and Tuesday. The Prime Minister, as Chairman of Cabinet, determines the times and business for all meetings (Cabinet Handbook 2004).

The agenda at cabinet meetings divides into three: political, ‘under the line’, and ‘above the line’ issues. Appointments are one of the first items of business at every meeting. Every significant appointment to any board or body that advises the Government is placed before cabinet for discussion.

Howard takes great interest in all the appointments that the Government makes to ensure that the Government’s appointments are people who are appropriate from the Government’s point of view (former cabinet minister 2006).

Political discussion may take place without officials, though with the cabinet secretary (who is a political appointee) and concerns politically sensitive issues which the prime minister feels are important for overall government management. This part may include relations with parliament, electoral issues, or coalition issues. Under the line issues relate to cabinet presentations that the prime minister has judged do not need a formal cabinet submission. They are usually based on a letter from the relevant minister, which may not have been circulated throughout the relevant departments and may be a late addition to the cabinet agenda. There is a tendency to use ‘under the line’ presentations more, particularly on politically sensitive issues. Thirdly, ‘above the line’ submissions relate to the formal business of cabinet, which are subject to the procedures outlined in the Cabinet Handbook. These formal procedures were streamlined in 2002 and included in the 2004 Cabinet Handbook.\(^7\) Although measures were designed to reduce the size and complexity of submissions, ministers have found ways round this by adding attachments or increasing under the line submissions.

The number of full cabinet meetings has declined down to between 25 and 30 per year, but the time allocated to strategic issues has increased (Wanna 2007). These strategic discussions often include individual presentations by Ministers which increasingly use Powerpoint as a means to present broad issues prior to a formal submission\(^8\).

---

\(^6\) ‘His [Howard’s] new blueprint for government and especially cabinet is not likely to be ditched by his successors – Labor or Liberal – because it works too well. It minimises the opportunities for damaging differences, time consuming discussions between ministers, and leaks’ (Sydney Morning Herald 16 August 2005).

\(^7\) See Howard: Strategic Leadership for Australia: Policy Directions in a Complex World (2002)

\(^8\) Julie Bishop MP Minister for Education Science and Technology, recently delivered a presentation on key issues that needed to be addressed in the next schools education negotiation
Cabinet Committees

Howard himself chairs four of the five cabinet committees including the key Expenditure Review Committee (ERC). Howard is involved right at the start of the process in the senior ministers review (PM, Deputy PM, Treasurer and Minister of Finance only), which sets the framework on what the overall size of the budget is to be, what the emphases are to be, and what can be brought forward into the ERC. The National Security Committee (NSC) has grown to rival the ERC as the most important cabinet committee. Howard regards the NSC (comprising of the six most senior ministers and the key agency heads) as ‘one of the very significant successes’ of his government in terms of governance arrangements (Howard 2005). Others have suggested that the NSC has been part of the trend of power centralising around the prime minister, consolidating his position as the unrivalled source of power and authority for national security policy making.9

Cabinet collegiality

This cabinet system looks more like a collegial system, one where ministers are involved and feel ownership of the process, though crucially are not permitted to develop a powerbase. Leaks are rare (although those that have occurred inevitably focused on the Howard-Costello relationship) and differences played out behind closed doors.10 ‘Howard’s cabinet is tight, secret and collective. Its secrecy is the most abject defeat for the press gallery in 30 years’ points out senior Australian journalist Paul Kelly (2006). The institution has been stretched to provide Howard with the authority of cabinet collectivity, new centres of power have arisen within the network to increase capacity within the structure (Bennister 2007). Yet this perception of collegiality can be misleading. The shift towards the strategic and truncation of formal submission has moved the emphasis in meetings. The cabinet has become much more an ‘advisory committee to the prime minister than it is the collective decision making body of the government’.11 Some have gone further suggesting that Howard may go through the motions of cabinet consultation, whilst in reality ‘he will have a position, he knows exactly what he’s working for, but until he’s ready, he’s not going to allow media or any interest group to force the pace, or force the position’12 Journalists have accused him of operating a ‘kitchen cabinet’, whereby he has cultivated an inner cabinet of confidents.13

Howard has maintained his faith in his Treasurer Costello as the heir apparent, but he has been meticulous in denying Costello a power base and asserting his ascendancy over his only credible rival. The other constant cabinet ministers have been Downer (who has remained as Foreign Minister for the duration) and Ruddock. Howard’s

with the states. These presentations have been called ‘pacifiers’ and any advantage in presentation may be lost in the tendency to simplification of complex issues (Wanna 2007).

10 See Australian Financial Review 6 June 2005 on Singapore Airlines.
11 Private information, confidential interview, former cabinet minister 9 November 2006.
12 Private information, confidential interview, 2 November 2006.
13 On the eve of the 2004 federal election, the Canberra Times wrote of Howard’s premiership: ‘At the first level has been a kitchen Cabinet problem, in which many of the primary decisions - in, say, defence, education, health, and social security - have been made by a coterie of ministers and political advisers, without ever getting proper coordinating review or disinterested debate. The closer the election, the more this process has been marked by focus-group input, firefighting, and by deal-making’ Canberra Times 5 October 2004.
reshuffles have been few in number (the January 2006 reshuffle which sparked tension with the Nationals and the 2007 resignations notwithstanding). They have tended not to be accompanied by large machinery of government changes. There is a relatively small pool of aspirants to choose from, and mindful of the 1997 resignations, Howard has shown a marked reluctance to lose ministerial colleagues during his tenure. Yet the few survivors from his first cabinet indicate that Howard has found other ways to move colleagues on, and renew his team without damaging resignations. These include giving them a ‘soft landing’ in a diplomatic post or jobs outside government. He has been careful to make sure no former ministers were left to smoulder on the backbenches (Weller 2007: 178).

Ministerial expectations are managed from the centre via the issuing of Charter Letters, sent to each minister at the beginning of each parliament or after a reshuffle. The letter ‘clarifies the government’s main priorities, what it intends to achieve, how the department concerned fits into the agenda, and indicates any specific requirement for each portfolio’ (Wanna 2007). Officially then,

The Prime Minister sets out his priorities and strategic direction for each portfolio in a letter sent to respective ministers shortly after they are appointed. This letter may also indicate in broad terms how the Prime Minister sees functions being shared by ministers in the portfolio (A guide on key elements of ministerial responsibility, PMC 1998)

The practice was developed under Hawke, but is now Howard’s established method of setting out his agenda, and latterly promoting a ‘whole-of-government’ approach.

Howard is often portrayed as using cabinet as ‘the instrument of his authority, of ministerial consultation, obedience, and unity’ and Paul Kelly has described the Howard cabinet the most unified since Menzies, reflecting a ‘remarkably shared outlook’ (Kelly 2006). It is an important tool to bind in colleagues and maintain unity both within the Liberal party and with the Nationals as coalition partners. Alternatively Howard has been referred to as ‘a giant amongst pygmies’, unchallenged by cabinet colleagues and able to ultimately get his way.

Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet

In Australia it [the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet] has existed since 1911 and each prime minister has used it differently. But it’s an enormous power to the prime minister because effectively it provides six hundred people in the department and control into cabinet. Those two things go together; that’s where it

---

14 His ‘aversion to the removal of ministers’ is said to relate to the 1997 so called ‘travel rorts’ scandal, when five frontbenchers and two staffers resigned over fraud allegations (Age 2005). The departing ministers were Assistant Treasurer, Jim Short, Minister for Small Business and Consumer Affairs, Geoffrey Prosser, Minister for Administrative Services, David Jull, Minister for Transport, John Sharp, and Minister for Science and Technology, Peter McGuaran. Two forced resignations (Ian Campbell and Senator Santoro) in March 2007 hit Howard’s reputation hard, opening questions of ministerial conduct.

15 There is some disquiet amongst Liberal party backbenchers regarding the over-representation of Nationals in cabinet. They currently hold the Deputy Prime Minister, Trade, and Agriculture portfolios.
gives the department power, the opportunity to brief the prime minister on every issue that is coming across government (Senior public servant, interview 2006).

The Department is very influential in implementation and designing systems; bringing the bureaucracy to the table. But of course, the Prime Minister may not need so much guidance about what to do or where the priorities are from the bureaucracy, and I guess this government is showing signs of having a Prime Minister who has been there for a while and is in command, and doesn’t need a lot of hand-holding (Liberal party staffer quoted in Tiernan 2006).

Former Secretary Geoffrey Yeend wrote in 1979 that the principal function of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PMC) was coordination of administration. Since then the department has expanded both its size and role considerably (Yeend 1979; Weller 1993; Jaensch 1997). Its chief function now is to provide the prime minister with a wide range of contestable advice and analysis. It now provides a balance between policy initiation and coordination (Wanna 2007)\(^\text{16}\). Table 1 below, summarises PMC’s workload in recent years under Howard. The large rise in activity in 2003 relates to business connected to the Iraq war.

### Table 1: PMC Workload

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>2001-02</th>
<th>2002-03</th>
<th>2003-04</th>
<th>2004-05</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Briefings</td>
<td>3000</td>
<td>4000</td>
<td>3000</td>
<td>6200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet meetings (including committees)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet submissions (decisions)</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSC/SCNS meetings</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSC/SCNS documents</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The formal functions of PMC are coordination of government administration; assistance to Cabinet and its committees; policy advice and administrative support to the Prime Minister; intergovernmental relations and communications with State and Territory governments and government ceremonial and hospitality. The department gives the prime minister the institutional resources to underpin his exercise of power. The key areas are administrative support, policy advice, and coordination.

PMC is divided into three main sections each headed by a Deputy Secretary, reporting to the Secretary of PMC. The structure of PMC reflects less the preoccupation of cabinet committees as these committees are used less, meet less often and now some have their own secretariat and more the main sectoral policy domains across government (international affairs, economic, security, industry, social policy) (Wanna 2007). Cabinet division sits at the centre, and contains the cabinet secretariat, providing support to

\(^{16}\) It is worth noting that the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PMC) does provide greater access and transparency than the UK Cabinet Office and Number 10. PMC’s development and historical role is covered by Yeend (1979) writing as head of the department at the time. PMC publishes the Cabinet Handbook which is a comprehensive catalogue of the principles and conventions which govern the mechanics of the cabinet system in Australia. The details included in the Handbook, such as scope of agenda, submission and consultation procedures, demonstrate the prescriptive nature of cabinet in Australia.
The Secretary of PMC has proved to be a crucial figure, not only driving forward an energetic Public Service reform agenda, but providing essential bureaucratic support to Howard (see Davis and Rhodes in Keating et al 2000). The first occupant of this position under John Howard, Max Moore-Wilton, drove through an aggressive programme of public service reform (gaining the nickname ‘Max the Axe’ for his cost cutting). He was key to delivering Howard’s agenda and developed a close relationship with the prime minister. The current Secretary Peter Shergold has proved less controversial and is not personally close to the prime minister, but increasingly policy is now driven from this department.

When prime ministers have gained greater power, as our prime minister has from having won four terms, then he can start to use that power to get his department to drive policies which would [otherwise] sit elsewhere (senior public servant, November 2006).

Taskforces have been increasingly used by the prime minister to centralise policy development in a series of sensitive areas. Taskforces are run from PMC, enabling the prime minister and his department to take the lead, give secretariat support and maintain policy ownership. Relevant departments are drafted in, as are experts from outside government but PMC runs the taskforce. Taskforces have the advantage of being flexible and expendable, appearing and disappearing as appropriate.\(^{18}\)

**Cabinet Policy Unit**

Greater resources supporting the prime minister do not however necessarily mean better or more effective institutional capacity. Howard felt the need to establish a Cabinet Policy Unit (CPU) located firmly in the core of the core executive, soon after his election in 1996. This small unit has performed a pivotal role for Howard during his premiership, often acting as a key power broker between the prime minister and departments and as

---

\(^{17}\) The Federal Executive Council was established by section 62 of the Constitution. Under section 63, any functions or powers vested in the “Governor-General-in-Council” by the constitution must be carried out or exercised with the advice of the Federal Executive Council. All Ministers of State and Parliamentary Secretaries are sworn as members of the Council, though not all of them attend all meetings. Meetings are usually held fortnightly, mostly at Government House. The Council is mainly concerned with powers given to the Governor-General-in-Council in Acts of the Commonwealth. This includes the making of regulations and statutory appointments, and the creation and abolition of government departments through Administrative Arrangements Orders. Further information is contained in the Federal Executive Council Handbook.

\(^{18}\) The following taskforces operated out of PMC in 2005 (PMC 2005/06)

- APEC 2007 Taskforce
- Avian Pandemic Taskforce
- Biofuels Taskforce (Secretariat)
- Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Health Taskforce
- COAG Human Capital Taskforce
- COAG Skills Recognition Taskforce
- National Competition Policy Review Taskforce Therapeutic Cloning Taskforce
- Uranium Mining Processing and Nuclear energy Review (Secretariat)
a key gatekeeper. The first head of the unit was a close Howard confident, Michael L'Estrange, who also assumed the role of Cabinet Secretary, thereby splitting the traditional roles of Cabinet Secretary between a political appointee and a public servant. Both the cabinet secretary and secretary of the department sit in cabinet as note-takers.

The CPU is a political unit placed at the heart of government, outside the jurisdiction of the Australian Public Service but under the Members of Parliament (Staff) Act 1998. It was initially located in PMC, but now resides in the Prime Minister's Office. Its small staff is appointed by the prime minister and accountable directly to him (PMC Annual Report 2000-01). Under its second head, Sydney businessman Paul McClintock, the unit took on a strategic role driving forward whole-of-government initiatives and playing a greater coordinating role (Howard 2002). It is now under its third head, Peter Conran who is a former PMO staffer. Ultimately the unit, which plans the agenda, lists the items and writes up cabinet decisions, is under the authority of Howard's Chief of Staff (Kelly 2006).

Cabinet Implementation Unit
In 2003 Howard sought to focus beyond coordination and look to greater control of delivery and implementation of decisions made in cabinet. One of the key institutional developments at the centre has been the establishment of the Cabinet Implementation Unit (CIU).

The introduction of a Cabinet Implementation Unit which is designed in a systematic way to ensure that decisions once taken with great fanfare are not then forgotten and lose their lustre through lack of vigorous detailed implementation, so far has proved to be a valuable addition to my understanding of progress, and also that of Ministers and I think the initiative, which has worked well, is one that is certainly here to stay (Howard 2005).

The establishment of the CIU drew heavily on Tony Blair’s model of a Cabinet Delivery Unit focused on implementation, planning and review to ensure that decisions taken are followed through. John Wanna acknowledges that such bodies, located in central government, may be part of a global trend, but the Australian model is different by design. Shergold rejected the Blair government’s emphasis on measurable targets and chose to adopt a more collaborative approach to implementation review. The CIU is based in Shergold’s own department and is run by public servants not political advisers. The CIU is not a political unit, as with the UK, but it can, according to Wanna, be seen as part of an evolving consolidation and institutionalisation of the cabinet process (Wanna 2006). As a senior public official pointed out the CIU ‘uses the authority of cabinet to much more influence delivery' and is an example of ‘the prime minister using his department as a gateway to exert power’.19

Prime Minister’s Office
Despite having a dedicated department at his disposal, Howard’s own office has continued to grow in size, following the trend set by his predecessors (see table 2, below). James Walter wrote in the 1980s that the institutionalisation of ministerial staffing was 'serving as another mechanism to assure prime ministerial preeminence', and the continued growth of the office since that time lends weight to this assessment (Holland 2002: 10). Staff numbers in Howard’s office had grown to forty-one by May 2006. Of

19 Confidential interview 28 November 2006.
these twenty-eight were classified as advisers.\textsuperscript{20} Howard’s decision to base himself in Sydney rather than Canberra accounts for some of this growth (Tiernan 2006). Throughout his prime ministership, Howard has maintained senior advisers in the areas of international, government, economics and social policy and since 2003 the senior advisory group has mirrored program areas in PMC (Tiernan 2006).

The core personnel in the PMO have remained fairly stable over Howard’s term of office and the structure has remained unaltered (Weller 2007, Tiernan 2006). Arthur Sinodonis has been at the helm, as Chief of Staff for almost all of Howard’s term of office, while Tony Nutt has been Principal Private Secretary. These two complemented each other - Sinodonis as the professional, effective operator, with Nutt as the political enforcer (Tiernan 2006).\textsuperscript{21} Anne Tiernan’s comprehensive analysis of the Howard’s advice structures concluded that the PMO functioned more effectively than previous PMOs (the adoption of a less high profile position by the PMO staff was no accident). She put this down to two factors. Firstly institutional: the PMO is less concerned with long term strategic policy and focuses on day to day political issues; and secondly personal: the significance of the understated style and personalities in the PMO.

### Table 2: Prime Ministerial Staff

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prime Minister</th>
<th>Number of staff in PMO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whitlam</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraser</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawke</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keating</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howard</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


#### 3. Prime Minister: Personal Resources

**Party Leader**

In the aftermath of the Menzies era the Liberal party discarded four leaders between 1966 and 1975. Stability came with Malcolm Fraser’s tenure, but following his resignation in 1983 the party then had five different leaders before John Howard’s second stint in 1995. The Liberal party has always been a leadership party which depends on a leader (Jaensch 1997: 274). The story of the Liberal party demonstrates the importance of ‘strong leadership’ to the party’s fortunes.

The Liberal Party has been politically successful when it has had an electorally successful leader, who has been able to give cohesion and direction to the party... [	extsuperscript{\textldots}] The party’s periods of difficulty have been marked by destructive conflicts over leadership (Brett 2006, 213).

\textsuperscript{20} Of the current 41.3 staff in Howard’s Private Office there are: 2 principal advisers, 3 senior advisers (PM), 7 senior advisers (Cabinet), 1 media adviser (Cabinet), 7 advisers, 8 assistant advisers, 7 EAOM, 6.3 secretaries (Senate Estimates 1 May 2006).

\textsuperscript{21} Arthur Sinodinos resigned in December 2006, to be replaced as Chief of Staff by Tony Nutt. Nutt has been described as a machine man focused on the politics rather than policy, and ensuring his boss’s interests are protected (The Bulletin, 4 June 2002 in Tiernan 2006).
Howard led the party for a brief period during the turbulent 1980’s, but lost the 1987 election. After he had lost two leadership contests, he claimed that returning to lead the party yet again would be akin to ‘Lazarus with a triple bypass’. He had been dubbed ‘Mr 18 per cent’, reflecting his standing in the polls. The party appeared desperate when it turned to him again in January 1995 following Alexander Downer’s disastrous stint. After the period of Liberal party strife it seemed the party had nowhere else to turn but to Howard. Howard was elected unopposed in 1995, with Peter Costello elected unopposed as his deputy. He had the opportunity to learn from his previous tenure, and from the mistakes made by the other leaders.

In contrast to the formalised manner by which British parties now select their leaders, with a wide and clearly defined constituency, the Liberal party of Australia concentrates the franchise in the federal parliamentary party, termed the caucus. Liberal party rules are not specific on the election of leaders; the only reference in its constitution to the how the leader is selected is as follows:

52. The Parliamentary Party shall:–
  (a) appoint its Leader, who shall thereupon become the Parliamentary Leader of the Organisation;

Voting and nomination procedures are not apparent or publicly available. Leaders are chosen by a small group of parliamentarians. The process is fluid and candidates emerge from the group testing support before putting themselves forward to challenge incumbents or fill a vacancy. The Australian Labor party (ALP) also selects its leaders from the parliamentary caucus, but its leader is bound by party policy and has much less autonomy. The Liberal party leader in contrast does not have the same checks and balances or restraints that operate in the ALP. Howard is free from factional pressure; though he does have groups to deal with, they tend not to be structured ones.

Brett calls the power of the leader of the parliamentary party the third organising principle in the Liberal party (the first two being control of the parliamentary party over the formation of party policy and a strong federal structure) (Brett 2006: 213).

Party discipline
Leadership and executive power are particularly important to Australian political parties. Kelly goes as far as to state that without executive power the major [Australian] parties not only look weak, but ‘unviable’ (2006: 6). Parties need electoral success, and the problems suffered by the Liberals between 1983 and 1996 and the ALP since 1996, illustrate this vividly. The Australian Liberal Party is particularly dependent on being in office and consequently gives the leader much autonomy. The parliamentary party has the power to choose and remove leaders, but beyond that authority is wrested in the leader, until he fails or looks likely to. It helps that the legislature is small with only 150 House of Representative members and 76 in the Senate. The parliamentary party is therefore currently made up of 74 members from the lower house and 33 senators, constituting a ‘party room’ of 107.

---

22 In 1987 Howard had beaten Andrew Peacock 41 votes to 28, and then lost to Peacock in 1989 by 27 votes to 44. In 1993 he lost to John Hewson by 47 votes to 30 (Barnett and Goward 1996).
Howard’s authority may have frayed a little after ten years in power, but the Liberal party ‘places great importance on leadership; on the need for Parliament to lead the nation, on the need for Cabinet to lead the Parliament, on the need for its own leader to lead the party’ (Jaensch 1997: 274). Dissent is rare (generally confined to the party room) and unity maintained. Indeed when three members including Costello supporter Petro Georgiou crossed the floor protesting against measures to process asylum seekers offshore in August 2006 it was a unique event. It led Howard to withdraw the proposal in the Senate.

David Kemp (academic, head of Fraser’s private office and then cabinet minister under Howard) wrote of the relationship between leader and followers:

> The first and most important relationship is between leader and followers, not between leader and the public…. The man who cannot unify and lead his colleagues in parliament and in the organisation cannot make a successful appeal to the electorate (Kemp in Weller 1989).

Howard has shown himself keenly aware of the need to cultivate and manage his party and has paid attention to Kemp’s words. Always mindful that he needs to keep the numbers on his side, Howard has astutely massaged and engaged with his party, whilst ensuring that the party is filled with MPs of his economically liberal and socially conservative persuasion.

Communication as a Resource

Howard may have secured the support of his followers, but Kelly suggests that he has opened up a new ‘operating concept – the prime minister in a constant dialogue with the public’ (2006). This broadening of the role of the Australian prime minister has married institutional resources (particularly the utilisation of incumbency) with personal factors.

The media unit in the PMO is regarded ‘the largest ever assembled by an Australian prime minister’ (Tiernan 2006). Whilst Howard has not employed a direct equivalent of the high profile Alistair Campbell in the UK with his powers to instruct civil servants, Tony O’Leary the most obvious (though little known) counterpart centrally coordinates the activities of thirty-four media staff serving the government. The National Media Liaison Service (NMLS but known as aNiMaLS), established in 1983 under the Hawke administration and then providing support to the Keating premiership, established the centralised media operation. It monitored media from all sources around Australia and produced detailed briefings for ministers and parliamentarians efficiently and effectively (Holland 2002). Howard and the Liberals campaigned against the NMLS in opposition and disbanded it on entering office, outsourcing media monitoring (Barns 2005). The need for a similar coordinated and centrally directed unit has seen the Government Members Secretariat (GMS) grow in prominence under Howard. The unit channels government messages to parliamentarians, reinforcing discipline and coherence. This helps to bind the parliamentary party together with the executive in the desire to coordinate messages, set the agenda and homogenise government pronouncements. A strategy has emerged to deliver the message increasingly through unmediated means. As table 3 below demonstrates, Howard has made use of radio and doorstop interviews much more than television and press conferences. Radio is the favoured means to speak to the electorate and the doorstop interview (which has generally replaced the

---

23 The Media Unit has a staff of eight, comprising a press secretary, a senior media advisor, a media advisor, an assistant media adviser, and four media assistants (Tiernan 2006,17).
long structured press conference) enables him to make his point and move on (Young
The Age 15 April 2007).

Table 3: Prime Minister Howard’s Media Encounters 1997-2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Radio interviews</th>
<th>TV Interviews</th>
<th>Doorstops</th>
<th>Press Conferences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997*</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Data covers June through December only

If any means of political communication defines Howard’s premiership it is the use of talkback radio. It was prompted by his suspicion of the Canberra Press Gallery and allows him to ‘address an older, more conservative audience which he regards as his natural constituency’ and circumvent the specialist political journalists so he can speak directly to voters (Ward 2006: 373).

This constant dialogue through his radio broadcasts can be misleading as Sally Young points out:

‘Even though Howard conducts many media interviews—particularly on his favoured Sydney talkback radio outlets—there are far fewer occasions when citizens can physically attend and hear the prime minister speak directly to them’ (Young 2007: 12).

Indeed rather than actually engaging with the Australian public he is in fact a reasonably closeted figure.

‘Howard has continued to draw criticism for a perceived lack of interactivity, for example, in 2001, he conducted no public meetings and just three street walks (where politicians, accompanied by television crews, visit shopping centres and retail streets to meet-and-greet citizens) in four weeks of election campaigning (Young 2007: 16).

Howard runs a tight ship and, although considerable use of media advisers is made, the level of briefing, leaking and media management is small. Senior Australian journalist Michelle Grattan acknowledges Howard as ‘an extraordinarily activist and canny media operator, always out there, visible, with something to say, in forums of his choosing, on everything’, but she laments the way ‘a modern government operates like a powerful hose, designed to get the message out in a forceful, directed and managed way’ and
describes the Howard method as ‘intimidation and favouritism’ (Grattan 2005). In fact the shorter electoral cycle in Australia, puts a greater imperative on constant news management. Howard has ‘stretched the limit’ in the government’s use of public money for political advertising to the extent that departmental advertising has been dubbed a ‘pseudo-political’ too to shore up re-election chances (Singleton 2005, Young in Ward and Stewart 2006). A grey area has developed between public service advertising campaigns and political promotion (the New Tax System, war on drugs, and anti-terrorist campaigns are obvious examples, see Orr in Ward and Stewart 2006: 201). As Strangio notes though this is not just the preserve of the federal government, rather one of incumbency.

Leadership Effects
In Australia, studies based on survey data collected in the 1970s and 1980s concluded that leaders do indeed have independent effects on the vote above and beyond what voters feel about the parties (McAllister 1992; Bean and Mughan 1989). ‘In Australia, the power of the executive is increasingly seen to be symbolically encapsulated in the figure of the Prime Minister and when it comes to making their voting choice, many ‘swinging’ voters are more interested in who is the party leader than any other single factor’ (Young 2007: 2).

As Anthony Mughan points out though leadership effects can be both positive and negative. They are at their strongest when leaders are conceptualised as autonomous electoral forces (Mughan 2005). In an era of ‘valence politics’ where there is a broad agreement on the end to be pursued (crime, prosperity, peace, and corruption), rather than position politics, leaders are a key point on which voters will choose.

Australia’s shorter electoral cycle (three years), makes exploitation of incumbency crucial to maintaining a ‘permanent campaign’. Howard’s discipline and attention to detail has made him the perfect leader in such an environment (Errington and Van Onselen 2006). It is the perception of his determination and strength that allows Howard to score relatively high popular approval ratings despite seeming to pursue unpopular policies (ibid). This enduring approval rating is facilitated by weak voter attachment, enhancing the role of the leader who can now ‘stand in’ for parties, representing issues, integrating interests and mobilising opinion (Walter 2006a).

Bean and McAllister, in their assessment of the 2004 federal election, concluded that popular perceptions of party leaders were much more important than socio-economic issues in the campaign. The high personal popularity of John Howard therefore counted for a great deal. Bean and McAllister (2006) suggest that the effects of the Iraq war were mediated by voters’ evaluations of Howard. So his autonomous position, personally associating himself with the policy blunted its negative effects.

4. Howard’s Impact on Governance

The Australian system of government contains a range of veto players and institutional constraints that can potentially exert the power to limit the excesses of ‘democratic

24 Strangio (2006) points out that the government with its 450 advisers outnumbers both the Labor opposition with 90 and the press gallery by some considerable way.

25 Incumbent governments also benefit from generous and growing postage and printing entitlements provided to members of parliament (Strangio 2006).
populist leadership’ and disperse power across the various points of the system. The Australian prime minister has to contend with a powerful upper house and state premiers with independent power bases (Weller 2003). These are but two veto players with which Howard has had to deal; there are others, such as the judiciary, but this section briefly addresses how Howard has been able to assert his dominance over the legislature and the states.

**Senate**

There has been an expectation in Australian politics that ‘no government could win a majority in the Senate, the Senate was often portrayed as a feature of the Australian Constitution which provided a permanent check on the executive branch of government’ (Summers 2006: 89). This state of affairs stemmed from the introduction of proportional representation for Senate elections in 1949. Representation of smaller parties rose steadily combining a powerful second chamber (originally created to represent the interests of the states) with the potential for small parties to hold the balance of power. As such the Senate can sway from periods of acquiescence to obstructionism depending on its composition (Maddox in Summers 2006: 85).

For the first three terms of the Howard Government (1996 to 2004) the Coalition had legislation blocked or modified by the Senate. These included areas which the government claimed were key to its program such as the privatisation of the national telecoms company (Telstra), anti-terrorist and security measures, and US free trade agreement. In 1998 the government had to engage in protracted negotiations with the Democrats, who held the balance of power in the Senate, in order to pass its legislation to introduce a Goods and Service Tax (GST).

Without a Senate majority governments of both main parties suffer frustration in pursuing their agenda. Keating famously described the Senate as ‘unrepresentative swill’ (Summers 2006: 87), and Howard issued a discussion paper in 2003 calling for constitutional reform to break the deadlock between the two Houses. Yet when governments do have a majority in both Houses the executive dominance so evident in the House of Representatives receives a huge boost. This situation occurred in 2004 when the coalition achieved a majority in the Senate. Instantly questions of obstruction and limits on the popular mandate were put to one side to be replaced by arguments of excessive executive control, and prime ministerial dominance. Harry Evans, Clerk of the Senate, has been an outspoken critic of the power of the executive in Australia. Since the government assumed its majority position in the Senate on 1 July 2005, there has ‘undoubtedly been a decline in accountability’ (Evans 2006). With government control over the senate backbenchers now much tighter in both the main parties, Howard has been able turn a majority into control of the procedure and agenda.

**Commonwealth-States relations**

The federal division of powers has been a source of frustration and institutional constraint on successive Australian prime ministers. Antagonism between Canberra and the States is of course not new and has in the past not been confined to political

---

26 See Uhr (2005, 89-115) for discussion of Howard’s ‘democratic populist leadership’.

27 The contentious inclusion of food in the GST, was dropped from the legislation following the negotiations with the Democrats.

28 See Evans 2006a and 2006b for summaries of the effects of the government majority in the Senate and the tactics used in the second chamber.
opponents. Bob Hawke is reported to have said of his fellow Labor premiers ‘if these are your friends, give me my enemies’. Howard himself has remarked ‘if we were starting Australia all over again I would not support having the existing state structure’ (quoted in Ward and Stewart 2006: 71). Confronted since 2002 with a Labor monopoly on government in all the States and Territories, Howard has sought to centralise more power to the Commonwealth and articulate what has been called a ‘new nationalist’ (Parkin and Anderson 2006) or ‘new federalist’ position (Hollander 2006).

Howard has defined his position in relation to the states as one that regards the Commonwealth government as the guardian of the national interest and the states as representing sectional interests whose actions may potentially harm the national interest (Parkin and Anderson 2006). Scholars have suggested that this goes beyond the development of a pragmatic arrangement with the states to deliver his agenda, but is part of Howard’s personal nation-building stance (Hollander 2006).

Such nation building has proven to be an unexpected feature of Howard’s premiership. Traditionally the ALP had been the party campaigning to abolish federalism (until 1971 when the policy was modified), while the Liberal party was seen as the defender of the status quo. Now Labor state premiers are the advocates of states’ ‘rights’ while Howard’s neoliberalism has embraced an Australia-wide agenda.

In a practical sense this has meant the federal government bypassing the states to fund community based health and education projects. Since 2004, with control of the senate it has also meant the imposition of new industrial relations legislation across Australia. It also sits alongside the security agenda that Howard has pursued since 11 September 2001, whereby he has sought to protect the interests of the nation as a whole.

**Conclusion**

Cabinet government according to Pat Weller is more vital in Australia than in other comparative countries, while Peter Shergold is proud that only in Australia is the tradition of cabinet government maintained (Weller 2007, 268). The prime minister must work through it and ultimately this strengthens his position. The prime minister in Australia can be removed at any time by the party room and has to contend with state premiers and an often troublesome upper house. This would all suggest that Australia should be moving closer to Uhr’s lattice of leadership whereby responsibility is dispersed upwards, downwards and outwards. Yet this is not the case: the lattice is more an aspirational than a reality. Uhr’s ‘lattice of leadership’ does not function under Howard who is more recognisable as Uhr’s ‘democratic populist leader’. The executive is dominant, party discipline firm and hierarchical (even monarchical) leadership prevalent.

Howard has developed strong structural resources to draw on. A powerful coordinating department is at his disposal, a stable and influential private office, and a compliant cabinet are expertly utilised. Howard has established political control through his office, the CPU and a plethora of advisers. He has strengthened central agency control through his department and public service reform has increased bureaucratic responsiveness to the government’s agenda. Taskforces and a delivery unit now provide greater central capacity to reinforce cabinet and the NSC drives the new security agenda from the centre. The institutional constraints in the system have been neutered (Parliament), bypassed (States), and reformed (Public Service). Cabinet is the key vehicle for

---

29 Howard happened to be in the US on 11 September 2001 meeting President George Bush.
dominance, locking in potential rivals (as well as binding in the overrepresented coalition partner) to collective action and crushing internal opposition.

The prime minister is the key to this process, he sits at the apex. Consecutive election victories have given Howard a level of authority within government that is unmatched. His institutional reforms reflect his own agenda, and the federal system exempts him from some of the more mundane ‘bad news’ stories of government (such as prison escapes, hospital closures etc). Local problems can be blamed on the states; while he is free to pursue strategic policy initiatives (for instance blame Victoria for holding up national water scheme).

It should not be surprising that an Australian system of government which produced Robert Menzies, a leader who dominated the political landscape from 1949 to 1966, should allow another Liberal leader such as Howard to dominate for 10 years. The Labor party has of course also produced strident prime ministers in Whitlam, Hawke and Keating\(^\text{30}\). Yet Howard, who is often compared to Menzies, is, in spite of his age, a modern prime minister. His public persona is one where the ‘I’ is emphasised; it is his winning formula. He has developed a conversation with the Australian people. His morning walk, radio broadcasts and comments on everything from drought to Ian Thorpe have become part of the Australian political backdrop. This approach, treating each day as a political battle to be won, utilising his considerable incumbency resources, and being the trustworthy safe option for the nation has served him well. Some say this is the private Howard as well as the public, others suspect a more Machiavellian personality trusting and conversational in public; ruthless and domineering in private.

Such is the investment in Howard as the agent, the ‘strong leader’, that a backbench Liberal MP suggested that all one needed to look at in the pre-election polls were Howard’s personal approval ratings if these continued to outstrip his opponent, irrespective of the two-party preference, the Coalition would win\(^\text{31}\). Howard, as many of his critics acknowledge, has been able to set the political agenda. Issues are debated on his terms (industrial relations, tax reform, immigration, nuclear energy). Howard’s political leadership may be uncharismatic in the traditional sense and the antithesis of the emotional leadership demonstrated by social democrats like Keating and Blair, but nevertheless he dominates. Uhr concurs ‘Howard’s political skill is more reconstructive: re-ordering the political frame of reference around democratic populism’ (Uhr 2005: 115).

The investment in the leader - developing this direct autonomous relationship with the electorate – has a flipside: when things begin to slide it is the leader that takes the rap. By entering into this constant dialogue (albeit one way) with the electorate the individual leader becomes the embodiment of the government and the nation. The discourse of simplicity whereby a leader insists he is control, can solve problems and make decisions comes apart when matters are more complex (drought in the Murray Darling basin, climate change, the AWB scandal).

This paper has outlined the impact of Howard’s dominance on Australian governance. His predominance has been derived from four election victories and a style of political opportunism and shrewd managerial skill. He has married enhanced institutional


\(^{31}\) Confidential interview 8 November 2006.
capacity with a carefully crafted personal dimension. This combination of structural and the agency factors locate power firmly in a powerful executive. His capacity to control and coordinate central government has been achieved by a series of incremental institutional reforms. He now receives contestable advice, generally from within government, but has established lines of communication that ensure he has all the political and institutional implications laid before him. The authority of being an incumbent electoral winner has made him unassailable within his party, a party wedded to the power of leadership. Even so, he is aware that he can be removed at any time and has cultivated the party room, bound the Coalition together, and limited the rise of alternative internal powerbases. Having firmly established Howard as an electoral asset for the Liberal party, it has traded on his leadership credentials in successive elections. The short electoral cycle lends itself to a perpetual emphasis on the power of leadership effects to shape electoral success. Almost undetected Howard has also developed a new nationalism, to deal with the states, and pursue his agenda beyond Canberra. Control of the Senate may have been a fortunate political occurrence, but it enabled him to achieve several of his unfulfilled promises.

The Australian prime minister is the resource-rich player in the system and Howard has taken the role to a new level. Strangio suggests that incumbents in Australia are assisted by the density of armoury shielding them. He identifies 'a proliferation of not only ministerial advisers but media managers, pollsters, marketers and policy entrepreneurs at the disposal of governments' which have evolved into a 'Praetorian Guard of government, attack dogs and a first and ferocious line of defence' (Strangio 2006). The resources available to incumbent governments to maintain the permanent campaign lock government and opposition in a not so virtuous circle of complicit campaigning techniques are considerable. Many ascribe this state of affairs to the collapse of mass participatory parties in Australia, allowing the rise of 'modest leaders' as surrogates for party identity.

The perils of opposition place even greater emphasis on finding the right leader to take office and then maintain it. But then, as Uhr bemoans, replacing a conservative 'democratic populist' like Howard with a progressive one will do little to change the underlying dynamic (2005, 114). The new Labor leader Kevin Rudd may yet prove to unseat Howard in this year's federal election (his current poll ratings suggest he has a better chance than any of his predecessors), but he is highly unlikely to dismantle the considerable prime ministerial power resources (both institutional and personal) established under Howard.


Helms, L (2005) Presidents, Prime Ministers and Chancellors; executive Leadership in Western Democracies, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan


PMC (2002), *Annual Report 2001/02*. Canberra, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

PMC (2003), *Annual Report 2002/03*. Canberra, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.


PMC (2004), *Cabinet Handbook 2004*. Canberra, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.


Uhr, J (2005), Terms of Trust: Arguments over Ethics in Australian Government, Sydney: UNSW Press.


