CHAPTER 1

The 300th Anniversary Bookend Prime Ministers

Walpole and Johnson

TÊTE-À-TÊTE OVER DINNER

Two well-nourished men, lit by a blaze of candles, are hunched over a celebration dinner in 10 Downing Street on Saturday 3 April 2021 on the day of the 300th anniversary of the prime minister. They are engrossed in the conversation.

'I always liked this room. It was my favourite.'

'Not bad for a town pad above the shop.' *Johnson is in an expansive mood, with more than a trace of condescension towards his guest whom he presumes his inferior in power and ability.*

'I never thought the post would last long, but you tell me that it has lasted 300 years? It surprises me.' *He surveys his host sceptically.*

'Indeed it has. They say I'm the *55th* prime minister. Ha! Imagine that: me as prime minister!'

'And what exactly did you do to make yourself "prime minister"?'

'A good question. Many ask. I was Mayor of London for eight years making it the world's greatest city, and then Foreign Secretary. Before, I wrote newspaper articles.'

'The Mayor and journalism I know. But what's the Foreign Secretary?'

'He runs British foreign policy. Well, doesn't actually *run* it. At least not now. I do all the interesting stuff as PM.'

'So when was it created?'

(*At a loss*) . . . 'A long time ago. Didn't *you* have a Foreign Secretary?'

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009429740.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'Certainly not. Increasingly I decided our foreign policy myself. You've kept the Americans under your thumb I trust?'

'Not exactly.'

'Don't tell me you've let the buggers go.'

'Bloody Americans,' Johnson mutters under his breath. 'Tell me, what did *you* do to become PM?,' *rapidly changing the subject.*

'I saved the establishment of Great Britain when their greed threatened to overturn it all, returning order and good governance – of a kind. It helped that almost all those at Court who disfavoured me managed to disgrace themselves.'

'Ah yes, the South Sea Bubble, I learned about that at school at Eton.'

'You went to Eton? So did I.'

'Yes. A King's Scholar, actually,' *the host boasts, swallowing the last of his Beef Wellington with a satisfied burp.*

'So was I. Destined for the Church, I was. At Eton I studied in Lower School, then Upper School, rebuilt shortly before I arrived.'

'*Mehercle!*[1] I was taught there too.'

'I boarded in Long Chamber.'

'So did I!'

'I ate in College Hall.'

'As did I!'

'I prayed in College Chapel and exercised in School Yard.'[2]

'*Ehem!*[3] Two British prime ministers, 300 years apart, nurtured in the same buildings and spaces.

'Well, who would have thought that?'

The common ground of their alma mater established, both men start to relax.

'So what keeps you awake at night?' *the older man asks, adjusting his wig.*

'The economy. I need money to "level up" the north.'

'Level up? I never went to the north. Barbarians. Have you tried taxing cider or putting up duties on imports from the American colonies? Sorry yes, you said: you *lost* them'. *Gaining the upper hand and pressing home the advantage.* 'What else troubles you?'

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'Scotland. Nightmare. Damned nationalists want to break up the Union. Disaster.'

'We'd just unified Parliaments when I became the First Minister. The Jacobite rogues had risen up in 1715 and tried to take over the country. Squashed them. You should try it.'

'Taking over the country is what the bloody EU have been trying to do for years!'

'The E U?'

'But I've fixed them now. We are free of them at last. Sovereignty reclaimed! Freedom to do what I will!'

'You really think so? I kept them firmly on the other side of the Channel. But I had a nervtötend German as my monarch who tried to be at the heart of everything. What else vexes you?'

'The epidemic ravaging our country. *Crapulentus sum!*'[4]

'London was suffering from the plague in my years. Then the Great Plague of Marseilles spread to England in my first year.'

'I nearly died of the illness: touch and go it was. I thought my number was up.'

'I nearly died in my first year too! The crows hovered! The dastardly Carteret – *bastard!* – was priming himself to take over. Damned business; Destouches, the French ambassador, gossiped everywhere about it.'[5]

'Never trust the French,' *the host replies, rustling his unkempt blond hair nervously.*

A knock at the door. 'Are you coming up soon? It's very late.'

'In time, in time.' *The door is closed, noisily.*

'Who is that beauty?' 'Carrie.'

'Your wife?'

'Not exactly. Fiancée,' *says Johnson, his chest swelling.*

'Ah-ha . . . well I had my mistress with me, Maria. 26 years my junior.

Even here, the older man, a tireless womaniser, matches Johnson.

'Carrie is 24 years my younger.'

'Aha,' *says the guest with a new understanding.* 'One needs one's distractions. It's hard being the man in charge,' *he*

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continues. 'Worst of it is that people are always plotting to get rid of you.'

'Touché! I got rid of my man next door early on, but no sooner had the new one arrived than he was after my office. They are the worst.'

'The man next door?'

'Chancellor of the Exchequer. Second Lord of the Treasury. He wants to control the money. Absurd. How was yours?'

'*I* was the Chancellor of the Exchequer.'

'*You* controlled the money?'

'I did!'

'Lucky you. But you didn't have to deal with the ghastly people in the press though like I do: they're as bad as my MPs.'

'I had a livid sewer thrown at me daily from writers, journalists, and cartoonists. So Parliament IS tough, too?'

'I never go there. Apart from when I have to.'

'I had no option. I was Leader of the House of Commons.'

'Good grief! I was told the PM's job has become steadily more powerful. *You* weren't supposed to have had real power.'

'Really? I could do largely what I wanted. Those unconvinced by my rhetoric would soon change their minds with a few . . . payments from the Secret Service Fund.'

'No pushback on your leadership from the Lords?'

'Pussycats.'

'Judges?'

'Powerless pontificators.'

'Business?'

'In my pocket.'

'Devolved nations?'

'What?!'

'Municipal mayors?'

'Never heard of them.'

'The bloody Treasury?'

'As I told you, my friend, *I* ran the Treasury.'

'The Tory Party?'

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'A troublesome lot, but in opposition. They were always awkward.'

A groan. He drains another glass of Château Lafite.

'Look, my friend, you have to understand. I ran the government. I oversaw Parliament. I dispensed patronage. I spent the nation's finances, ran the elections, I kept us out of wars.'

'I'm exhausted contemplating it.'

'Oh it wasn't so bad. There were real compensations too.'

'Such as?'

'Power.'

'I'd like some more of that.'

'And an abundance of food.

'Yes.'

'Fine wines.'

'Yes, please.'

'Women and money.'

'Well . . . '

'Weeks away in the country, quite cut off from Downing Street: letters took two days to reach Norfolk. Bliss!'

Another sigh . . . The older man shoots a look of sympathy at his host.

'How long did you last?'

'Twenty-one years.'

'Well I'm going to quit after just half that.' *He smiles, conspiratorially.*

So we leave both men, talking late into the night.

Just an imaginary conversation, or is there any truth in their remarks? Was Johnson right in his presumption that the prime minister had acquired powers unimaginable in Walpole's day? Despite the differences in the office and the periods in which they held it, are the similarities more striking between the bookenders than the differences? Let us now focus on these two notable prime ministers at the beginning and end of the 300 years to explore these questions.

Striking certainly are the similarities between the two *men* who occupied the office. Both came to power on opportunistic responses to national crises: for Walpole, the South Sea Bubble, where he posed as the defender of the political establishment

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against rampant greed and speculation, while for Johnson it was Brexit, capitalising on the widespread national frustration with the stumbling of his predecessor, Theresa May (54th, 2016–19), and offering a bold way through the impasse.

Walpole and Johnson were high-stakes chancers, revelling in their *coup de théâtre*: for Walpole had protected many of those who had let the South Sea Company get out of control, up to and including the king, adopting the 'skreen system', described as 'an extraordinary incidence of political nerve'.[6] For Johnson, it was challenging the establishment head on by forcing through the Brexit vote in Parliament, and his bravura in calling a make-or-break general election in December 2019.[7]

Both prime ministers needed luck and crisis, and each enjoyed more than his fair share of it: for Walpole, many of his rivals for power were damaged by the South Sea scandal, like Charles Stanhope and John Aislabie, or died, like James Stanhope and James Craggs. For Johnson, Brexit undid those who had previously blocked his path to power, notably David Cameron (53rd, 2010–16), George Osborne, and, eventually, Theresa May.

Historians and political scientists have highlighted the changes to *the office* of prime minister since 1721, and this book examines these in depth. But is the job that Johnson did in 2021 one that Walpole would have recognised, which justifies it being considered the same office, and is it right to presume that the power at the disposal of Johnson was necessarily greater than for Walpole, not the least with the eclipse of the monarchy over the 300 years?

THE FIRST DAY FOR WALPOLE AND JOHNSON

Thursday 3 April 1721 was an unremarkable day in political London. No known fanfare or ceremony surrounded the announcement by George I of his appointment of Walpole as First Lord of the Treasury, and Chancellor of the Exchequer. Merely a bald paragraph appeared in the press announcing: 'We are inform'd that a Commiſſion is preparing, appointing Mr Walpole firſt Lord Commiſſioner of the Treasury and

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Chancellor of the Exchequer.'[8] The appointment was not unexpected. Eight months earlier in June 1720, Walpole had been made Paymaster-General with the understanding he would become First Lord of the Treasury at the earliest opportunity.[9] But 1721 was not seen by contemporaries as in any respect a transformational year in political history, like 1776 in the United States, or 1789 in France.

More public attention came when George II, who succeeded his father in 1727, offered Walpole Number 10 Downing Street as a personal gift five years later. Initially he declined the offer, but later accepted it on the condition that it should 'be & remain for the use & habitation of the first Commissioner of his Majesty's Treasury for the time being'.[10] The *Gentleman's Magazine* recorded: 'Thursday, 20th July, 1732. Sir Robert Walpole, being an Inhabitant of the Parish of St Margaret's at Westminster, by having obtain'd a Grant of Count Bothmar's house in St James's-Park.'[11] Sitting tenants, Mr Chicken and Mr Scroop, had first to move out, and extensive work was carried out on the shoddy building, before it was ready for Walpole and his family to move into three years later. The *London Daily Post* duly recorded in September 1735: 'Yesterday the Right Hon. Sir Robert Walpole with his Lady and Family removed from their House in St James's Square to his new House adjoining to the Treasury in St James's Park.'[12] No one at the time could have foreseen that this move would prove of so much historic significance in defining the office and home of the prime minister. The acquisition further marked out Walpole's position against his other colleagues as the recipient of the king's special favour. No other minister was afforded the privilege of a central London home so close to Westminster and the royal palace of St James's, from where George I and II conducted much of their business.

The lack of excitement surrounding Walpole's appointment contrasts with the high drama and international media hysteria which greeted. Boris Johnson's meticulously choreographed appointment as prime minister on 24 July 2019. On the day before, it had been announced that he had beaten his

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final competitor, Jeremy Hunt, and become leader of the Conservative Party by a margin of 66 to 34 per cent.

Theresa May spoke for her final time in the House of Commons as prime minister the following day at Prime Minister's Questions. At 2.30 p.m. she delivered her departing speech in the street outside Number 10, arriving at Buckingham Palace twenty minutes later to formally resign to the monarch, Elizabeth II. At 3.10 p.m. Johnson arrived at Buckingham Palace to 'kiss hands' with the queen, when she constitutionally invited him to become her fourteenth prime minister. For those intervening minutes, Britain had no prime minister, and all executive power had been invested in her. At 3.55pm Johnson spoke outside Downing Street, both to the crowd of journalists and to the watching world, delivering the message: 'The time has come to act, to take decisions, to give strong leadership and change the country for the better', and he pledged that Britain would leave the EU on 31 October 2019, 'No ifs, no buts.'[13]

Was Walpole given instructions by the monarch? History cannot tell us what words passed between George I and Walpole on 3 April 1721, if any did, nor indeed will we know what precise words Elizabeth said to Johnson on his appointment 298 years later, beyond his indiscretion that she told him 'I don't know why anyone would want the job.'[14] A good question indeed.

We know instead what the most senior official in the country, Cabinet Secretary Mark Sedwill, custodian of the British constitution, said to Johnson less than an hour later. The two men had conversed in the brief interval between Johnson's election as Conservative leader and his appointment as prime minister, to talk about the contents of a letter Sedwill had written him, which opened: 'Tomorrow you will become the 55th prime minister of the United Kingdom.' It laid out the range of responsibilities, the main choices and decisions, that he would have to take early on in office. The official carefully outlined the principal national security issues, explaining what his roles as First Lord of the Treasury and Minister of the Civil Service entailed. When composing his letter, Sedwill had searched out the missive that his predecessor as Cabinet Secretary, Jeremy Heywood, had sent to

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Theresa May when she herself became prime minister in July 2016. Much was similar.

The secret Cabinet Office briefing expanded on the challenges he might expect in his first 100 days. It assured Johnson that the Civil Service was behind him and would give their very best to him. It branched out into Johnson's 'war powers', including his oversight as Chair of the National Security Council of the Intelligence Services, the National Command Authority, the nuclear deterrent, and the engagement protocols for 9/11-style attacks. These, and other duties it explained, were the prerogative functions he would be exerting on behalf of the monarch.

Johnson had not anticipated such a long and grave list. The briefing advised him that he would need to work closely with the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the government was to succeed. He paused at the long list of economic challenges, not remotely his area of expertise. Nor was bureaucracy his thing, so he flicked quickly through the paragraphs on his responsibility for the Civil Service, and for its top 200 appointments. He was barely any more interested in his options for appointing Cabinet, and his choices on the structure of Cabinet committees. He perked up when reading about options for securing Brexit and Global Britain, the risks surrounding no deal, and preparing the Queen's Speech. At last, the moment he craved had arrived.

When Johnson returned from the Palace, Sedwill greeted him in Number 10's entrance hall before escorting him down the long corridor to the Cabinet Room. Then, he passed through that famous room into the adjacent office that has served as a study for prime ministers since Blair. Sedwill and he were joined by senior civil servants Peter Hill and Helen MacNamara, as well as members of his own team, including Eddie Lister, Lee Cain, and Dominic Cummings. Mark Spencer, whom Johnson had earmarked for Chief Whip, soon joined them.

In the study, he at last sat down for a cup of tea and his first meeting as prime minister. They used the Cabinet Office letter as an agenda. The civil servants told him how the prime minister, more than any other member of government, can personally

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shape the course the government takes, because unlike other Cabinet positions, which have a full job description, his new job is much less prescribed. The PM, he was told, can operate in a loose way, as Ronald Reagan did as president of the United States during the 1980s, or could be very interventionist, like Gordon Brown (52nd, 2007–10).

Johnson discussed his schedule for the next few days, which would focus on appointing his Cabinet. Other key duties would follow, including defence and security briefings, and the writing of 'Letters of Last Resort' to the commanders of Britain's nuclear-armed submarines, which provide instructions in the circumstances of the total destruction of British political and military command. Calls from world leaders, including those of Britain's NATO allies, needed to be placed in order.

As these discussions continued in the study, while going through his duties as PM for the first time, observers saw the full weight of the office begin to dawn on Johnson. Before, it had been a dream, a lifelong ambition. Now, the heavy responsibility seemed all too real. The future tone and direction of his entire premiership was dictated by his early decisions, above all, the appointment of the brilliant if anarchic Cummings as his chief advisor.

THE INHERITANCE IN 1721 AND 2019

Walpole and Johnson came to office at moments of great national consequence. For the former, financial consolidation was imperative after the Nine Years' War (1688–97) and the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14), described by former Treasury official Nick Macpherson as 'the most expensive war Britain had fought to date, which more than doubled the national debt'.[15]

By 1719, it had reached £50 million, before the South Sea Bubble further jeopardised the national finances. Negotiating new tariff arrangements was an early claim on Walpole's time, as was finding a balance between the interests of the City of London and British companies. Protecting British business from foreign

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competition through a new tariff system while ensuring that the tax burden was spread more fairly was no easy act.[16]

The economy was equally central to Johnson. His most urgent task was securing Britain's exit from the EU with a trading relationship that would support British business and the City. 'Levelling up' to achieve a fairer spread of economic activity across the nation, particularly in the Midlands and the North, where many traditionally Labour constituencies voted Tory for the first time in the 2019 general election, was another central concern. As an official said:

> There were two very big issues that Johnson kept returning to from the outset, which saw his energy levels shoot right up: they were Brexit and 'levelling up' which encapsulated his view about what a modern Toryism was all about, socially as well as geographically.[17]

However, his ambitions for Brexit and levelling up far exceeded his ability to deliver on them, such was his very limited grasp of how to effect change in No. 10.[18]

The Union was of existential importance to both prime ministers. While Walpole faced the Jacobite threat – supporters of the exiled Stuarts who dreamed of overthrowing the Hanoverians, and lingering discontent among Scots following the Union with England in 1707 – Johnson faced a different challenge to the Union, not as violent, but no less serious. Walpole's task was to maintain Scotland securely in the Union; Johnson's task was to ensure that it didn't leave the Union entirely. In Edinburgh, an SNP administration, capitalising on Brexit's unpopularity in Scotland, pressed for a second independence referendum to reverse the result of September 2014. To help combat the risk, which he knew would prove fatal to his premiership, Johnson appointed himself the first 'Minister for the Union': 'To ensure that all of government is acting on behalf of the United Kingdom: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales'.[19] Johnson never exerted himself in this area in the way his new title suggested that he might, and Northern Ireland was to prove much more troublesome to him than Scotland was ever to do,

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with the likelihood of independence receding in his years and with the SNP's momentum reducing. Walpole came to office without any great relish for foreign policy, imagining he could leave it to other ministers. The task fell principally to Lord Townshend as 'Northern Secretary' (1721–30), who shared it with the 'Secretary for the Southern Department'. Walpole, though, found himself, as did his successors as prime minister, increasingly sucked into it. His claim to be undisputed First Minister became much stronger with the resignation of Townshend in May 1730. Likewise, Johnson too came to office with little relish for the rigours of foreign affairs, any more than he'd shown during his colourful period as Foreign Secretary (2016–18). He too, though, found himself getting drawn in once PM, finding the top global table the prime minister sits at much more congenial than the Foreign Secretary's lot, especially in times of war, as occurred late on his watch in Ukraine, where his leadership proved strong and effective.

Walpole's foreign policy inclination was to promote peace with European powers at all costs, one of many stances he shared with his Tory adversaries. He remained pragmatically pacifist: he 'resisted the calls for belligerence to the very end. His defeat on the issue [over the War of Jenkins' Ear] signalled . . . a decline in his political power', wrote Reed Browning.[20] Johnson equally wanted to paint in primary colours after Britain left the European Union, with his vision of Britain leading the world as a powerful force for liberalism.

THE POWERS OF THE PRIME MINISTER: WALPOLE VERSUS JOHNSON

The responsibilities of the prime minister have evolved over the more than 300 years of the office's existence. But how much more freedom and power did Johnson have compared to Walpole? Let's examine the roles they shared one by one.

Majority in Parliament. The appointment of Walpole as First Lord of the Treasury ushered in a quiet revolution in British

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government. As historian Peter Jupp argues, it led to 'the establishment of a convention' that government from then on would be 'conducted in the Monarch's name by a group of ministers who had one acknowledged head, who would normally be First Lord of the Treasury, and leader of the House of Commons or House of Lords'.[21] The centrality of Parliament to the new office was thus embedded from the outset. Walpole's position may have been dependent on the confidence of George I and George II in a way that Johnson's was not on Elizabeth II, but even in the eighteenth century, the monarch's choice for First Lord was heavily constrained by the state of parties in the House of Commons. Walpole's survival for twenty-one years owed as much to his power base in the House of Commons as it did to the monarch, as Walpole himself fully understood.

Maintaining a majority in the House of Commons was as fundamental to the task of Johnson as it was for Walpole. The experience of Theresa May from the inconclusive general election in 2017 demonstrated the problems a prime minister faces without a parliamentary majority. The thirty-five years before 1721 had created a new political system, without which Walpole would never have emerged as the first recognisable prime minister. The Glorious Revolution of 1688, the Bill of Rights of 1689, and subsequent Acts had established the key principle of parliamentary supremacy or 'sovereignty'. The Crown recognised that in future the levying of taxes without parliamentary consent would be illegal, and that Acts of Parliament could not be suspended or repealed except by Parliament itself, and that Parliament was to meet regularly. The Triennial Act of 1694 specified that there would be general elections every three years, amended by the Septennial Act of 1716 which required that they should be held every seven years (amended in 1911, to provide for five-year parliaments). Although the monarch in 1721 still retained considerable independent, if ill-defined, powers, Britain had gone a very long way towards becoming a *constitutional* as opposed to an *absolute* monarchy. The monarch's real authority had already begun significantly to wither.

Historian Jeremy Black regards the 1694 Triennial Act as the pivotal moment when Parliament became an indispensable

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feature of the political settlement. After it, crucially, the monarch would need a reliable figure to represent him, implanted securely within it to ensure a majority: 'Parliament didn't sit in 1682, 1683, 1684, 1686 or 1687, but after 1694 it becomes a permanent feature of the British constitution', he says, 'and the King needs his own person there to help ensure it does what he wants'.[22]

The circumstances were thereby created for the emergence of an embryonic party system of Whigs and Tories, although, for much of the eighteenth century, many parliamentarians remained independent, eschewing hard labels. The two groupings centred around different sets of tendencies or beliefs: Tories held strong views on the reservation of the Anglican Church, and were more supportive of the monarchy and more hostile to military involvement in continental Europe than Whig politicians, who were at the heart of the Glorious Revolution and were the sworn enemies of the Stuart dynasty.[23]

The Act of Settlement in 1701 which ruled that no Catholic could ever become monarch again, further constrained the monarch with respect to Parliament, and established the independence of the judiciary, by making it clear that judges held office on the basis of their own good conduct, rather than on the word of the monarch. Descendants of Charles I (other than the safely Protestant future Queen Anne) were delegitimized, and Sophia of Hanover (granddaughter of James I/VI) became the next Protestant in line after her. The Act of Union of 1707 ended the independence of Scotland and the historic Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh voted to dissolve itself, a large Scottish representation then becoming Members of Parliament in Westminster. Two months before Queen Anne died in August 1714, Sophia died in Hanover, and her largely unknown son George inherited the succession. The Tory ministers Anne had favoured were promptly ejected from positions of influence. George I, as he became, preferred the Whigs, finding them more congenial and loyal to Hanoverians, and a prolonged period of 'Whig Supremacy' endured throughout his reign (1714–27) and George II's (1727–60). What these first two Georges needed above all was a powerful minister on whom they could rely to

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ensure legislation and finances passed through Parliament. For this, Robert Walpole was their man.

Walpole's oversight of Parliament is recognisable today. As Leader of the House, he managed business in the Commons. He fought the general elections of 1722, 1727 (two years short of the seven-year span, due to the death of George I), 1734, and 1741, winning them all, albeit the last only narrowly. Winning them stacked power even more heavily in the Whigs' favour, for as historian David Scott says, they had the spoils of office and the government slush funds at their disposal to pay the not inconsiderable costs.[24] Not the least of Walpole's parliamentary skills was to adopt Tory policies and lean into the centre-ground, a tactic deployed when it suited him by Johnson, from levelling up to spending on public services. Both prime ministers knew in their bowels how to go with the grain of public opinion on policy, if not always in response to their political scandals.

Managing the Cabinet. Johnson's ability to appoint the Cabinet he wanted was evident in his unashamed preference for loyalist Brexit-supporters over talent. Until the last few months, he was its undisputed master. In Walpole's day, ministers owed their appointment and allegiance to the monarch, and they had the right to discuss their department's business directly with the king. The early form of Cabinet was the 'Cabinet Council', which included Hanoverian courtiers, the Lord Chancellor and the Archbishop of Canterbury – confidants of the monarch rather than the PM. Hanoverians monarchs had particular interest in foreign and colonial policy, which entailed a close bond with the secretaries of the Northern and Southern Departments (which merged into the Foreign and Home Offices in 1782). Consequently Walpole gnawed away at their independence until he gained more influence over foreign policy following Townshend's resignation in 1730.

'Her Majesty's government' may still have been the correct form in 2021, but no one disputed that Cabinet ministers owed their allegiance and continuation in office to the prime minister – especially in Johnson's cabinet where subservience to his wishes was a precondition. However, Queen Elizabeth II

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certainly had a degree of informal influence over Johnson – her advice considered to be important in the negotiation tactics of his 2019 Brexit deal.[25] Walpole enhanced his personal authority by circumventing the large Cabinet Council, and operating a small 'Inner Cabinet' in which ministers owed their loyalty more to him. Over time, Walpole asserted his will in this way and thus put his stamp on the government. As historian J. H. Plumb wrote seventy years ago: 'A coherence emerged to government policy under Walpole, which coalesced around the ideas of peace, prosperity and a contented king and parliament, which led to questions about whether the government was in fact more Walpole's than the Monarch's.'[26]

Chairing Cabinet remains a key task of modern prime ministers. Traditionally they use the body to discuss policy, debate the most important decisions, and keep ministers in line. If a critical and controversial decision was to be made, such as over military action, policy of constitutional significance, or of major national economic and public health concerns, then for much of the institution's history, it was decided at the Cabinet table. But since the latter twentieth century, the routine business of government, including decisions and debates, have been taken in committees or in small group meetings (like Walpole's 'Inner Cabinet') around the prime minister, with Cabinet itself left to review, endorse, and adjust the direction of policy. Johnson himself had a barely concealed irritation for Cabinet meetings, though Theresa May and Rishi Sunak (57th, 2023–) had more time for them. Full Cabinet still meets formally though every week, at least when Parliament is sitting, and more frequently at times of crisis. During the 2020–1 COVID-19 pandemic, it met using conference calls and video links (such as Zoom), simultaneously illustrating both the continuity and changes that have taken place since Walpole's day. A monarch-free Cabinet has not meant a criticism-free Cabinet for the PM. For all the greater formalisation since his day, Walpole would have recognised the continued ad hoc and often chaotic nature of much decision-making around the prime minister.

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Managing the Monarchy. While possessing a deep nostalgic, if inchoate romantic attachment to the incumbent, Johnson elected to manage Elizabeth II in a brusquer way than any of his thirteen predecessors. Soon after coming to power, he attempted to prorogue Parliament during the Brexit crisis in late 2019, which was judged by the Supreme Court to be 'improper' and therefore unlawful, resulting in an embarrassing apology from Johnson to the queen. Johnson knew that the monarch had no effective control or power over him, and he could behave as he wanted, short of antagonising the powerful reservoir of press and public opinion fiercely loyal to the Queen. Cabinet Secretary Sedwill though felt the need to explicitly remind him that the monarch still possessed the royal prerogative powers, which the prime minister only exercised in their name. Johnson shrugged, Cummings fumed. It was evident Johnson's Number 10 had little time for the constitutional safeguards or traditional stakeholders within the British establishment. By 2022 relations between Number 10 and the Palace had deteriorated so badly that the 'magic circle' of three senior state officials debated during the last days of Johnson's premiership whether they might be needed to dissuade him from calling an election in a desperate attempt to prolong his political life – an action the Queen may have been forced to reject under the so-called 'Lascelles principles' (see Chapter 7).[27]

Walpole could not take the monarch for granted, nor was the king bound to accept his advice. George I, when replacing Queen Anne's Tory ministers wholesale with Whigs, showed how powerful the post-1688 monarch could still be.[28] Despite a lack of familiarity with the English language, for his first few years George I convened and attended Cabinet meetings regularly, maintaining a keen interest in domestic as well as foreign policy.[29] Protecting the reputation of the monarchy during the South Sea Bubble – the king was a governor, and he had large holdings with the Company – had helped Walpole win his trust, as had helping patch up relations between him and his son George, Prince of Wales, which reached a crisis point in 1721. But Walpole constantly had to use guile and knowledge of the German language to retain the confidence of George I, and his position was far from secure. His sinuous ability to worm his way

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into the affections of influential women at court underpinned his role, notably with George I's mistress, Melusine von der Schulenburg (Duchess of Kendal), and later with Queen Caroline of Ansbach, wife of George II.[30] 'For all his skill as a Parliamentarian, Walpole's supreme talent lay in managing the Royal Closet', historian Paul Langford wrote.[31]

Walpole was adept too at outmanoeuvring potential rivals, like Lord Carteret, among the few in Court who could speak German, and whose views were closer to George I on Hanoverian matters. So Walpole dispatched Carteret to Ireland in 1723 as Lord Lieutenant. Johnson tried a similar tactic by appointing his rival Liz Truss Foreign Secretary, hoping she would be too distracted by foreign policy matters to continue plotting against him. The move backfired because it served to shield her from calamitous domestic events, which actively helped her become prime minister. Squashing the nebulous 'Atterbury Plot' smartly in 1722, when the Bishop of Rochester, Francis Atterbury, was accused of trying to carry out a Jacobite coup d'état, strengthened his relations with George I. During the crisis, Walpole ordered the plotters arrested, deployed soldiers to Hyde Park from Ireland, suspended *habeas corpus* for a year, and had one member of the conspiracy executed at Tyburn. Thereafter, Walpole took control personally of 'Jacobite intelligence' and ensured both Georges knew it. Speaker Onslow (on Walpole's payroll) said that the Atterbury plot had 'fixed [Walpole] with the King, and united for a time the whole body of the Whigs to him'.[32]

Walpole proved deft too in managing the kings' long absences during the summer months when they went to Hanover every few summers, thereby enhancing the power and responsibilities of 'the emerging role of Prime Minister', as Andrew Thompson wrote.[33] Returning by carriage on uneven roads from Hanover to the Channel ports was slow, and once at the Channel, the royal party could be holed up for several days or longer, Black reminds us, if the winds were not favourable.[34]

A moment of extreme peril for Walpole came when George I died in 1727. Fearful for his future, he seized the initiative and travelled to Richmond Lodge where the new king was residing 10 miles to the west of Westminster. On learning that George and

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Queen Caroline were taking an afternoon nap, he insisted that they be woken up so he could break the news personally and ask what they wanted him to do. The new George II was very clear what he wanted: Walpole's rival Spencer Compton to be First Minister, not him.[35] But Walpole was too quick, rapidly ingratiating himself with the new king by offering to help secure a £100,000 increase in the Civil List through Parliament.[36] Besides, unlike Walpole, Compton had little ability to control Parliament, and lacked Walpole's political talent. 'It was one of Walpole's most dangerous moments', argues Daniel Finkelstein, ascribing his ability to survive the death of George I and remain prime minister as 'primarily because of his ability in Parliament. It was his relationship with Queen Caroline though which was responsible for him continuing for so long as prime minister.'[37] When Walpole moved into Downing Street in 1735, Caroline became a regular visitor, breakfasting with Walpole within a week of their move in October.[38]

We may ask whether the continued eclipse of the monarchy's political power was inevitable once a powerful First Lord had emerged. Nothing in history of course is destined. But what of this teasing counterfactual posed by political scientist Patrick Weller?

> If the throne had passed on by lineage in 1714 to a Prussian or Russian [ruler] rather than Hanoverian, one could only speculate whether Frederick the Great (1740–86) or Catherine the Great (1762–96) would have been as prepared to yield as much to the demands of Walpole, or to any other prime minister. Frederick and Catherine had the ambition and political skills to have made far more of the British throne had it come their way. So one can interpret Walpole as filling a void: if the monarch will not rule, the first minister must, and Walpole does so willingly and effectively.[39]

The danger with overstating Hanoverian impotence is that it underestimates the political acumen of George II in particular, and the direction of travel of the British monarchy since 1688. Had a Frederick or a Catherine tried to set Britain back on

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a course towards an absolute monarchy, the political system would have risen up in revolt.

Walpole's leadership began seriously to falter in his seventeenth year in power, ironically, within eighteen months of his moving into Downing Street. In 1737, when his principal ally at Court, Caroline, died, it exposed him to the full force of opposition of the Prince of Wales, Frederick (who remained a powerful figure until his death from a lung injury in 1751, when his son, the future George III, succeeded him).

Behind the scenes, Walpole's long-standing foe, the Duke of Newcastle, who had long operated in his shadow, challenged him increasingly (and himself later became the PM in 1754). Walpole allowed himself to be dragged into war in 1739 (the War of Jenkins' Ear) which proved a costly failure, and he became increasingly mired in allegations of corruption, resigning after being defeated in a vote of no confidence. George II wept at the news and demanded to keep receiving Walpole's advice even after he stood down.[40]

Elizabeth II, then with just weeks to live, was unlikely to have wept when news broke of Johnson shuffling off his Downing Street coil. But his successor Liz Truss (56th, 2022) did not have to pick sides in Court intrigue, nor worry if she would be replaced on the accession of Charles III. Neither Johnson nor Truss agonised over whether they were in favour with the Prince of Wales, nor took a stand on Prince Andrew's private life, nor on the Duke and Duchess of Sussex's feud out with the royal Court. Nevertheless, as Peter Hennessy points out: 'Managing the relationship between the Government and the Monarch, and the Heir to the Throne *remains* [our italics] firmly top of their list, as the first duty of the Prime Minister's functions.'[41]

Oversight of Finance. Johnson may have been First Lord of the all-powerful Treasury, but the Treasury had long since ceased to be a personal resource at the PM's personal disposal. As Walpole would have readily understood, the Treasury and the office of Chancellor of the Exchequer predated that of prime minister by several hundred years. The Treasury was established after the Norman Conquest: the

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Domesday Book in 1086 speaks of 'Henry the Treasurer'.[42] Older than any other department in Whitehall except the Royal Mint, it was located from Henry VIII's time within the vast, ramshackle Palace of Whitehall.[43] When William III and Mary moved to Kensington Palace following the Whitehall Palace fire in 1698, the Treasury relocated to the 'Cockpit' area, one of the few remnants of Whitehall Palace not burnt to the ground. In the 1730s, it moved into offices on the same site designed by architect William Kent, who was working simultaneously on upgrading Number 10 for Walpole. The Treasury remained within two hundred yards of the front door of Downing Street for two centuries until it moved into its current offices in 1940 in the new Treasury building on the corner of Whitehall and Parliament Square, opened in two phases in 1908 and 1917. The Treasury's continuing proximity to Number 10, and the dominance of the Chancellor at its head, are a constant reminder of its power as a counterweight to the prime minister (Chapter 9).

Walpole had been Chancellor of the Exchequer ('Second Lord of the Treasury') from 1713–15, returning to the post and combining it with the First Lord of the Treasury in April 1721. Fundamental to his work and authority was his control over finance, underpinned by the enhanced role the Treasury acquired from the early eighteenth century, aided by the rapid development of the City of London from the late seventeenth century, combined with the setting up of the Bank of England in 1694, which helped ensure a favourable funding environment. Combining the office of First Lord with Chancellor greatly enhanced Walpole's strength. The Treasury provided him with capable officials, including John Scrope and Nicholas Paxton, who became significant allies and aides, especially as they sat in the House of Commons, helping ensure him parliamentary support.[44]

Johnson was in a far weaker position than Walpole over financial policy. His economic team in No. 10 was minuscule compared to the numbers working for the Chancellor. Johnson may have been responsible for appointing Sajid Javid Chancellor of the Exchequer (and forcing his departure in

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February 2020) and was loosely involved in budget planning, but his successor Rishi Sunak quickly showed he had his own views on economic policy thank you very much. Johnson could theoretically have sacked or moved him. But it would have been all but impossible to bring off so soon after the dismissal of Javid, and with Johnson's dwindling political capital and Sunak building powerful allies in government. Dismissing Chancellors, unlike home or foreign secretaries, has dramatic impacts on the markets, financial and political. Their resignations, too, can have fatal impacts, as did the consecutive exits of Chancellor Sunak and ex-Chancellor (then Health Secretary) Javid in July 2022 – effectively triggering the end of Johnson's government. Well might Johnson envy Walpole.

Patronage. How easy it is to believe that Johnson had far greater patronage powers than Walpole, because the Hanoverian monarchs retained so much authority over jobs, whereas Elizabeth II had passively to follow advice on all the many appointments in her name. But do the facts confirm this picture?

Johnson was certainly more activist and ideological in appointments than many prime ministers. At the top of the tree, he was able to appoint and dismiss some twenty Cabinet ministers, and eighty more junior ministerial positions, whereas Walpole's far smaller numbers of heads of department and key figures within them, as we've seen, owed their positions to the monarch. But Walpole still possessed considerable influence over some appointments, notably to the Treasury. The monarch's ministerial choices in contrast were limited to the ruling Whig party, in which the range of capable and loyal individuals to appoint was not wide.

Modern prime ministers too, whilst theoretically able to appoint and sack any politician, need to ensure a balance of different factions, genders, ethnicities and regions within the party. Social diversity balance did not keep Walpole awake at night.

Walpole's and Johnson's patronage powers extended far beyond ministers. Despite being far less interested in intelligence matters than Walpole, Johnson appointed the heads of

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the three security services, MI5, MI6, and GCHQ, as well as heads of the armed services, though these are rarely political appointments, and he generally accepted the recommendations from within the security and military services, much to the displeasure of Cummings. More than many prime ministers though, he chose to exercise his right to select top civil servants, dismissing more Permanent Secretaries than any previous prime minister, trying to replace them by figures deemed more sympathetic to his pro-Brexit, modernising agenda – an agenda determined by Cummings. He was responsible for a wide range of public sector appointments and regulators (numbering some 300 in 2021, down from over 2,000 in 1979),[45] a process that again he had been eager to influence in an attempt to fight a 'culture war' from Number 10 against a supposedly 'woke' anti-Brexit, anti free-market establishment.[46]

During Walpole's time, George I and George II were keenly interested in military appointments, though even here Walpole did have some influence over the raising of regiments, because it involved spending Treasury money. Johnson, not known for being devoutly religious, though his wife Carrie was a practising Catholic, was responsible for top ecclesiastical appointments. Since 2010 though, the PM has merely conveyed to the monarch the preference of the Church of England without comment; in 1721–42 the Church was a central part of national life.

Walpole milked the powers of patronage that he possessed to the full. Architect William Kent was enlisted to design his opulent Palladian country seat at Houghton Hall in Norfolk, which he used to host lavish entertainment. Every spring, it hosted ministers, politicians, and dignitaries for up to three weeks, known as the 'Norfolk congress'.[47] Housekeeping cost him some £1,500 a week: after one occasion, his wine merchant in London took back 500 empty cases of Château Lafite and Château Margaux. Walpole 'did not survive simply by telling backbenchers that he felt their pain', as Robin Lane-Fox put it.[48] Johnson, too, dispensed invitations to Downing Street or to Chequers, the country home of the prime minister since 1921, though shortage of time in office and COVID, and a lack of

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appetite for entertaining MPs, heavily constrained this tool. Johnson also relied on rich and powerful friends to extend patronage on his behalf, notably Lord Bamford who hosted and entertained the prime minister on several occasions, including his wedding with Carrie in 2022.

'Walpole worked hard to ensure that neither George I nor George II felt that they were being taken for granted. He never forgot that patronage is effectively at the disposal of the Crown, and took great care to exercise his influence over appointments in a way that didn't unsettle them', says Black.[49] Much of Walpole's patronage regime was more covert than overt, and became known as the 'Robinocracy' (Robin being a pejorative derivation of his first name, 'Robert'). With MPs not receiving a salary until 1911, it was common in the eighteenth century for inducements to be offered to them. The Secret Service fund was one of Walpole's nest-eggs: intended for espionage, he siphoned it off to help win elections and buttress support. (Johnson's own 'Towns Fund', criticised as little more than pork-barrelling, paled into insignificance compared to Walpole's dark arts).[50] Speaker of the House of Commons, Arthur Onslow, was just one of many on Walpole's payroll.[51] Sinecures, pensions, and some 'rotten borough' parliamentary seats were further gifts at his disposal. It was supposedly Walpole who commented about a group of MPs, 'all those men have their price'.[52] Harry Dickinson argues in *The Whig Supremacy* that 'Walpole remained in power for more than 20 years because he had an unrivalled ability to manage men, and a profound understanding of how the political system, which developed after 1714, actually worked.'[53]

Was Walpole corrupt, or was he merely playing by the rules of the day? Biographer Ed Pearce is in no doubt: 'Admirers must face the fact that Walpole was about power – acquisition of power, keeping of power, and getting rich by power. The fibre was always coarse, the vision low. Walpole did not invent English political corruption, but he turned it into a public company.'[54] Historian Frank O'Gorman in contrast argues 'it has never been convincingly demonstrated that the British political nation became more corrupt under Walpole than it had been

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earlier'.[55] So Walpole may not have been corrupt compared to the norms of the time, nor indeed compared to many countries today. Walpole was simply playing the game, a game at which he was notably adept.

The parliamentary 'Committee of Secrecy', set up after his fall in 1742, tried to build a case to prosecute him. His actions over the previous ten years were investigated, with his use of the Secret Service Fund a particular interest. But its inquiries were hindered by Walpole destroying many of his own papers – a great blow to historians. Aides like Scrope were uncooperative, refusing to answer questions or telling them that the Secret Service Fund was the king's business, and nobody else's. Nor was objectivity helped by some of Walpole's supporters being appointed committee members. Eventually, the committee's efforts petered out; too many important people had too much to hide. Thus, when his enemies thought they had finally got him, 'Cock Robin' managed to escape one last time.[56] Later, a reform was passed preventing Treasury officials like Scrope and Paxton from again sitting in the House of Commons.[57] Was Johnson's modus operandi more corrupt than Walpole's? Certainly his attempt to discredit his own post-mortem, the Privileges Committee's investigation into his conduct of Number 10 during Covid, failed completely. The 30,000-word document published in June 2023 found that he committed multiple contempts of Parliament, including deliberately misleading the House, deliberately misleading the Committee, breaching confidence, impugning the Committee and the democratic process of the House, and 'being complicit in the campaign of abuse and attempted intimidation of the Committee'.[58] In his case, two of his leading officials, Martin Reynolds and Jack Doyle, refused to uphold Johnson's claim that he had followed advice on the conduct of parties in Downing Street.

But while Walpole and Johnson exploited their patronage powers to the full and beyond, it is far from evident that it was a more powerful asset to Johnson than it had been to the first holder of his office.

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National Leader. The final area of prime ministerial power is national leadership. Here at least we might imagine that Johnson easily outshone Walpole. Johnson was, after all, demonstrably the legitimate *national* leader, rather than the monarch, directing the country at times of crisis, as during Brexit, the COVID epidemic, and Ukrainian-Russian war, and speaking directly to the nation about his decisions. The chief executive on the office's 300th anniversary in 2021 was unequivocally the prime minister, rather than the monarch; the principal communicator to the nation in the media and House of Commons was the PM, not the monarch; the chief determiner of government policy was the PM, not the monarch; the significant intermediary with heads of government and heads of state abroad, and the person who ultimately declares war and would launch the UK nuclear strike, was the PM, not the monarch.[59]

We would be wrong, however, to dismiss Walpole's role as a national leader. The 'Robinocracy' referred not just to Walpole's system of patronage, but the character it gave to the entire political system. It can be compared to 'Thatcherism', defining the political era in which both leaders were in office. Walpole was the most recognisable figure in the government, and the focus of both approbation and ire, not the monarch: it was his effigy, not the monarch's, that angry mobs burnt during the Excise Crisis of 1733, when he attempted to increase duties. It was Walpole, not the monarch, who was the subject of ridicule from some of the most prominent writers of his day, Jonathan Swift, John Gay and Henry Fielding. Gay's *Beggar's Opera* is a satire of Walpole's Britain. A short distance of travel only separates allusions to him in the line 'Robin of Bagshot, alias Gorgon, alias Bob Bluff, alias Bob Booty' from the puppet of Johnson in *Spitting Image* on television from October 2020, or his leadership scrutinised in popular television series like *This England* (2022) and *The Diplomat* (2023).[60]

Nevertheless, Walpole had to compete with George I and II as, nominally at least, head of government. While it is true that the early Georgians had little of the presence and visibility of earlier rulers, Henry VIII, Elizabeth I or Queen Anne, they still set many key aspects of policy. King George II's support for

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war in 1739 undermined Walpole's position. Moreover, during Walpole's era, the existence of the Hanoverian monarchy itself was a controversial issue, with the exiled Stuart Court, and their domestic supporters, scheming for a restoration. In contrast, in 2021, Elizabeth II had a variety of constitutional, symbolic, and ceremonial roles, and she embodied the values of tradition and continuity. She was a symbol of national unity at a time when centrifugal forces were strong, and had authority across the Commonwealth. During COVID, the Queen's message to the nation in April 2020 was seen by 24 million, just short of the number who tuned in to listen to Johnson announce new restrictions the month before. When the Queen died in September 2022, coverage across the media in Britain and abroad easily eclipsed the departure of Johnson and the appointment of his successor, Liz Truss. As we will see in Chapter 9, the ability of the monarch to represent the nation at home and abroad compares not insignificantly with that of the prime minister.

The Prime Minister's Day. Our final comparison of the prime ministers 300 years apart focuses on their working day: do we find that Johnson's day easily eclipsed Walpole's in intensity and depth? The first incumbent may have had fewer responsibilities than Johnson, but as historians have stressed, he worked formidably hard, especially when Parliament was in session. His duties included:

> The reading of all the dispatches flowing in from the embassies and foreign courts; the perusal of reports from agents within the three kingdoms; formal meetings with members of the Privy Council, and outer and inner cabinets and the Treasury board; conferences with individual ministers; the delivery of speeches and the encouragement of supporters in Parliament; and, of course, daily audiences with the Monarch.[61]

This is not the programme of an amateur or part-time national leader. The team assisting Walpole may have been small in comparison to the 400 or so overseen in Downing Street by

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Johnson. Walpole, though, had not insignificant support, with MPs to help him in addition to Treasury officials, including, at different times, Henry Pelham (3rd PM, 1743–54), Thomas Winnington, Thomas Brereton, and Walpole's brother Horatio. Help came from several in the Lords too, such as from Edmund Gibson, Bishop of London, widely known as 'Walpole's pope', who brought him the votes of the twenty-six bishops.[62] The Duke of Argyll and Earl of Ilay helped him dominate Scottish politics in the 1730s, while in Ireland, then a British client state, Hanoverian business was aided by 'local Whig managers'.[63] A loose team of writers and journalists wrote supportive articles and propaganda, watered by the expenditure of £50,000 in his last ten years, as uncovered by the committee investigating his actions after his fall from power. While Johnson didn't directly pay journalists, he sanctioned unrivalled access to him and to his staff in Number 10, in return for their strong support, particularly the right-wing publications of *The Telegraph*, *The Spectator*, and *Daily Mail*. But his growing dependence on the publications' goodwill made him vulnerable to the whims of their editors.

Walpole had more freedom on how he spent his day. Johnson did not have that luxury. His every hour was tightly choreographed by the prime minister's Private Office and political team, who tried to suggest down to the smallest unit of time how the prime minister should optimise it. Prime ministers are initially surprised by how much of their day is taken up with tasks and meetings over which they apparently have no discretion. Walpole didn't have his own court, but since the Cabinet Secretariat was created in 1916 and the prime minister's office from 1964, the modern prime minister certainly does, with a retinue of staff with their own political climate, with some striking similarities to the monarch's court in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. 'The way Number 10 operates today has many similarities with the way the court operated under Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell', according to Ben Rhodes. 'There are obvious differences: Monarchs remain for life whereas prime ministers come and go. But the shenanigans, and the revolving door of key advisors who come in and out, is

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strikingly like the favourites in royal courts of the monarch in earlier centuries.'[64]

And so, appropriately, we finish our comparison of our bookend prime ministers in the company of the two monarchs who oversaw them.

SNIPPET OF A DINNER CONVERSATION BETWEEN KING GEORGE I AND QUEEN ELIZABETH II

Over a long candlelit table, attended on by smartly dressed courtiers, we find two distantly-related monarchs conversing in broken English:

> 'So you still have a First Minister in England, do you?' asks the Hanoverian.
>
> 'Indeed we do. We call them "Prime Minister" now. I have had fourteen so far. Fourteen!'
>
> '*Vierzehn!* I had my hands full with just one. Sir Robert hated being called that title.'
>
> 'I hope you kept him in order?'
>
> 'Indeed! But I could not have ruled without him in truth; he spared me a . . . how do you say . . . *schrecklich* embarrassment just before he became First Lord. After that, he saved my skin when there was a plot of murder against me in 1722. I owe him everything. And you?'
>
> 'Oh, they come and go. Huff and puff. "Full of sound and fury, signifying [often] nothing, and none serving anything like as long as your Sir Robert. It would have been very awkward.'
>
> 'I'm glad to hear that.'
>
> 'The state, the state, endures through them all.'

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