

A big fish, small pond scenario

Tony Blair might hold sway in his cabinet, but in the global arena he is more than a cigar short of a Churchill, argues **Richard Rose**



The paradox of power is simply stated: at Westminster, the prime minister's power over colleagues has greatly increased, but in the world beyond Dover, it has diminished.

Tony Blair has shown that the Victorian dictum that the prime minister is first among equals is as dead as Queen Victoria. At Westminster the prime minister is first without equal.

But what you see depends on where you look. In the Council of Ministers of the European Union, Britain's leader is only one among 15, each with their own interests to defend. In the world beyond Dover, a domestic election victory cannot return Britain to the eminence it enjoyed in the days of Winston Churchill or Clement Attlee. In the introverted world of Westminster, irreversible

changes have enhanced the position of the prime minister vis-à-vis colleagues. The advent of round-the-clock television and print coverage of political personalities greatly increases the attention given to the occupant of No 10.

Elections are no longer tribal contests or ideological conflicts between socialists and Tories. It is the personalities of party leaders that count.

Patronage has replaced parliamentary performance as the chief device by which the prime minister dominates MPs. This can be a disadvantage when Downing Street's weakness at the polls turns colleagues into "bastards" intriguing for the succession, as John Major learnt to his cost.

In opposition, Blair established his authority over colleagues by becoming, with assistance from Conservative quarrels, a unique electoral asset. He also rewrote the rules to protect Labour's prime minister from loss of office by a vote of MPs or party members.

Blair has created an organisational weapon at No 10, a large personal staff intended to make policies as well as headlines. The team is loyal, in a way that cabinet colleagues are not, because when Blair goes, the authority of Alastair Campbell, Jonathan Powell and others who speak for him also dies.

But Blair's big staff is a sign of uncertainty about what to do. Margaret Thatcher did not need a large staff. Her weapon was a set of clearly enunciated convictions that cabinet ministers were expected to turn into policies.

The "world" that Blair stands astride is a small world. It does not control much that happens in the everyday world of most British people, especially the world in which harassed public employees are meant to deliver education, healthcare and other public services.

An event such as an outbreak of illness among a few cattle in Cumbria and Devon achieved what cabinet colleagues have never been able to do, namely, force the prime minister to alter the date of a general election.

In the world beyond Dover, the influence of Downing Street has shrunk greatly. When Churchill and Attlee sat beside President Truman and Josef Stalin at the Potsdam conference of 1945, Britain was one of the Big Three powers in the world.

But in an increasingly interdependent international economy, when a British prime minister summons spirits from the "vasty deeps", he or she appears like Shakespeare's boastful Glendower, whose claim to power was punctured by Hotspur's question:

"But will they come when you do call for them?" Even worse, foreign spirits can come bearing messages threatening the prime minister's position at Westminster.

The re-election of Blair's government will present him with fresh challenges from all three worlds in which he is involved. Within Westminster, the media will feed on speculation about when Blair will retire and who will replace him. Their appetite for stories will be fed by ambitious ministers and special advisers at war for their prince.

In two years, when Scots vote to elect the next Scottish Parliament, the achievements and shortcomings of Henry McLeish's executive will be at

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issue, and intervention from Downing Street could backfire to the advantage of the Scottish Nationalists.

And as long as weapons and the will to use them remain with Irish Republicans and Ulster Loyalists, the prime minister's appeal for peace in Northern Ireland can be blown up, literally.

The economic boom that Blair has enjoyed owes more to Alan Greenspan than to Blair's naive approach to economics. When the world economy goes into recession, Blair may appear more like Glendower than John Maynard Keynes. Any effort by No 10 to take charge of the economy is a recipe for conflict with the tenant of No 11, Gordon Brown.

On the day Blair announced the general election, the White House reaffirmed the importance of the "special relationship" — but in a message directed at the Japanese government. In Washington, a cricket-loving prime minister is no match for a president who plays hardball. The election of George W. Bush last year may have more impact on British foreign policy than our election this June, for Bush

is not an isolationist. He seeks to advance America's interests through unilateralist action whenever he deems appropriate.

Europe remains the great challenge and threat. While the preferences of *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* may govern British politics, the policies of Downing Street are more affected by people whose preferred British newspaper is an international edition of the *Financial Times* that buries British news in a remote inside page. The relative power of British voices — as against the voices of un-British English-speakers — was made palpable in the foreign exchange crisis of the pound in September 1992. John Major's successful stroking of *The Sun* helped him win the general election, but his failure to stroke the German Bundesbank led to the collapse of the pound and to his domestic political authority, too.

Early in the new Parliament, Blair will have to announce whether he will call a referendum on the euro. So far, his policy has echoed St Augustine of Hippo's commitment to chastity: "Lord make me a European — but not yet." Opinion-poll data in Downing Street emphasise that winning a referendum on the euro would be an uphill battle. For a risk-averse politician, the simplest strategy is to avoid a referendum, for you cannot lose a vote that is not held.

Staying out of the euro is an entirely feasible policy; it is, after all, the government's current position. Doing so would bracket Britain with small, rich Scandinavian countries that many would like to emulate. However, a British prime minister wants to stand tall in Westminster and be a heavyweight when world leaders meet.

But for a prime minister to follow Douglas Hurd's advice of pursuing a policy of "punching above our weight" risks his being knocked out when punching with the real heavyweights in Washington, Brussels, Tokyo and beyond.

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