

THE FUNCTIONING OF THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT: AN OVERVIEW AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this work is to critically analyse the relationship between the monarch, the Prime Minister, the Cabinet and parliament. By referring to the events of 2016, this work will analyse how the Prime Minister is appointed, party leaders removed and the differences between the methods of choosing a leader practiced by the two main parties. Additional consideration will be given to what happens if no party can command an overall majority in parliament. The overall argument made here is that while the monarchy is one of the oldest systems of governance, it has been criticised because it does not embrace the ideals of democracy. In addition, there has been increasing criticism given to use the power of the Prime Minister.

The Relationship between the Monarch, the Prime Minister, Cabinet, and Parliament

The Monarch, the Parliament, and the Prime Minister

The Crown, or the monarchy as it is otherwise referred to, is the oldest part of the system of government in the UK (Monarchist, 2016). The Queen remains neutral concerning political matters (Knight, 2010). The Queen does not vote or stand for election in any political position. The Queen's role, instead, is to "provide continuity and the focus for national unity" (Monarchist, 2016). The Queen does, however, perform ceremonial roles concerning the UK government and

has a relationship with the Parliament as supported by the Constitution (Jones & Norton, 2013). As an example, one of the more important roles the Queen fulfills relates to the opening and dissolving the parliament (a power that only the Queen has) (Knight, 2010). So if Prime Minister, for instance, wants a parliamentary session or call for a general election, the permission of the Queen must be sought first (for that purpose the Prime Minister usually travels to Buckingham Palace) (Monarchist, 2016). The only exception to this is if the Sovereign has passed away. During this time, her Majesty opens the parliament, addresses the House of Lords' chambers and outlines the program for government in the Queen's speech (Monarchist, 2016). No business will commence until the Queen's speech is completed.

The Queen has a special relationship with the Prime Minister. When a prime minister called to the palace to be presented to Her Majesty, the Queen asks whether he or she will form a government in the name of the Queen (Monarchist, 2016). The most common answer to this question is yes, though there has been a time when the situation was uncertain, as happened with Sir Alec Douglas Home in 1963 (Monarchist, 2016). Once a new prime minister is appointed, the record will show that the "the Prime Minister Kissed Hands on Appointment" (Knight, 2010), as occurred with the equipment on Theresa May as a new prime minister in 2016 (ITV, 2016). The Queen will then discuss issues with Prime Minister weekly, where she may express her views on the government matters. This meeting might take place in person or over the telephone. Whatever is stated during this time is however the confidential (Monarchist, 2016). During the resignation, as with appointment, it is also necessary for a meeting to take place with the Queen, an example being David Cameron in 2016 (Wilkinson, 2016). Cameron ultimately resigned after deciding to call a referendum for the UK to leave the EU which, as the CNN article cited, was a "unnecessary and costly gamble" (Masters, 2016, p. 1), one that he made to apparently resolve

the "constant infighting within the Conservative Party over the UK's position in Europe" (Masters, 2016, p. 1).

It is difficult to find criticism against the Queen, but there is some criticism against the Monarch as a system. A few articles suggest the establishment is incompatible with democracy. Graham Smith, writing on CNN indicated for instance:

"In a democratic society, there is no room for a head of state who is put there for life and by birth. A hereditary monarch has no place in a society that believes "we the people" should be in charge. The principled objection is unanswerable" (Smith, 2012, p. 1).

In that regard, the crown is seen as having the highest authority in the country rather than people because some of the powers cannot even be challenged by law. Indeed, the Queen has considerable powers to engage in activities like dissolving parliament, waging war or signing treaties through the Privy Council (A council made of hundreds of people from the Parliament but also includes judges, archbishops as well as Commonwealth leaders who meet once a month though the meetings are "shrouded in secrecy" (Weaver, 2015, p. 1). The Economist (2015) has indicated that although Queen Elizabeth II does not present very much danger in that regard, the problem with succession that it never is quite easy to call what will happen down the line. As a result, there may be a competing set of interests between what the people want versus what the monarchy wants that threatens the system of democracy.

The Prime Minister and the Cabinet

The Prime Minister is the head of the government in the UK (Morrison, 2013). The Prime Minister is responsible for various policies and decisions such as appointing permanent

members, overseeing and administering government agencies and also govern the House of Commons (Gov.UK, 2016). Over the years, however, there have been a number of claims that the Prime Minister's power has increased to the extent that it "represents emergence of a presidential dimension" (Foley, 2012, p. 1) and it could "encroach upon the legitimate rights of the electorate, undermine the essential role of Parliament, usurp the functions of the collective coveted decision-making, and neutralise much of the influence driving from the internal democracy of the party" (Blick, 2010). However, some claim that their critique may extend from the growth of media criticism as well as each the role of globalisation that might be facing more important than the Prime Minister to be involved in global affairs.

Another criticism is that the prime minister is not voted for by the public because of the parliamentary democracy system (Morrison, 2013). Britain elects a parliament once every five years. The party that wins the majority of the parliament in the House of Commons (the parliament to be discussed more next and what happens if a majority does not win), then the party wins the majority, forms its government and appoints a Prime Minister. May was elected not because the public chose her consequently, but instead, her party did (they saw her as a potentially useful way to quell some of the in party fighting among the Conservative party and the arguments around the Brexit controversy) (Blakemore, 2016).

The prime minister also has a vital role with the cabinet. The Cabinet comprises 20 or so members of the government who are chosen by the Prime Minister (Parliament.UK, 2016). These include for instance the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the Secretary of State for Education, Health, Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, as well as among others the chancellor of Exchequer. The PM most often selects the MPs of the governing

party in the House of Commons (Knight & Pattison, 2011), though theoretically, the PM could choose anyone. The ability of the Prime Minister to do this has been criticised in the past, like with David Cameron for instance, where his appointments were said to be representative of white, elite interests. This is not conducive to a democratic state considering the interest of other groups, including various ethnicities as gender or transgender is taken into consideration (Metro, 2012).

Still, there is the possibility that when a new prime ministers appointed, like Theresa May, where a number of cabinet members (including George Osborne, John Mindel, Nikki Morgan, and Oliver Letwin, to name a few) (BBC, 2016) were removed in order to pursue the government's strategic objectives with the Tory Party (that is, the conservative right-wing party, in contrast to the left wing, Labour Party). The rise of this party should not be particularly surprising given the broader movement of populism, and the voice of the right-wing is not just the EU but also in America (Frum, 2015). Still, there a lot of debate (The Spectator, 2016) as to the rationale of some appointments, like why Boris Johnson was chosen as Foreign Secretary by Theresa May. Some argued that Boris would be useful in managing Brexit, while others criticised the decision because of the inappropriate comments he has made in the past. Most notably, the comments Boris made regarding Barack Obama's heritage (Stone, 2016) as the controversial poem that he penned about Turkey's president, to name just a few questionable instances) (Griffiths, 2016).

In any event, the job of the cabinet members is to decide the policies the government is going to pursue and the members get together to discuss the issues they will pursue (Parliament.UK, 2016). The Cabinet also has its secretary. The secretary provides administrative services,

including ensuring decisions are consistent, overseeing the efficiency and effectiveness of the ministries while also circulating that minutes from meetings of the cabinet and its committees (Parliament.UK, 2016). Once a year, though, the PM does look to bring in new members to the Cabinet in what is called 'reshuffles.' These are classified as "being big occasions" (Knight & Pattison, 2011, p. 233) in UK as the PM brings in prominent journalists to talk about which ministers likely to go where or who is going to be chosen (Knight, 2010).

Apart from the cabinet that is directly appointed by the prime minister, there is also the shadow cabinet. The shadow cabinet is the opposition party. Their job is to suggest policy adoption by another party if they held office. Knight and Pattison (2011) give an example for instance if the Secretary of State for Health sets out a policy on hospital treatment, and the shadow will put forth with the opposition party would want to do if elected. Alternatively, perhaps the shadow would present an option based on what they believe are failings within the government policy. This is good and healthy for a democracy to debate, discuss, and have different viewpoints to encourage policy that is good for the people.

The Parliament

The parliament represents the interests of the people and, as such, makes sure the government considers its needs. The government is responsible for overseeing daily activities as well as deciding such things as taxes and how to deliver services such as housing, policing, welfare benefits, energy and more (Morrison, 2013). Without the agreement of the Parliament, however, the government cannot make new laws or raise taxes (Parliament.UK, 2016). The parliament will assess such things, as whether the decisions made by the government are "open and transparent,"

"workable and efficient," as well as other the initiated store policies are "fair and nondiscriminatory" (Parliament.UK, 2016).

Those in the Parliament comprise two houses; one is the House of Commons. Those in the House of Commons have been elected or appointed at the general election (and thus sit in their positions for at least five years as according to the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011) (Parliament UK General Elections, 2016). If there is no majority in Parliament, it is a 'hung Parliament,' the most recent following the 2010 election (Morrison, 2014) and it was at the time when the minority administrate forged a coalition with another party (which in 2010 happened after the Lib Dems decided to join the Conservative government).

The Parliament also comprises the House of Lords, whose members (of which some 700 consisting of mostly conservatives followed by labour and Liberal Democrats) are appointed for life rather than being elected. Usually, they are chosen because of their experience or achievement (which is a primary source of criticism and has been the subject of scandal in the past whereby some of those who had appointments made significant donations to the then Labour Party) (BBC, 2007). While the House of Lords does not usually have the power to stop laws from the past, they nevertheless have the power to reconsider proposals as well as delay bills. Plus, as the Electoral Reform Society argues, it is not democratic to have unelected politicians decide how the country is run. Even worse, the House of Lords is huge, it only has 400 seats available but has more than 700 members, making it the "second-largest such decision-making body after China's National People's Congress" (Stansal, 2015, p. 1), and it does not represent the population of the UK accurately. For instance, Stansal (2015) indicates that the North West of England has the same population of London, but London has five times more

members in the House of Lords. Reformers in the past have called for the House of Lords to be elected for a fixed term. However, those in favour of the current system believe that it works because, without the election, they have the "will or the courage to stand up against public opinion" (Stansal, 2015, p. 1) while also gaining the valuable insight and information from the generals, academics and judges who comprise the House of Lords. However, because some experts might have been an authority in their field decades ago, the concern is that they did not have the current, most up-to-date knowledge.

Conclusion

Overall, this work discussed and analysed the relationship between the Monarch, the Prime Minister, the Cabinet and parliament as it pertains to the functioning of the British government. The system does have its shortcomings, where for instance, the system of the monarchy is thought to be incompatible with democracy; there are also questions about the power of the Prime Minister. Further, there are concerns regarding the power that the Prime Minister has instances selecting members, sometimes very questionable and, further cabinet, vile parliamentary reform has been considered given the fact that the public does not elect members of the House of Lords. This shows that it is not only important to generate awareness of how the government works but to understand where the potential limitations are and why.

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