THE IMPOSSIBLE OFFICE?

Marking the third centenary of the office of prime minister, this book tells its extraordinary story, explaining how and why it has endured longer than any other democratic political office. Sir Anthony Seldon, historian of Number 10 Downing Street, explores the lives and careers, loves and scandals, successes and failures, of all our great prime ministers. From Robert Walpole and William Pitt the Younger, to Clement Attlee and Margaret Thatcher, Seldon discusses which of our prime ministers have been most effective and why. He reveals the changing relationship between the monarchy and the office of the prime minister in intimate detail, describing how the increasing power of the prime minister in becoming leader of Britain coincided with the steadily falling influence of the monarchy. This book celebrates the humanity and frailty, work and achievement, of these fifty-five remarkable individuals, who averted revolution and civil war, leading the country through times of peace, crisis, and war.

Sir Anthony Seldon is the acknowledged national authority on all matters to do with Number 10 and prime ministers. His first book on a prime minister, Churchill’s Indian Summer (1981), was published forty years ago, and since then he has written or edited many books, including the definitive insider accounts of the last five prime ministers. He is the honorary historian at Number 10 Downing Street, chair of the National Archives Trust, and has interviewed virtually all senior figures who have worked in Number 10 in the last fifty years.

Jonathan Meakin was educated at Royal Holloway, University of London and at the University of St Andrews. He has had a lifelong interest in history. He has worked on many publications with Anthony Seldon, including Cameron at 10 and The Cabinet Office, 1916–2016.

Illias Thoms has worked with Anthony Seldon for over ten years and this is their fourth book together, including Cameron at 10 and Brown at 10. He graduated from Balliol College, Oxford with a degree in history and politics in 2014 and works as an assistant director in the UK film and television industries.
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THE IMPOSSIBLE OFFICE?

The History of the British Prime Minister

Anthony Seldon

with

Jonathan Meakin and Illias Thoms
To Peter Hennessy, my lifelong friend, colleague, and mentor, who has done as much to illuminate the office of prime minister as any figure in history.
# Contents

**Preface**

1. The Bookend Prime Ministers: Walpole and Johnson ..... 1
3. The Liminal Premiership: From the Saxons to 1806 ..... 58
4. The Transformational Prime Ministers, 1806–2021 ..... 95
5. The Powers and Resources of the Prime Minister, 1721–2021 ..... 136
6. The Constraints on the Prime Minister, 1721–2021 ..... 179
7. The Eclipse of the Monarchy, 1660–2021 ..... 220
8. The Rise and Fall of the Foreign Secretary, 1782–2021 ..... 250
9. The Rise, and Rise, of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1660–2021 ..... 281
10. The Impossible Office? The Prime Minister by 2021 ..... 313

**Acknowledgments**

**Notes**

**Bibliography**

**Index**

339
343
382
405
Preface

This book may have been written during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, but it has been forty years in gestation since I wrote my first book on a prime minister, *Churchill’s Indian Summer*, in 1981. Five years before that, I had asked my tutor ‘Copper’ LeMay what I could give him as a leaving gift from university, and he replied, ‘The Office of Prime Minister by Robert Blake’ which had just been published. I was captivated, and have remained so for the rest of my life. At Oxford, I studied under David Butler and Vernon Bogdanor too, who became lifelong friends, inspirations and fellow travellers on this journey. In 1986, with Peter Hennessy, to whom this book is dedicated, I founded the Institute of Contemporary British History, in part to deepen the study of the prime minister. In the years since, I have edited many books on the effect that prime ministers have had, have written three on Number 10 and its staff, and six on different prime ministers, from John Major to Theresa May. These were each based on interviews with some 500 insiders, amounting to many millions of words of written record. The most valuable sources were always the civil servants who worked close to the prime minister: meticulous, objective, and retentive. These were the figures I asked to read over the books in draft, often many times to ensure accuracy and fairness, guided by Peter Hennessy’s and my belief that the writing and study of contemporary history matters, and that it can be executed with its own kind of historical precision.

Certain questions have obsessed me all my life. Is the office of prime minister still the same over the years? Why did it emerge in 1721? How has it survived? Can and how should the office be strengthened? Why are only some PMs successful? Have political scientists been asking the wrong questions, e.g. has the office become presidential, and why don’t they and...
historians of prime ministers talk more? Why do people want to be PM, and did the experience fulfil them?

Many of the most important events in Britain over the last 300 years that have shaped the lives of its people have of course occurred independently of the particular prime minister of the day: the economic upturns and downturns, the human and animal epidemics, the great technological advances, and social changes. Indeed, the figures who have influenced Britain more over the last 300 years have often been the scientists like Charles Darwin and Alan Turing, the social reformers like William Wilberforce and Emmeline Pankhurst, and economists Adam Smith and J. M. Keynes.

Occasional repetition is inevitable for the argument to make sense to those who alight just on individual chapters. I have tried to keep repetition to a bare minimum.

Chapter 1, which opens with an imagined dinner conversation in April 2021 between the first and the fifty-fifth prime ministers to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the office, asks how far it is indeed the same office, and explores the similarities between the jobs of Robert Walpole and Boris Johnson. While their tasks are more similar than many have thought, Chapter 2 looks at the vastly differently worlds they inhabit, and the fifty-three prime ministers in between them, due to economic, social, technological, and political changes. Walpole rarely left London, and when he did, he travelled no further than Norfolk: Johnson can travel to Berlin and back in a day. How has the arrival of rail, the car, and the airplane affected the prime minister, and equally the telegraph, the telephone, and the internet?

Chapter 3, ‘The Liminal Premiership’, looks at the origins of the premiership, whether the chief ministers since medieval times, like Thomas Cromwell, foreshadowed the position, and how and why the post of prime minister emerged when it did in 1721. Following Walpole’s departure in 1742, it examines how the office, which could have disappeared, survived until William Pitt the Younger in 1783, the figure who consolidated the position. After him, there was no going back.

Chapter 4 looks at prime ministers since Pitt the Younger’s death in 1806, focusing on the six figures in the 215 years after him who have changed the agenda of British politics and left a long shadow under which their successors operated, trying to be either like them, or unlike them, but incapable of escaping their shadow. Chapter 5 discusses the
power and the resources prime ministers have in their possession, not least the role of the spouse, an under-recognised support for the prime minister. Despite Britain having female monarchs for 45 per cent of the last 300 years, there have only been two female prime ministers, in office for less than 5 per cent of that time. The history of the premiership, and indeed those who have written about it, is almost exclusively male, as well as white, and socially exclusive, as the book explores. Chapter 6 looks at the constraints on the prime minister. These provide the key to why some prime ministers are successful: they maximise their advantages, and negotiate their way around these constraints, which have grown in number and complexity.

The next three chapters look at the prime minister in relation to three positions that have most affected the evolution of the office: Chapter 7 examines how, when and why the prime minister took over many of the roles and powers of the monarch; Chapter 8, the rise and fall of the Foreign Secretary, rendering the prime minister today, not the Foreign Secretary nor the monarch, the principal figure who represents the country abroad and decides its foreign policy; and Chapter 9 looks at the rise, and rise, of the Chancellor of the Exchequer since the job was separated from the prime minister’s by Robert Peel in 1841, and how the Chancellor has emerged as the prime minister’s greatest challenge. Finally, Chapter 10 looks at the position of the prime minister today. Why have more incumbents not achieved even their own ambitions, especially given the many advantages that prime ministers have in Britain over their opposite numbers abroad? These include leading a unitary rather than a federal country, not being constrained by a written constitution, having a head of state who is hereditary rather than elected, and an electoral system that usually guarantees a clear majority in Parliament rather than a coalition. It describes the ingredients that account for successful premierships, and explains, in contrast to say German Chancellors since 1945, why so many prime ministers have run into trouble. Finally, it recommends five changes to the office which will allow it to perform more successfully as it enters its fourth century.

Anthony Seldon