Lecture three: The Executives

I. The Political Executive

The functions of executives

The key function of the executive branch is to take decisions and assume overall responsibility for the direction and co-ordination of government policy; in other words, executives provide political leadership. Providing leadership involves several distinctive roles:

- Heads of state (be they monarchs or Presidents), Chief Executives and government ministers on occasion undertake **ceremonial duties** such as receiving foreign visitors, staging banquets and signing treaties. In Britain, the **Queen has a key ceremonial function**, although on frequent occasions ministers – and especially the Prime Minister – are also required to meet dignitaries and engage in discussions with other heads of state or their representatives. In America, **the President combines the role of Head of State and Chief of the Executive**. He or she is the symbolic head of state and as such a focal point for loyalty. Again, the President has ceremonial functions ranging from visiting foreign countries to attending important national occasions.
- Key members of the Executive have to **respond in times of crisis**, and provide leadership. The potential dangers range from an upsurge of discontent at home from militant groups to terrorism abroad, from conflict in the world's trouble-spots to the need to cope with famines and earthquakes in territories which fall within a nation's responsibilities.
- Members of the Executive seek to **mobilise support** for the government to which they belong, for without such support the task of implementing policy is much more difficult. This involves appearing on the media or taking other opportunities via which the ministerial case can be put across to the public.
- The most important day-to-day role of the executive branch is to **control the policy-making process**, a function which has expanded notably in

the twentieth century with the increasing involvement of government in running the economy and providing welfare programmes. As a result of the greater degree of state intervention and regulation, **ministers are constantly involved in making decisions** on a whole range of issues which have a major consequence on people's daily lives.

- **The Political Executive oversees the work of the Official Executive,** and whilst it is bureaucrats who implement the decisions which have been taken it is nonetheless usually the politicians who get the praise or blame for what is done.

The Increase in executive power

Heads of state have benefited from the increasing **attention of the media** over the last few decades, but their powers have for a long time been largely symbolic unless – as in the case of the United States – the President fulfils a dual ceremonial role as head of state and also acts as Chief Executive. Chiefs of the Executive have major responsibilities, and their public profile is markedly higher than that of their ministerial colleagues. Much of their increase in power derives from **the growth in governmental interventionism**, but the globalisation of economic and political concerns has also added to their responsibilities and recognition. For first ministers, the degree of power they can exercise depends largely upon two areas:

• The relationship with ministerial colleagues in the Cabinet.

• Leadership of the party via which they can influence the legislature and the voters.

The position of Prime Minister in Britain was already well established by the end of the nineteenth century, when it was described as '*primus inter pares*' (first among equals), but circumstances in the twentieth century allowed premiers to develop the potential of their office to the full and to become much more than the description implies. In particular, war leadership – whether it

be in World War One, World War Two or the Falklands War – provided opportunities for a display of assertive, personal leadership. Managing a war effort requires broad shoulders, a willingness to take tough decisions and accept responsibility if things go wrong and an ability to rally and inspire the nation. It did much for the fortunes of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister, for she was able to cast herself in Churchillian mould.

American Presidents have benefited from similar factors, notably:

• The growth of 'big government' in the years after 1933, as the role of President became identified with increased federal intervention.

• The importance of foreign policy, with the development of an American world role following World War Two.

• The mass media: the media can concentrate on one national office, for the President is news. Since the 1960s, television has been increasingly important and Presidents regularly make the headlines.

In addition, **the inertia of Congress**, which surrendered much influence in the early post-war decades, enabled Presidents to assume a larger leadership role. The mid-1960s saw the peak of enthusiasm for presidential power, for by then it seemed as though there was a broad consensus about domestic and foreign policy (by the end of the decade, division over the Vietnam War had threatened that consensus), and Congress was willing to accept presidential leadership.

Strength and weakness in political leaders

❖ **The case of the UK**

The central elements in prime ministerial power are well known but difficult to measure. They are:

• The power of appointment and dismissal of Cabinet and other ministerial offices;

• Power over the structure and membership of Cabinet committees, any of which the Prime Minister may chair;

• The central, overseeing non-departmental nature of the office

• Leadership of the party; and

• A high degree of public visibility.

These features operated for much of the twentieth century (certainly since 1945). No Prime Minister since World War Two has been anything less than very powerful, but individuals have made a greater or lesser impact upon the office.

❖ **The case of the USA**

There has been an ebb and flow of power because the presidency has flourished during emergencies which are, by definition, a temporary condition. When normality has been restored, presidential domination has come to an end. The fear of dictatorship has re-emerged, and Congress reasserted itself. The **modern presidency really began in 1933**, for the Great Depression created – or at least accelerated – a fundamental change in political behaviour in the United States. The sheer scale of economic dislocation and hardship required a national lead, and the administration of Franklin D Roosevelt was only too willing to respond. Since then, the American system has become a very presidential one.

This growth of executive power prompted Arthur Schlesinger to argue that the concept of the constitutional presidency had given way by the 1970s to an **imperial presidency**, a revolutionary use of power very different from what had originally been intended. Abuses of presidential power did occur – Vietnam and Watergate were but the most significant. Many Americans realised for the first time in 1974 the tremendous accretion of power in the hands of the President. Most modern Presidents have by inclination been more activists than stewards, even if – like Clinton – they have found that the post-1970s presidency is less susceptible to a display of real leadership.

Prime Minister and President compared

In Britain, academics have paid consistent attention to the premiership and written of 'government by Prime Minister', 'prime ministerial government' or of 'presidential government'. An obvious difference is that in Britain the **ceremonial and political roles** are separated, so that the monarch is the titular head of state while the Prime Minister is the chief executive or political head of the government. In America the roles are combined in one person, a consideration which imposes considerable demands on the incumbent, but means that he or she has many opportunities to appear on social occasions and attract favourable media coverage.

The Prime Minister is relieved of certain time-consuming duties, such as receiving ambassadors and dignitaries from abroad, and there may be an advantage in separating the ceremonial and efficient roles, pomp from power. But wearing both hats gives the President a dimension of prestige lacking in the office of Prime Minister, for he or she is only a politician whereas the President is both in and above the political battle, more obviously representing the national interest.

The holders of both offices have a similar responsibility for the overall **surveillance and direction of the work of executive departments of government**, and there are advantages of the Prime Minister over the President and vice versa. The Prime Minister is part of a plural executive, and he or she and the Cabinet are collectively responsible to the House of Commons. He or she may, of course, have acquired a real ascendancy over colleagues, and the impact of Margaret Thatcher's tenure in office showed the extent of prime ministerial dominance. Yet the British Cabinet is bound to be concerned in most major decisions during the lifetime of a government.

In the USA, the Cabinet is much less significant, and several Presidents – whilst not formally dispensing with the Cabinet – have been casual about holding meetings and and have treated its suggestions in a cavalier manner.

Their Cabinet colleagues tend to be people drawn from the world of business, the ranks of academia or other professions, and return there once their term in office has expired; they have no personal following of their own in Congress or in the country. Cabinet members in Britain have a greater political standing in their own right, and are less easily ignored; they may be contenders for the party leadership.

A key factor in the comparison of Prime Minister and President is that the former is a more **powerful party leader**. He leads a disciplined party, whereas the President does not. This means that whereas the President can find difficulty in getting his proposals enacted into law, perhaps because of states rights, the views of Congress or the Supreme Court, the Prime Minister, given a reasonable majority, is likely to get most of his or her programme through. In as much as the reputation of a government may depend on what it can achieve, the Prime Minister has far more chance of implementing the proposals he or she wants. In the area of foreign policy, both people are generally in charge of the direction of the government's external relations. On their own or through the appropriate departments, they declare the tone of the nation's foreign policy.

There are differences in their position, however, for the President must have any treaty approved by two-thirds of the Senate, and if the policy requires legislative back-up, he or she may have difficulty in getting this through the Congress. On the other hand, whereas the President may decide administration policy alone or in conjunction with the Secretary of State, a British Prime Minister is much more likely to put his or her policy before the Cabinet where views can be expressed.

The Prime Minister is of course always liable to be defeated in the House, and therefore may not see out the term. The occupant of the White House has a guaranteed fixed term in office, unless he or she does something very wrong, as over Watergate. The advantage in security of tenure is with the President, although when it comes to choosing the date of the next election (and

manipulating the economy to create the 'feel good' factor), the advantage is with the Prime Minister. Within the two political systems, the Prime Minister has the edge in domestic policy, because of his leadership of a disciplined, centralised party in a political culture which is orientated towards party government. He can get things done and he has considerable freedom of action in terms of how he wishes to do it.

By comparison, presidential powers are more constrained. In foreign policy, Prime Ministers such as Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair have usually been able to get their way, whatever opposition they have faced. Labour leaders in particular may face hostile elements in their party and Cabinet but, as long as they are perceived as an electoral asset, they can override them. In contrast, despite the War Powers Act, Presidents have been able to carry out short-term military forays, commanding American forces without much significant opposition. Presidents dominate the conduct of foreign policy.

II. ***The Official Executive (The Bureaucracy)***

By the term bureaucrats, we refer to the thousands or even millions of people who operate in the Executive Branch, whose career is based in government service and normally work there as a result of appointment rather than election. Often known as civil servants, they serve in organisational units such as government departments, agencies and bureaux. Wherever they work, they operate under common regulations, with matters such as recruitment, pay, promotion, grading and other conditions of service being determined by a central body.

In Britain, it is the **Civil Service Commission;** in the United States, it is the **Office of Personnel Management**. The task of bureaucrats is to carry out the ongoing business of interpreting and implementing the policies enacted by the government. There are several aspects to their work:

• They give advice to their political masters concerning the direction and content of policy;

• They implement policy, turning legislative policy goals into actual programmes;
• They administer policy, an often routine role although it involves exercising a degree of discretion; and
• They are regulators who develop rules and regulations.

The bureaucracy was noted for three qualities which have been much written about ever since:

Permanence: The job was viewed as a career, rather than as a temporary position based on political patronage. Civil servants do not change at election time, as they do in the USA. This permanence is associated with experience and continuity, so that an inexperienced incoming government will be able to count on official expertise. Permanence, coupled with confidentiality, means that civil servants can speak frankly to ministers, without fear of dismissal.

Neutrality: As a result of the permanence, it was essential that any official should serve any government impartially, whatever its political complexion. Officials must not let their personal political leanings affect their actions. If they were to be partisan, this would make it difficult for them to remain in office and serve as permanent officials.

Anonymity: Civil servants were to stay silent on issues of public policy, their political masters (the ministers) being accountable for their actions and discussing issues in the public domain. If officials became public figures, this would endanger their reputation for neutrality, for they could become identified with a particular policy.

These traditional characteristics have been called into question from the late 1980s onwards. Partly this was because of the managerial reform undertaken by successive governments (see pp. 99–101), but it was also related to the monopoly of one party in power.

- ***The United States***

About 95 per cent of federal civilian jobs are covered by 'civil service rules' laid down by the Office of Personnel Management. Appointment is to a specific department or job, so that the civil service is specialist rather than generalist. These posts are permanent, so that – as in Britain – there is continuity and stability in administration. The American civil service is also expected to be politically neutral, as in Britain. Officials are unable to take part in overt political activity. However, neutrality is undermined by the fact that several thousand posts in the federal civil service remain in the gift of the President. He or she can nominate more than 3000 senior civil servants to serve in the administration and these include the heads of the fourteen major departments (the secretaries), as well as assistant and deputy department secretaries, deputy assistant secretaries and a variety of other appointive positions.

Political appointees are not expected to be neutral and they can be blamed for policy failures. Once in office, their tenure of office depends on how the White House judges their performance. In making political appointments, the President is likely to choose personnel whom he regards as loyal and competent, and who share his political outlook.

- **Size and organization**

There are now well under 500,000 civil servants, The ones who concern us most are those who belong to the top administrative grades, often referred to as the **'mandarins'** or, collectively, as '**the higher civil service'**. These 750–800 senior officials are based mainly in the large Whitehall departments such as the Treasury, the Home Office and the Foreign Office, although some work in the Next Step agencies which were introduced in the 1990s.

The American civil service expanded considerably during the days of the New Deal, as 'big government' came into fashion. Today, some 5 million peoplework in the Executive Branch, 60 per cent of them civilians, the rest

being military personnel. America has a decentralised bureaucracy, only 12 per cent of federal officials working in Washington, the rest being based around the country. The federal administration is organised around most of the same vital functions which exist in any other national bureaucracy. The administrative apparatus responsible for fulfilling them is divided into three broad categories:

- **Government or executive departments.**
- **Independent agencies.**
- **Government corporations**

Civil service power

Ministers are very reliant on the performance of the civil servants who work in their department. They are transient. They come and go, perhaps serving for a full administration or maybe being moved after a couple of years. By contrast, their officials may have been in the department for a long time and have developed considerable expertise. Their views will reflect a 'departmental view', but this may conflict with the government's or minister's priorities. In this situation there is scope for conflict between them.

Much has been written about 'mandarin power', mandarins being the very senior officials who have close and regular contact with ministers. It is suggested that often, because of their ability, experience and expertise, they exert a powerful influence over what happens in a department, especially over the policies that emerge.

The American bureaucracy has a large degree of freedom, each agency having its own clientele, power base and authority. Much of that authority derives from Congress which creates or destroys agencies, authorises and approves reorganisation plans, defines powers, and appropriates agency funds. Yet even Congress is unable to control the operation of bodies once they are established and many of them have a life of their own. There is popular suspicion of bureaucratic power and many commentators suggest that federal bureaucrats misuse or even abuse it.