



Statue of Margaret Thatcher at Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands

# British prime ministers

## Power and success

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Anthony Seldon, biographer of prime ministers from Major to May, analyses why some are more powerful and successful than others

### EXAM LINKS

All A-level exam boards require analysis and evaluation of the factors that influence prime ministerial power and of the ability of prime ministers to dictate events and determine policy. Cross-topic links lie in the relationships that exist between the branches of government: executive, legislature and judiciary.

**N**ewspapers love to run polls about the UK's best and worst prime ministers, but why is it that some prime ministers wield significant power with considerable success, and others do not?

### Top talent

The instinctive skill of knowing when to appoint and when to sack, especially to and from the cabinet, is the most important power of a prime minister (PM). It is cabinet ministers who implement government policy,

not the prime minister. The PM can nudge and prod ministers, but they do not actually do the work, for example as foreign secretary or education secretary. Clement Attlee (1945–51) was a conspicuously good appointer. Theresa May (2016–19) made several unfortunate appointments, including a Chancellor of the Exchequer who she constantly locked horns with, while ignoring the merits of experienced figures such as George Osborne.

Top-quality ministers are essential for great premierships, but they do not guarantee them. Attlee was fortunate to benefit from a large number of ministers who had gained enormous experience by serving in Churchill's wartime coalition government (1940–45). They included Ernest Bevin (foreign secretary), Hugh Dalton (Chancellor of the Exchequer), Stafford Cripps (who succeeded as chancellor in 1947), Herbert Morrison (Lord President of the Council) and Nye Bevan who, as minister of health, set up the National Health Service (NHS). All but Nye Bevan had served in Churchill's wartime coalition.

### Personal qualities

PMs need to be good chairs of meetings, ensuring that they deal with the right issues in the right way and do not lose control of the agenda. This was a strength of James Callaghan (1976–79), most notably during the International Monetary Fund crisis of 1976–77.

PMs must have high intelligence, and the ability to think quickly and act decisively. David Cameron (2010–16) was always on top of his brief but sometimes took decisions too quickly. On the contrary, Anthony Eden (1955–57) found decision-making hard, especially on economic matters of which he had little experience or understanding. PMs also need to work extremely hard for very long periods without a break. Theresa May was one of the hardest-working prime ministers, while some question how well Boris Johnson — notoriously bored by repetitive work that does not interest him — will manage when the novelty of the job wears off.

PMs need to maintain their mental and physical health. Since 1945, the latter stages of the premierships of Attlee, Winston Churchill (1951–55), Eden, Harold Macmillan (1957–63), Harold Wilson (1964–70 and 1974–76) and Margaret Thatcher (1979–90) were all compromised by illness or fatigue.

Finally, PMs need a sense of *mission*. A prime minister can have all the other qualities, but if they don't have a clear vision that they communicate well

### Box 1 Mission and vision

Successful prime ministers need mission and vision. Edward Heath (1970–74) had a clear vision, namely to take the UK into the European Union (EU). Boris Johnson had a clear mission to take the UK out of the EU. Thatcher's mission was to make the UK a more economically dynamic and a diplomatically strong nation on the world stage.

Some more recent prime ministers have found it hard to identify their overriding mission, including John Major (1990–97), Gordon Brown (2007–2010) and David Cameron.

### Box 2 Longevity in office

There is no doubt that, to make a mark, prime ministers need 5 or more years in office. Thatcher (11 years) and Blair (10 years) thus had great advantages. Eden and Alec Douglas-Home (both less than 2 years); Brown (less than 3 years); and Heath, Callaghan and May (all under 4 years) had too little time to make a mark. However, longevity does not guarantee greatness.

to the nation, their premiership will never take off (Box 1). Sufficient time in office to complete a mission is also vital (Box 2).



Harold Wilson on the campaign trail in 1964



## Leadership in opposition

It is of considerable benefit to an incoming PM if they have served as leader of the opposition, because they will have gained an understanding of government and policy across all departments. Lack of experience as leader of the opposition was a particular handicap for Eden, Major, Brown and May.

Equally, PMs may be hampered by long periods spent in opposition, as few (or none) of their top team will have had previous senior cabinet experience. This was as telling a factor for Tony Blair in 1997 (after Labour had been in opposition for 18 years) as for David Cameron in 2010 (after 13 years of opposition for the Conservatives). There were early miscalculations in a number of governing areas that were potentially due to inexperience — for Blair in foreign policy and domestic legislation (particularly freedom of information and rights) and for Cameron on climate change, the NHS and Europe.

Having a clear programme for government while in opposition, with detailed policies ready to be enacted, is vital for success. Attlee, Wilson (in 1964), Heath and Thatcher all had clear programmes for office. In 1951, Churchill had a particularly weak grasp on policy, having become largely detached from the thinking within the Conservative Party during its time in opposition since 1945.

Leadership can be particularly problematic for a PM suddenly catapulted into Number 10, as Major and May both found. Surprisingly, there are also those who

struggle with leadership even after a long period as heir apparent, such as Eden and Brown.

## Elections and majorities

A PM is never more powerful than in the 18 months after winning a general election. An election victory gives a PM an immense boost to their standing and authority among their MPs in the House of Commons, their party in the country and the electorate at large. MPs like to think that their party leader is popular with the electorate, as this helps to guarantee their own re-election and job security. MPs can become highly critical of a PM who looks unlikely to win an election. Needless to say, winning general elections is no guarantee of success if prime ministers do not use their electoral authority urgently and positively.

However qualified and capable a PM, they can do little if they don't have a significant majority in Parliament. A parliamentary majority allows PMs to concentrate on their job without having to worry endlessly about securing a majority for legislation in Parliament. For a prime minister not to be troubled by their own rebels, they usually need a majority of over 30 (Box 3).

Having a majority in Parliament is no guarantee of high success, but it certainly helps. A small majority can mean constant difficulties, as Wilson found between 1964 and 1966 (majority of four), John Major after 1992 (majority of 21) and May after 2017 (in which she lost her majority).



Gordon Brown was effective at the G20 summit in 2009

## Box 3 Largest majorities since 1945

- Attlee in 1945, with a majority of 145.
- Macmillan in 1959, with a majority of 100.
- Wilson in 1966, with a majority of 98.
- Thatcher in 1983, with a majority of 144.
- Blair in 1997, with a majority of 179.
- Johnson in 2019, with a majority of 80.

## The media

The media has become steadily more significant over the period since 1945. The first prime minister to really suffer from an adverse media climate was Harold Macmillan in 1961, the year that satirical magazine *Private Eye* was founded. Macmillan was ruthlessly laughed at for being completely out of touch with the new spirit of the age. John Major was similarly ridiculed by the television puppet show *Spitting Image*, which portrayed him as a dull character (a claim that would be disputed by those who have actually met him).

Prime ministers who best chimed with the popular mood were Harold Wilson in 1964, Tony Blair in 1997 and Boris Johnson in 2019, the latter telling a nation tired of 3 years of stalemate that he would 'get Brexit done'. Thatcher rode the public mood for her first 10 years, with considerable support from the right-wing press and intellectuals. However, in her last year and a half, the media and national mood turned against her.

## The economy

Prime ministers need money to enact policies. A weak economy makes them look weak and reduces their ability to force their agenda through. Wilson after 1967, Heath after 1971, Callaghan throughout his period in office and Major after 1992 all suffered from troubled economies.

However, Attlee, despite Britain being close to bankruptcy after the end of the Second World War, was able to introduce more significant legislation than any other prime minister in the period after 1945. Gordon Brown was able to turn the 2008–9 global financial crisis to his benefit by his skilful handling of international leaders, above all at the G20 summit in London in April 2009.

## Luck and timing

Prime ministers need a fair bit of luck if they are to be a great success. Churchill's reputation as Britain's greatest prime minister rests upon his performance as leader during the Second World War, which played entirely to his strengths. Thatcher was in power as the Cold War was ending, and she could play a key mediating role between President Reagan of the USA and President Gorbachev of the Soviet Union. The Falklands War (1982) also played to her strengths.



Clement Attlee and Nye Bevan

Many in the UK were crying out for strong leadership, above all on the economy and industrial relations.

Prime ministers are also fortunate if they face a weak leader in opposition, as Thatcher did against Michael Foot (1980–83) and Blair did against both William Hague (1997–2001) and Iain Duncan Smith (2001–3). But a strong opposition leader can inflict considerable damage, as Alec Douglas-Home found out when Wilson became Labour leader in 1963, and Major found when Blair became Labour leader in 1994.

There is little doubt that entering office in an atmosphere of hope and renewal is highly beneficial. Attlee in 1945, Wilson in 1964 and Blair in 1997 all rode waves of optimism. Prime ministers who come to office after the party has already been in power for several years, by then often appearing tired and divided, fare less well. Douglas-Home, Major in 1990 and Brown in 2007 all experienced difficulties, some purely down to the time that they rose to power. It remains to be seen whether Boris Johnson, coming to office after his party had been in power for almost a decade, can buck the trend.

## Conclusion

In the final historical analysis, most prime ministers are faced with one significant decision that utterly dominates all others and affects the way their entire premiership is viewed:

- Eden will forever be associated with his miscalculations over the Suez crisis (1956).