

## **Swimming for Their Lives - Waving or Drowning?**

### **A Review of the evidence of Ministerial Overload and of Potential Remedies for it.**

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(First published in the *Political Quarterly*, issue 3, 2009)

#### **Summary**

*There is a range of evidence pointing to the problem of overload on Government Ministers in both the UK and other Westminster system countries. This article reviews evidence from the time of Gladstone to the present day, concentrating on evidence relating to the last twenty five years. It surveys the comments and opinions of serving and retired politicians and of academic commentators, assessing the contention that the burden on Ministers has increased, is likely to continue to increase, and ought to be diminished. It goes on to look at what have been put forward as potential solutions and explores the extent to which they might offer some respite. Finally, the article concludes that the remedy to the problems involved largely lies in the hands of Ministers and their closest advisers, and suggests that it is in all our interests that options to reduce overload should be further explored and implemented.*

#### **Introduction**

“I was much too far out all my life, And not waving but drowning.”

Stevie Smith’s poem is an apt prologue to the topic of Ministerial overload. The more that my work as a civil servant brought me into regular contact with Ministers the more that I felt an unexpected concern for them. We as officials and taxpayers are dependent on their success, but we seem determined to drown them in paper and processes through their workload. They seem resigned to this as an inevitable consequence of office.

The hypothesis I have developed over 35 years exposure to the processes of Government, both here and overseas, is that Government Ministers are more likely to be subject to an unacceptable degree of overload than almost any other profession. Sadly, however, they, those who work for them and those that they represent often do not recognise this until it is too late.

Overload matters because it can sometimes affect some leaders’ ability to think clearly and strategically and take good decisions on all our behalf. It matters more now because the overload is getting worse. Someone needs to do something about it. But who and what? This article offers some analysis of the causes and some suggestions.

## History

My investigation started by reviewing what participants and observers have written about it. At one end of the historical spectrum, Lord Jenkins's biography of Gladstone<sup>1</sup> provides one insight:

*“On 31 December 1868..... he [Gladstone] added a perceptive comment on the restricted and often too reactive life of a Minister: “Swimming for his life, a man does not see much of the country through which the river winds, and I probably know little of these years through which I busily work and live...”*

At the other end of the historical spectrum, a number of recent Ministers have made even more rueful comments. Alan Millburn said on the BBC Radio 4 programme “*The Choice*” on 1 March 2004:

*“I think that very many members of the public simply have no idea about the gruelling pressures and hours that Ministers work. It wouldn't be unusual for me to work an 18 hour day and be away from home for 6 days a week. I would return home on Friday night, having tried to spend Friday in my constituency in Darlington. So you walk through the door at 8 o'clock at night and the phone's already ringing and the fax machine is whirring and the emails are arriving ...And you want to see the kids, and the kids want to see you, but actually there's a lot of business to be dealt with, and then you wake up on Saturday morning and the boxes arrive bright and early, and they sit there like a nagging toothache in the hallway, reminding you that actually you might be at home physically but mentally your mind is elsewhere.”*

This chimes in with evidence given by other Ministers of all parties, including over the current administration David Blunkett and Peter Hain, about the pressures on them which have made it difficult for them to think straight and deal effectively with Ministerial and Party business.

In an article in *The Independent* on 9 October 2006 the commentator Bruce Anderson, not known for his sympathies for Ministers, drew attention to the seriousness of the situation and said:

*“If we insist on putting our politicians through so much stress the quality of government will suffer. A friend of mine volunteered to help in Number 10 during the 1992 election. By the end, very senior people were asking him to think things through for them. They acknowledged that their brains were no longer working. Admittedly that was a general election, with an additional overload. But Britain has not been well governed in recent years. Policies have not been properly thought out. Sense of direction has crumbled under the pressure of events.*

*Immense sums of money have been wasted. Tiredness must take some of the responsibility.”*

## **The Role of Ministers**

The reasons for this pressure arise because the role of Ministers in our system of Government has evolved so that it is even more challenging than in Gladstone’s day when Parliament sat for only half the year, and there was time for him to go the country and cut down trees. Now the trees tend to be cut down to make the paper for the endless reports and submissions with which Ministers have to deal.

Although, as Alan Millburn suggests, most members of the public do not fully appreciate it, Ministers play at least eleven different roles in the course of their daily lives. As I originally recorded in what has now become the National School of Government publication Finding Your Way Around Whitehall and Beyond, a summary of their roles amounts to the following daunting list:

- taking key decisions at the head of Government departments, setting the main policy agenda;
- taking important decisions about the operation, organisation and staffing of their departments;
- performing an increasingly high profile democratic accountability role, defending their policy and department under parliamentary scrutiny - such as at Question Time, in front of Select Committees and in debates - countering the claims of a “rival firm” mounting nearly every day a “hostile take-over bid” (Her Majesty’s Opposition);
- acting as advocates for the detail of legislation brought before the Houses of Parliament;
- playing a lead role in public relations in front of an often critical and sometimes hostile media;
- acting as an advocate for their plans and policies and the expenditure to support it in Cabinet and Cabinet Committees, and in discussion with Treasury Ministers, and where appropriate providing a constructively critical commentary on other Ministers’ policies and plans;
- taking a lead role in often complex international organisations in Europe and around the world, promoting UK interests, international co-operation and assistance to the developing world;
- dealing with pressure groups, companies, interested parties and individual members of the public who wish to lobby for or against change;
- playing a leading part for their party, both voting in important divisions in Parliament and making speeches at conferences and party functions;
- unless they are members of the House of Lords, playing their full role as constituency MPs;
- being husband/wife/father/mother/partner in what remains of their private lives, always with the risk that even this area of their lives will end up with the spotlight of publicity trained on it.

This abundance of time-consuming roles might perhaps be matched by leading players in a variety of professions across the private, voluntary and public sectors. However, Ministers' lives are particularly subject to stressful pressures. These pressures arise in my view primarily from six factors: *unpredictability*, *instability*, *mobility*, *novelty*, *accountability* and *unsociability*. These are what get politicians' adrenalin flowing as they first experience the excitement of Government. But they can also take their toll.

*Unpredictability* comes from that truism about politics encapsulated by Harold Macmillan: "events, dear boy, events". The "events" are usually unexpected developments casting doubt on previous plans. Major events like oil crises or the actions of unstable foreign regimes immediately come to mind. Sudden apparently more manageable concerns about dangerous dogs, salmonella, aids, BSE, tobacco sponsorship, drugs offences, campaign funding, expenses or bank liquidity crises can sometimes escalate to become the centre of a frenzy of interest and be as difficult to address.

*Instability* and *mobility* come from the combination of roles played by Ministers. They need minds like butterflies but the strike capacity of bees to flit, as their diaries compel them to do, from one important subject in one forum to another. They also need increasingly to master the pressures, frustration and fatigue of travel between engagements, whether in London and the UK regions, around Europe and the rest of the world, or - as is often the case - all of these.

*Novelty* comes from our practice of regularly expecting both new and experienced Ministers to switch to dealing with a subject matter and area of departmental business of which they may have no previous experience or even interest, at the drop of a hat or telephone receiver. Their expertise is in the conduct of politics, not necessarily the subjects with which we expect them to grapple. We expect them to do this with little preparation or training and sometimes without easily available support.

*Accountability* places the additional pressure on Ministers of constantly having to explain what they are doing and thinking and planning, sometimes before they have had time to think it through fully. Today, that is often under fierce daily or hourly questioning from media inquisitors, who - thanks to the flexibility offered by modern technology - can be camped outside their homes and offices, ready and eager to feed the appetite of 24/7 news. If this can be a strength in democratic terms, it is certainly an added stress factor in decision making. Most businessmen who have moved between top positions in the private sector and the public sector have commented on the profound added pressure of having to operate all the time in a "goldfish bowl" of public accountability. In politics, those mounting a hostile take-over bid - the Opposition and their sympathisers in the media - are active virtually every day of the year. This pressure has now been further increased by commitments under the Freedom of Information legislation.

*Unsociability* results from the demands of parliamentary timetables and party and representational duties on their already full diaries. Votes still take place in Parliament, sometimes late at night. Most Ministers have to master two homes - in London and their

Constituency - with a steady stream of requests to attend functions at both ends, and at weekends. As Alan Millburn observed, the time for true relaxation with friends and family or for leisure activities and exercise is all too easily lost. When it is taken, it can all too easily be itself the focus of lurid and exaggerated criticism.

### **More Evidence from Ministers and Top Officials**

Evidence from other Ministerial and Permanent Secretary sources confirms the impression of Ministers as people with potential time and stress management problems. Denis Healey, Secretary of State for Defence and Chancellor of the Exchequer in the 1970s and someone with renowned stamina, is particularly illuminating:

*“Throughout my six years as Secretary of State for Defence, I worked harder than I ever imagined I could. I toiled ten to twelve hours a day for five or six days a week, in my own office or in Cabinet Committees; then I spent several hours every night across the road in Admiralty House on my despatch boxes. This routine was broken by regular visits to our forces at home or abroad, and occasional meetings with my colleagues in NATO or the Commonwealth. It was not easy to squeeze in my monthly weekends in Leeds, and more difficult still to find time with my family. Yet I loved every minute of it. The work was challenging in the extreme and stretched me to the limit....”*

Denis Healey: The Time of My Life<sup>ii</sup>

Later, however, contemplating his period as Chancellor of the Exchequer, the verdict subtly changes:

*“ In addition to all those meetings in Whitehall, and innumerable discussions inside the Treasury itself, I went at least once a month to the Council of Finance Ministers of the European Community in Brussels, and to meetings of the International Monetary Fund on both sides of the Atlantic, not to speak of the private meetings of leading finance ministers in Europe or the United States. I worked far harder and longer even than I had as Defence Secretary. Nearly all the work was intellectually demanding and often strained me to the limit. Re-reading the scanty diaries I kept at the time, I am shocked to find how often each day’s record ends with the words “To bed dog tired.”*

*The mental fatigue took its physical toll. I had constant trouble with my teeth...I contracted colds or influenza more often than ever before, developed arthritis in a shoulder, deafness in an ear. I had to prepare one of my budgets while bruised all over after slipping on the stairs, another after an attack of shingles...I do not believe I ever took a day off in the whole five years. Nevertheless, physical and mental exhaustion is not an ideal condition in which to take difficult decisions....There must be a better way to run the Treasury than the way I felt compelled to follow.”*

Tony Benn is reported by Sir Patrick Nairne in BBC Radio 4's Times Past, Time Future programme in January 1996 to have summed this up even more succinctly:

*“New Ministers come in with very little knowledge and a great deal of energy - and leave with a great deal of knowledge and very little energy...”*

Sir Geoffrey Holland, a former Permanent Secretary at the Departments of Employment and Education, adds to this picture:

*“...it is a constant source of wonder that any Minister fits it all in. It is easy to give intellectual assent to the fact that time pressures are endless and constant. At first hand it means that Ministers are, mentally at least, switching from one world to another, from one topic to another, constantly, every day of the week for the whole of their career as Ministers. There is no let up. They are constantly on call, constantly expected to be accessible by the Cabinet Office, the Department, the party, the constituency. It is tiring; it is exhausting; it is a wonder that most Ministers do so well. And woe betide the Sir Humphrey or the Department who do not, at the interface with Ministers, recognise these pressures, allow for them, and allow simple humanity to break through. All Ministers need a break from time to time...”*

Sir Geoffrey Holland: Alas ! Sir Humphrey, I Knew Him Well  
(RSA Lecture, 3 May 1995)

An even more recent set of examples was given in the BBC 2 TV programme How to be a Foreign Secretary (January 1998). During this programme a former UK Ambassador to Washington, Lord Renwick, commented:

*“Virtually every Foreign Secretary I have ever served I have seen fall asleep at meetings...”*

Former Foreign Secretary Lord Owen said of one such occasion:

*“I remember taking a pin from my lapel and pushing it into my thigh to keep myself awake.”*

Lord Howe added:

*“I once calculated that I processed some 24 tons of paper from my Ministerial boxes after office hours.”*

Malcolm Rifkind said:

*“Thinking time is important. I instructed my diary secretary to put aside an hour each day for me to think. It was not popular with my office but I found it essential...”*

More recently still, Sir Christopher Mayer in his DC Confidential<sup>iii</sup> memoirs includes a graphic passage about top-level discussions in Washington during his time there, when Lord Howe was Foreign Secretary:

*“To the gentle throb of engines and the sound of swishing water was added the soporific rumble of the two Great Men as they grappled with subjects like population control. The entire British team was soon asleep at the dinner table. Shultz and Howe would sometimes doze as the other spoke.....”*

He adds of his time at 10 Downing Street:

*“Nothing, but nothing, prepares you for working in Downing Street in intimate relationship with the Prime Minister. Several things happen to you with shocking velocity. The pressure of events almost suffocates in its intensity. There is little time for reflection. Reflex replaces reasoned thought. You are cut off from the outside world. You function inside a combination of hothouse and bunker..... You see more of the Prime Minister and colleagues than you do of your family. Only the strongest marriages survive. My average day – by no means the longest in No 10 – began at 5.45 am and ended about 9.30 pm. There were Saturdays and Sundays when I never got out of my pyjamas – awoken by some emergency and then having to handle it all day until it was time to go to bed. Exhaustion starts to distort judgement. You keep going on the adrenalin and the thrill of being at the summit of things. In the end the attrition gets you. It is a far cry from the days of Sir Jock Colville, Winston Churchill’s wartime private secretary, who noted in his diary that you knew there was a war on because everyone was working till 6 pm.”*

Even a junior Minister can face these pressures, as I saw as a Private Secretary to one. Another, the late Tony Banks, then a junior Minister for Sport, summed it up in an interview to Men’s Health Magazine in July 1997:

*“I’ll be honest with you, I’ll level with you. I am feeling very, very tired, you know, not tired enough to jack it in, but very tired, you know. I could do with a break. I know I feel much better if I am getting some decent sleep... and some good exercise... I’ve actually found it’s more difficult to do this in the eight weeks since I’ve been minister than before and things are beginning to slip rather badly now...”*

### **Evidence from Academics**

The few studies done by academic writers on the subject confirm the analysis. One of the most comprehensive is an Australian study carried out by Professor Patrick Weller and Michelle Grattan and published as Can Ministers Cope?<sup>iv</sup> in 1981. Weller and Grattan carried out a survey and a variety of interviews with Australian Ministers and reviewed published evidence then available.

They identified six factors making life difficult for all Ministers. First, is lack of time. Many Ministers expected to work for fifteen hours a day and even then had to make choices about what to do and what to leave to one side. Second, is the need to act under pressure. Ministers have to make decisions quickly one after another, and then may have to answer questions about them in the media and parliament, often several times a day. Third, pressure is increased by the diversity of Ministerial activity. Fourth, the workload is increased by public expectations, relating to personal availability and political activity. Fifth, they point to the legal responsibilities of Ministers which mean that only they can approve some actions, even some which are on the surface trivial. Finally, they point to the ruthless nature of politics – “*an incestuous cauldron of rumour, gossip and self-interest*” - where one mistake can end a Minister’s career.

The main comparable UK study was carried out by Bruce Headey and published in 1974 in his soberly titled book British Cabinet Ministers.<sup>v</sup> He too carried out a survey of Cabinet Ministers’ working weeks and produced an intriguing analysis of their activity. It showed 3-5 hours in Cabinet; 3-6 hours in Cabinet Committees; 1-2 hours in informal meetings with colleagues; 10-15 hours in Parliament; 1-2 hours in party meetings; 8-10 hours in interviews with the press, delegations and MPs with constituency problems; 6-8 hours in formal receptions and meetings with Ministers from abroad; 10-12 hours in visits and inspections; 2-3 hours dealing with constituency responsibilities; 5-10 hours in office meetings; and 10-20 hours dealing with papers. These figures excluded work done at weekends.

A recent check suggested, for example that four or five Ministerial boxes of papers to work through at weekends is not uncommon. One Minister’s box in 2005 contained 25 letters to read and sign; 15 submissions seeking a decision; 10 draft replies to Parliamentary Questions for approval; 5 invitations to events to consider; 2 draft press releases to approve; 1 draft question and answer brief to study; 1 Parliamentary statement to approve; 110 pages of press cuttings to skim; 20 briefings to look through; 15 letters from Cabinet colleagues to digest and decide whether to comment; 8 papers with attachments to prepare for meetings the next day; and a folder of papers from Special Advisers offering additional comment and advice.

Professor Peter Hennessy has commented perceptively on the issues in his book The Hidden Wiring<sup>vi</sup> published in 1995. He refers to a study carried out under Harold Macmillan’s Government in 1957 and to a draft Cabinet Paper produced by then Cabinet Secretary Sir Norman Brook, which refers to the development of:

*“a strain which represents a real threat to efficiency and in the long run to health. There is no prospect that this will be lessened ...by a relaxation of the pressures of public business. We cannot therefore look for any automatic relief. If we are to have relief, we must secure it by adjusting our own methods of work.”*

### **Is the Problem Getting Worse?**



As Professor Hennessy has pointed out, sadly the Macmillan government did not take much significant action after its discussion of overload. Unfortunately, the evidence since then, from personal testimony and such statistics as are available, points to the problem of overload getting worse rather than better.

At first sight this might not seem to be so, for data about meetings of the Cabinet itself points to a lessening of its activity. In the 1940s there were over 100 Cabinet meetings on average each year. In the 1990s this is down to only around 40. In the immediate post-war period around 450 Cabinet papers were circulated each year. In the 1990s this had dropped to less than 20.

But this picture is misleading. The strategy for making the handling of business manageable, and the taste of successive Prime Ministers, has been to transfer much business to a whole raft of informal meetings or Cabinet Committees chaired by either the Prime Minister or a senior trusted colleague, with Cabinet restricted to more formal business and topical discussion based on oral reports. Cabinet Committee meetings now average around 375, compared with 300 in the 1970s, and the average number of Cabinet Committee papers a year has risen with the current Labour Government to some 440, compared with around 250 in the 1970s. Another example is Written Parliamentary Questions (PQs) which have mushroomed alarmingly. In 1920 there were some 2000 a year. By 1976/77 this had reached 25,000. In 1994/95 this had almost doubled to 45,000. In the 2005/6 session a total of 61,000 had been reached in addition to the 17000 oral questions. Yet the Procedure Committee has resolutely recommended against any overall limitation on the grounds that this would “inhibit accountability”.

Moreover, on top of the UK meetings, many Ministers have to fit in debates with their European counterparts in Brussels in addition to the bilateral discussions with overseas colleagues that have always taken place. Taken with the proliferation of demands from an increasingly numerous tribe of media contacts - from satellite and terrestrial channels, national and local radio, and the press - there can be no doubt that the workload has continued to expand.

### **Does it Matter?**

It is worth pausing to ask whether the volume of work and the undoubted pressure on Ministers' time really matters. After all, there is rarely a shortage of volunteers for the job.

There are however potential penalties. As Bruce Headey comments:

*“The figures... give rise to several significant points... even if we suppose that Ministers work sixty plus hours a week ( and many work longer) they can only spend a relatively small percentage of their time on major policy problems confronting their departments. At most about twenty hours a week are available for holding office meetings and reading papers and, as indicated, a good deal of this time would be devoted not so much to substantive policy questions as to*

*reading defensive briefs, discussing tactics for Cabinet Committees and so forth. Too often policy decisions have to be fitted in between other engagements or taken late in the evening. It is unfortunate that Ministers can only give sufficient attention to what a majority regard as their most important task by dint of putting in the kind of working week which is prohibited for long distance lorry drivers and others whose errors of judgement are recognised to have fatal consequences.”*

The same issue troubles Peter Hennessy:

*“If nothing is done, it is not only the efficiency of government that will continue to suffer; so too, as Sir Norman Brook warned nearly forty years ago, will the health of its leading practitioners, to the detriment of both them and us. .. As they say in the social services world, these people need help, and as so often in life, they are the last ones to realise it.”*

Weller and Grattan sum up similarly the nature of the risk as exposed on the other side of the globe:

*“Even working for fifteen or more hours a day, choices have to be made; not everything can be done, not everyone can be seen. Further, the lack of time must have its effect on the quality of decisions, as well as the quantity that are made. Speeches that have to be made in a hurry may lack preparation; decisions are made on the available information. It may in theory be desirable for a Minister to contemplate every decision with care; those affected by the results will complain later that they do not understand why it was made. But in practice such contemplation can be undertaken for only the most important topics, and even that is unlikely to be uninterrupted.....”*

*“We do not want to suggest that we should feel sympathetic towards Ministers because of the burdens they must shoulder. They actively, often ruthlessly, seek the job, and most of them revel in its pressures.... Rather we are concerned to examine possible changes to the Ministerial style because Ministers can be so central. They fulfil a function no one else can play - that of the link between Cabinet, the bureaucracy and the public. What is needed is the environment in which Ministers can operate as heads of departments, as active members of the Cabinet and as public figures - and still have time to give adequate thought and consideration to the problems on which they must adjudicate. At the moment, the pressures on a Minister’s time mean that the horizons of many Ministers are narrow, the schedules full, and the detail excessive... We need to consider the problems that Ministers face and to suggest alternative working strategies because we depend so much on their good performance.”*

### **What Can Be Done About Overload?**

The analysis, then, is clear-cut. Both respected practitioners and commentators feel that the burden is verging on the intolerable, that it is getting worse, and that it carries considerable risks to both personal health and good governance. Unfortunately, as is the case so often, while there is plenty of agreement on the problem, there is less agreement on convincing ideas for potential solutions.

The academic commentators have a number of common threads in their analysis. The consensus from all the writers referred to above seems to be that action is required on a number of fronts, including the processes used in Government; the preparation and specialisation of Ministers; the way in which work is delegated and priorities are set; the support given to Ministers; and the reform of parliamentary and constitutional conventions.

Certainly all the commentators cited so far refer to the need for Ministers to think more about the process of being a Minister, and not just follow the flow of business imposed on them by their department and their party. Bruce Headey goes as far as to suggest that after getting through basic duties of paperwork, defending one's department in parliament, and being its advocate in Cabinet, Ministers have a choice of roles. He suggests that they can choose to be *policy selectors*, injecting political judgement into the consideration of experts; or *policy initiators*, setting departmental objectives and priorities and reviewing functions; or *executive managers*, maintaining and boosting morale and ensuring efficient organisation; or *ambassadors and public relations specialists* communicating policies and projecting the department's image. He implies that Ministers would be unwise to choose to take on all roles.

Other commentators seem to regard such a stark choice as unduly rigid and impractical, but would argue that Ministers do need consciously to focus on their priorities and not to allow their time to become spread too thinly across the range of activities. Gerald Kaufman, a practitioner and a commentator, suggests in his 1980 book How to Be A Minister<sup>vii</sup>:

*“He who controls the Minister’s diary controls his life. So it had better be you...This may sound elementary but it is vital. Into the office of every Minister, however junior, there rolls a constant stream of invitations. Even if they disagree with your policies, every trade association likes to have a Ministerial representative to grace its lunch or dinner.... You must keep control of every engagement that you make..... your Diary secretary... will... unless halted proceed to make engagements until as one of my colleagues pathetically put it you will not be able to get a razor blade between them. This makes for fatigue. It also leaves very little time for all the other things you have to do.”*

Other common threads concern the need for Ministers to have both adequate support - perhaps from an enlarged number of political advisers or the introduction of French style *cabinets* - and to delegate work appropriately both to junior Ministerial colleagues and to their civil servants, particularly those who head Government agencies. Cabinet Ministers

can be surprisingly reluctant to do this. As one Australian Minister put it to Weller and Grattan when commenting on the problem of delegating to junior Ministers:

*“If they’re no good they’re a bloody nuisance; if they’re any good, they are after your bloody job all the time.”*

Many commentators have also argued that it will not be possible to reduce pressure sufficiently without continuing parliamentary reform which would reduce the unsocial hours and makes fewer demands on Ministers through the voting process. Question time has been seen as ripe for reform, with the Parliamentary theatre of oral questions largely irrelevant to true accountability and many written questions unnecessary. The information sought in such PQs is often already available from other sources, and the device of asking a question sometimes seeks to bypass other avenues of research, or is used to provide copy for local newspapers, or to begin a political campaign by drawing attention to a fact or set of statistics. Because these can take up more of Ministers’ and officials’ time than is often recognised, given the large expansion of their numbers, other less wasteful ways of achieving the same ends may need to be found.

Other suggestions have been that Ministers should be left in their jobs longer to enable them to benefit from greater familiarity with the subject matter, and that there should be greater succession planning of Ministerial appointments by Prime Ministers. Appointments should develop people’s expertise in particular areas and build on it, and Ministerial teams should be chosen whose talents complement each other.

A major obstacle to the adoption of any or all of these suggestions is likely to be the potential opposition they would draw forth – from those who would suspect an undermining of democratic accountability. There might also be resistance because of the character of successful Ministers themselves. They tend to be the sort of extrovert hands-on people who enjoy activity and being busy at the centre of things. Even Denis Healey, despite complaining of the burdens of office, seems to see no irony when he describes how he resisted a plan by Prime Minister James Callaghan to relieve him of some duties:

*“In the USA, the secretary for finance was not responsible for Government spending, which came under a separate Bureau of the Budget. But my responsibilities also gave me powers which the American Finance Secretary could only envy...Jim Callaghan... was well aware from his own experience how heavy a burden I had to carry. Indeed he told me that he did not think that any man should be Chancellor for more than two and a half years..... he suggested that the Treasury should be split, perhaps by putting public spending under another Minister. I disagreed, arguing that this would only add to my burdens, since I would be locked in permanent negotiation with the Minister responsible for spending, without in the last resort being able to impose my views on him.”*

These tensions between the lure of power and the burden of responsibility and accountability are always likely to raise their head in discussions about the relief of overload.

Moreover, as we have seen in many cases, most recently in 2004 in the situation that arose with regard to the resignation of the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, Ministers' lives are often complex. The power they wield can mean that they attract social and personal attention which can be a yet further, and sometimes major, distraction.

### **The Way Forward**

So what is the way forward? The analysis so far has, I would argue, demonstrated that the problem of Ministerial overload is a longstanding and worsening one, which is also intractable. It has been recognised since the days of Gladstone, and regarded as potentially serious since the days of Macmillan, particularly by those involved once they have laid aside the burdens of office. But little has been done to tackle it. Ministers are suffering from what might by analogy to "passive smoking" be called "*passive overload*": if nothing is done, the actions of others unconsciously conspire to overload them.

However, the temptation not to act is great. Fame, power and responsibility are both exhilarating and addictive. Politics is also an unusual profession. The talents and qualities which lead to success - a tendency to extroversion, political sensitivity, sound judgement and tactics, the aptitude to be articulate and capture people's feelings and values in memorable phrases, media skills, energy, drive and stamina - are powerful and commendable ones. These are strong and resourceful people. But these qualities are necessary but not sufficient to be a successful Minister. Good Ministers also need the capacity and time to master complex briefs, strong problem solving skills, good leadership, people and resource management skills, and the capacity for long term strategic thinking. Fortunately for us, many of our Ministers over many years have also displayed these qualities too. But the exercise of such skills requires more deliberate choice than riding the tide of success and events. With a tendency in recent years for electorates to give administrations long periods in continuous office, there also needs to be a recognition that continuous exposure without respite to these pressures may over time, in some cases, damage health or capacity.

To make space for both strategic thinking and personal recuperation time, Ministers and their officials need to look at the true "added value" of Ministerial activities, select the approaches most appropriate for different types of challenges, and ruthlessly discard those activities of least value, even if some hitherto sacred cows have to be slaughtered along the way.

This is very much the thrust of Professor Michael Barber's intriguing account of his time as the Head of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit in Prime Minister Tony Blair's Downing Street. Professor Barber's book *Instruction to Deliver*<sup>viii</sup> shows how he and his team were ruthless in helping Ministers focus on a few key priorities. They also unashamedly kept returning to simple but searching questions in relation to these topics: *what are you trying to do? How are you trying to do it? How do you know you are*

*succeeding? If you are not succeeding, how will you change things? How can we help you?*

In line with this analysis, I suggest that priority action should be taken on four fronts:

- **Focus**

Successful *Ministers* are likely to be those who can demonstrate in future not just IQ and EQ – problem solving skills and the emotional intelligence to engage with the electorate, their colleagues and staff – but also what might be called “FQ - *focal intelligence*”. This, I would define, as the ability to focus their attention and activity on an insightfully limited selection of policies related to what matters most now and in the future within their remit, and not to be distracted by the hubbub of other traffic that will come their way. They will need to exercise what senior armed forces commanders tend to call “Mission Command” under which they make absolutely and unequivocally clear the *strategy and goals* they are seeking to pursue. But they will largely need to leave the implementation and detailed work to others, except for a few key topics and selective audit of broader effectiveness.

- **Continuity and Use of Experts**

Successful *Administrations* are likely to be those which can sustain Ministers and Senior Officials in post and in business areas for longer more sustained periods, with more development of in-depth topic knowledge and personal expertise. This is likely to reduce the burden of “learning curve” study and briefing and encourage the building of trust and more ready discussion and debate between politicians and a variety of stakeholders. Such administrations are also likely to seek to foster fewer occasions when Ministers are required to take part in policy decision-making meetings without expert advisers being present at least for part of the time. The “Cobra” pattern of meetings used to deal with national emergencies, with a hybrid membership of Ministers and official experts, is one to be encouraged on more occasions.

- **Support**

Successful *Civil Services* are likely to be those which build support structures which assist Ministers to sustain focus and continuity. This will require the will to devolve or delegate areas of work to other administrations or civil service units. It will certainly require those who work closely with Ministers – senior officials, special advisers and Ministerial private offices - to measure success in their role by the way in which they help Ministers avoid overload and select the most appropriate way for the policies that do need to reach Ministerial level to be debated, decided and implemented. It may well mean that activity which has limited added value will need to be challenged. One example could be the little noticed written PQ explosion. One relatively easy symbolic step might be to announce that on a change of administration the new Prime Minister and Cabinet would not take up office until after a delay of, say two weeks, to allow them to recover from the strain of campaign.

- **Mutual Learning**

Successful *teams* – of Ministers, special advisers and officials - are likely to be those which recognise the need at the outset, and through their period of office, to invest in appropriate opportunities to learn about others’ experiences of effectively carrying out their tasks, and to stand back and review strategic as well as item by item progress. This is likely to require more commitment to initial formal induction briefing for new Ministers, extended and tailored to cover private office staff, special advisers and even Permanent Secretaries. There should also be some systematic use of periodic reviews – a form of continuous professional development - to allow for the exchange of information and techniques between Ministers and officials. Ministers need to be asked regularly if they are receiving the support they need. Officials need to review if they are providing the right kind of support and protecting Ministers enough from the burdens of office to enable them to function effectively.

Ultimately, of course, action to control overload will depend on the strength of mind and creativity of Ministers, their families and their immediate advisers. I would suggest the following law of Ministerial overload:

*“Ministerial diaries abhor a vacuum. So Ministerial business and paperwork will automatically expand to fill every waking minute of a Minister’s day, unless this is countered by a reverse irresistible force directed by the Minister and his or her personal staff, advisers and partners.”*

The argument of this article is that it is increasingly urgent that there should be a more concerted and sustained attempts to address it. Ministers will not serve us well if they are forced - in Gladstone’s words - “to swim for their lives”: they will serve us right. If changes are not made, they are even more likely in future to be drowning rather than waving, and that will be to everyone’s disadvantage.

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<sup>i</sup> Roy Jenkins, *Gladstone*, Great Britain, Macmillan, 1995

<sup>ii</sup> Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life*, Great Britain, Michael Joseph, 1989

<sup>iii</sup> Christopher Meyer, *DC Confidential*, Great Britain, Phoenix Books, 2006

<sup>iv</sup> Patrick Weller and Michelle Grattan, *Can Ministers Cope?*, Australia, Hutchinson, 1981

<sup>v</sup> Bruce Headey, *British Cabinet Ministers*, Great Britain, Allen and Unwin, 1974

<sup>vi</sup> Peter Hennessy, *The Hidden Wiring*, Great Britain, Victor Gollancz, 1995

<sup>vii</sup> Gerald Kaufman, *How to Be a Minister*, Great Britain, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1980

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<sup>viii</sup> Michael Barber, *Instruction to Deliver*, Great Britain, Politico's, 2007