

This is a review, by David Laughrin, of Alun Evans'

*The Intimacy of Power.*

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The best private secretary's line from the treasured BBC TV series "Yes, Minister" was uttered when he was asked by his Minister what happened when the chips were down. "It is our job, Minister" came the reply "to make sure that the chips stay up." That simple concept underlies much of the work of private offices across central government, including those who work directly for the Prime Minister in 10 Downing Street.

They help Ministers transmit their plans, ideas and priorities to the right people, pull together responses, programme timely meetings and discussions, accompany Ministers to most engagements, record conclusions and decisions ensuring they reach the right people, make sure clear aims and objectives and funding implications are understood and accepted and (to the extent that time allows) check on implementation. They also provide support through all the necessary constitutional and administrative processes needed to translate plans into action, ensure appropriate arrangements are made through press offices for handling the relevant media and help take account of the challenges – and unforeseen crises - that inevitably arise along the way.

Alun Evans, a former Senior Civil Servant, had direct experience of all of this from being Principal Private Secretary to three different Cabinet Ministers and a period working in 10 Downing Street. He has followed up his civil service career by completing a PhD looking at the history of private offices and the private secretaries who staff them. From a wide-ranging study of the relevant literature and from direct interviews with many key players in the events of recent years, he has now put together this comprehensive and detailed analysis of what has worked well and less well in the operation of what he calls a key "junction box" in what Professor Peter Hennessy christened the hidden wiring of the government machine.

In over 400 closely packed pages Evans has described the earliest origins of the role from the days of Samuel Pepys through to the present day and highlights the complex personal interactions that can contribute to success or failure in operating the role successfully. He focuses most on more recent years and sketches out the personal characteristics that have made some private secretaries such as Robert Armstrong, Robin Butler, Ken Stowe, Alex Allan and Jeremy Heywood notably valuable and successful. He also highlights the tensions that can arise when some individuals – and he cites in particular Charles Powell and Bernard Ingham – seem to develop such strong relationships with the Ministers they serve that they become players in their own right rather than intermediaries drawing in the relevant officials and other contacts. He describes clearly the tensions that can arise on a change of government and the most successful approaches for handling such transitions.

His researches have brought together a large and valuable quarry of well-presented examples showing the positive impact of effective private office support in dealing with crises such as the foot and mouth epidemic, the Iraq war, and the 2007 financial crisis. The great strength of this material lies in the way he is able to clearly run through the stage by stage developments and map out what worked effectively and what did not seem to work. He outlines some telling stories and lessons to be learned including on the successful delivery of desired

outcomes and effective ways to ensure fruitful collaboration between private offices and the increasing numbers of special advisers. These accounts make compelling reading.

The regime that attracts most criticism is that period of Boris Johnson's premiership when the Principal Private Secretary, appears to have been a key instigator of at least one event in Downing Street that broke the rules that the government had set for the rest of the country and even observed afterwards that the office "appeared to have got away with it." The loss of principle and appropriate leadership standards at this time in those leading 10 Downing Street and the loss of continuity of support thereafter is seen as a serious lapse from necessary standards and previous examples.

The final chapter of the book stands back to review how private offices perform two vital and fundamental roles. First is to ensure that the business of government is transacted quickly, accurately and efficiently with due propriety. The second is to offer flexibility to serve any politician loyally and impartially, without fear or favour, provided they work with due probity. It outlines how the tasks have become much harder as the role and pressures have become more complex. The speed of transactions and decision making have increased, and changes of technology and the reach of different media have all impacted on this. Nonetheless the arrangements have relatively smoothly managed eight changes of the party of government between 1945 and 2020 and ten separate changes of Prime Minister between general elections (with some exceptions in the recent past.).

Evans has a notably traditional approach to the concept of a non-political civil service ready to serve any party or coalition, not seeing the US system as effective, and is unimpressed by ideas about extended ministerial offices or exploring potential moves towards "cabinets" supporting Ministers along European lines. He does though support the idea of effective chiefs of staff in tandem with Principal Private Secretaries to help co-ordinate political overview of progress. His analysis is perhaps rather lacking in international comparisons. Nonetheless, it covers a lot of ground and makes a good case that effective private office support is an aspect of good government that should not be underestimated or neglected.

David Laughrin

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David Laughrin had a distinguished civil service career including a spell as Private Secretary to the Head of the Civil Service. He has since written about a range of subjects including [Ministerial Overload](#), [What Ministers Think of their Civil Service Support](#) and [Special Advisers](#).