SUMMARY OF 'THE BRITISH WAY OF CABINET GOVERNMENT'

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For nearly thirty years there has been a continuing debate inside the British political community about the condition of Cabinet Government in the United Kingdom. Ever since Professor John Mackintosh published his standard work, The British Cabinet in 1962 (which argued that system of collective Cabinet decision taking was succumbing to a more presidential style under the impulse of growing prime ministerial power), the argument has become a regular feature of political science examinations at all levels and the subject of periodic comment in quality newspapers and journals.

Mrs Thatcher's commanding approach to political leadership since 1979 has revived the traditional debate in a vigorous fashion.

It was a marginal issue in the 1983 general election and a central one in 1987 when Neil Kinnock, Leader of the Opposition, made much of the dangers of 'one person government'. It is certain to figure prominently during the next election in 1991 or 1992.

Cabinet v. Prime Ministerial/Presidential Government is a very British debate for two reasons:

1. Over three decades, it has became beautifully embellished, almost
ritualised, as much a part of the scene as Buckingham Palace, 10 Downing Street or the Houses of Parliament. In other words, it's part of our mainstream British culture.

2. It is a narrowly focused, immensely inward-looking debate. If it is at all true (and I have profound doubts about it) that the UK has slipped towards presidential government, the shift can be measured in millimetres rather than metres let alone kilometres. And if the health of British democracy has suffered, it's on the scale of a headcold rather than influenza, let alone anything terminal.

The British, for an allegedly phlegmatic people, have a habit of exaggeration minor changes largely because they suffer from a 'This is England' syndrome and refuse to compare their political habits with other democracies, let alone command societies or faintest trickling of alarm bells.

The best antidote for this, certainly on Britain itself, is a glance at history for that way comes perspective. Let's compare Mrs Thatcher to her predecessors in No 10 Downing Street since the end of the Second World War.

1. Clement Attlee (Labour), 1945–51. Terse, brief and efficient in Cabinet, he showed it was possible to have both genuine collective discussion and the swift despatch of business. Some key decision, however, such as the manufacture of the first British nuclear weapons, he kept away from the full Cabinet (confining discussion to a Cabinet Committee) on the grounds that some of his colleagues were to be trusted with secrets of that kind.