

From Rab to Raab: The Construction of the Office of First Secretary of State

STEPHEN THORNTON* AND JONATHAN KIRKUP

Department of Politics and International Relations, School of Law and Politics, Cardiff University, Museum Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3AT, UK

*Correspondence: thorntonsl@cardiff.ac.uk

Through information gained from interviews with key political actors, archival research and close examination of biographical material, this article aims to provide the first detailed account of what it means to be the British First Secretary of State. Sometimes regarded simply as a synonym for Deputy Prime Minister, it will be demonstrated that the reality is far more complicated. Not all First Secretaries have been regarded as the Prime Minister's second-in-command, indeed there have been many years where the post has ceased to exist. Yet, at other times, First Secretaries have led the country, albeit briefly. The main argument to be made is that the office of First Secretary of State is only as important as the person holding that office is perceived to be important, but there is potential for that to change.

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1. Introduction

In the British context, the office of First Secretary of State is an enigmatic one. It is clearly, as the name suggests, a senior ministerial post, yet the position is not always filled and its functions exceedingly vague. The Cabinet Manual has this to say about the position: 'A minister may be appointed First Secretary of State to indicate seniority. The appointment may be held with another office. The responsibilities of the First Secretary of State will vary according to the circumstances' (Cabinet Manual, 2011, p. 22). As this article will demonstrate, the position of First Secretary of State has proved, on occasion, to be one of significance; indeed, at brief points in history, a First Secretary has led the government. This occurred most recently in April 2020 when, as Prime Minister Boris Johnson lay in the Intensive Care Unit at London's St Thomas' Hospital gravely ill with symptoms

of coronavirus, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab—expressly in his less familiar guise as First Secretary—took over the reins of power. However, at other times, the post seems without clear purpose. It sometimes involves performing inconspicuous though useful co-ordination tasks to relieve the strain on the Prime Minister, but, just as often, the First Secretary has had no such function. At other times, the position has vanished completely. Similar to the Room of Requirement in the Harry Potter universe, this is an institution that only tends to appear when a person—in this case the Prime Minister—senses a real need for it. So, if not the automatic stand-in for the Prime Minister, nor an office with a clear job description, what, then, is the point of the First Secretary of State?

Some academics and observers of the British system of government have made a start trying to answer this question. Some of this information is available in various explanations of the position known as Deputy Prime Minister, which has important overlaps with the position of First Secretary (e.g. [Bogdanor, 1995](#); [Hennessy, 1996](#); [Gay, 2013](#); [James, 2020](#)). This literature also includes a piece by this article's authors ([Kirkup and Thornton, 2017](#)), in which a typology of the principal motivations of Prime Ministers when appointing a deputy was presented, and this article can be regarded as a companion piece which updates this piece largely through exploring in greater depth the creation of the post of First Secretary and by moving the story forward into the premierships of Theresa May and Boris Johnson. It is also the case that the position of First Secretary deserves its own place in the sun because it is not simply a synonym for Deputy Prime Minister. Norton's recent publication, *Governing Britain* (2020) has started this process. He identifies the main features of First Secretaryship: that the post came into being on 16 July 1962 with the appointment of R.A. ('Rab') Butler; that only ten ministers have been accorded the title since Butler; that it is a post sometimes interpreted as denoting the status of Deputy Prime Minister, but that the 'essential distinction' between the two positions is that the First Secretary is a full ministerial post, with its own seals of office ([Norton, 2020](#), p. 147); and, though there are no defined responsibilities that come with the position, there exists a loose expectation that the holder of the post will take on a senior co-ordination role within the machinery of government (2020, pp. 145–148). By using archive sources, in particular those located in The National Archives at Kew (TNA), and interviews with former First Secretaries and other key actors, this article will take Norton's observations as a base on which to illuminate still further a position which, though a post that signifies a senior status within government, is largely an empty vessel.

This article will explore the creation of the position of First Secretary, highlighting that the post was not designed to provide constitutional clarity; rather, to avoid officially naming a deputy and to prevent any assumption that the First Secretary would be a likely successor to an existing Prime Minister. The

remainder of the article will follow the patchy evolution of the position of First Secretary, exploring what it meant to some of the holders of the post and those around them. As will be demonstrated, strikingly different perceptions of First Secretaryship have existed since its inception, and this remains a prominent characteristic. Indeed, another conspicuous feature throughout the post's evolution has been the lengths to which some First Secretaries have gone to secure symbols of seniority—such as a grand car or palatial office or access to a country estate—to provide physical reassurance of the post's assumed importance. Nick Clegg—who, although not First Secretary, held a title of similar vagueness when Deputy Prime Minister—understood this compulsion, noting that the 'symbolism and imagery of power shape people's perceptions of who is wielding it. And perception is nine-tenths of the reality of power' (Clegg, 2016, p. 74).

Taking further the theme that perceptions of First Secretaryship were at least as important as the material reality of the office, this article will draw on the work of those who emphasise the significance of social construction. For constructivist institutionalists such as Hay, understanding actors' perceptions of the institution they inhabit is central to any explanation of political change, with traditional neo-institutional approaches—such as historical institutionalism which tends to focus on path-dependent lock-in constraints—more adept, he argues, at explaining stability rather than regular institutional disequilibrium (Hay, 2006). The jerky, unstable development of the position of First Secretary—one which includes long periods when the institution simply disappeared—seems to suit this approach, focusing as it does 'on the processes of institutionalisation, de-institutionalisation and re-institutionalisation rather than on institutions per se' (Hay, 2016, p. 526). As Bell argues, with this approach there lurks the danger that any institution is reduced to becoming simply what every involved agent believes it to be, effectively leaving the idea of an institution itself devoid of explanatory value (Bell, 2011, p. 884). Hay counters this criticism by suggesting institutions and, crucially, ideas about institutions remain significant because agents' 'perceptions about what is feasible, legitimate, possible, and desirable are shaped by the institutional environment in which they find themselves' along with any broader views about how the world works (Hay, 2006, p. 65).

From this constructivist perspective, the reality of the post of First Secretary consists primarily of the expectations and understandings of the minister who holds the office at a particular moment in time, and those of the Prime Minister, the Civil Service and other Cabinet ministers around that individual. Thus, that senior Cabinet minister Harriet Harman—unexpectedly denied the post in the government of Gordon Brown—was factually incorrect to describe the First Secretaryship 'as an office which puts the holder above all other Cabinet ministers and is always held by the Deputy Prime Minister' (Harman, 2017, p. 309) is less

significant to the process of understanding the political world than the reality that she believed this to be the case.

Though every First Secretary appointed will be mentioned in this article, the focus will be on those for whom this was their main ministerial post. That, for example, George Osborne was First Secretary from May 2015 to July 2016 is a matter of interest but tells us little about how the position was regarded as Osborne's First Secretaryship was almost wholly shrouded by his additional position as Chancellor of the Exchequer. One exception will be the case of Dominic Raab—Foreign Secretary as well as First Secretary—as his case brings to light the UK's lack of constitutional clarity at times when a Prime Minister is unable to function. The ministers who were *foremost* First Secretary were Michael Heseltine, for some of the time John Prescott, Damian Green and, most significantly, the inaugural First Secretary, Rab Butler.

2. Creation of the position

The backdrop to the appointment of Butler as First Secretary was Harold Macmillan's struggle, after some years in office, to cope with the administrative load that came with being Prime Minister. Aware of the strain Macmillan was under, the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Norman Brook, suggested that, 'It would undoubtedly help you if there were a senior colleague who was able, so far as it is possible, to share the Ministerial burdens that fall on your shoulders' (The National Archives [TNA], 1961a). The position Brook had in mind was that of 'Deputy Prime Minister', though he was at pains to point out that such a post would only be 'a matter of administrative convenience' and any announcement must 'not in any way implicate the sovereign in this' (TNA, 1961a).

Brook's warning referred to the constitutional roadblock that had, for some years, prevented the wholehearted appointment of a Deputy Prime Minister. Indeed, though three senior ministers had been referred to by that title with various degrees of seriousness prior to 1961—Clement Attlee, Herbert Morrison and Anthony Eden—none had enjoyed the approval from the monarch to sport that label in any official capacity (Kirkup and Thornton, 2017). It was Eden's claim to the title that made the monarch's displeasure conspicuous. Eden had long been regarded as Winston Churchill's 'crown prince', but in 1951, when an ageing Churchill led the Conservatives to victory in that year's general election and appointed Eden Foreign Secretary, an impatient Eden wanted a yet more conspicuous badge of seniority. He insisted that he officially be accorded the title Deputy Prime Minister. Churchill agreed, and the initial list of appointments made to the George VI in October 1951 included, next to Eden's name, this impressive job description: 'Deputy Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary and Leader of the House of Commons' (TNA, 1951a).

However, the response from the Palace to the submission of this list was hostile. It included a demand that the original be destroyed and a new one prepared ‘in which the words “Deputy Prime Minister” did not occur’ (TNA, 1951b). The primary impediment was that, should the Prime Minister resign or die, ‘it might be argued that the Sovereign was under some obligation to send for the “Deputy”—an infringement of one of the most important Royal Prerogatives, which allows the Sovereign unfettered choice in this matter’ (TNA, 1951b).

Brook, as Cabinet Secretary back in 1951, knew this history, hence his warning to Macmillan a decade later when the Prime Minister was considering a similar move. Although by 1961 a new monarch was on the throne, Brook remained adamant that Elizabeth II had to be seen as ‘unfettered in Her right to send for whomsoever She wishes if the issue of succession arises’ (TNA, 1961a). Nevertheless, the craving for a recognisable deputy-type figure remained powerful, and the individual Macmillan and Brook had in mind was clearly Butler, though Brook avoided using his name at this stage, instead referring to a mysterious ‘Mr. X’ (TNA, 1961a).

By this stage Macmillan had come to rely on Butler, despite the fact he profoundly disliked him (Campbell, 2009). As Enoch Powell remarked, when Butler was absent, ‘It was as if government itself came to a standstill’ (James, 2020, p.110). Thus, Macmillan needed Butler’s administrative acumen to cope with the pressure of being at the centre of government, however constitutional propriety combined with personal animosity required that the position Butler was expected to fill could not enhance his political standing, nor suggest Butler was favourite to succeed the Prime Minister. The trick was to persuade Butler otherwise. That he was already regarded as the second most senior member of the Cabinet and naturally stepped in to chair the Cabinet when Macmillan was unavailable meant this was not an easy illusion to pull off.

There were two stages to this deception. Until October 1961 Butler held three formal positions of power: as Home Secretary, as Leader of the House of Commons and as Chairman of the Conservative Party. Butler was aware that Macmillan was keen to involve him more in a support role, and thus was likely to be asked to lose some of those responsibilities. Therefore, Butler contacted Chief Whip, Martin Redmayne, to record that, should this occur, he wanted official recognition of his deputy role as recompense (TNA, 1961b). In the event, however, Butler meekly agreed at a meeting with Macmillan and Redmayne ‘to yield’ some of his positions to help the Prime Minister on various committees without the condition of declaring him Deputy Prime Minister (Macmillan, 2011, p. 414, diary entry for 25 September 1961). An early official draft to explain Butler’s new position stated that he was relinquishing his posts—except that of Home

Secretary—in order ‘to assist the Prime Minister by presiding over a wide range of Cabinet Committees on the Home Front’ (TNA, 1961c).

A few months later Butler was asked to make further sacrifice. To inject some dynamism into a government that appeared aged and listless, Macmillan decided that radical reconstruction of the government was necessary, with the potential removal of many members of the Cabinet (TNA, 1962a). This savage reconstruction, when it occurred a few months later, became known as the ‘Night of the Long Knives’. Butler was safe. Rather than the tasks expected, much of his time since the reshuffle involved attempting to resolve an intensely knotty problem involving the fragmentation of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (Howard, 1988, p. 289). Even as Home Secretary Butler was willing to be sent to Africa to help ease the Prime Minister’s burden. However, this was clearly an unsustainable position, and Macmillan wanted Butler to drop his role as Home Secretary to take on more coordination duties in the new Cabinet.

In June 1962 Timothy Bligh, Macmillan’s Principal Private Secretary, sought the advice of Sir Noel Hutton, the Parliamentary Counsel, to find a means whereby Butler could leave the Home Office and be granted a position of seniority without ‘any definite responsibilities’ (TNA, 1962a). The title of Deputy Prime Minister being beyond the constitutional pale, a new post, at this stage referred to as the ‘Principal Secretary of State’, was hesitantly considered as a functional equivalent (TNA, 1962a). Hutton responded by pointing out that this proposal contained many difficulties. These problems included the usual constitutional one about identifying one minister as superior to all others, but also a semantic one: strictly speaking, ‘All of the Secretaries of State are “Principal Secretaries of State”’ (TNA, 1962b; see also Simcock, 1992). However, though the proposal contained its fair share of difficulties, Hutton concluded that ‘it does not appear impossible from the legal point of view’ (TNA, 1962b). That appointing a minister to a position of seniority but without a particular portfolio was legally proper was confirmed by the Attorney General, the government’s chief legal adviser—though, to avoid confusion, this post was re-labelled ‘First Secretary of State’. The American sounding ‘Secretary of State’ was also briefly considered (TNA, 1962c).

When Butler got to hear of these plans he was, unsurprisingly, unimpressed:

The latest proposal is that I become Secretary of State (*tout court*). I will to the public mind have no duties except Africa. Furthermore, without a classical office such as Lord President, I shall be out on a raft, as I was after Anthony Eden’s decision in 1955. I know what this means: one personal assistant and inadequate staff to transact business (Butler in Howard, 1988, p. 292).

Reluctant as Butler clearly was, Macmillan convinced him—at least initially—that the new position was one of significance. So, on 13 July, when Butler was confirmed in his new post, the lobby were briefed that the position of First Secretary was akin to being Deputy Prime Minister. *The Times* reported that:

Mr. Butler has had the unofficial role of deputy Prime Minister since the major reconstruction of the Cabinet in October last year, as well as being Home Secretary, Minister for Central African Affairs, and chairman of the key Cabinet committee on Common Market matters. Now he leaves the Home Office [...] and takes on a more official description as deputy Prime Minister ([The Times, 1962](#)).

Nevertheless, the briefing did not fully remove the impression that this was little more than an illusion. The deputy role may have been ‘more official’ than it had been, but, critically, the report went on to confirm that this was ‘not’ a new constitutional convention, rather had been ‘brought into use by Mr. Macmillan to describe a situation to which Mr. Butler will relieve the Prime Minister of many of his responsibilities in home and overseas affairs’ ([The Times, 1962](#)).

Butler received his own seals of office as ‘a Principal Secretary of State’, but, of more practical use, the ‘Office of the First Secretary of State’ was created, with a small team of officials ([TNA, 1962d](#)). The office itself was based in the Treasury building and—foreshadowing Michael Heseltine’s period as First Secretary—was ‘reputed to be the largest anywhere in Whitehall’ ([Howard, 1988](#), p. 293).

Despite the initial conspicuous show of dignity, Butler’s initial suspicions proved well founded. When Macmillan was asked about the substance of Butler’s position in the Commons he replied, ‘My right hon. Friend the First Secretary of State will act as Deputy Prime Minister’, and when pressed whether this amounted to ‘the official appointment for the first time in British constitutional history of a Deputy Prime Minister’, Macmillan replied:

This is not an appointment submitted to the Sovereign but is a statement of the organisation of Government. It follows a very high precedent, for it is exactly the arrangement made by right hon. Friend the Member for Woodford (Sir W. Churchill) when Sir Anthony Eden was appointed Deputy Prime Minister ([House of Commons Debates \[HC Deb\], 1962](#)).

In the Commons, Butler’s appointment as First Secretary was regarded with suspicion and confusion. In the debate before the vote required to fund Butler’s new office, searching questions were asked about the nature of the post and precisely what Butler was responsible for beyond his Africa brief. For example, Labour MP Douglas Houghton asked, ‘One also wonders what any Minister is

doing as First Secretary of State when he is now mostly, if not exclusively, the Secretary of State for Central African Affairs' (*HC Deb, 1963a*).

Furthermore, Butler was only paid the same as the 'ordinary' secretaries of state, a salary of £5000—paid for initially through the Supplementary Estimate (*TNA, 1962e*). The Prime Minister earned twice that amount. Perhaps to compensate, Butler made strenuous efforts to make sure his official car was fitted to a similar standard to that of the Prime Minister's vehicle, down to the flashing lights and bell. One of the officers who was asked to make the necessary adjustments was less than impressed:

Thank you for your letter of yesterday about the lights and bells on Minister's cars. [...] I do not quite see why I should have to do anything about putting a similar arrangement on the Deputy Prime Minister's car. [...] These things must have some significance: we cannot proceed on the assumption that they are just toys for the amusement of the passengers in the car (*TNA, 1962f*).

The significance the officer questioned was that such symbols of prestige were nearly all that Butler had to cling to. In response to Houghton's pointed questions in the Commons, Butler tried to defend the worth of his new post. He remarked that the position of First Secretary of State could at least claim ample vintage. The title was first deployed, he argued, in 1476, 'largely to distinguish its holder from the amanuenses who accompanied the King, or the scullions who served in his kitchen' (*HC Deb, 1963b*). However, despite these claims of antiquity, it was evident Butler by this stage was not impressed by the actuality of his new job. His responsibilities—beyond his African duties—consisted of trying 'to look after things as best he can as deputy for the Prime Minister' (*HC Deb, 1963c*).

Turning to briefly what Butler actually did as the inaugural First Secretary, 'looking after things' for the Prime Minister proved an accurate description. Part of this task involved standing in for Macmillan while the Prime Minister was otherwise engaged, 'holding the baby' to use Butler's own phrase (*Howard, 1988, p. 258*). This involved tasks such as chairing the Cabinet and answering questions in the Commons, this latter task taking on extra significance after the introduction of Prime Minister Questions (PMQs) in 1961. Butler led the government while Macmillan, immediately before his resignation, was hospitalised in October 1963. During this short period as 'Acting P.M.', Butler had, *inter alia*, to meet visiting dignitaries, respond on behalf of the government to the publication of the Robbins Report into the future of higher education, and become involved in a debate whether to publish a potentially damaging report about the state-owned airline BOAC (*TNA, 1963a*).

However, this was not a task he was given just because he was First Secretary. Butler had played this role many times before. He effectively acted as premier as

early as the summer of 1953 while both Churchill and Eden were incapacitated. He stood-in for Eden in 1956 after the strain of the Suez Crisis had forced the hapless premier to set sail for Jamaica to try to recover his health. Butler also covered for Macmillan on many occasions prior to his becoming First Secretary. Sometimes this was for an extended period, such as covering for the Prime Minister during Macmillan's near two-month tour of the Commonwealth in 1958 (Howard, 1988, pp. 260–261).

The other 'looking after things' duty Butler performed was the 'correlation, co-ordination and chairmanship of committees' role that kept government ticking over smoothly (Butler in Norton, 2020, p. 149). Beyond committee chairing duties, Butler also had an important role at the interface between the workings of government and the activities of the political party. For example, Butler was instrumental in reviving the steering committee to plan the election programme, which he devised as 'a small, central committee' designed to 'pull together all the threads of the work which is being done both in the Government machine and in the Party' (TNA, 1963b). Other random tasks included writing an obituary for Macmillan 'if one were unhappily to be needed' (TNA, 1963c). But again, this function did not begin when Butler became First Secretary. It was noted in *The Times* as early as January 1957, when Macmillan formed his first Cabinet, that Butler had been gifted 'general oversight of the home front' (*The Times*, 1957).

To summarise, Butler was widely regarded as deputy to the Prime Minister by colleagues, by the press, and by Macmillan himself. Butler was 'the 'unquestioned No. 2' (Dell, 1996, p. 203). Yet this was the position *before* Butler became First Secretary. Butler initially saw this new position, with its own seals of office, as way of securing his constitutional status. Macmillan saw it as a costless means to keep Butler doing tasks that he did not fancy doing himself, but without damaging Butler's position so obviously that he would feel compelled to resign. As noted in Kirkup and Thornton (2017, p. 498), Macmillan's appointment of Butler is a classic example of using an apparent promotion to neuter or mollify a rival. Butler eventually realised he had been duped and—with a nod to institutional constructivism—came to perceive the institution he embodied as essentially meaningless: 'I had no executive department to control; my responsibilities were, so to speak, supernal—specific or general, as the Prime Minister might from time to time determine' (Butler, 1971, p. 234). He also warned that no-one in future should be offered the position, nor for it to be accepted if proposed (Butler, 1971, p. 234).

3. After Butler

Regarding the post of First Secretary, the first significant event following Macmillan's resignation as Prime Minister in October 1963 was its abrupt

disappearance. At the start of Alec Douglas-Home's 363-day premiership a thick line was drawn through the title of First Secretary of State in the drafts of Cabinet membership; Butler was named only as Foreign Secretary, and no-one replaced him in his previous job (TNA, 1963d).

At a stroke Douglas-Home demonstrated that a government could operate without a First Secretary, though *The Times* suggested this was a mistake and that it was 'hardly possible' for any administration to function without someone doing the job Butler had done (*The Times*, 1963). There was little time to test this theory as Douglas-Home's government was defeated by Harold Wilson's Labour Party in October 1964, an event that sparked the return of the First Secretary. The minister granted the title was George Brown (TNA, 1964). Similar to Butler, the rather volatile Brown was a senior figure with whom the Prime Minister had a difficult relationship, and one who needed to be comforted and accommodated through the award of a post which sounded sufficiently prestigious. That Brown was the Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, elected by Labour MPs, meant Wilson had to treat Brown with particular care. Hence, the resurrection of the post of First Secretary, which Brown did regard as a symbol of distinct seniority. As he explained in his memoirs, 'The title of First Secretary then was meant to indicate what it said. There is no provision in our constitutional system for a Deputy Prime Minister, and the First Secretaryship was a convenient way of indicating who was in fact deputy to the premier' (Brown, 1971, p. 98). However, being First Secretary was not perceived as Brown's primary function. Instead, he was to take charge of the government's long-term economic and industrial strategy in his more conspicuous guise as Secretary of State at the newly created Department of Economic Affairs.

Though Brown saw the post as First Secretary as synonymous with being deputy, Wilson saw the situation differently. As Simcock notes, Wilson did not mention Brown becoming First Secretary in his lengthy account of his 1964–1970 administrations, which Simcock attributes to a lack of interest in such constitutional matters (Simcock, 1992, p. 550). In fact, Wilson was attentive to such matters; it was with a later text, *The Governance of Britain* (Wilson, 1976), that he explored this theme. In it he acknowledged that Brown was, from 1964 to 1968, his main deputy-figure, that is the minister who would chair 'Cabinet and any Cabinet committee normally chaired by me, if I were absent', and also the one to stand in his place to answer questions in Parliament (Wilson, 1976, p. 23). However, this situation did not arise because Brown was First Secretary. As Wilson clearly explained, he took considerable heed of the order of precedence within Cabinet, 'the so-called "pecking-order"', and, as Brown was second on the list, it was he—irrespective of his First Secretaryship—who deputised (Wilson, 1976, p. 23).

This ministerial order of precedence, which is published at the start of each new Cabinet, is different from the order of precedence in terms of the Privy Council and in public ceremonies, where—for example—the Lord Chancellor takes precedence over the Prime Minister. Instead, this ministerial list of precedence has indicated, since the 1920s, the relative importance of each member of the Cabinet, this being wholly determined by the Prime Minister, ‘guided partly by tradition and partly by political and personal considerations’ (TNA, 1977). Some premiers have not taken this list too seriously. Macmillan noted that he thought it ‘all rather “nonsense” and wd. [would] much prefer an order based on the traditional dignity of the office, instead of a batting order of merit’ (TNA, 1957). Wilson, on the other hand, did take it seriously.

That it was Brown’s position on the list of precedence that led to his assuming deputising duties, rather than his appointment as First Secretary, was confirmed in August 1966 when Brown threatened to resign from Cabinet. Though such threats were not an unusual occurrence, to placate him this time Wilson made Brown Foreign Secretary. Michael Stewart took Brown’s position both as Secretary of State for Economic Affairs and First Secretary. However, Brown remained second on the list of precedence—Stewart rose to third—and it was Brown who continued the deputy duties rather than the new First Secretary. Brown noted that following this change the role of First Secretary ‘ceased to signify the Deputy Prime Minister’ (Brown, 1971, p. 98). For Wilson, it never had.

The link between being First Secretary and possessing a deputy role was broken further when, in April 1968, Wilson finally accepted one of Brown’s letters of resignation. As a result, Stewart returned to the Foreign Office and moved up the order of precedence to second, becoming—as Wilson confirmed—his effective deputy in government (Wilson, 1976, p. 23; Stewart, 1980, p. 191). Stewart did not, however, remain First Secretary. It was Barbara Castle who received that title, in addition to becoming Secretary of State for Employment and Productivity. Castle was aware of the ‘high status’ that came as the result of her new position (Castle, 1984, p. 421, diary entry for 4 April 1968). Similarly, the Parliamentary Counsel, still Noel Hutton, remarked that the designation he partly created was ‘now highly prized’ (TNA, 1968a). Nevertheless, this new status did not stretch to Castle being regarded as Wilson’s deputy. Castle herself made no claim to this role, with this clearly being fulfilled by Stewart as Wilson clarified in a statement in the Commons (HC Deb, 1968). Furthermore, Castle was only sixth in the order of precedence (TNA, 1968b).

In short, although Brown at least believed his possession of the First Secretary meant he was Wilson’s deputy, Wilson did not, and this Prime Minister maintained Macmillan’s perception of the post as a largely meaningless bauble. Neither Stewart nor Castle regarded the position as signifying deputy status. Holding the title also made little practical difference to the day jobs of each First

Secretary, Brown and Stewart at Economic Affairs or Castle at Employment and Productivity. Castle's primary task was to attempt forge a new relationship between the state and trade unions, a matter that proved one of the most demanding and painful of the Wilson era. Being First Secretary did not accord her extra respect in this matter from Cabinet rivals such as James Callaghan (Dorey, 2019).

Neither Brown nor Stewart acted as stand-in for Wilson for anything other than the odd Cabinet meeting or to a few answer questions in Parliament (Stewart, 1980, p. 191), which, in any case, was not seen by Wilson as the responsibility of the First Secretary *per se*. Initially there was an element of the 'home front' Cabinet Committee-minding task that Butler carried out, but even this became detached from the job of First Secretary. When Stewart moved to the Foreign Office in 1968, Wilson ordered that Stewart's task of chairing certain committees should not be transferred to Castle; rather, that job moved to Richard Crossman as Lord President of the Council (TNA, 1968c). Even the small unit of staff that Stewart had maintained for his First Secretary duties was instructed to report *en bloc* to Crossman. Few noticed when, with the defeat of Wilson's government at the general election of 1970, the position of First Secretary disappeared.

4. Rebirth of an institution

It took a full 25 years for the next First Secretary to be appointed. In the interim, there were some figures generally regarded as Deputy Prime Minister, most notably Willie Whitelaw, Margaret Thatcher's loyal and effective second-in-command. However, Whitelaw was never appointed First Secretary. It took a crisis of prime ministerial leadership to prompt the return of that peculiar position.

In June 1995 Thatcher's successor, John Major, found himself so beleaguered by party infighting that he announced he was inviting challenges to his position as leader of the Conservative Party—'time to put up or shut up', as he phrased it (Major, 2000, p. 626). Though not political allies as such, in his hour of need Major recognised Michael Heseltine's talents as a minister and media performer and was willing to offer him a deputy-like role (Major, 2000, p. 609). As Lord Butler (in 1995, as Sir Robin Butler, the Cabinet Secretary) confirmed in an interview with the authors, Major 'wanted to strengthen his position by having Heseltine in the tent—and the role he particularly wanted him to play was "Minister for the Media"' (Butler, 2016). The leadership contest forced the issue, and, on the morning before the results were announced, Major offered Heseltine 'the post of First Secretary of State and Deputy Prime Minister, with a choice of responsibilities' (Major, 2000, p. 642). Major won the contest—though not in a manner that particularly strengthened his hand—and the following day Heseltine took up his post.

Heseltine chose the option of taking on a non-departmental policy co-ordination role based in the Cabinet Office. This was a significant role designed ‘to push through the government’s agenda’ (Heseltine, 2000, p. 486), and was backed through Heseltine’s chairing of many Cabinet Committees (Hennessy, 1996, p. 17). Moreover, he accepted the traditional deputy stand-in duties to chair the Cabinet and cover PMQs, though there was no equivalent of the acting Prime Minister role played by Butler during Macmillan’s illness.

In most respects, Heseltine—supported by Major—recreated a defunct institution, that of First Secretary, and gave it prestige it had never previously enjoyed. However, returning to the theme of social construction, it is significant that different agents perceived the institution in different ways. Heseltine himself did not regard the position of First Secretary as significant. As he remarked in an interview with the authors, ‘the words that mattered were Deputy Prime Minister’; that being additionally First Secretary ‘was of no consequence to me’ (Heseltine, 2016). It was, however, of consequence to Major. The Prime Minister did consider appointing Heseltine Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster but demurred as that position ‘did not reflect his seniority’ (Major, 2000, p. 609), suggesting—to Major at least—that being First Secretary was a particularly prestigious position.

The Cabinet Secretary, Robin Butler, conceptualised the post in another way. Recalling events from 1995, Butler explained that the role of First Secretary is two-fold: ‘a way of paying someone and a *signal* to others in Cabinet that they are No. 2’ (Butler, 2016; authors’ emphasis). Thus, for the head civil servant at the time, Heseltine’s First Secretaryship included both practical and symbolic dimensions. The practical element refers the issue that the position of Deputy Prime Minister technically does not exist, so another more constitutionally secure position is needed to secure a ministerial salary. More emblematically, through the appointment of Heseltine, the institution of First Secretary restored the connection—in the eyes of other ministers at least—with a position in the hierarchy second only to the Prime Minister, a status it had not held since the days of George Brown. Tellingly Heseltine—sceptical of the extent of political capital associated with being First Secretary—made sure this impression of power was bolstered through insistence that his position in the order of precedence was ‘next to the prime minister himself at the top of the cabinet pecking order’ (Heseltine, 2000, p.479). He also secured for himself one of the grandest offices in Whitehall—with a security pass for the connecting door into No. 10—again a conspicuous symbol of seniority (Heseltine, 2000, p. 484). Heseltine was in post for less than two years, the *New Labour Party* of Tony Blair sweeping to power in May 1997, but during that time Heseltine—one of the ‘big beasts’ of British politics (King, 2015, p. 224)—became universally regarded as the most powerful minister after Major. That he was First Secretary was part of that conception, for some at least, if not

Heseltine himself. Heseltine also noted that his ‘powerbase rested entirely on John Major backing me’ (Heseltine, 2016).

In a similar situation to Harold Wilson in 1964, Blair had an elected deputy leader of the party he probably would not have chosen: John Prescott. Nevertheless, Blair—like Wilson before him—recognised that Prescott required a position of conspicuous seniority (Blair, 2010). Thus, initially Prescott was accorded the title Deputy Prime Minister, alongside the necessary additional position, in this instance that of Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Bedford, 1997, p. 920; *The Times*, 1997). The latter post was a full departmental position as well as a means of obtaining a salary.

However, returning to the theme of perceptions, Prescott himself suggested that he was also appointed First Secretary from 1997 (Prescott, 2016). If this the case then it was not the announced in the traditional manner, though John Rentoul did report a few months before the election that that ‘Mr Blair has promised Mr Prescott the title First Secretary’, with Rentoul demonstrating the importance of creation stories in shaping the perceptions of these positions by adding that ‘the title was invented, after the “night of the long knives” in 1962, for RA Butler—who also combined it with Deputy Prime Minister’ (Rentoul, 1996). Moreover, it is revealing that Prescott, unlike Heseltine, did regard the position of First Secretary as possessing real authority. In particular, he stated that ‘the Civil Service don’t recognise the Deputy Prime Minister, all they recognise is First Secretary’ (Prescott, 2016). Nevertheless, again in support of a constructivist approach, Prescott also suggests that this badge of seniority is less significant than simple observation of the relationships around the Cabinet table. Citing the example of Geoffrey Howe, who was nominally deputy to Thatcher 1989–90, Prescott argued that the title—be it ‘First Secretary or Deputy Prime Minister’—is irrelevant if the Civil Service can see the relationship between premier and the minister sporting that title has broken down (Prescott, 2016).

Whether or not First Secretary from 1997, Prescott did perform from the start the traditional duties of standing in for the Prime Minister in Parliament and chairing the Cabinet in Blair’s absence. Prescott also claimed to possess acting Prime Minister powers ‘during the first few hours of the July 7 bombing in 2005 until Mr Blair returned from the G8 meeting in Scotland’ (Hough, 2011). However, as second in the list of precedence and Blair’s acknowledged deputy, it is likely that Prescott would have been expected to perform these tasks irrespective of his title.

Like his predecessors, Prescott also saw the worth in securing symbols of authority to bolster the constitutional vagueness of his position. This time, rather than Heseltine’s vast office—Prescott wanted somewhere ‘cosier’ (Butler, 2016)—the main issue was the ministerial car. After initial resistance, Prescott insisted that—like Heseltine, who he regarded as his direct predecessor—he

should have the services of a suitably appointed Jaguar (Prescott, 2016). As another symbol of seniority, Prescott was also offered use of the country house Dorneywood, a gift only accorded to particularly senior ministers (Prescott, 2008, p. 240).

After the 2001 general election Prescott was officially named as First Secretary (*The Times*, 2001). His old super-department was broken up, and the parts that remained under Prescott's control moved to the Cabinet Office and thence to a new Office for the Deputy Prime Minister. From May 2006 Prescott stopped being a departmental minister completely and played a more Butler/Heseltine-like central role, one which involved chairing nine Cabinet Committees from his base in the Cabinet Office.

After the resignation of Blair in June 2007, Gordon Brown became Prime Minister. Harriet Harman, who had succeeded Prescott as Deputy Leader of the Labour Party, expected Brown to follow precedent (Harman, 2017, p.276). However, Harman was not named First Secretary, nor awarded any other form of symbol of deputy status. She was only a lowly eleventh in the pecking order (*Downing Street*, 2007). Nor did she perform the usual co-ordination role, with 'veteran heavyweights of the Cabinet' Alistair Darling—the Chancellor of the Exchequer—and Jack Straw—Lord Chancellor—largely taking over Prescott's responsibilities (Riddell, 2007, p. 25). Harman did, however, step-in for Brown at PMQs (Harman, 2017, p. 282).

As time progressed, Brown's government became increasingly rocked by crises. By the summer of 2009, reeling from resignations from the Cabinet and woe-filled local election results, Brown sought the special sanctuary that comes with identifying a Rab Butler-like figure to carry some of the strain. However, rather than Harman, Lord (Peter) Mandelson was appointed First Secretary of State—while also Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, and Lord President of the Council. As noted earlier, to Harman the appointment of Mandelson as First Secretary meant to her that he was Brown's deputy. Mandelson (2010) agreed, becoming, in his own words, 'Deputy Prime Minister in everything but name' (p. 473), the actual title he suggests not being used out of sensitivity to Harman. Brown's (2017) memoirs are quiet on the issue.

With a position on 35 Cabinet Committees, and a large office with an adjoining door to No. 10, Mandelson's role was—in the tradition of Butler—'to share a significant amount of the day-to-day burden of running the country' (Wardrop, 2009). Also following tradition, the relationship between Brown and Mandelson had been fraught one, though it had mellowed by this stage; in any case, Mandelson's position in the House of Lords meant he was not a threat to Brown's premiership. Prescott believes Mandelson would also have been the one to whom the Civil Service would have turned had Brown been incapacitated on account of his First Secretaryship (Hough, 2011). However—possibly out of

consideration for his beleaguered Deputy Leader of the Labour Party—Brown quietly moved Harman to second on the list of precedence, thus she arguably outranked Mandelson, who was placed third ([Downing Street, 2009](#)). In the event, this situation lasted less than a year and the Civil Service never had to make that historic choice, though, that even Harman believed Mandelson's title trumped her ranking provides some hint about what likely would have occurred ([Harman, 2017](#), p. 309).

Since the 2010 general election there have been four First Secretaries, all Conservatives. Three of these primarily held one of the great offices of state; the First Secretaryship merely a largely unnoticed badge of additional seniority. This list includes two senior ministers who held office during David Cameron's premiership: William Hague (2010–15, additionally Foreign Secretary 2010–2014 and Leader of the Commons 2014–15) and George Osborne (2015–16, additionally Chancellor of the Exchequer). Hague is an unusual case as his First Secretaryship co-existed with an acknowledged Deputy Prime Minister, namely Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg, though this situation can be seen largely as a by-product of coalition government. [Cameron \(2019\)](#) noted in his memoirs that 'I made William first secretary of state, essentially my deputy, so he could chair cabinet and take PMQs in my absence' (p. 137). That plan was partially scuppered when, later, Clegg insisted that he 'be deputy prime minister' ([Cameron, 2019](#), p. 139). Thus, it was Clegg who became second in the 'pecking order' ([Priddy, 2017](#))—thus outranking Hague in third—and took on the traditional standing-in duties. It was a typical fudge, to the extent that both Hague and Clegg shared access to Dorneywood, but it was one that worked as relations between the two remained cordial ([Clegg, 2016](#), p. 74). Later Cameron referred to Hague as his 'de facto *political* deputy' and highlighted Hague's party role, perhaps to distinguish him from his deputy in government, Clegg ([BBC, 2014](#); authors' emphasis). Osborne became First Secretary after Hague stepped down from front-line politics at the 2015 general election, an appointment regarded primarily as a signal that Osborne was to be seen as Cameron's designated successor ([Watt, 2015](#)). However, Cameron's abrupt resignation as Prime Minister following the result of the 2016 referendum ruined that plan.

Though Cameron's replacement, Theresa May, initially tried to govern without an acknowledged deputy she eventually appointed one, Damian Green, who was granted the title First Secretary. Unlike his immediate predecessors, Green was widely known as First Secretary—he had an additional position as Minister for the Cabinet Office—and he was also placed second on the list of precedence ([Gov.uk, 2017](#)). Moreover, in a story similar to that of Butler, Heseltine and Mandelson, his appointment to a general support role came at a moment of peril for the government. In June 2017, the May government had just lost its majority at a general election and was struggling simultaneously to deal with the fall-out

from the 2016 referendum decision and manage domestic policy. Thus, Green was brought in as ‘defacto Deputy PM’ to relieve some of the pressure that comes with leading a government (Cheung, 2017). Green did this by replacing May on many Cabinet Committees, and by taking responsibility for various pressing issues such as relations with the devolved nations. Green saw his role being to ‘facilitate good governance’, largely through the means of ‘saving the Prime Minister time’ (Green, 2018).

Of the First Secretaryship, Green stressed the symbolic expressions of power. He mentioned his position around the Cabinet table—he sat directly opposite May—and ‘symbolically again, when I sat in for her in Cabinet committees, I sat in the Prime Minister’s chair’ (Green, 2018). Of one occasion, Green remembered that at one Cabinet Committee there were many ministers around the table who had run for the leadership of the party: ‘I can see there are a lot of egos around, but, nevertheless, I’m chairing this meeting’ (Green, 2018).

After Green’s abrupt resignation at the end of 2017, he was replaced by David Lidington, who fulfilled a similar role as Minister for the Cabinet Office, and who was also regarded as ‘de facto deputy’—indeed, Lidington was someone seriously touted as potential interim leader had May been ousted by her own party in the heady days of March 2019 (Jacobson, 2019). However, Lidington was not appointed First Secretary, rather he was Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. Returning to the theme of social construction, Lidington himself believes that—despite clear signals from May that he was her deputy, including awarding him a position second on the pecking order—having that ‘formal title’ would have made his life easier: this is because ‘that would have been the signal to Whitehall [... that] this is how the government hierarchy works, and then the machine swings behind it’ (Lidington, 2020). In the end he achieved sufficient status, but—Lidington believes—‘it took more time than if I had had the title from the beginning’ (Lidington, 2020).

At time of writing the First Secretary is Dominic Raab. Once Boris Johnson had succeeded May in July 2019, he swiftly appointed Raab to that position. Raab’s promotion was seen in part as his reward for being on Johnson’s side of the referendum debate (ITV.com, 2019). However, as additionally Foreign Secretary, Raab has generally been unable to fulfil the co-ordination duties sometimes associated with the First Secretaryship. This partially explains why Michael Gove is sometimes perceived as being as Johnson’s deputy, filling, as he does, the behind-the-scenes organisational function associated with Butler, Heseltine and Green (Stone, 2020). Gove also enjoys a position of proximity to the Prime Minister’s office through the connecting door in the Cabinet Office. Indeed, Gove’s predecessor as both Minister for the Cabinet Office and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, David Lidington, has questioned Raab’s status, musing that, despite Raab’s position as First Secretary, ‘is Michael Gove effectively the number

two?’ (Lidington, 2020). To confuse matters still further, Raab is not even second in the ‘pecking order’. That position is held by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak (Gov.uk, 2020a).

Nevertheless, Raab’s tenure as First Secretary is significant as it has seriously raised, for the first time since Macmillan’s illness in 1963, the issue of government leadership when the Prime Minister is unable to lead. This is an issue because, as the Institute of Government makes plain, ‘The UK does not have a formal constitutional role of a deputy or caretaker prime minister who would step in should the prime minister be unable to perform their job for any reason’ (2020), and that precise situation arose in April 2020 as Johnson lay in intensive care.

On 6 April Downing Street released a statement to clarify who filling in for the Prime Minister. It read: ‘The PM has asked Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, *who is the First Secretary of State*, to deputise for him where necessary’ (Gov.uk, 2020b; authors’ emphasis). However, unlike the situation in 1963 when it was just assumed Butler would step in during Macmillan’s illness, it was far from certain until that moment that Raab would to be the one called upon to fill Johnson’s shoes. Gove was seen as serious candidate to become Johnson’s stand-in (Adam, 2020). However, that Gove was seen to have ‘torpedoed’ Johnson’s chances to succeed Cameron in 2016 (Shipman and Kenber, 2019) may have had some bearing on Johnson’s decision to overlook him. Sunak, as second in the ministerial rankings, may also have been considered, though it is likely that Sunak’s inexperience—he had been in post for less than two months at this stage—would have been taken into consideration.

So, in Johnson’s absence, it was Raab who chaired the Cabinet and the National Security Council and possessed the power to authorise military action—though Johnson’s letters to the submarine captains carrying the UK’s nuclear deterrent remained operational (Parker and Payne, 2020). Raab also took responsibility for chairing key meetings, including the so-called ‘War Cabinet’ that was established to co-ordinate the response to the COVID-19 crisis (Mikhailova, 2020). He also represented the UK at a virtual summit of G7 world leaders established to discuss the international response to the pandemic (Gov.uk, 2020c). However, Raab’s experience at this time also highlighted the limitations of such a role. He did not have the symbolically significant weekly audiences with the Queen, and—of more material concern—was not able to hire and fire ministers (Mikhailova, 2020). Moreover, Raab was bound by the requirement for his authority to be supported by the rest of the Cabinet, limiting his room for manoeuvre (Institution for Government, 2020). As Gove explained during the crisis—tellingly using Raab’s first name—while ‘Dominic takes on the responsibilities of chairing the various meetings that the Prime Minister would have chaired [...] we’re all working together to implement the plan that the

Prime Minister set out in order to try to marshal all the resources of government in the fight against this invisible enemy' (Mikhailova, 2020).

Yet, for all the limitations, that Raab—expressly in his capacity as First Secretary—rather than Sunak or Gove was selected to deputise for Johnson does set a precedent for similar situations, making it more likely that a future holder of the position of First Secretary will be called upon should a similar, or an even more serious calamity, befall a Prime Minister. Indeed, as Heseltine pointed out, this experience suggests that the constitutional situation at times of emergency does need to be clarified and the decision-making capacity for the minister acting as Prime Minister enhanced as there will 'come a time when a deputy is effectively prime minister' (Mikhailova, 2020).

5. Conclusion

There is no instruction manual to being First Secretary. The designation provides a sign that the holders of the post may deputise for the Prime Minister, but—as demonstrated—that has not always been the case. It is not a synonym for Deputy Prime Minister. Indeed, though not infallible, a position next to the premier on the list of precedence—Wilson's pecking-order—is a marginally better signal of deputy status, as Heseltine was aware. There is also a common assumption that the holder of the position will hold a senior co-ordination role, and, in many cases, a First Secretary has provided invaluable support for a struggling premier; someone, in those words from Norman Brook 60 years ago, who can share 'the Ministerial burdens that fall on [the Prime Minister's] shoulders.' However, again, there have been many exceptions. For example, none of Harold Wilson's three First Secretaries provided this type of service. Furthermore, ministers other than the First Minister have also played similar supporting functions, most obviously David Lidington whose role was almost identical to that of Damian Green.

From the day Macmillan hoodwinked Butler, the post of First Minister has largely remained an illusion of power. It has, however, become a powerful illusion: many ministers, civil servants and the press have convinced themselves that the emperor does indeed wear fine clothes. As the constructivist position suggests, that key individuals such as John Major, John Prescott and Harriet Harman *believed* the very title First Secretary possessed authority meant that it did. This illusion has sometimes been maintained by a façade of symbols suggesting power such as a grand office, a suitable car, or country house; the 'plumage that surrounds high office' as Nick Clegg calls it (2016, p. 74).

Thus, the Office of First Secretary of State is only as important as the person holding that office is perceived to be important. If that person is regarded, not least by the Civil Service, as the second most senior minister, then they will be accorded that respect. However, as soon as that perception is damaged, then—as

Prescott—explained, simply *being* First Secretary will not prevent that regard from vanishing, leaving the minister concerned metaphorically naked. Nevertheless, as the recent case of Raab deputising for the ailing Johnson demonstrated, in certain circumstances the position of First Minister can assume acute importance and real power. Moreover, having set that precedent, it may be that Macmillan's bauble could yet become an office of substance.

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